

# HIGHER FLAX MILLS CONSERVATION AREA APPRAISAL



*South Somerset District Council 2010*

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# HIGHER FLAX MILLS CONSERVATION AREA APPRAISAL

## Approved by committee 12<sup>th</sup> May 2010

### Introduction

Higher Flax Mills is an area of C19 industrial development immediately to the west of Castle Cary town centre, linked to the commercial core of the town by Torbay Road and Station Road. The mill complex is one of the largest and best preserved factories of the once substantial Somerset and Dorset flax industry, formerly producing linen warps, rope, twine and webbing from flax, hemp and tow. Adjacent to the works, is a terrace of mill workers houses and larger houses associated with the original owners. Part of the factory buildings continues to give employment to the town, as John Boyd Textiles Ltd, who produce horsehair fabric on traditional power looms. The enterprise is a rare survivor of a specialised traditional business located in historically important buildings.

The Higher Flax Mills Conservation Area was designated in February 2002, focused upon the factory complex. A large extension to the east was designated in June 2007, embracing the areas of workers and owners' housing. The conservation area is separate from the larger Castle Cary Conservation Area, which focuses upon South Cary, the town centre and Upper High Street and North Street. The Castle Cary designation is the subject of a detailed appraisal of its assets and special qualities and this document is a concurrent appraisal of the Higher Flax Mills area.

Conservation areas are areas of special architectural or historic interest, the character or appearance of which it is desirable to preserve or enhance. The District Council is required by Section 71 of the Town and Country Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 to formulate and publish proposals for the preservation and enhancement of conservation areas. This can be achieved through conservation area appraisals.

In order that designation is effective in conserving the special interest, planning

decisions must be based on a thorough understanding of the area's character.

Appraisals are essential tools for the planning process and to manage informed intervention. They will provide a sound basis, defensible on appeal, for the relevant development plan policies and development control decisions and will form the framework for effective management of change.

The appraisal should provide the District Council and the local community with a clear idea of what features and details contribute to the character of the conservation area.

The appraisal document is prepared following advice from English Heritage. There is a summary of the planning policy context and an assessment of the special interest of the conservation area: landscape setting, historic development and archaeology and a more detailed description of the buildings, groups, building materials and architectural details, green elements and opportunities for beneficial change.

### Definition of the Special Interest of the Area

The key assets of the Higher Flax Mills Conservation Area are:

- the survival of a complex of mid-late C19 flax processing buildings, formerly producing linen warps, rope, twine and webbing, with the mill building, warehouses, offices, other specialised buildings, covered and open ropewalks largely intact; the buildings are of architectural value and have many attractive details and they represent regionally and nationally rare building types;
- the continuation of historically interesting manufacturing processes, partly using C19 machinery, with the current production of horsehair-related products by John Boyd Textiles Ltd;

- the survival of associated owners' and workers' housing on Station Road and Bridgwater Buildings, representing, in a unified entity, a C19 industrial business.

## The Planning Policy Context

The Regional Spatial Strategy and the Saved Policies from the South Somerset Local Plan (Adopted 2006) form the current (2010) context for conservation area policies. Additional policy for the protection and management of conservation areas is contained in the national Planning Policy Statement 5 'Planning for the Historic Environment'.

## Assessment of Special Interest

### Landscape Setting

Higher Flax Mills is situated on the western edge of Castle Cary in the valley of the River Cary, close to its source at Park Pond. Torbay Road runs east-west off Station Road, along a 60m contour and the factory site is set at a slightly lower level to the road and the river course is at the valley bottom. Bridgwater Buildings run off Station Road at an angle, gently and constantly descending towards the river.

To the south, on the other side of the river, a rounded hill rises to 100m. Its slopes are well treed and it forms an attractive setting to the mill complex. There is open countryside either side of the ribbon of development on Torbay Road and the Bristol-Weymouth railway line runs further to the west, with the town station to the north of the conservation area, at the end of Station Road.

### Historical Development and Archaeology

The upper Cary valley above Fulford's Cross appears to have been occupied by a series of water mills over a long period of time. Three mills are mentioned in Domesday and the current Higher Flax Mills site seems to have had earlier activity, a map of 1673 showing a possible mill building near a label of 'Mill Close'. A late C18 map shows two adjoining buildings and an adjacent pond and an 1808 map definitely shows a water-powered mill on the present site. There is documentary

evidence of cloth processing from, at least, the first decade of the C19.

In 1818, Charles Donne was active at Torbay Mill, downstream of the Higher Flax Mills site. In 1848, TS Donne and Sons had occupied Higher Flax Mills as flax and tow spinners, thread, line and twine manufacturers. At the same period, Bridgwater Buildings was constructed, with extensions and alterations up to 1885. In 1870, the flax mill at the eastern end of the site was rebuilt and the river culverted. Slightly later, pre-1885, the western and central warehouses were built, an entry lodge constructed and a second mill pond created. The last major building project was the eastern warehouse, completed in 1896.

In 1956, part of the works was leased to John Boyd Ltd (originally operating in Chapel Yard, South Cary and later at the Ansford works) and 45 horsehair looms were transferred from the Ansford site. Formal amalgamation occurred in 1977. Webbing and twine manufacture was ended in the 1980s but horsehair fabrics continue to be produced on thirty remaining Boyd looms, which date from the 1870s, and other, introduced, machinery.

The considerable rebuilding and extensions of the C19 leave no apparent visible features from pre-1870 activities but investigation and research may reveal evidence. The archaeology of the site has been compromised by recent infilling of one of the millponds and redevelopment (with housing) of the upper ropewalks. Despite this, the wider site is of major historical, industrial archaeological and architectural significance, recognized by Listed Building and conservation area designations and the production of a detailed historical and visual survey by English Heritage in 2001, which includes useful photographs and plans. The upper Cary valley is identified in the Somerset Extensive Urban Survey as of interest as an industrial area from early times, with considerable archaeological potential.

In any research work, there are various **maps** that are helpful in determining the extent and nature of development and details of individual plots, in particular estate and manorial maps of various dates, an 1841

Tithe Map and a series of excellent Ordnance Survey maps, including the editions of 1886 and 1901.

## Spatial Analysis

### The Character and Interrelationship of Spaces within the Conservation Area

The various spaces that exist in any settlement or group of buildings occur in sequences and combinations that create stimulating **townscape**, which is best experienced by walking across the conservation area. A logical route is from east to west, from Station Road, down Bridgwater Buildings and then along the edge of the designated area, through the modern Brookfields to the western end of the mill site on Torbay Road and thence into the complex.

**Station Road** is a corridor of buildings set on the road edge, behind boundary walls and slightly above the road line with front gardens. The three gable ends of Millbrook House and stretches of boundary wall are evident on the south side. On the north, Fairview Terrace is prominent by virtue of its elevation above the road and the twin brick cubes of Nicholas House and Tor Cottage then mark the change in road alignment, being set close to the inside of the curve, behind a small front space.

These buildings and the large brick mass of the Constitutional Club are positioned by the junction of a narrow lane running SW, with the long terrace of **Bridgwater Buildings** running in a series of steps down the slope. At the end of the lane, there is a glimpse of water in the former mill leat by Mill Barn and of back gardens behind the Buildings. There is a view of Brookfield back towards Station Road, with its crested roof ridge and chimney.

The open spaces of the river channel and open ropewalks are seen through a private entrance. To the NW, the modern estate layout of Brookfields dominates but there is a first view of the **Higher Flax Mills buildings** at an estate adjunct, Badgers Folly. The long rear elevation of the Flax Mill runs north-south across the view and is set at a lower

level, with its upper floors, roof and bell-cote visible.

There are views down into the complex and then there is a sequence of varied buildings running more or less east-west – the long ranges of the Upper and Middle Warehouses, two storey towards Brookfields and the full three storeys visible at the western end of the block, in a return elevation complete with hoist and crane; the apparently single storey, brick Dyehouse; and the taller Lower Warehouse. The older buildings have a backing in the form of the long, mainly modern, Ropewalks building, characterised by its white, metal roof.



**Higher Flax Mill site from Brookfields**

**The Lodge** is a suitable flourish at the entry to the works, with architectural detail and embellishment. It heralds a long, narrow corridor through the mill buildings, with the sequence of warehouses, offices and Dyehouse strung out in a linear progression to the left (north) and the Ropewalks shed to the right. The older buildings have a rhythm of arched openings interspersed with occasional contrasts, in the form of the end façade of the Middle Warehouse and the domestic looking bay window of the offices and the major element of the large bulk of the Flax Mill terminating the vista to the east, at right angles to the other buildings.

The **colours** of the area are varied, related closely to traditional building materials, with the tawny orange browns of local limestone; greys of other stone details; red and orange brick details and whole facades; and dark brown clay roofing tiles.

**Key Views** are

- the view westwards along Station Road towards the change in

- alignment marked by Nicholas House and Tor Cottage;
- the view down Bridgwater Buildings and a return view back to Tor Cottage;
- views from Brookfields over and into the Mill complex; and linear, channeled views within the Higher Flax Mill site, particularly east towards the Flax Mill.

The outstanding **landmarks** are the Flax Mill building (highlighted by the bell-cote) and The Lodge, set at the obvious entrance and loaded with architectural detail.

## Character Analysis

The conservation area has two distinct parts, reflected in the two part designations of the Mill core and the adjacent housing to the east but they are interrelated historically and in terms of patronage and ownership. It is thus proposed to describe the conservation area as a whole, without recourse to sub-areas.

**Building uses** are or were:

- **industrial**, with a long history of mill use and subsequent adaptation of buildings for flax and horsehair processing, notably marked by a major rebuilding and expansion from 1870 onwards;
- **residential**, with a hierarchy of house types, ranging from gentry and mill owners' detached properties and former accommodation for workers in Bridgwater Buildings.

**Building types** are:

- a former flax mill, built in two phases, eleven bays and three storeys, set across the valley floor, originally with a waterwheel at the southern, river end and an integral steam engine;
- large three storey, multiple bay warehouses, with internal iron columns and wooden floor joists, areas of top floor open plan storage and features like taking-in doors, cranes and hoists; they may be one or two storey on their northern sides because of their position on a steep slope;

- other specialised buildings, notably the Dyehouse (formerly a fire engine house and a canteen) and the entrance lodge and a long, single storey modern Ropewalks cover building, which has superseded and partly incorporated older structures (open ropewalks areas have been developed as the Brookfields housing estate but another area survives SE of the main Mill buildings);
- detached gentry houses, varying in plan from the linear Millbrook House (set at right angles to the road edge, with twin gables marking a double pile, a later extension in line and a parallel service block across a yard); a large detached late C19 house in Brookfield set in its plot and having a complex accretive plan; smaller detached blocks in Nicholas House and Tor Cottage; and the eighteen unit long row of Bridgwater Buildings, with a through passage giving access to a communal pathway, the proper 'fronts' of the houses and gardens.

**Boundaries** are varied in character, with stone walls either side of Millbrook House (currently part-demolished); a brick wall in front of Brookfield; stone retaining walls on the northern boundaries of the Mill; and iron railings fronting Nicholas House and Tor Cottage.

## Key Buildings and Structures

The listed buildings in the conservation area include the whole of the mill complex being one Grade II\* entry and The Lodge and Nicholas House both Grade II entries. All of these are seen as **key buildings**:

- **Nicholas House**, is an early C19 building in Flemish Bond brick with twelve and sixteen pane sashes with rubbed brick lintels, it has simple but effective spear-headed railings and a contemporary gate;



**Nicholas House**

- **The Lodge** to Higher Flax Mills site is late C19 Cary Stone and brick trim, with an elaborate gabled façade and gabled porch, decorative bargeboards, patterning on its clay roof tiles and cast iron hexagonal glazing bars on its windows;



**The Lodge**

- **The Higher Flax Mill** buildings consist of a series of mainly 1870-

1895 functional structures, handsome and characterised by rhythms of multi-paned iron windows in cambered arches, larger taking-in doors and sliding ground floor doors; limited decoration is provided by contrasting brick corner quoins and arch lintels and features like a small gablet over taking-in doors; the Dyehouse is of contrasting scale and materials.



**Higher Flax Mills**

For fuller descriptions, see the listed buildings schedule and the 2001 English Heritage report.

There are a number of **unlisted buildings** of individual merit and/or wider group value:

- **Fairview Terrace, Torbay Road**, early C20 orange brick, Double Roman tiles and decorative scalloped clay tiles on a long pentice roof that covers ground floor canted bays and bracketed porches; four pane sashes, crested ridge tiles and large brick chimneys with horizontal bands and mouldings;



**Fairview Terrace**



**Millbrook House**

- **Millbrook House, Station Road**, an interesting and slightly enigmatic group of rubble, render and brick buildings set in two parallel ranges at right angles to the road, mid-C19 and later C19; coped gables, nearer double gabled house unit is rubble with ashlar dressings and brick dressings on western elevation, two pane sashes; further house unit is rendered (Roman Cement?) with a symmetrical arrangement of sashes and central porch and a canted bay either side; parallel former service

range is single storey with (inserted?) hipped dormers; definite group value with its stone boundary wall;

- **Tor Cottage**, very similar to adjacent listed Nicholas House, early C19 Flemish Bond brick with sashes set under rubbed brick lintels; iron railings in front with diagonally intersecting tops; group value;



**Tor Cottage**

- **Brookfield**, large detached late C19 house, not wholly visible from the road but of brick and a Double Roman tile roof and crested ridge tiles; sashes and canted bays; brick boundary walls (Roseleigh, to the NW on Torbay Road, outside the conservation area, shares similar details);
- **Bridgwater Buildings**, a long terrace of rubble, mid-C19 houses, each unit of two bays stepping down the slope, originally with wooden casements but much altered; example of workers' housing associated with the Mill and of group value. Roseleigh and the Constitutional Club are of some interest (the former for good detailing and the latter for its red brick presence and massing) but are outside the current



***Bridgwater Buildings***

conservation area boundary. There is also a SCC sign post at the junction of Station Road and Torbay Road, again outside the boundary.

The Mill complex and The Lodge forms a coherent **group** of buildings:

**Building materials and architectural details**

The most common building stone is the local Cary or Hadspen Stone, an orange-brown ferruginous limestone of the Inferior Oolite, usually in coursed and squared or roughly coursed rubble form. A grey Blue Lias limestone forms the base courses of most of the Mill buildings and part of the eastern gable end of the Upper Warehouse. Doulling Stone is used for ashlar details, such as keystones and cills.

An orange or dark red brick is seen on the two houses, Nicholas House and Tor Cottage (although the latter has a Cary Stone rubble rear element), in Flemish Bond and with carefully rubbed and gauged window and door lintels. The brick probably came from the nearby works on the north side of Station Road. The Mill Dyehouse is of similar materials and the brickwork bond is enlivened by the introduction of vitrified or burnt headers. Brick is used on other Mill buildings for dressings, contrasting with the local stone.



***Materials: Flax Mill, Cary Stone & red brick (see drawing at end of report)***



***Materials: brick with vitrified headers, Dyehouse***

Corrugated steel sheet and non-local bricks are used on the modern Ropewalks building.

Roofs vary between Double Roman, plain clay tiles (with decorative bands of scalloped tiles on The Lodge) and a pantiled rear building at Millbrook House. Mill buildings have stone copings, with kneelers and small pinnacles on the Flax Mill. Ridges are often adorned with crested tiles, with a rhythm of three points and plain tiles appearing on several buildings. Chimneys are of brick, with banding and moulding on later C19 houses.

Boundary walls are of stone rubble, both dwarf and up to 2m high, and of brick. Copings are of vertical stones or moulded brick, a bull-nose or half round profile being apparent.

Windows vary with building age, use and status. The Mill buildings have multiple pane iron windows with some opening lights, with sashes and one stone canted bay at the

former office part of the Middle Warehouse. The Lodge has narrow lancets, wider two part units and a canted bay with attractive cast iron hexagon patterns. Vertical sash windows change in detail over the course of the C19, with 16 and 12 panes early in the century and four and two panes at the end. Bridgewater Buildings had wooden casements with wood lintels.

Doors tend to be vertically planked, seen in industrial examples and on smaller houses. Panelled and half glazed examples are seen in larger C19-early C20 houses. The Lodge has a gabled porch and Fairview Terrace has a bracketed lean-to that is part of a longer pentice roof.

**Details** are exemplified by the wall crane and hoists on Mill buildings; the bell-cote on the former Flax Mill; the three ammonites set into the eastern end wall of the Upper Warehouse; the elaborate timber bargeboards at The Lodge; the speared, saltire and hooped iron railings at Nicholas House, Tor Cottage and The Lodge respectively and the scrolled ironwork on Nicholas House's front gate. There is a raised pavement in front of Nicholas House and Tor Cottage, built on coursed rubble.



**Ammonites in Cary Stone**

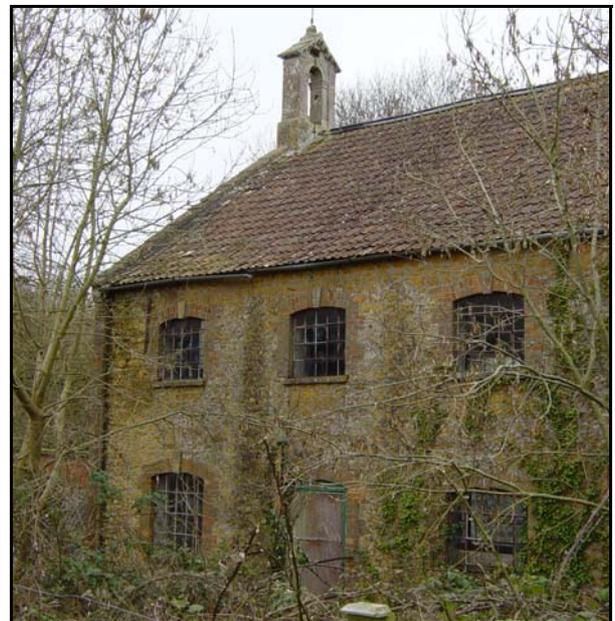
### **Parks, gardens, trees and open space**

There is a long line of trees along the River Cary, south of Millbrook House and the Mill complex (on the site of one of the millponds) that is important in views from Station Road and Torbay Road. The open and rising land to the south of the mill building complex including the former mill pond is a significant part of its setting.

The former garden area of Millbrook House on the southern of the River Cary provides an important sylvan backdrop to the house and Bridgewater Buildings.

### **Opportunities for Beneficial Change**

include the repair of the stone boundary wall at Millbrook House; the restoration of lost details, including door and window patterns on unlisted buildings (such as Bridgewater Buildings); further tree planting on the southern side of Brookfields, to soften the transition between modern and older development; the improvement of the unsightly modern workshop buildings attached to the gable of the western mill building by the main works entrance; and necessary repairs to Mill buildings, particularly the currently unused Flax Mill. The open ropewalks area and mill pond might be examined and some sort of clearance and management considered.



**The Flax Mill, needing new uses and repair**

### **Community Involvement**

The appraisal has been the subject of consultation with Castle Cary Town Council, local landowners and other interests.

### **Amendments to Conservation Area Boundary**

The current boundary is a recent designation and there do not appear to be any obvious anomalies or omissions of important assets.

### **General Condition**

The current condition of the Flax Mill and its lack of use are of major concern. The open ropewalks and the surviving mill pond are overgrown and, seemingly, inaccessible. The break in the Station Road boundary wall of Millbrook House is very noticeable. The loss of traditional window details on the unlisted Bridgwater Buildings is having a cumulative impact on the character and unity of the row.



**Station Road boundary wall of Millbrook House**

## Summary of Issues

The Higher Flax Mills Conservation Area embraces a regionally and nationally important complex of industrial buildings of architectural and historical value, underlined by the survival of machinery, processes and skills in the continuity of use in part of the site. The future uses and the urgent need for repair of the Flax Mill are the most pressing issues

## Useful Information

The appraisal was prepared by John Wykes Planning and Conservation and South Somerset District Council. Approved by committee after consultation and amendment on 12<sup>th</sup> May 2010.

**Criteria used for assessing the contribution made by unlisted buildings:** the actual design characteristics, such as mass, skyline, interesting details and materials; and position relative to the wider setting, individual or groups of Listed Buildings.

## References and Further Reading

*Understanding Place*, Guidance on conservation area appraisals, English Heritage, August 2005

*The Schedule of buildings of Special Architectural and Historical Interest*, DCMS

*The Somerset Historic Environment Records (SHERS)*, Somerset County Council

*Higher Flax Mills, Historic Buildings Report*, Mike Williams & Sheila Ely, English Heritage, February 2001

*English Heritage Extensive Urban Surveys, an archaeological assessment of Castle Cary*, Miranda Richardson, SC, 1994-8

*South Somerset Local Plan (adopted 2004)*, SSDC

*Planning Policy Guidance 15: Planning & The Historic Environment*, Department of the Environment & Department of National Heritage, September 1994

*Planning Policy Guidance 16: Archaeology & Planning*, Department of the Environment, November 1990

## Maps

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## Glossary of Architectural Terms

**Architrave:** lintels and jambs surrounding a door or window

**Ashlar:** best quality masonry with smooth face and narrow joints

**Bargeboard:** timber board covering ends of roof joists in a gable, often decorated

**Bull nose:** a brick of rounded profile

**Cambered arch:** a very flat curved arch  
**Canted bay:** splayed or angled sides to projecting window  
**Casement:** opening lights hinged at one side  
**Coped gable:** angled capping, usually raised above height of adjoining roof  
**Double Roman pantile:** curved, S-profile clay tile  
**Dressed stone:** masonry worked to produce an even finish but not as precisely as ashlar  
**Expressed keystone:** the central arch stone that projects further from the wall face than its neighbours  
**Flemish Bond:** brickwork of every course with alternate headers and stretchers  
**Gable:** small gable  
**Gentry house:** a high status house  
**Glazing bar:** usually wooden division of a window light  
**Hipped roof:** both roof slopes are angled back at corners  
**Lancet:** narrow window  
**Lintel (or lintol):** horizontal stone or wood former to top of door or window opening

**Pantile:** a clay roof tile of shaped or curved section

**Pentice:** a lean-to roof

**Plain tile:** a clay roof tile of flat section

**Rubbed and gauged:** fine quality brickwork with narrow joints and smooth finish achieved by abrasion with other bricks or stone

**Rubble random:** unworked and unshaped stone walling without any form of coursing; squared and coursed has deliberate shaping and arrangement of stones

**Sash:** a timber window capable of being raised and lowered in vertical side grooves and controlled by pulleys and weights

**Scalloped tile:** plain tile of half-round or fish-scale shape

**Taking-in door:** on industrial buildings, an upper floor doorway served by a crane or hoist

**Vitrified header:** end of brick that has been burnt in a kiln to produce crystalline, darker texture and colour

multiple pane iron  
window set under  
Cambered brick arch  
& stone keystone

hoist & pulley  
with goblet over

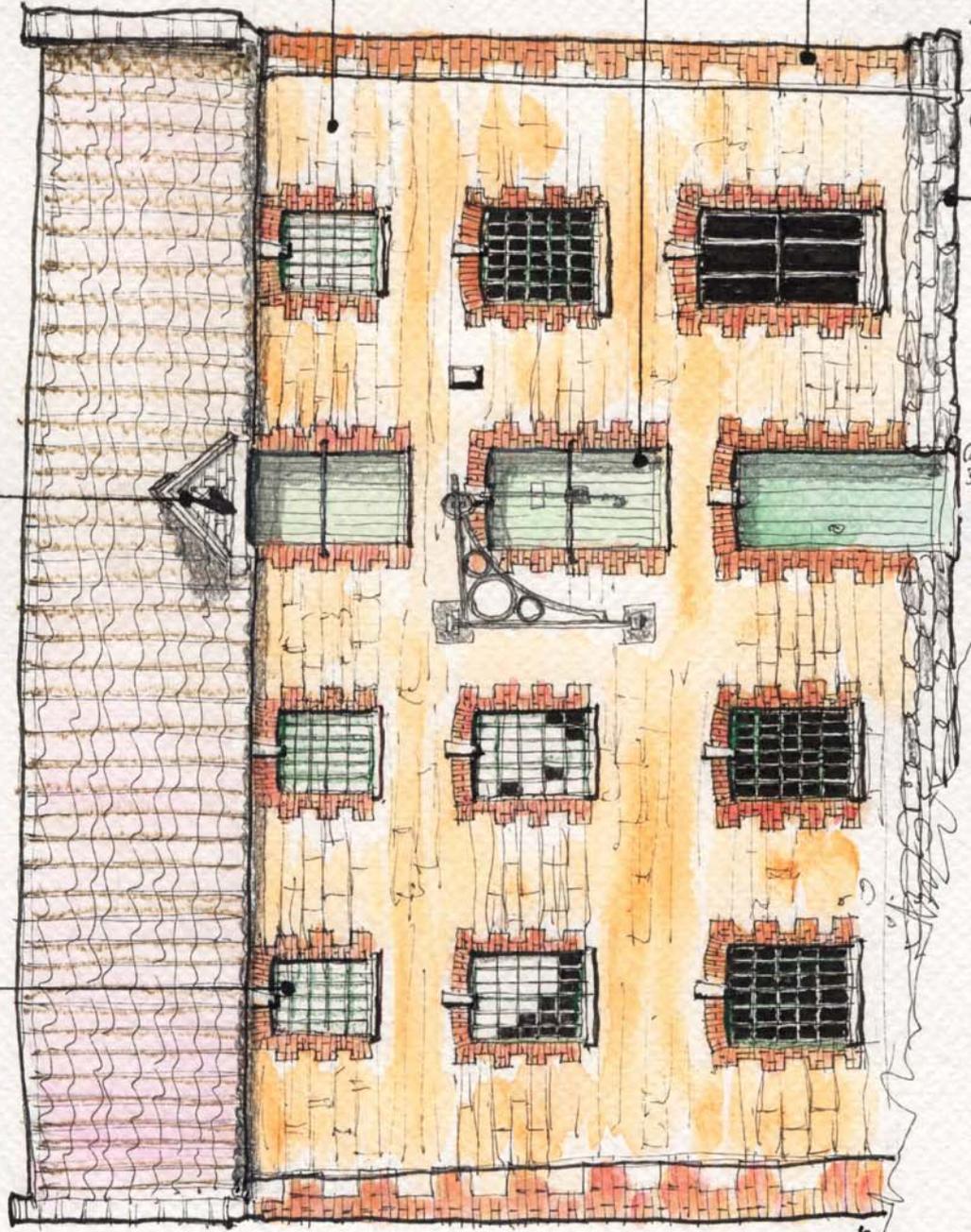
Coped gable &  
kneeler

squared &  
coursed  
Cary Stone

taking-in  
doors &  
wall crane

brick quoins  
& door &  
window  
surrounds

Blue Lias base



JOHN WYKES

INDUSTRIAL VOCABULARY - MIDDLE WAREHOUSE