

Clipping Bulletin 40, January 1997

The City Trust's annual award, open to all buildings constructed or restored in Durham District during 1996, has been won by Aykley Heads House. The Grade 2* listed building, unoccupied, neglected and vandalised during the 1980s, when it was the focus of a succession of letters from the Trust, has now been gloriously restored.

In the field of architecture one has to accept that the ideal must yield to some acceptable or feasible compromise – not least in tasks involving conservation or historical reconstruction – but not in this particular instance! Here, not a jot has been ed, not a detail overlooked or skimped, in a truly remarkable exercise. The transformation constitutes a case study worthy of wide dissemination.

The key figure in the restoration is Peter Candler, director of Rivergreen Developments Ltd, entrepreneur extraordinary, a civil engineer by training, with a keen knowledge of, and sensitivity to, historic buildings. As overall director of the scheme, he negotiated the purchase of the building from the County Council, and engaged Simpson and Brown of Edinburgh to produce a Conservation Strategy, and Darbyshire and Kendall as architects. The expertise and enthusiasm of this trio has been continued by the various craftsmen who have worked on the project.

The saving of Cortese's fine mid-18th century stucco ceilings from their sodden state, restoration of exuberant wooden mouldings, recovery of stolen fireplaces and installation of a fire-vandalised Venetian window on the basis of old photographs, the application of appropriate pastel colours – these are but some of the components of a rescue and restoration act which has been progressing for more than four years. The fortunate new occupants of the building are the County's Career Service, which has been unable to furnish it in a manner befitting the restoration, Rivergreen Developments, Building Design Northern and an award-winning Bistro 21.

So remarkable is the story of the rescue and restoration of Aykley Heads House that the occasion of handing over the Architectural Commendation certificate will be accompanied by illustrated talks by the key people involved. Peter Candler, John Saunders (Simpson and Brown) and David Kendall (Darbyshire and Kendall) have all kindly agreed to speak – Saturday 15 February 1997, Elvet Riverside I at 2.30 pm.

A further sign of the interest and significance of the work is that the Architectural and Archaeological Society of Durham and Northumberland has expressed a wish to join us for the meeting.