

Mortimer's Heritage Project Summary

In 2016, the Grade II listed Mortimer's Warehouse was purchased by a local benefactor who would like to transform it into a heritage visitor centre where the story of Driffield Canal and its importance to the region's maritime past and Britain's great age of canal building could be told. The owner has committed to working in partnership to realise this ambition to create a high-quality heritage asset that would be self-sustaining and an attractive part of the East Riding's cultural and tourism offer. The grant from the Resilient Heritage programme will enable us to develop a robust management body that would take the lead on maximising the warehouse's potential. A preliminary assessment carried out in 2017 found the building to be in sound condition. It also proposed a strategic combination of uses, including interpretive and retail space, a café and holiday-let accommodation, which has the potential to generate sufficient income for the re-developed warehouse to operate sustainably in the future while respecting its heritage value. The grant will enable us to put in place a strong, representative and legitimate body that could explore these proposals and take this shared vision forward.

The Heritage Background:

This project focuses on the Grade II listed Mortimer's Warehouse, which is located at the head of Driffield Navigation in the market town of Driffield, East Yorkshire. The canal extends 11 miles from River Head, close to the town centre, to Struncheon Lock where it meets the tidal River Hull. Driffield Canal was opened in 1770, providing the town and surrounding area with access to the Port of Hull and beyond via the Rivers Hull and Humber. A cluster of warehouses, including Mortimer's, was built at River Head in the late-18th century to support the export of agricultural products such as wheat and intake of coal and other goods. The canal prospered in the 19th century, despite the introduction of the railway in 1846, and remained a commercial waterway until 1951.

'Mortimer' is a prominent name in Driffield. Resident John Robert Mortimer (1825-1911) is recognised for his contribution to modern British archaeology, publishing 'Forty Years' Researches in British and Saxon Burial Mounds of East Yorkshire' in 1905. He also founded James Mortimer Ltd., a grain and seed merchants, in 1869. From the 1870s to 2014, the Mortimer family used the River Head warehouses for their business.

Mortimer's Warehouse remained a grain store until 2016 when it was bought by a private individual. Based on a rectangular plan, Mortimer's Warehouse is spread over three floors, covering a total area of 341m². The existing grain silo is a triple height void occupying one third of the building. Notable heritage features include original brickwork, timbers and the exterior sign. A recent survey found the building to be in good condition. Currently not in use, the warehouse has the potential to be developed as a symbol of Driffield's place in Britain's great age of canal building.

How did Mortimer's Heritage Project start?

In October 2016, we organised a stakeholder meeting for individuals and organisations that have an interest in Driffield Navigation (referred to in section 3c) with East Riding of Yorkshire Council and Waterways Partnership. This meeting was arranged to facilitate constructive discussion about how best to develop the Driffield Canal. Participants discussed various ideas and all agreed that a project steering group should be formed to focus on improving River Head, starting with the re-development of Mortimer's Warehouse. The steering group, including the building's owner, was formed in December 2017 and it is this group that now have been successful in their bid to the Heritage Lottery.

Over the summer and autumn of 2017, a non-intrusive survey of the building was carried out. This study concluded that the building is sound and dry although a range of repairs, conservation work, adaptations and improvements to services – all of which would need planning and/or listed building consent – would be needed in order to make it appropriate for public and commercial use. It is understood that this study would have to be superseded by a full building survey and viability appraisal in order to better understand the conservation deficit and inform any concrete proposals for development. However, it gave partners a basic understanding of the needs of the warehouse as a heritage asset and the projected costs for carrying out the transformation work. This information has given the partners confidence that the project is achievable despite it being a sizeable undertaking and we have decided to embark on this journey of realising the building's potential.

How this project will make a difference to our heritage.

Driffield Navigation has much to offer in terms of its natural, built and cultural heritage. It would therefore be fitting for Mortimer's Warehouse, as an exemplary Grade II listed canal warehouse, to be used to bring people into contact with this heritage and learn about the canal's importance in the wider context.

With regard to natural heritage, Driffield Navigation is located in the environs of the 'River Hull Headwaters' Site of Special Scientific Interest, which is nationally important as the UK's most northerly chalk stream system. The Environment Agency has classified the canal's environmental status as good, which is evidenced by the rich array of plant and wildlife. Indeed, a number of protected species, including water vole, otter, kingfishers, mink, bats, wild brown trout, lamprey and bullhead, make the canal their home.

Driffield Navigation was constructed during Britain's great age of canal building. In the 19th century, it promoted growth and prosperity in the agricultural town of Driffield, connecting regional farms, producers and merchants to markets in Hull and beyond and bringing vital goods into the area. Four of the canal's five locks are Grade II listed. A number of significant wharves, cranes and warehouses are also extant at River Head, providing the basis for its conservation area designation. Most of the warehouses have, however, been converted for commercial or residential purposes.

Throughout its lifetime to 2016, Mortimer's Warehouse has been used as a grain and feed store so there have been few changes to its physical structure. Mortimer's Warehouse has been found to be in good condition and suitable for re-development as a heritage visitor centre. At present, the owner has no plans to convert it or sell it for financial gain, giving the project partners a prime opportunity to "save" the building, bring it back into use and safeguard its heritage value.

What difference will Mortimer's Heritage Project make to Driffield?

A transformed Mortimer's Warehouse would provide the community with a new visitor attraction where people can learn about the history and heritage of Driffield Canal and engage with it. The new centre would help to raise the profile of the waterway and the town of Driffield, and celebrate their connections to the region's maritime and industrial past.

Mortimer's could also be a place where people can come together, reminisce and enjoy the benefits of being by water. As a visitor attraction, it has the potential to bring vitality to one of the town's priority regeneration locations and add value to the East Riding's culture and tourism offer.