

Building on the industry of past endeavours

Holt's historic tannery site is having new life breathed into it by a visionary housing and workspace development. As work begins, Gary Lawrence learns more about the site's long and fascinating history.

THE ALLEYWAYS and factory floors are silent and empty now, weeds thrust up through the cracks in the paving stones and dank puddles form beneath the holes in its roofs. But Frank Holmes remembers when there was barely a square foot of this five acre site not teeming with activity.

He joined the staff at J&T Beaven's Holt tannery in July 1968 as a bookkeeper and 51 years later is still there, having seen the 249-year-old company ride the rollercoaster of an industry that has been continuously buffeted by economic, technological and environmental pressures.

No-one knows more than the avuncular 70-year-old about the history of a firm that once employed almost an entire village and exported its products all over the world.

The Beaven family has been at the site since Christopher Beaven first bought land in Holt in 1758 and set up a wool business sometime later (believed to be 1770 but, charmingly, no one knows for sure). The firm transported wagonloads of wool from the Duke of Beaufort's estate at Badminton, where it was treated and graded before being transported to Yorkshire.

Gradually, as a by-product of handling so many sheepskins, the firm introduced its tannery and began making rough leather gloves for farmers and housemaids. By 1870 it was producing better quality leather and a chance visit by a wealthy customer did much to transform the company's fortunes.

He saw the cheap leather gloves being made and asked for some of his own, but made from the top quality chamois, complete with buttons and points. When, as was the custom, he left his stylish new gloves along with his stick on the hall table of his smart London club, fellow fashion-conscious members were smitten and demanded some of their own.

J&T Beaven went into glove production and began to expand almost as quickly as its reputation. The family bought a large house that dominated the village, known as The Great House, for £630 to house glove production. Work continued there until 1957 when it was demolished and replaced.

‘We just fell in love with the site as we saw it’

As the company developed and perfected its process it grew. At its peak it was employing around 600 people and processing around 1,500 dozen sheepskins a week to process chamois leathers and leather for gloves, book covers, clothes and wallets, to name but a few uses.

Almost every aspect of village life was in the gift of the company. Besides providing employment for generations of families, it owned and let 50 cottages in the area, provided allotments, contributed to the church and organised social events.

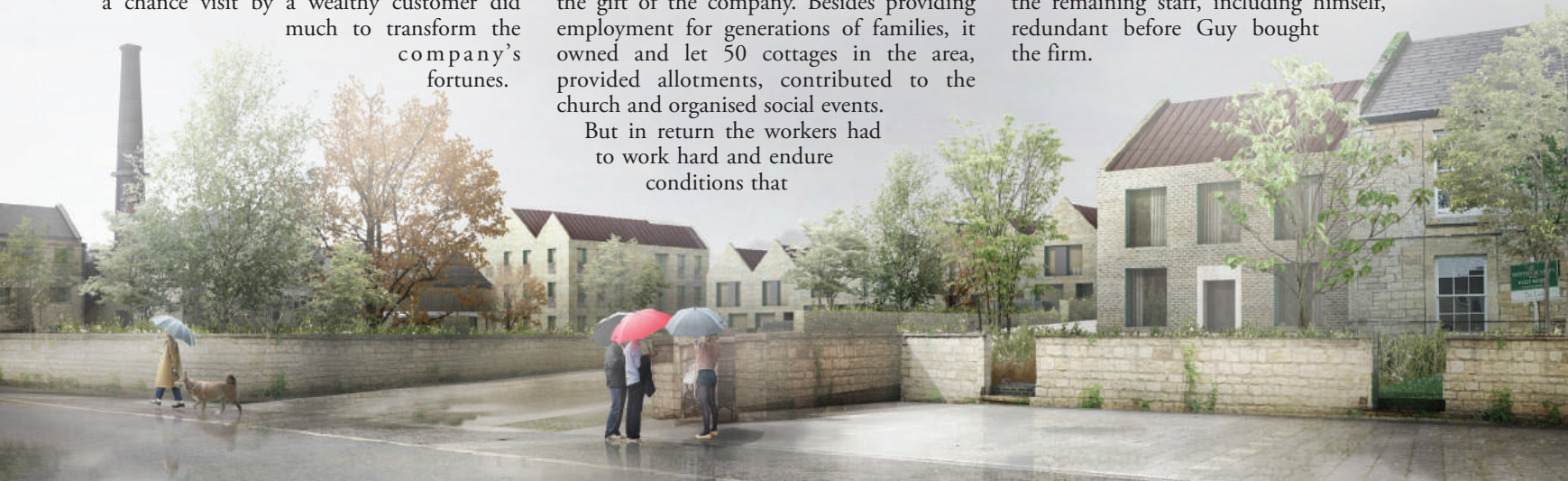
But in return the workers had to work hard and endure conditions that

would give today's health and safety officials heart failure. "It was a tough life," says Frank. "Everything was done manually then and the process was dirty and smelly. In the winter there would be water everywhere and they'd be handling wet skins. The temperature would be minus something outside and it was hard for the workers."

Elsewhere in the tannery, conditions were just as horrendous. The skins had to be stripped, cleaned, and split into two layers before they were processed, the inside of the split skin was tanned in cod liver oil and degreased using ammonia, then hung up to dry, trimmed and worked with an abrasive wheel to raise the nap. Hauling skins and breathing in the tiny fibres generated by the nap work was in no way healthy work.

J&T Beaven's products were of such high quality that the firm's reputation extended worldwide, but by the time Frank joined the industry was already in decline as the demand for leather, particularly chamois, fell, largely owing to the advances in cheaper man-made alternatives.

In 1970, J&T Beaven merged with another major producer and between then and 1995 it had two more owners as the industry contracted. But the firm was still teetering on collapse when Guy Colle appeared on the scene late that year. Frank, who was by now company accountant in sole charge of finances, remembers having to make 88 of the remaining staff, including himself, redundant before Guy bought the firm.





PHOTOS BY TOM ASKEW-MILLER

Guy had grown up in a family of leather producers in Deinze, Belgium, and was enticed by J&T Beaven's fame and the prospect of restoring its fortunes. "When I first came in I thought it would be easy to turn the firm around but it was very tough," he recalls.

What undoubtedly saved the firm was a move into importing and repackaging car cleaning products. It now sells these all over the world and has contracts with the likes of Halfords.

After an abortive project in China, it found a home for chamois production in India in 2007, since when it is seeing a resurgence in demand thanks to an increasing appetite for sustainable products. The offices in Holt are still the focal point of an operation that includes a large warehouse in Poland.

But with production moving abroad, most of the Holt site had become virtually redundant.

In 2008, Nick Kirkham and Alix Paiver bought part of the site and launched Glove Factory Studios in 2010. Nearly 10 years on, more than 50 businesses and 160 people, as well as the Field Kitchen Café create an energetic and dynamic business community overlooking lakes and parkland.

Guy could see how the idea could be expanded to the remaining redundant industrial quarter and began talking to developers. "I knew I wanted to preserve as much I could but build something for the future," he says.

He met Matt Aitkenhead and Ben Lang, owners of Stonewood Partnerships in Castle Combe and was impressed by their track record in converting listed buildings into beautiful bespoke homes. They have begun work on converting the historic stone and brick buildings used for washing, drying and trimming the skins into offices, studios, workshops and services for up to 100 tenants and building 44 new houses and flats around

them to fulfil a vision of a site that provides somewhere to live, work and play.

"We just fell in love with the site as soon as we saw it," says Ben. "There's a wonderful sense of history here and we'll capture and preserve that in this development."

The design of the new buildings will reflect the industrial nature of the site and the team plan to use the remnants of its heritage in a positive way to remind the people living and working there of the 249 years of skill and craftsmanship that went before them.

"We want to use some of the artefacts like the old wooden tanning drums within the design," says Ben. "It is important to us that we retain the look and feel of all the years of industry that have taken place here."

The workspace and residential areas are linked by a public space that will encourage users of both to mix, bringing a sense of community to those who live and work there.

Glove Factory Studios are in partnership with Guy to set up, let and manage the new flexible managed workspace community, which will offer industrial heritage inspiring

spaces from two to 50 desks. Nick sees Holt as pioneering a rural live/work vision where achieving a healthy work-life balance, with urban comforts and access to the outdoors is intertwined in the setting.

It is a template that could be the saviour of many flagging rural communities in the south west – a means of bringing new skills, wealth, families and energy into communities strangled by high house prices and few means of retaining younger residents.

"With high speed connectivity not every business now needs to be in a city," says Alix. "Holt is a fabulous village with enormous energy and social capital, Holt Tannery's new village homes and workspace community can only add to that feeling."

J&T Beaven's headquarters will remain in the same listed building, maintaining a link with the founding family that stretches back into the reign of George II, which pleases Frank.

"The Beaven family were like the squires of the manor," he says. "They loved the village and helped make it what it is – and their name will quite rightly live on." **WL**



Opposite: an artist's impression of how the site will look post-development

This page: most of the Holt site had become redundant when production moved abroad