

Civic Award 2014 - 22 Bancroft, Hitchin

The Hitchin Society Civic Award for 2014 has been presented for a remarkable restoration project in one of Hitchin's most important streets, the completely renovated town house at 22 Bancroft. This fine, early 19th century house was in need of considerable care and attention if it was to resume its position as one of the most significant houses in Hitchin. Bancroft itself, once described as one of the finest streets in England, is distinctive for the number of large houses dating from Georgian and Victorian times, as well as earlier historic buildings. Despite losses to redevelopment in the post-war period, much of the dignity and character of Bancroft remains to this day.



The house at 22 Bancroft dates from the early 19th century; an 1818 map indicates a smaller building on the site, while the present house is shown on the 1840 map.

Early owners of the property included Joseph Sharples, Quaker and partner in a banking firm that was a precursor of Barclays Bank. He was followed as owner by his nephew William Ransom who purchased the house in 1880. William Ransom, also a Quaker, was an accomplished naturalist and archaeologist, and was the founder of the Ransom's distillery and pharmaceuticals business. He lived in 22 Bancroft for a number of years before moving to Newlands, a large house (since demolished) in Newlands Lane, Hitchin. He retained the ownership of 22 Bancroft until he died in 1914, when the house passed to his daughter, but it was his niece Priscilla Ransom who lived there until 1935.

The house was then bought by Dr Harvey Williams, when it became the centre of a growing medical practice until 1981, when the practice relocated to new premises in Queen Street, and became the Portmill Surgery.

After almost 80 years of non-residential use, much work was required to restore it to the standards appropriate to a Grade II listed building. The outside of the building has been transformed; removal of vegetation, total cleaning of the brickwork, re-pointing by a specialist team, and the reinstatement of the iron railings along the front that had been removed in the second world war.

It was considered that the building merited a Civic Award if only for the contribution the renovated building would make to the street scene of Bancroft. However, the inside of the building has also been renovated and restored to an exceptionally high standard. It now

brings out the best of the past, while being converted into two separate houses each providing a high standard of living accommodation for today.

The interior changes include exposing the suitably worn stone floor in the entrance hall, the carefully restored, graceful curved staircase, and the attention to detail with which the plasterwork has been restored - missing pieces re-made by specialist craftsmen from moulds taken from surviving plasterwork. Original fireplaces have been cleaned from layers of paint, and restored to working condition. Cast iron radiators have been installed where appropriate to the period, and perhaps particularly noteworthy, the roof light to the stairwell reformed as a walk-on glass floor in a new space on the top floor. The original window shutters have been restored and the floors renovated using wherever possible the original flooring, all to a high standard; in all respects, highly deserving of a Civic Award.



The Award was made to the developer, Tony Biddle of Garden House Homes Ltd, the architect, Stephen Boddey of BBR Architects, and the specialist builder, Modplan Building & Refurbishment Contractors Ltd. of Shefford.

