



Developments and leases: crisis for the Trust

The Trust has faced a very uncertain future over the last few years due to the development of the Forth Banks site, of which the Trust's premises – Stephenson's Works – is a small part. The site had been designated a development area by the City Council and was to be known as the Stephenson Quarter. Our original landlord, the St Mary the Virgin Charitable Trust sold the freehold of the site to Silverlink Holdings in 2004. The Trust was aware that it was due to have a rent review in March 2008 and entered in to talks with Silverlink regarding the Trust's future. Silverlink was not agreeable to the Trust continuing to lease the boiler shop for car parking as a means of raising income but did agree to find a new tenant for the premises on a short term lease. CENAMPS took over the premises in 2004 on a 3 year lease which gave the Trust a very significant income for that period. Further talks, however, made it clear that our rent, in March 2008, would rise from £5,400 to £140,000 per annum, based on a cleared site. In addition we were faced with a demand for repairs to the building at an estimated cost of £67,000.

It appeared that for the Trust to stay in the building was not an option and so Silverlink and the Trust Commissioned Tyne and Wear Museums (T&WM) to explore the options to find a viable solution for the Trust and Stephenson's Works. In early 2008 the Trust asked for an extension of one year to its current lease at the original terms to give it time to evaluate the T&WM report and the proposed Planning Application and consult with its solicitors and land agents. This was agreed.

The T&WM was published in March 2008, initially with five options that were considered in detail, with a sixth being added later. Finally the Trust was told that David Clouston, the MD of Silverlink had decided take the sixth option to create a not-for-profit company, Stephenson (Special Projects) Ltd, to bring together all public art and heritage strands for the whole site. No further details were available.

A Planning Application was lodged with the City Planning Department in 2008 by Stephenson Quarter Developments (SQD), a subsidiary Company of Silverlink Holdings. This Application, 2008/0500/01/DET, was validated and came into the public domain in September 2008 for anyone to examine in person or online. This generated many comments, from conservation and heritage bodies, to the planning department expressing concern over the perceived threat to the heritage of the site and the inappropriate nature of the proposed developments. These comments included a well researched critical appraisal of the Application by Jules Brown of North of England Civic Trust (NECT) for the Newcastle Conservation Advisory Panel (NCAP) and other comments from English Heritage, the Robert Stephenson Trust, the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE), the Victorian Society, and the Georgian Society.

SQD had specifically excluded the Stephenson's Works from the Application but, in spite of this, stated that it expects the Stephenson's Works to remain with the current users; namely the Robert Stephenson Trust, who had a lease until 2054. This appeared to be at odds with the fact that SQD had known for several months that the Trust would not be able to afford the new rent, particularly as further leasing of the boiler shop would not be allowed.

With relatively few changes or concessions to heritage, the City planners approved the Application in November 2008.

In a further offer Silverlink offered to lease the offices only and excluding the mezzanine and boiler shop at £20,000 per annum. With no prospect of renting the workshop space this was no more affordable than the earlier offer and was rejected as unrealistic. A further suggestion to act as caretaker for an unspecified but limited period at a peppercorn rent was also rejected.

Robert Stephenson Trust



Without a new basis for our tenancy the Trust's continued presence at 20 South Street was unsustainable and in January 2009 the Trust resolved to surrender its lease and vacate the premises by 27 February 2009, one month before the expiry of the current arrangement.

[In a quite separate initiative](#), the Robert Stephenson Trust has been named as coming under the umbrella organisation of a Joint Development Committee. This association of like minded institutions includes the [North East Institute of Mining and Mechanical Engineers](#) and the Literary & Philosophical Society which both occupy Grade II* buildings in close proximity to 20 South Street. We will all benefit from joint promotions.