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On the rocks: Heatherwick Studio's distillery
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BUILDING

Gin and Tectonics

Heatherwick Studio's renovation of a decayed mill for Bombay Sapphire is as remarkable for its subtlety as its set-pieces, says ***Dominic McKenzie****.*

A beautiful, crisp autumnal day in the bucolic Hampshire countryside: blue skies, leaves turning golden. Laverstoke Mill is an immaculately preserved Victorian factory complex with mature trees all around and the crystal clear River Test coursing through its heart. As the production site for Bombay Sapphire gin, the setting is almost too good to be true. Close your eyes and try to picture a drinks factory – I imagine some hulking corrugated processing plant on the outskirts of Slough. Instead, this is the industrial equivalent of Ridley Scott's Hovis commercial. As one walks to the heart of the factory along the banks of the babbling river, thick with rushes and purple flowers, one can only wonder at the incredible good fortune that its buildings are all so well preserved, and how lucky Bombay Sapphire has been to be based here through the centuries…

But of course it is not by chance that all is so perfect. That arrival sequence has been carefully choreographed, as indeed has the layout and ad-hoc appearance of the buildings, and even the river. And in fact, it turns out that even the apparent longevity of Bombay Sapphire's residency in this location is illusory. The gin – launched in 1987 – was produced in Warrington until a catastrophic fire at the distillery in 2006 started a nationwide search for a new home.

Thomas Heatherwick's involvement began a few years later. It was right at the start of the recession, so he was particularly delighted to be asked to design a working factory, and 'not to convert one into an art gallery'. At that time the company was still considering sites across the country and Heatherwick originally anticipated designing a visitor centre as part of a new-build plant.

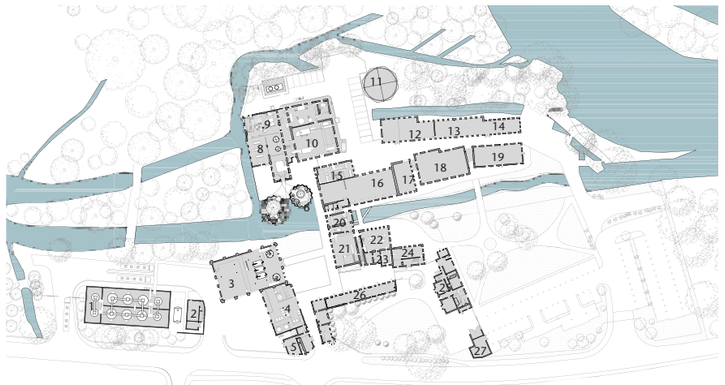
When the derelict mill was discovered, its potential excited everyone involved. The client appreciated the opportunity to reinforce the company's branding as a 'premium English gin' by embedding the company in the picturesque English countryside, and the team relished the chance to restore 'an iconic piece of English history'.

Dating from the early eighteenth century, Laverstoke Mill originally produced paper, and came to national significance supplying banknotes. Production stopped in the 1960s and the site gradually decayed. What remained when Bombay Sapphire acquired it in 2009 were 49 structures, some of very high quality and others not. A crucial part of Heatherwick's initial masterplanning work was 'unpicking' these buildings, which he describes as being 'built up like barnacles… a cacophony of structures clogging the site'.

Key strategic decisions were made about which buildings should be removed. Some – concerning buildings that were poorly constructed from sheet metal or asbestos – were easy, but more difficult choices were hotly debated with English Heritage and the local conservation department. In the end the team removed 23 structures to create a new open centre at the heart of the site.

The other primary move was to restore the river. When the designers first visited Laverstoke Mill, they were shocked that there was no sense of the river being there; it had been consigned to a concrete culvert running under the site. Indeed once you were inside the complex there was no sense of being in the countryside at all.

Heatherwick says that the integration of the river with the buildings is what he is 'most proud of'. The watercourse was widened so that it is clearly visible throughout the site, and it does give a fantastic quality to the whole project, connecting and orienting the visitor and framing all the buildings with a waterside view. 'The river is the device that navigates the visitor across the site', as Heatherwick puts it.



The Victorian buildings that remain have been restored in a sensitive way. Project architect Eliot Postma (who worked with executive architect GWP Architects) explains that Heatherwick Studio's policy was to restore the existing buildings with an extremely light touch and that there was a 'conscious effort to avoid everything feeling too designed'.

Grade 2-listed facades were carefully restored, and where removed structures had

Top, left *Two glasshouses occupy the cleared heart of the site (all phs: Iwan Baan).*
Plan *1 Tank Farm, 2 MCC, 3 India House, 4 botanical store, 5 gatehouse, 6 tropical glasshouse, 7 Mediterranean glasshouse, 8 dry room, 9 Carterhead Still House, 10 energy centre, 11 sprinkler tank, 12 pump house, 13 storage, 14 filter room, 15 facilities, 16 gallery, 17 Daiken House, 18 restaurant, 19 cafe, 20 Laverstoke Heritage Room, 21 entrance, 22 Mill Bar, 23 The Vault, 24 shop, 25 Master Distillers House, 26 cottages, 27 coach house.*

previously abutted others, new brick facades tie in seamlessly. New details such as enlarged steel windows again match closely with original details found on the site. Heatherwick describes instinctively selecting designs which you might find in archetypal factories: key-clamp balustrades and open mesh stairs.

Internally the existing buildings are largely painted white, with white-painted tongue-and-groove matchboarding under the roofs and existing structural elements painted white to match. Lighting is white and discreet. Floors are dark grey concrete. Against this reticent, tasteful palette, the extraordinary sculptural forms of the copper gin stills are appropriately foregrounded.

So far, so modest: moves so subtle and well-judged that you wouldn't know work had been done. This is impressive, intelligently considered renovation, but can it really be from Thomas Heatherwick, the master showman? Inevitably there is one significant flourish, which forms the centrepiece to the entire scheme – a pair of greenhouses which contain living examples of the 'botanicals' (the herbs, spices and fruits) that are used to produce gin. One greenhouse has a Mediterranean climate, and the other a tropical climate.

Ingeniously, the greenhouses use waste heat from the distillation process, contributing to the project's BREEAM Outstanding rating. Hot air is introduced through vents at the bottom of the greenhouses, expelled through extruded nozzle forms at the top and vented via the chimney of an adjacent Victorian building. In effect the greenhouses are like three-dimensional air circulation diagrams.

These are 'iconic' buildings in the truest Jencksian sense: they adorn the book I was given on departure, and will inevitably come to represent the distillery in our collective memory. Similarly, Heatherwick compares the hard-to-describe sculptural forms to glass cloches that you get in gardens. So did the client request an iconic building for branding purposes? Heatherwick's answer is a definite 'no'. The greenhouses are the result of problem-solving - one problem being: how do you avoid the kitsch of the visitor centre, with its simulated versions of what happens in the factory beyond, housed in over-designed rooms? The answer: you let the visitor see the actual factory and the process of making. Another problem: how do you communicate what goes into the gin? Answer: you build greenhouses to show the living plants.

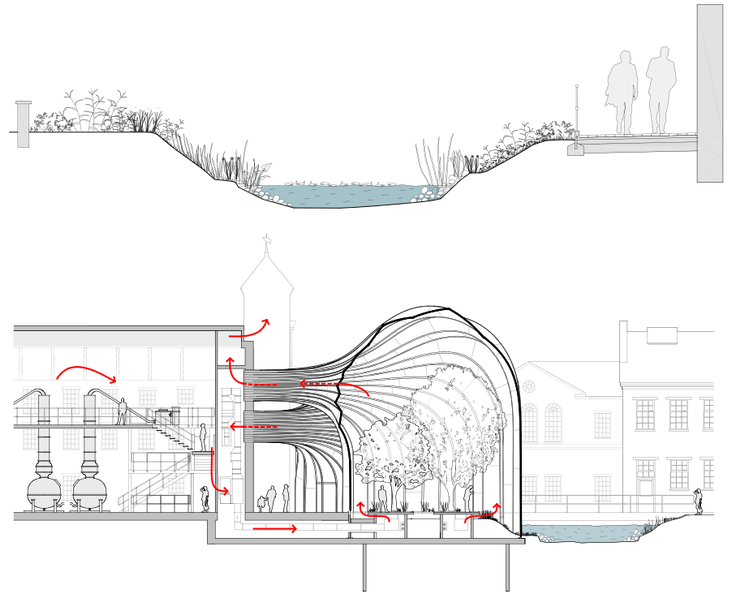
Once the idea was established, the designers considered the history of English greenhouses from Paxton to the Palm House at Kew, and discussed how they might add to this tradition. A key driver was Heatherwick Studio's dislike of the conventional way of venting air via louvres at the top of greenhouses. The resultant form comprises 793 pieces of uniquely-shaped curved structural glass and over 10,000 individual components.

Heatherwick also highlights both his and the client's longstanding interest in glass. Ten years ago he won a competition organised by Bombay Sapphire for a bridge in King's Cross which was to be made entirely from glass, and the distiller has a strong tradition of exploring glass forms in its packaging and branding.

Overall Thomas Heatherwick's intervention at Laverstoke Mill is an extremely strong piece of work. Inevitably the 'cloches' will get all the attention, but to my mind the rest of the work is every bit as impressive: strategic thinking and careful restoration combine to bring the historic mill to life again and reintegrate it with the beautiful countryside. Step forward the modest Thomas Heatherwick.

Above *The two glasshouses, 11m and 15m tall, shelter 10 varieties of botanicals. Laverstoke Mill is Bombay Sapphire's first in-house production facility, and is also open for members of the public to visit. The original brief included a visitor centre. However the design team preferred to give the public a more authentic experience by getting closer to the distillation process and seeing the copper stills in use.*

Below *Buildings before renovation; 'before' and 'after' plans.*



Dominic McKenzie established Dominc McKenzie Architects in 2011 and was previously a director at Alison Brooks Architects. Recent projects include the mirror-faced Eidolon House in north London.

Project team
Designer: Heatherwick Studio; design team: Thomas Heatherwick, Katerina Dionysopoulou, Eliot Postma, Alma Wang, Ville Saarikoski; executive architect, landscape architect: GWP; project manager: Meller; glass house structural engineer: Arup; m&e engineer: Couch Perry Wilkes; civil and structural engineer: Graham Schofield Assocs; planning consultant: CBRE; heritage consultant: Giles Quarme Assocs; environmental consultant: SKM Enviros; horticultural advisor: Royal Botanical Gardens of Kew; process consultant: Alectia; BREEAM assessor: Project Services.