

Charles Bage, the Flax Industry and Shrewsbury's Iron-Framed Mills

Image: View of Ditherington Mill in April 2003, the world's first completely iron-framed building. The factory was built in 1796-1797 to spin flax. It continued to manufacture the product until 1886. After 1897, the buildings were adapted as a maltings by William Jones & Sons. With a brief interruption during World War II, they continued to serve as a maltings until 1987. The building has been empty ever since.

Image from: photograph by Nabi Heydari (April 2003)

Text: Malcolm Dick

Summary

Between 1796 and 1797, the world's first completely iron-framed building, Ditherington Flax Mill, was built for a partnership, Marshall, Benyon and Bage. Their aim was to create a factory to spin flax which could then be woven into linen. Historically, the purpose of the building was less important than its design by its architect, Charles Bage (1751-1822). Bage created the ancestor of all iron-framed and steel-framed structures, including modern skyscrapers. The building remains largely intact and is currently (2004) unused. It lies within a complex of several former industrial buildings on the outskirts of Shrewsbury town centre.

This article by Malcolm Dick explores the history of Ditherington Mill and places the factory within the context of local industrial developments. It also examines the partnerships in which Bage was involved and looks at his involvement in two other industrial sites in Shrewsbury at Castlefields and Kingsland.

The author has been helped by published research by Barrie Trinder into the industrial archaeology of the mill and archival material at Shropshire Archives. Illustrations are drawn from Shropshire Archives, Birmingham City Archives and contemporary photographs by Nabi Heydari, which were taken in April 2003.