

Historic Portlaw site set for assessment



The Irish Tanners site, which was also the home of Portlaw's once thriving Cotton Mill

Thirty years after its closure, sending Portlaw into an economic downturn that one could argue it's never fully recovered from, the former Irish Tanners plant is to be environmentally assessed by Waterford City & County Council.

"The long-term remediation" of the site "is a step closer" after Portlaw native and Minister of State Paudie Coffey confirmed that the local authority will "assess the environmental condition of the site and inform the investigation of the longer-term options for use of the site and to initiate remediation and reuse of the site".

The site, within which the derelict Mayfield House also stands, has laid largely idle for 30 years, and fallen into deeper dereliction with every passing year - it's also had an environmental question mark hanging over it for several decades.

As this newspaper reported back in January 2006: "The polluted area includes an untreated 3.5-acre dump filled with hazardous waste in what was once a mill pond and reservoir for the town's water supply directly beside the canal and River Clodiagh.

"According to the EPA, 'as the Pond is unlined, it is likely that these substances are contaminating the groundwater in the vicinity as well as seeping into the nearby canal'. While an amount of liquid waste has been removed, other contaminants such as chemicals and dyes are contained in barrels and vats."

Then a County Councillor, Paudie Coffey said it was "'highly unacceptable' that the 30 acres of development lands that make up the former industrial Mayfield complex adjacent to the town have been allowed to lie idle for years", according to Jamie O'Keeffe's report.

The land in question, according to the statement issued on Thursday last "has always been a complicated brownfield site due to landfilling on the site during the operational years of Irish Tanners".

With that in mind, Minister Coffey "has committed €200,000 over a two-year period to support the on-site remediation study which is a critical step forward to bring the site back to beneficial use for the community," according to a statement released on Thursday last.

"The initial objective is to secure the environmental safety (including physical access, soils, aquatic and atmospheric conditions) of the site by a geo-survey and environmental contamination study to establish the range of contaminants and extent of area impacted within the Tannery/Cotton Mill Site on the adjacent environment including River Clodiagh (a Special Area of Conservation) and public water supply.

"The study will inform and address the current unregulated environmental condition of site including risks to public health and safety."

Minister Coffey, who was the first Chairman of Portlaw's Heritage Committee, stated: "I've always believed that the site has strong potential for regeneration and re-use given its significant historical and industrial heritage..."

"But the real potential of the site can only be achieved when the contamination and environmental issues are dealt with in a strategic and comprehensive way."

Waterford City & County Council is to engage experts to carry out the various technical and scientific assessments required "present a holistic picture of the specific conditions on site with regard to waste, water, pollutants etc".

The Minister's statement adds: "The reports from this assessment will be considered by the City & County Council along with the Department and the Environmental Protection Agency with a view to making specific recommendations for options for full remediation of the site." The site itself was recently subject to a visit from staff from both the Department of the Environment and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Said Minister Coffey: "What's been put in motion is, without question, long overdue but a critical step in the overall process of remediation process and of bringing the site back into beneficial use.

"This is a site of major cultural, industrial and historical significance. Portlaw Cotton Mill is an important part of the story not only of Waterford but the story of Ireland.

It was a pioneering town in terms of planning, engineering and industrial innovation and pointed the way towards a better

future for thousands of people while also serving as a model for other towns in Ireland and the United Kingdom.

"It has much to teach us still and demands to be preserved and cherished as part of where we have come from and who we are."

The site was originally home to the famous Cotton Mill that was built and operated by the Malcolmsen family, who leased 16 acres of land from John Medlycott of Mayfield House in 1825.

The cotton mill operated on the site from the late 1820s through to the 1890s, by then under the aegis of the Portlaw Spinning Company, before closing in 1904.

Upon its completion, the factory's 260 feet by 40 feet dimensions made it (as widely reported at the time) the largest single span building in the world.

The site remained idle for 28 years until Irish Tanners took it over, prior to its official opening on September 26th 1935 by then Industry and Commerce Minister, and future Taoiseach, Sean Lemass.

According to author Tom Hunt: "Many geographers whilst referring to the model townships of the Industrial Revolution...fail to recognise that Portlaw was the inspiration behind Bessbrook (in Armagh) and it also said that Cadburys, when building their village of Bournville had Portlaw in mind - at least its layout." woven.

Hope, as opposed to inspiration, has been injected into the debate about this historic Mid-Waterford site for the first time in several years. And while this represents only the first step, no journey is possible without such a stride.

A Welcome Step Towards Regeneration

It's a historical coincidence that one of Waterford's most prominent industrial sites has been idle for approximately three decades on two separate occasions in the past 116 years.

And while Minister Coffey's announcement of Thursday last doesn't mean we'll be seeing a rejuvenated Cotton Mill/Tannery site open to the public in the next year, or even the next three years, to have some hope injected into its potential future use makes for welcome news.

The exact nature of what was left on site following the tannery's closure - be it buried or otherwise - has been the subject of claim and counterclaim for the better part of 30 years.

The reality? No-one is really too sure how bad things are environmentally, and what level of damage has been inflicted upon the local water table for that matter.

And what may be unearthed in the event of the Mill Pond being re-exposed could well determine how quickly, slowly or otherwise anything is ever to be done with this riverside site, which flanks onto the forested splendour of Curraghmore Estate.

The prospect of a sweeping public park on the site, the potential expansion of the delightful canal/river walk beneath Bridge Street, the floodlighting of the magnificent chimney stack, an industrial museum, etc, is enticing. But all of this will cost big bucks, money that the Exchequer doesn't have to spare right now.

But there's no harm in dreaming about a better future for an area which could be made possible by honouring its mighty industrial past.