

WINNING ENTRY FOR NAILSWORTH POET LAUREATE 2024

DAYS MILL, NAILSWORTH

By Pip Haywood

Eleven chance courses of grey bricks,  
A hieroglyph inlaid in limestone  
With two in umber on the ends of lines  
As punctuation,  
Evidence of industry, a trace  
Of all that happened here.

Drop down the stonework  
To the deafening stream  
Powering through its dark culvert  
Where once turned the majestic wheel  
Of Days Mill, each paddle filled and  
Drained, rising and descending,  
The repetition the pages of an  
Album flick flicking

Flick flick flickering to drive  
The cogs and belts within,  
Clattering the open looms  
Shuttling the thin silk threads  
Turning bolts of fine cloth.

Now, no wheel, but a little bridge  
Fenced with twirls of random ironwork.  
Look upstream,  
See the shaded gulley, where Edna  
Would delight in the dance of the  
Dipper, and find wild raspberries  
Behind parked cars.

The presence of a building  
Each age and set of concerns  
Defining the present, but with  
An eye to the accumulation  
Of all that has gone before.

The flickering of film on the top floor  
My spooling of word and image  
Enlacing time, and there  
With me is Raymond, fourth Davis  
Since Alphonso in this place,  
Looking out on the memory of his  
Childhood. Above his Edna's dipper

Is now a dead straight channel  
And to its right, the toilet block  
And grey expanse where the buses  
Swing in. Behind, the 'sixties in  
Straight lines: newsagent,  
Police station, library. For young Ray  
This had been different place. He made a  
Raft, and paddled across the wide  
Expanse of the millpond,  
By then no longer turning its wheel  
But still glinting in the sunlight,  
Covering all that became the  
Conveniences, the bus station  
The shops, the consequence of his father's  
Compulsory buy-out, the Council's  
Drive for the greater good.

And there's more. Where now you  
Can buy fine wine in the old fire station  
Or dine next door on Indian cuisine  
Stood the pens of the cattle market  
With all the sounds of bellowing  
And hammered prices.  
In my mind's eye I see standing there  
Great backs of bulls  
Undulating in the waters of the pond.

So that was Raymond's time,  
And Alastair their son would  
Cut you to exact size a mattress  
Or bench cushions, up in the 'foam room',  
While down in the shop  
Ray and Edna would occupy the  
Parker Knolls, unconcerned about the  
Lack of sales. One lunchtime  
We came down from cutting film  
And they remarked how peaceful the  
Morning had been. On going to the  
Front door, we found it still  
Securely bolted.

Come in today through the same  
Glazed door, with Days Mill  
Still clear on the glass above,  
The same rattle of the brass knob  
And yes, the same bolt.  
In the wide window  
Now a dining table, metal  
Lampshades, a brown overall

On a dress dummy, none  
Dissimilar to the Davis' way  
With a clothes-horse, foot-stool,  
Hat-stand and stacking tables,  
Except for the crinkly, orange gel  
Stuck firmly to the glass,  
Serving since the 'fifties  
As sun-protection. Like a burden  
Of inheritance, never removed,  
Thus mystifying the display  
To any passers-by outside.

Come in now, all is bright and  
Welcoming, with a fine restored  
Sofa in the opposite window, even  
Advertised proudly on the website.  
The team are ready to assist  
In any way they can. But stand  
For just a moment and the  
Kept finger-marked paintwork,  
The mysterious doors, tell  
So much about the passage of time.

Turn right as you enter  
And there was Ray in his dark office,  
Quietly whistling as you knocked.  
You wait while he completes  
A hand-written bill, a curled calendar  
From a decade past, still there on the  
Partition. Every chit carefully  
Considered and transcribed into  
Heavy books of accounts,  
The scratch of his fountain pen,  
The patience of a time long before  
Keyboards and screens.

Walk through now past the  
Tubs of bright candles  
And you will find a curtained  
Doorway with a timeworn sign above  
Saying Staff. Stepping through, you'd  
Have entered here a catacomb of  
Costume: is it fancy dress,  
Pantomime, World War, Thirties,  
Wet-look booties, pink wigs?  
You name it, and finger along  
Rail upon rail, squeaking the  
Hangers, disappearing behind  
Voluminous and billowing curtains

With such titters and Oh My Gods!

Back to the candles and skin lotions  
There's another unobtrusive  
Closed door, oh, Edna's making coffee  
She emerges with steaming cups.  
Inside, the hot kettle on its shelf,  
The only toilet in the building,  
The gas boiler with the chrome arm  
Of the hot tap you must always  
Keep over the little basin.  
While you stand there, you can glimpse  
Hell through the floorboards -  
The basement foundry with  
Purple flames and stuttered  
Detonations, a chasm  
I never descended to in all my years.

Now, you may walk down the grand  
New painted stairway, pink and red,  
Deep into this underworld, where you  
May find bright plastic cups, dog cards,  
Yo-yos and minute rubber giraffes.  
Walk through and treat yourself  
To cake and coffee, wary all the time  
That a flame-breathing gremlin may  
Emerge from a cubby-hole.

So is this as fine a time as any  
For Days Mill? Flick back to the  
Sore hands of the loom workers,  
All the chairs and divans  
Bought and sold, shelves of  
Dutch wax prints with African designs,  
So many etchings and paintings  
Quietly considered on white-washed walls,  
Second-hand books leafed through  
And contemplated.

This place cupboards us  
And peeping in we see that  
What we are is veined  
By what has come before.

And what of our hieroglyph?  
Still there, above the  
Powering stream,  
As we stand on the brink  
Of time less clear

Than any we have known.