

Derry/Londonderry

# WITHIN THESE WALLS

Post-conflict Derry/Londonderry is finally enjoying the right balance of heritage and progress, writes **Mary Kerrigan**

PICTURE: FRANK HARKIN

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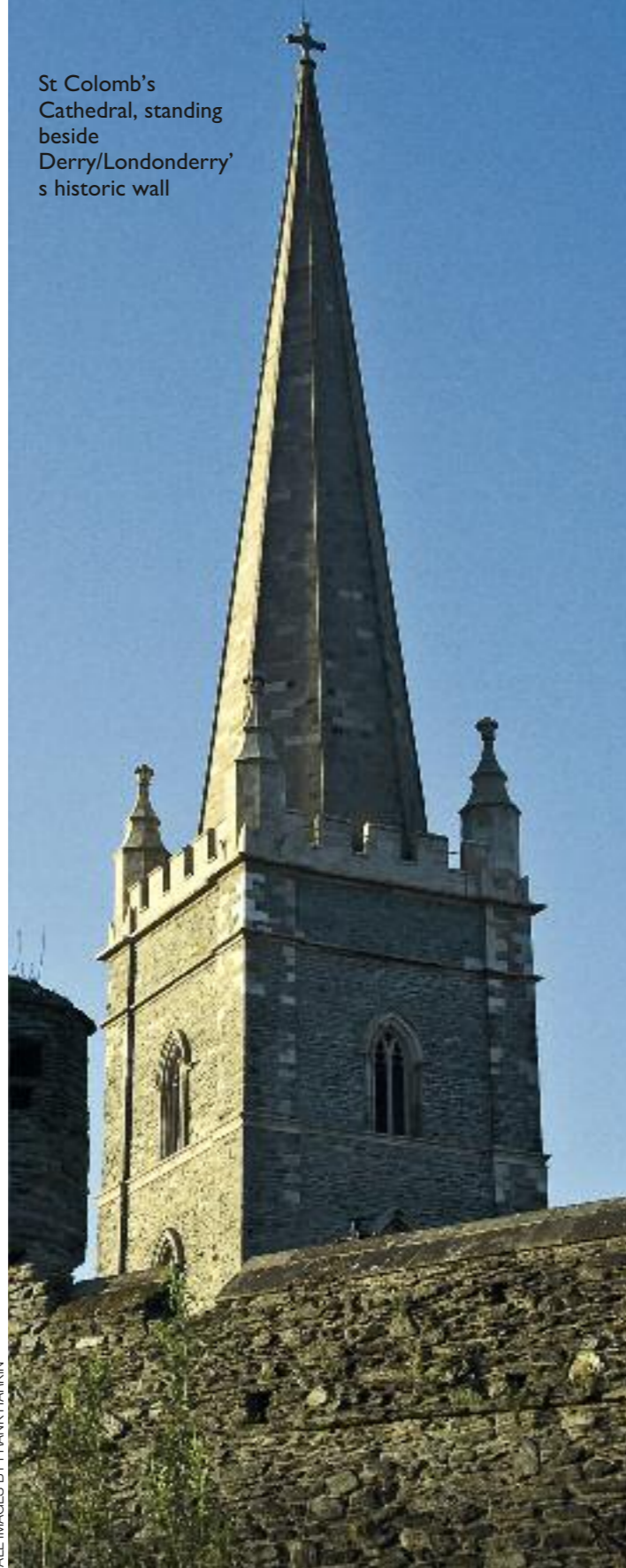
**F**orged on the anvil of conflict, the walled city of Derry/Londonderry is the multi-faceted jewel in the crown of James I's early 17th-century Plantation of Ulster. Arguably the most beautifully sited city on the island of Ireland, its formation was built and paid for by London's livery companies. Europe's youngest walled city, the last in Ireland with intact walls, rises from the strategically defensive "Hill of Derry". Its stunning setting overlooks the broad sweep of the majestic River Foyle, taking in panoramic views east towards the Sperrin Mountains, and Inishowen Hills in the north.

Created to protect incoming English and Scottish Planters from the native Irish, it was one of 23 new towns proposed in the 1609 Regional Plan for Ulster, by the town planners of the day. The only one enclosed by defensive walls, the city was founded in 1613 and was complete by 1619. Ulster Plantation towns are immediately identifiable by a central space called "The Diamond", though, curiously, none is diamond shaped. This urban heritage collection is unique in Britain and Ireland.

Ireland's first example of true urban planning, Derry's walled city streets were laid out on a formal grid pattern derived from Roman military planning. The roots of this thinking are evident in the ruins of Pompeii. This walled city is thoroughly European and classical – a highly significant, distinctive cultural heritage asset – for everyone in these islands.

Besieged in 1689 by the forces of James II, the city was stretched almost to breaking point. The people, reduced to eating rats, held out for 105 days in favour of William of Orange. Two of Ireland's most important historic events, the Derry Siege and the 1690 Battle of the Boyne, significantly changed the course of European history. Today, the only visible remnant of pre-Siege Derry is St Columb's Cathedral (1628-33), the first post-Reformation cathedral built by the Anglican Church in the British Isles. As a result of the Great Fire of London, this is the only authentic London Planter's Gothic-style church left.

Within living memory of the Siege, the flamboyant, Fourth Earl of Bristol, Frederick Hervey, became Bishop of Derry in 1768. Active, philanthropic and with a great interest in art, this man of the Enlightenment undertook the Grand Tour five times during his Derry bishopric. His influence was central to the emergence of the Georgian Derry. His Casino in Derry, later the St Columb's College library, was browsed by such giants of the 20th century political and literary scene as John Hume and the late Seamus Heaney. Ecumenically minded, the Earl Bishop donated impressive marble Corinthian columns to the interior of the Roman Catholic Long Tower



St Columb's Cathedral, standing beside Derry/Londonderry's historic wall

ALL IMAGES BY FRANK HARKIN

Church built in 1783, on the site of St Columba's 6th-century monastic settlement.

Georgian elegance gave way to industrialisation. Expansion beyond the walls accommodated hordes of rural workers arriving in search of work in the burgeoning shirt factories and docks. In its heyday more shirts were manufactured in Derry than anywhere else in Britain. Once the backbone of the city's economy, none of its 44 shirt factories operate



**Left:** Bishop Street. **Above:** London Street. **Right:** Bin men on the streets of Derry/Londonderry. **Below:** A portrait of Derry/Londonderry in 1800 by Henry Brocas

today, and only a handful are left to tell the tale.

After the Second World War, grinding poverty for the majority exacerbated by sectarianism and gerrymandering, triggered the Troubles. At the epicentre, hundreds of bombs exploded within and without the famous Derry walls. Though they didn't rain out of the sky, they might as well have done. The effect was the same. On top of tragic loss of life and injury they tore the physical heart out of this most special, historic city.

It's remarkable more wasn't lost. The actions of a few committed local architects saved numerous bomb-damaged Georgian buildings, within the walls, from the wrecking ball. Some "at risk", listed shirt factories were given new life and brighter futures under then North West Development Officer, Jim Foster.

But, despite those moments of brightness, lots of old buildings languished or bit the dust unnecessarily, long after the bombings stopped.



COURTESY OF DERRY CITY COUNCIL, ARCHIVES & GENEALOGY

Other factors contributed. In the early years of the Troubles, removal of most council powers to a centralised civil service, unaccountable to the local electorate, created what was known as the "democratic deficit", as well as very fragmented governance structures. Along with a chronically weak economy, weak planning controls, and a slow-bedding 1990s Peace Process, all of these shaped the emerging culture of development. Unwilling to invest in such a high-risk context the private sector was courted by a public sector laden with carrots of generous grant aid. Inadvertently this gave developers the balance of power.

"Progress" was new-build – listed buildings nothing more than a potential "site". Senior civil servants spoke of the need to "balance heritage against progress". In reality heritage barely got a look in. In the drive to jump-start Derry's flagging economy, efforts by local politicians keen to create retail facilities "on a par" with other UK cities resulted in demolition of whole streets, parts of streets, and more than a few listed buildings, to facilitate constructions like FoyleSide – the largest single shopping centre under one roof in Northern Ireland. Immediately outside the walls, FoyleSide's success was the death knell for commercial life in the walled city. This and other uninspiring developments presented a new Derry face to its majestic River Foyle. Sadly the quality of replacements was no match for the cultural and architectural riches of the predecessors.

Cultural disinterest in old buildings revealed itself in spectacular losses. Despite valiant lobbying by a few, the B+ listed "Tillie and Henderson" shirt factory – the largest in the British Isles when built (mentioned by Karl Marx in *Das Kapital* and visited by his daughter Eleanor) was demolished without official consent in January 2003. Its fate was sealed by an owner set on its removal in favour of a new hotel (still unbuilt a decade later); protracted inaction by the statutory government agencies tasked with its protection; 38 arson attacks, and the predominant collective lack of interest in heritage among the wider community.

As Tillie's bit the dust a counter movement was underway. In the late 1960s Derry's doughtiest heritage campaigner, architect Joe Tracey, set about recording what remained. Passionate about Derry's old buildings he founded the Foyle Civic Trust in 1989. For a quarter-century it presented the case for heritage in the northwest – even when no one listened.

In 1999 Heritage Lottery Fund launched its Townscape Heritage Initiative (THI) across the UK, providing repair grant aid to owners of selected old buildings in economically deprived areas. Seeing the opportunity and seizing the moment, the relatively newly formed town centre management organisation, City Centre Initiative, and then Foyle Civic Trust Chair, Mary McLaughlin, fostered buy-in from key statutory bodies to establish Walled City Partnership. Twelve years on this enduring marriage between Foyle Civic Trust, Derry City Council and City

# Derry/ Londonderry

Centre Initiative, is Northern Ireland's largest, most successful THI.

Walled City THI has overseen the repair of 25 old buildings in one quarter of the walled city. Today 25 ground-floor shops are occupied, primarily by locally owned independents. Their previously vacant upper floors function as 22 inner city apartments and over 1,500 square metres of office space achieve 95 per cent occupancy. The relatively modest HLF grant of just under £2.7m, in two phases, has generated an overall spend, so far, of approximately £6.5m from a range of statutory agencies; and private owners' contributions.

Clusters of repaired "two up, two down" shops and flats combine with flagship buildings like the former Northern Counties Hotel at nearby Magazine Gate, or former Irvine's Printing Works. The latter presents a statuesque Edwardian facade onto picturesque Waterloo Street, once the backdrop to regular rioting and devastating events like Bloody Sunday. Also fronting Hangman's Bastion on the city walls, dancers come and go to its upper floors, on their way to Echo Echo, Northern Ireland's leading contemporary dance company's new studio. This has really ramped up street vibrancy and vitality.

The physical transformation wrought by the Walled City THI was described by Gillian Darley as "cohesive, substantial and transformative" (bdonline.co.uk). This physical transformation goes hand in hand with the intangible transformation of minds spearheaded by a new Walled City THI education programme. The first of its kind in Northern Ireland, it's been generating greater awareness and appreciation of built heritage townscape in the walled city.

With Northern Irish heritage awareness lagging well behind the rest of the UK, in all walks of life, it was clear that a programme of advertised lectures and workshops, however fascinating, would likely preach only to the converted. Instead, Walled City Partnership initiated a dynamic opportunistic strategy to engage wide-ranging target audiences. Live heritage issues locally, were used as the vehicle for rapid, meaningful learning. Opportunities aplenty presented.

As part of the pre-UK City of Culture 2013 street clean-up, removal of old cast-iron streetlights in two of Derry's finest Georgian streets, prompted adjacent property owners to voice concerns. Told these were being removed for fear that vehicular impact would cause the old cast iron to shatter, and could cause a pedestrian fatality, the authorities advised, with conviction, they were beyond repair. The truth was their condition hadn't ever been



IMAGE BY MARTIN MCKEOWN



IMAGE BY FRANK HARKIN

properly inspected or analysed.

In its research, Walled City THI discovered these were Northern Ireland's last collection of historic streetlights, perhaps the oldest on the island of Ireland, and nationally important. Their replacement with reproductions bearing no resemblance to the originals, stirred attempts to halt further removal of the old lampposts through official channels – to no avail. The sight of historic Mourne granite kerbs heading off on the back of a lorry to the local dump, signalled it was time to circulate Walled City Partnership's findings to journalists and the wider community.

BBC Radio Foyle's Mark Patterson Show started the ball rolling. Its interest piqued by *North West Telegraph's* Anna Maguire in her piece "Road to Ruin", UTV featured the story on Sunday teatime news. Derry News headlines screamed 'STREETLIGHTS COULD HAVE KILLED', while in the *Derry Journal*, Eamonn McCann asked: "Why don't they bulldoze all

those basalt columns at the Giant's Causeway into the sea and install slabs of pre-stressed concrete instead? The Department.....could ensure nothing of historical or aesthetic value is lost by spray-painting the new chunks of stone an appropriate colour to blend in with the seascape. If it's good enough for Clarendon Street." Despite more coverage than the average murder, the diggers kept on digging.

Directed, by the SPAB Technical Helpline, to master heritage ironworker Geoff Wallis in Bristol, his invaluable guidance on the ins and outs of repairing historic cast-iron columns, informed a second Eamonn McCann article. Within days, the rape of Derry's cultural townscape heritage had ceased. By the end of 2013 three different types of old cast-iron lampposts in nearby Asylum Road, had been repaired to best conservation practice, and reinstated. Old granite kerbs and setts remain where they are.

**Above:** A Derry/  
Londonderry teenager taking part in a traditional building skills workshop.

**Left:** An event aiming to demonstrate the effect on street vibrancy of a building project at the former Northern Counties Hotel

# Derry/ Londonderry



**Above:** Children taking part in The Seeing Project, which aims to 'prop up the eyelids of young children on matchsticks'. **Right:** Mary Kerrigan speaking to Derry/Londonderry youngsters

Late in 2011 news that an Options Appraisal examining the future location of a rail terminus for Derry had been commissioned, presented another great learning opportunity. Potential to re-use Derry's old listed, at-risk Victorian station, the last remaining historic rail terminus in Northern Ireland, was the least favoured of four options by co-funding agencies, Ilex (Derry's Urban Regeneration Company) and Translink (Northern Ireland's rail provider). Walled City Partnership's briefings, highlighting the architectural and historic significance of the old station, and making the economic case for re-using unique heritage, were circulated to a range of key stakeholders, including local councillors, MLAs, and Into The West, Derry's community rail lobby group.

Walled City Partnership was invited by the Speaker of the House at Stormont, William Hay, MLA, to convene a representative delegation to meet Minister for Transport, Danny Kennedy. A public consultation followed. Sixty-four per cent of respondents favoured repair and re-use of the old station. For the first time since the Troubles began Derry's wider community registered majority support for the repair and re-use of a historic building, over new-build.

In a city with a severe shortage of traditional building and heritage management skills, "A Taste of Traditional Building Skills" is a key Walled City THI programme. Strongly influenced by the approach taken in SPAB Scholarship and William Morris Crafts Fellowship, this is

designed to whet appetites and raise interest in heritage careers. This series of site-based workshops, offers mixed clusters of students, construction professionals and trades-people, opportunities for hands-on experience with high-calibre specialist repair craftsmen and women.

Last, but by no means least, the children. Engaging teenagers in heritage awareness seemed daunting. An invitation from St Joseph's College, in Derry's Creggan Estate, to collaborate with its Year 10 Geography and Art teachers and classes, on their entry for the Northern Ireland Environment Agency's 2012 "Open Doors to the Future" competition, was a welcome opportunity to help a class of mixed ability 14-year-old boys develop a conservation plan for an old building. Focusing on the listed, almost vacant former Rosemount Shirt Factory nearby, Walled City THI devised and delivered a series of interactive workshops. Their creative entry achieved first prize in its age category. The boys received their prize from Minister Alex Attwood, DoE (NI), and met Prince Charles.

Keen to instill a deep love of heritage as well as creative design in the youngest children, Walled City THI devised "The Seeing Project". This fun, interactive, cross-curricular project is designed to "prop up the eyelids of young children on matchsticks" so they truly see the heritage in their world. Part of the Derry-Londonderry UK City of Culture 2013 programme, this develops the capacity of seven-year-olds to recognise and describe five types of



IMAGES BY JOHN MADDAI

old windows and in turn two major western, architectural styles – as well as any architect.

Using their newly gained knowledge the kids get a chance to create the heritage of the future. Influenced by the Appreciative Inquiry philosophy [www.seeingproject.co.uk](http://www.seeingproject.co.uk) provides teachers, parents and children, worldwide, with all the resources needed to see, appreciate and share their unique cultural heritage. A year later, Deanna from Fountain Primary School, Londonderry (aged five during the project), amazed interviewer Eileen Walsh on Derry's Drive 105 Arts Show, telling her how much she'd enjoyed learning about 12 pane sliding sash windows.

Twelve years on, the Walled City THI team's work, as custodian of the physical and cultural transformation of this fascinating post-conflict European and Georgian walled city, is bearing fruit. Though there is still a way to go, this most special of Diamonds is regaining its sparkle. ○

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is a SPAB Scholar.**