

# Historic 'eyesores' - should they stay or should they go?

Mary Kerrigan  
Walled City Partnership

Following the dramatic demolition of the historic Hamilton's Shirt factory on John Street last week, the Walled City Partnership's Education Officer Mary Kerrigan looks at some of Derry's oldest buildings which, despite their historic significance, lie empty. She asks - what next?

Hamilton's Shirt Factory - an eyesore fit for nothing but the wrecker's ball, or worth saving as part of the collective legacy of Derry's important 19th and 20th century textile industry? Now it's gone these questions might seem irrelevant. But are they?

What about other empty, dilapidated old buildings in our three conservation areas? If Hamilton's was only fit for the bulldozer how many others should we add to the list? The buildings pictured here are the tip of the iceberg. All lie in our conservation areas. Many have been empty for years. All are repairable. Should we knock them all down in the name of 'progress'? Or should we work pro-actively to rescue them and find new uses? Why bother?

Roots are important to us all. We need to know who we are and where we came from. Without this vital information our sense of identity is not complete. It's no different for a city. Historic buildings are one of the most obvious expressions of our past and our communal identity. They help tell and explain our story.

New towns like Craigavon and Milton Keynes, devoid of any memory or legacy from the past, are sterile and anonymous. Authentic old buildings are unique. They can't be re-created. That makes them special. They are integral to our distinctiveness and make Derry instantly recognisable from Armagh, Cork or Belfast. As our old buildings collapse Derry becomes more anonymous - less special, less unique - more like anywhere else. Does this matter?

Last October an Irish Times report on research prepared for Tourism Ireland revealed that many British tourists no longer see the Republic of Ireland as being sufficiently different to merit holidaying there. UK tourists peaked in 2006 at 3.8m but in 2010 the figure was 2.5m. This loss of British visitors is a serious concern to Irish tourism. It should be our wake up call.

With our textile industry dead and increasingly buried, our university expansion little more than a pipe dream, and our financial institutions in freefall it seems the forthcoming UK City of Culture 2013 is the only show in town. That leaves tourism as our best hope of regenerating our economy. What have dilapidated historic eyesores got to do with that?

Does anyone question the need to preserve the city walls because of the part they played in our history and the character they give to today's city? What about the growing number of tourists they attract?

Think of the money they spend here. Is tourism all about the city walls, important though they are? What else are visitors interested in? They are interested in everything that makes this place different from their place. They're interested in seeing our built heritage - all of it.

We ignore the findings in the Tourism Ireland research at our peril and will have to be vigilant to halt our creeping loss of heritage. If we allow this to continue then the research tells us the consequent loss of distinctiveness will lead to a loss of visitors. That will hit us where it hurts most - in our pockets.

Many of the memory joggers that evoked Phil Coulter's wistful nostalgia have disappeared. The gas yard wall and the shirt factory horn are gone. So is the jail. Eventually there'll be no shirt factories,

no Fountain, no Wapping Lane, no Carlisle Road, no St Columb's Hall, no Waterside Train Station...the list goes on.

Our conservation areas are like a jam sandwich. Buildings like the Guildhall or St Columb's Cathedral are the jam. Unlisted heritage forming our 18th and 19th century streets is the bread. When the bread crumbles the sandwich falls apart. If we keep letting our old buildings collapse we won't have any historic streets left. Then what will be left of this historic town we all love so well?

Shouldn't we ask ourselves whether we want this incremental loss to continue? Do we want to keep losing part of our history, our evidence of who we are and where we came from? Do we want to continue leaving the future of our unique heritage entirely in the control of developers who'll give

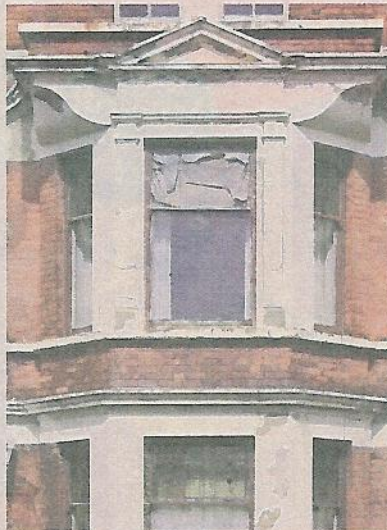
us something new, but generally, something anonymous that could be anywhere else in the world? Or do we want our crumbling heritage brought back into use for the good of their owners, the people of Derry, and to retain our growing number of visitors?

The Walled City Partnership Townscape Heritage Initiative has repaired and brought 19 unlisted historic buildings into full use, including the former Northern Counties Hotel, Derry City Council's excellent work at the Guildhall is being revealed in all its glory. These and the exemplary conservation of the Playhouse, 1st Derry Pres-

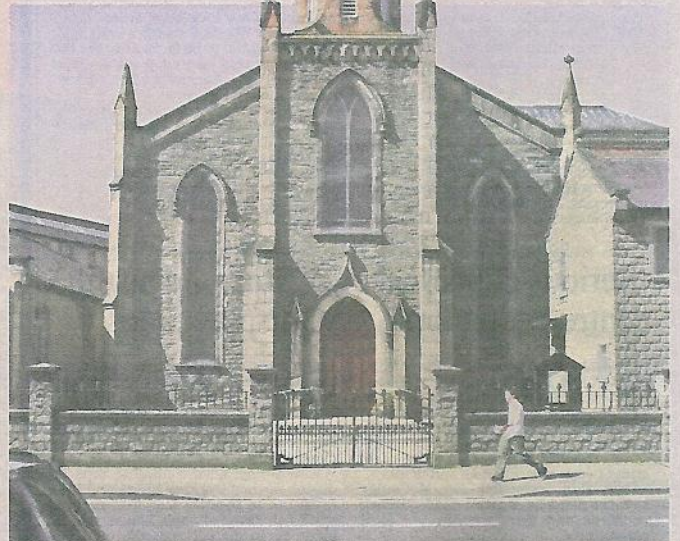
byterian Church, the Star, Hogg and Mitchell, and Rosemount Factories all show what's achievable when the will's there.

In the end it just requires will and determination - the will to retain Derry as Derry - to stop it becoming 'Somewhere-elseville'. In the words of the song "What's done is done and what's won is won. What's lost is lost and gone forever. I can only pray for a bright new day in the town I love so well." Our experience shows that working together in the town we all love so well really can achieve that bright new day.

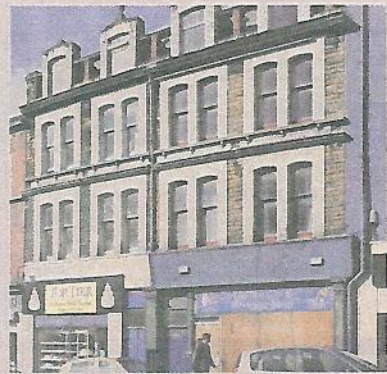
*This is one of a series of articles on our Buildings at Risk by the Walled City Partnership's Education Officer, Mary Kerrigan. Coming next: read about the economic realities of saving built heritage in 'Making it all stack up'.*



No 15 Lawrence Hill, which is derelict and at risk. It is one of four distinctive Jacobean fronted town houses in the area. (2001JC2)



The former Presbyterian Church on Strand Road, which is both vacant and at risk. (2001JC1a)



Building at risk in Derry's Carlisle Road. (2001JC4)



These two historic buildings on the left are both vacant and at risk in the Fountain Estate. (2001JC3)