

# Last roll call?

The future of  
historic school  
buildings in  
Northern Ireland

April 2009

ULSTER ARCHITECTURAL  
HERITAGE SOCIETY



The **Ulster Architectural Heritage Society** exists to promote the appreciation and enjoyment of architecture from the prehistoric to the present in the nine counties of Ulster, and to encourage its preservation and conservation.

FRONT COVER PHOTOGRAPH: Avoniel Primary School, east Belfast

**For further information contact:**

**Ulster Architectural Heritage Society**, 66 Donegall Pass, Belfast BT7 1BU

T: 028 9055 0213 F: 028 9055 0214

E: [info@uahs.org.uk](mailto:info@uahs.org.uk) W: [www.uahs.org.uk](http://www.uahs.org.uk)

## Our objectives...

- To **raise awareness** of the **value** of our historic school buildings
- To argue for their **continued educational use** but also to promote the **sympathetic adaptation** to new uses for those facing closure
- To ensure that public bodies disposing of historic school buildings **follow salient Government guidelines** which state, amongst other things:
  - The **maximisation** of receipts from the sale of an historic building is **not** an overriding priority
  - Feasibility of adaptation to alternative uses should be considered **in advance** of closure
  - Buildings should be sold in a **timely manner**
  - Measures must be taken to adequately **secure** buildings following closure
- To stress that demolition is **not an option**

## Background

Historic school buildings represent some of our most cherished landmarks. They occupy a formative part of each of our lives, and often serve as the most tangible binders between the generations, and within the community. Put simply, they are part of the heritage of who we are.

All school buildings are valued in the local areas that they serve, but many are more widely recognised for their historic or architectural interest, ranging from the smallest rural National School to the modernistic 20th-century compositions of R S Wilshere. A significant number have been afforded statutory protection through 'listing', 'conservation area' or 'area of townscape character' designations. However, in this time of change there is increasing uncertainty over the future of our schools buildings, some of which may be threatened with closure.

This document sets out some of the issues of public concern related to historic school buildings in Northern Ireland, as interpreted by the UAHS. It will hopefully contribute in an informed way to the wider public debate, and serve to underline

the need for decisions to be taken with due regard to the long-term consequences for the buildings, and the community.

### Pressures for change

The difficulties facing the education sector have been much trailed in the media; pressures on school budgets; the falling school age population; and an ensuing drive to realise the maximum value from property estates. All of this occurring against a background of changing educational needs; shifting demographics and decline in some areas (particularly inner city Belfast); as well as the invention of new public procurement processes, with Public Private Partnerships a prime example. There is a perception to date that amongst all of this the individual significance of our historic school buildings has been overlooked.

### Continued use

A recent RIBA/CABE publication (2004, p. 13) pointed out that "*new learning environments do not have to be new-build; they can be adapted from existing buildings*". There is no reason that many historic school buildings cannot continue in educational

use, either in their current form, or through sympathetic adaptation and extension. Planning Policy Statement 6 (DOE, p. 25) states: “*many listed buildings can tolerate some degree of thoughtful alteration or extension to accommodate continuing or new uses*”. Such continuity of usage is both less wasteful of scarce environmental and financial resources and also less disruptive for the community.

Examples of historic school buildings still in educational use includes: Methodist College; Euston Street Primary School; Enniskillen Collegiate; Dungannon Royal School; Newtownards Model Primary School; and Culmore Primary School.

### **Adaptive re-use potential**

Historic school buildings are also more than capable of adaptive re-use. It is Government’s view that “*while the most appropriate use of an historic building will often be that for which it was designed, the Department accepts that new compatible uses should be found for historic buildings where they can no longer reasonably be expected to serve their original use*” (DOE, Planning Policy Statement 6, p. 23). Numerous examples exist of

successful and sympathetic re-use, whether for residential, community or business purposes.

### **Appropriate disposal procedures**

In the event of an historic school building being deemed surplus to requirements it is crucial that the disposal process is both timely, and focused on securing the long-term future of the building. Valuation & Lands Agency guidelines state: “*it is particularly important to set disposal procedures in train as soon as possible after historic buildings are judged surplus to requirements; even if they have not yet become vacant*” (VLA, 2005, p. 21). Furthermore, “*it is Government policy that the maximisation of receipts should not be the overriding objective in such disposals*” (VLA, 2005, p. 20).

Public bodies should consider the feasibility of adaptation to a new use well in advance of closure, with a view to handing the building over to a sympathetic restoring purchaser, either through a development brief or with restrictive covenants. They should also consider gifting a building, either on a long-lease, or for a symbolic price, to a preservation trust with knowledge of working with historic buildings.

## **Belfast focus**

Arguably the greatest uncertainty surrounds the Belfast school estate, in particular the 'listed' schools designed by R S Wilshere. Built for the Belfast Education Committee, mostly between the wars, they have collectively been labelled as "*the first modern schools to be built anywhere in Ireland*" (Larmour, 1987, p. 84). Several are situated in the most deprived parts of Belfast, including areas designated by the Government for Targeting Social Need. As few other local historic landmarks remain, it is essential that the buildings, if not their current functions, are retained and sympathetically adapted as appropriate. What meaningful regeneration could otherwise be achieved?

## **Not more buildings at risk...**

The consequences following closure for an historic building can be dire. There are currently some 20 former school buildings on the *Built Heritage at Risk Northern Ireland Register* (BHARNI). Several of these have suffered severe vandalism, fire damage, and in the case of Linfield Road National School, total

destruction. This is bad for our historic environment, bad for the community, and reflects badly on the former owning body. Historic buildings have years of cumulative public investment retained within their walls; this should not be squandered as a result of badly managed or poorly thought through decisions.

Furthermore, it is a priority of Government to reduce the number of buildings at risk by at least 200 over a ten year period. This is set out in two documents: *Environment NI: A Vision for the Future* and the *Northern Ireland Sustainable Development Strategy*. Adding additional buildings to the *Buildings at Risk Northern Ireland Register* as a result of closure would be unfortunate in the extreme.

## CASE STUDIES



### **Old Belmont School, east Belfast**

This Gothic Revivalist style school, built 1890-92, closed in 1999 after the construction of a new building on an adjacent site. Grade B1 listed, its subsequent restoration and re-use scheme was undertaken by the Old Belmont School Preservation Trust, a charity formed by several concerned local residents. The building is again at the centre of the community with high quality rooms for hire, a coffee shop and playgroup/after school facility.



### **Former Irish Society School, Coleraine**

Built in the late-1880s to the designs of Thomas Turner, this rambling and picturesque former school has been transformed following conversion to residential accommodation with some new build flats to the rear. It had lain forlorn and vacant for a number of years but was purchased by a private developer who has undertaken the project.



### **Caledon National School**

A former National School in the 'Arts and Crafts' style, built in 1907. Five-bay, single-storey with dormers, it is prominently located at the northern entrance to the village, which has experienced a positive heritage-led regeneration in recent years. This building has been sensitively restored and adapted to a contemporary community use.



### **First Derry Primary School**

Located on the southwest corner of the city walls, this former school has been imaginatively transformed into the Verbal Arts Centre, a venue dedicated to all verbal art forms. Amongst other facilities the centre has a debating chamber, a children's studio, a recording studio, a coffee house and an artists flat. The project was completed by the Verbal Arts Centre, a charity, in 2000.

## References

Department of the Environment (Planning Service) – *Planning Policy Statement 6: Planning, Archaeology and the Built Heritage* (1999) [View publication online](#)

Department of the Environment – *Northern Ireland Sustainable Development Strategy* (2006) [View publication online](#)

Department of the Environment (Environment and Heritage Service) – *Environment NI: A Vision for the Future* (2005)

Department of Finance and Personnel (Valuation & Lands Agency) – *Disposal of Surplus Public Sector Property in Northern Ireland* (2005) [View publication online](#)

Department for Culture, Media and Sport - *The Disposal of Historic Assets* (2008) [View publication online](#)

Larmour P. – *Belfast: An illustrated architectural guide* (1987)  
– Friar's Bush Press

Royal Institute of British Architects and the Commission for Architecture & the Built Environment – *21st Century Schools: Learning Environments of the Future* (2004) [View publication online](#)

## Further Reading

SAVE Britain's Heritage – *Beacons of Learning – Breathing New Life into Old Schools* (1995)

English Heritage – *The Future of Historic School Buildings* (2005) [View publication online](#)

Wylie R. – *Ulster Model Schools* (1997) – Ulster Architectural Heritage Society