

Transforming Heritage Podcast Ep. 4 – Riddel’s Warehouse

KELCEY WILSON-LEE

Hello, and welcome to the *Transforming Heritage* podcast. I’m Kelcey Wilson-Lee, Director of Programmes at the Architectural Heritage Fund.

Across the UK, the AHF is supporting many amazing heritage and community-led regeneration projects that are bringing new life to historic buildings in our towns, cities and villages.

In this short series, we’ll be learning about five of these projects, giving you the chance to hear directly from the people involved in them.

Join us as we explore the history and significance of these historic sites, as we look back on the local communities’ fond memories of them, and look ahead to their new futures as places that will be enjoyed by many more people for generations to come.

KELCEY WILSON-LEE

At the heart of the industrial centre of Victorian Belfast stands a large, handsome building with an arcaded façade. This is Riddel’s Warehouse.

I am joined today by Marcus Patton, the Vice Chair of Trustees at Hearth Historic Buildings Trust, which is currently working to conserve and restore this former ironmongery warehouse as a centre for the creative industry.

It was great to sit down with Marcus to talk about the history and exciting future of this extraordinary building.

We hope you enjoy the episode.

KELCEY WILSON-LEE

Marcus – can you tell us about Riddel’s Warehouse? What was this extraordinary building?

MARCUS PATTON

Well, it was an ironmongery warehouse. In other words, not a shop for ironmongery, but a place where ironmongery goods were brought in and then distributed, really around the north of Ireland. It was probably the biggest ironmongery business in Ireland in its day in the 19th century.

The reason it’s placed where it is, is because it’s right beside the docks, so that ironmongery coming in from Liverpool or Glasgow, which were both big centres of the industry for ironmongery - they only had to have a short run on a horse and

cart about 500 yards into the warehouse. And there were half a dozen other big ironmongery resale places within the city centre of Belfast as well, all really close to Riddel's. So, that's why it was there.

Riddel's had been set up about 1800 in a different location and they grew very rapidly through the 19th century. And this particular warehouse was built in 1867, mainly for agricultural and really heavy ironmongery – things to be used on farms and things like heating stoves. Big heavy stuff, rather than delicate, small ironmongery, for which there was a different outlet.

KELCEY WILSON-LEE

What kind of environment were these stoves and large pieces of agricultural equipment within?

MARCUS PATTON

Well, as you come into the warehouse, you're in initially a conventional warehouse, as we know from many other locations – tall ceilings, big open spaces. But, as you come through the main warehouse building, you find yourself in what really would be a courtyard with a roof over it. I think this is probably not uncommon in Belfast and other industrial buildings in the 19th century because if you're dealing with something large and needed to move things around, you didn't have artificial light in Winter – not to any great extent – so you depended on daylight. So, you had either an open courtyard or, in this case, with iron being something that needed to be kept dry, you had a glass roof over it. And that's what there was here.

And the ironmongers then brought around galleries around that open space. So, it's really a courtyard with galleries – five stories of galleries – around it and a glass roof over it.

KELCEY WILSON-LEE

Right. And so, within this space, people worked from the late 19th century. When did the warehouse close down?

MARCUS PATTON

Well, it closed in 1973 - and if you knew your Belfast history, or Northern Ireland history, the troubles broke out here about 1969, and very rapidly became unmanageable. By 1972, there were bombs everywhere, and trying to bring a lorry load of metal out of this warehouse – or anywhere – was going to be very difficult.

There was the ring of steel, as it was called, where there were barricades all around the city centre to prevent vehicles being brought in or out without control. This meant that taking a lorry out might be two hours instead of just driving out in five minutes.

So, they moved elsewhere, and the building stayed empty for a while. But it is right beside the largest police station in Northern Ireland – the Musgrave Street Police Station – and the police eventually took the building over, really as a blast wall. It wasn't because they wanted the building, and they didn't use it really to any extent. But it meant that it protected the station in behind.

KELCEY WILSON-LEE

Well, that's a really interesting, unique history in two different ways – two different periods of Belfast's history really being told through that building.

So, you are the Vice Chair of Hearth Historic Buildings Trust. Can you tell us a little bit about Hearth's involvement in this project and indeed with the wider work that you do across the city?

MARCUS PATTON

Well, Hearth is the longest established building preservation trust in Northern Ireland. We've been going about fifty years now. We knew about this building for quite a long time, probably twenty-five or thirty years, but during much of that time it was owned by the police, and we were told that it would never be released – it was required for security around the station.

I first saw it, probably about twenty-five years ago – I was doing some listing work for the department and saw inside the building, and thought it was just amazing. It was derelict, or unused, even then. But it was an extraordinary space and I thought of galleries and performance spaces. It wasn't what it was built as, of course, but it can lend itself to those different uses.

And it was only about eight years ago that the building suddenly came on the market. It was considered surplus to requirements and the police were told to put it on the market. And we bid for it and were able to acquire it, thanks to a loan from Ulster Garden Villages, which is a very helpful local charity.

KELCEY WILSON-LEE

And what was the state of the building when you finally took ownership?

MARCUS PATTON

Pretty dirty. Pigeons had been in and out of it – they weren't there at that stage, the police had tidied it up in order to market the building. But, basically, a lot of things were left as they were fifty years ago, when Riddel's moved out of the building.

So, there are quite a lot – there are graffiti around columns and things like that, which have still survived from fifty years ago. And some of the artefacts are in the building as well. The whole feeling of the building is as it was.

KELCEY WILSON-LEE

And what is it that Hearth intends to do - what's your vision for the building in the future?

MARCUS PATTON

Anytime we've looked at a building, we think how little alteration we can make to a building to give it a new use. So, the obvious use for this building was not housing, which we have often done, but some kind of performance space or arts space – which is a very flexible use of a building.

There are other arts locations obviously within the city centre, including a new arts centre called the MAC, which was built about eight or nine years ago and is heavily subsidised by the Arts Council. In a sense, there might be no need for another arts venue, but when we looked at this, we thought it had such unique character.

While we've had it, there have been about a hundred meanwhile uses for the building – theatre, performance, filming, music gigs, exhibition spaces, and so on. So, it's been tried out, in a sense, as we've had the building, even though it has no facilities – there's no toilets, running water, and so on at this stage.

KELCEY WILSON-LEE

So, the local community is embracing the opportunity to use the space once again.

MARCUS PATTON

Not many people will have known the building ten years ago. It has a security fence in front of it, and before we got it, it was covered in grey soot and had been for fifty years. So, a lot of people did not know the building. But, as it's been used more and more, and open for culture nights and things like that, a lot of people now have got to know it and are waiting to use it once we get it restored.

KELCEY WILSON-LEE

That's wonderful.

And, when you think about restoring buildings like this, that tell that particular story about the past in Belfast – and indeed, in this case, about two separate distinct periods of the past – what does it mean to you, as a Trustee of Hearth, to be involved in conserving that story and making sure it's there for the future?

MARCUS PATTON

Well, we've been involved with historic buildings for many years, and it's not unique in that sense. It is probably the biggest single building we've looked at, and it's one that we've gotten very fond of over the course of building up the finance and so on – trying to persuade people to fund it and support it.

It's got us greatly involved in the history of ironmongery, which- You know, ironmongery shops used to be an everyday thing and the corner of every street had an ironmongery shop and a fishmonger, and so on. Those things have disappeared.

In Belfast, particularly, iron was at the core of the linen industry, which was Belfast's big source of wealth. And, of course, shipbuilding as well. Iron was very key to those things, so though this is just one part of that industry, it takes you into an area of history that most of us probably haven't thought of a lot.

And we've interviewed people who worked in the building, although it was fifty years ago, and they were teenagers. So, they weren't involved in the higher running of the building, but they had good memories of it, and they enjoyed the building. And we've built up stories like that.

KELCEY WILSON-LEE

Now, I've been into this building and it's actually extraordinary to think that people were working there only fifty years ago, because it very much has an atmosphere of- That we would, I suppose, many of us would associate with the 19th century. It's really big pieces of iron and steel and giant planks of wood holding everything together.

So, how is that you're going to tell the story of the building within the building. It's not going to become a museum, so how will you integrate the history into the arts function that you're intending?

MARCUS PATTON

The building itself will be a museum artefact, if you like. So, in simply coming into the building, you're very much aware that you're in a different kind of space.

Belfast has very few historic interiors, partly because of the troubles and partly because of the sheer amount of development that's happened in the last fifty years.

For most people coming into the building, it's an exciting thing in itself. They then ask the question, 'Why is it there?' and 'What was it used for?' So, we will have exhibitions of some kind in it. It's early days for thinking just how we're going to show it, but we are building up archives of images, archives of oral interviews and documentation wherever we can get it. And we'll show that throughout the building in different ways.

KELCEY WILSON-LEE

Imagine, you're done ten years from now, and a young person is walking into Riddel's Warehouse not knowing these stories about the building. Can you kind of paint a picture for us of the completed project as you see it?

We hope that it will not be very different from how it is now. The impression should still be you're walking into an old building – a 19th-century building – and a building which is not highly finished. Not a sort of gilded, baroque interior – it's a rough industrial interior.

People might have come, for instance, from – there's a very big new exhibition of the Titanic in east Belfast and a lot of visitors go to there, for instance, as the first thing they see in Belfast. But it's situated in an environment which is entirely modern – there's office blocks all around it. So, until you come back into the city centre and walk into a building like Riddel's, you really have no concept of what industrial Belfast was like. So, that would be the first thing that would hit someone coming into it.

Hopefully also, they will see a variety of activities. We're seeing a variety of uses here – performances use, which are obviously at a particular time of day, but working uses as well, where people will have their business based on the upper floors of the building and exhibitions around the sides of the building, and so on. So, it will have a lot of activity going on and inevitably a café. So, people will be able to stop and have a cup of coffee or tea before they have a look at something else.

They will be able to walk round and see exhibitions at any time of the day, or at night, they may be coming in for a performance. And if they do that, if it's a theatre performance-

We had someone in the building yesterday – an American – and she was saying, 'This place will be great for Shakespeare.' Well, a lot of theatre people say that. It's the size of a small theatre; it's got the height of the historic Globe building – it's ideal for performance. It doesn't need a proscenium arch, but we'll use different parts of the building for different parts of the performance – the event. So, it lends itself to a lot of things like that. Those are the sort of things that will be going on when someone visits it.

Thanks for listening to this episode of the Architectural Heritage Fund's *Transforming Heritage* Podcast.

Join us again next time as we hear more interesting stories about some of the historic buildings and sites that are being transformed by communities across the UK.