

Meeting on 12th December 2018 **Observing Belfast – Billy McCullagh**

There was a change of speaker at December's meeting of the Ards Historical Society, the topic being 'Observing Belfast' presented by Billy McCullagh. He explained that during his working life of more than 40 years he had to visit every building in the six counties that the government was responsible for, such as police stations, post offices, telephone exchanges and other buildings many of which are no longer the responsibility of the government. His interest in historic monuments began to evolve and as a keen photographer he began taking his camera to record architectural features at those sites that he had to visit. He later took the decision to photograph the buildings of Belfast especially as many were being destroyed, burnt down, demolished or standing derelict. The oldest streets are in the city centre and the 4 'corners' comprise Donegall Street, North Road, Bridge Street and Waring Street with the addition of Rosemary Street. Later he discovered 'Central Belfast – An Historical Gazetteer' by Marcus Patton that lists all buildings in and around the centre of the city, information on the building, how long it's been on the site, who first occupied it, who occupies it now, why it was built and who built it.

Mr McCullagh made the point that many of us frequently pass by the same buildings, perhaps taking note of the facade but seldom if ever venturing inside to find out more. By looking up, architectural features such as keystones, monograms and sculptured insignias can be observed and these can provide information about the building and its history. Some of these features have been preserved and retained even if the building has been subject to redevelopment or conversion, sadly however, many are in a poor state, broken or missing. He has concentrated on photographing as many of these features as possible and combined with information published in Marcus Patton's book, the evening's illustrated talk provided a fascinating insight into much of Belfast's history, political, commercial and sociological development. A few of the very many examples were:-

There is a bust of Sir Arthur Chichester over the main entrance of Swanston House, 41-49 Queens Street, at one time the Athletic Stores. Belfast was granted a royal charter by James I in 1613 and as Lord Deputy of Ireland, Chichester is considered to be the founder of the city. The building was a linen warehouse constructed in 1890 for Swanston & Bones, manufacturers of linen cuffs, collars and accessories most of which were exported. The City Council planned to demolish the building; however it was purchased by the Ulster Architectural Heritage Society (UHAS) and has been redeveloped as student accommodation.



Commercial Court is an alley off Donegall Street in which is situated the 'Duke of York' public house. There are 2 blue ceramic plaques that refer to the 'Belfast Pot House' dated 1697 to 1725, it is believed that the pottery was of exceptional quality and it is thought that this is the oldest recorded place of industry in the city. Robert Leathes was a wealthy merchant who managed the factory and from 1685 to 1690 he was a Sovereign of Belfast, a position of office that pre-dates a Lord Mayor. An iron foundry occupied an adjoining building during the 18th century.

Belfast Academy was the oldest school in the city, founded in 1785 and located in Academy Street. It moved to the present site on Cliftonville Road during 1880, the badly eroded sandstone plaque above the main entrance records both dates.

In 1888 Queen Victoria granted Belfast city status and the school was permitted a change of name to Belfast Royal Academy. The school uniform makes reference to all three dates.



34-38 Victoria Street was built in 1867 as a seed warehouse, on the front are 5 sculptures (caryatids) each representing a continent and emphasising the importance of Belfast as a port trading across the world. The facades have been conserved and the building now operates as the Malmaison Hotel.

Other buildings and features were highlighted by the speaker and his enthusiasm will have urged many of those attending to 'look up' and find out more.