

Overview

FIRST DERRY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH



It's heritage preserved. First Derry Presbyterian Church is a shining example of restoration work at its best.



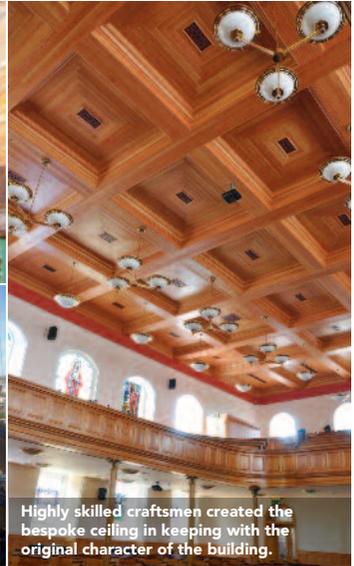
Stripped back and cleaned to remove multiple layers of old varnish, the pews take on a fresh new lease of life.



The extent of the dry rot on the roof trusses was a major problem.



Work on the roof included removing the original roof trusses, lowering them to the ground by crane using a special cradle sling and replacing the rotten timber.



Highly skilled craftsmen created the bespoke ceiling in keeping with the original character of the building.

MAJOR CHURCH RESTORATION PROJECT BREATHES FRESH LIFE INTO BUILDING AND SITE DATING BACK TO SIEGE OF DERRY...

Historical building reveals some of its secrets during vital restoration work

Silent for almost nine years, apart from the cooing of the pigeons which took up residence when the humans stopped visiting, First Derry Presbyterian Church is once again resounding with the voice of its congregation, gathering together for Sunday worship.

The third key historical restoration to take place in L'Derry, coming after work at the Guildhall and St Columb's Cathedral, the current First Derry Presbyterian Church - just inside the city walls at Upper Magazine Street - has a distinguished past that dates back to the 1780s but its roots go back even further to before the famous Siege of Derry.

Now a £2.5million restoration project by Woodvale Construction Company has brought this important historic building back to life and restored it to its former glory.

Overcoming the complexities of the job required skilled planning and craftsmanship, with unexpected challenges surfacing along the way - as is the nature with major historical projects such as this.

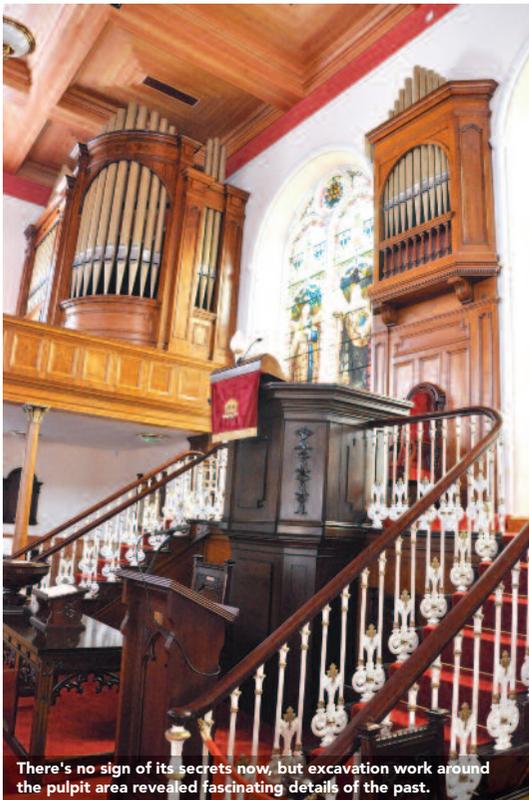
"The building had to be closed back in 2002 due to the discovery of extensive dry rot," said Richard Smith, HSEQ Manager for main contractors, Woodvale Construction Company. "The roof trusses were in such a dangerous condition they had to be supported with scaffolding as a holding position until the necessary funds could be raised to carry out the extensive restoration work necessary before the congregation could use the building again."

"The first obstacle we had to overcome was dealing with the pigeons," laughed Richard. But actually, this was not such a trivial matter. "We got quite a shock when we saw the building. It was in a dreadful state and the pigeons had left their visiting cards everywhere. Their droppings actually contain about 40 different pathogens, including a major one that affects the lungs, so the first thing we had to do was to organise people in masks and white suits to get rid of the mess. It was nearly three weeks before we could let anyone get on with the real job of

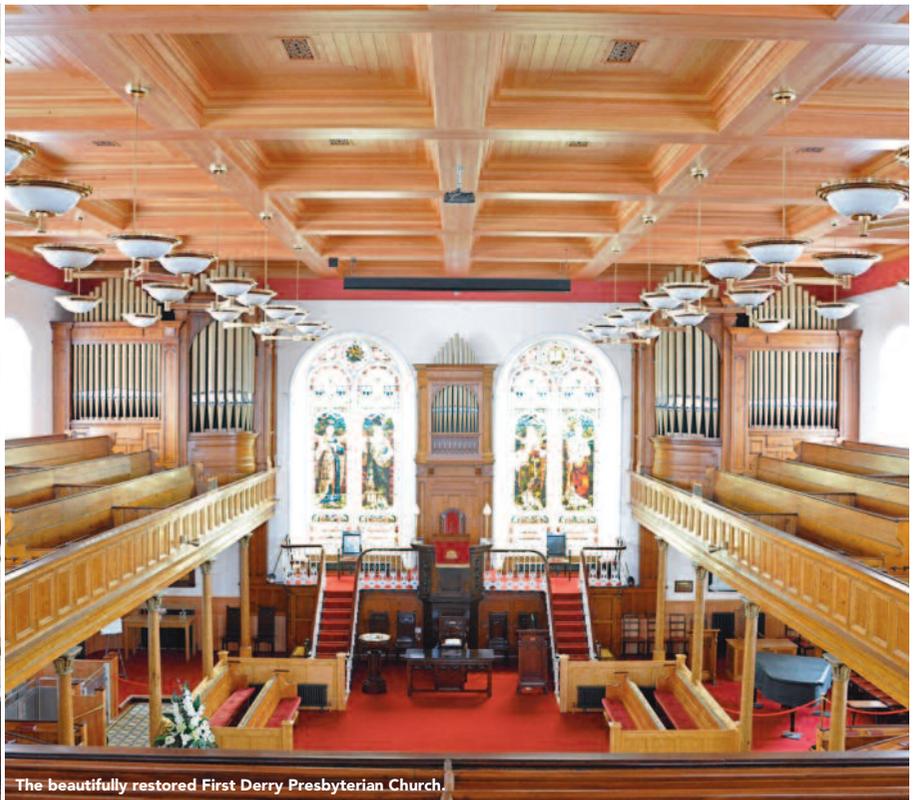
restoration."

Once that was sorted, the major challenge of the project was to bring the building back to an acceptable state of restoration while still maintaining as much authenticity as possible. Because of this, the restoration of the roof trusses was the biggest part of the job. Measuring 17metres long and five metres high, the seven trusses had to carefully lowered by crane and held in special cradle slings while the rotten ends were cut off and new pieces manufactured and then spliced on to the existing good timber, before being hoisted up and secured in place again. Under the leadership of Bob McCurry, Contracts Manager and William Hetherington, Site Manager, Woodvale Construction Company worked in collaboration with UDCG to repair the roof trusses.

Internally, the challenge was to create a fitting home for the congregation and the extensive use of wood throughout required expert skills from the Woodvale Construction Company team, particularly for the intricate ceiling.



There's no sign of its secrets now, but excavation work around the pulpit area revealed fascinating details of the past.



The beautifully restored First Derry Presbyterian Church.

"Wood is a very traditional product for church projects but we wanted to add something more eye-catching and detailed and our expert team of joiners have provided real attention to detail in their work, making First Derry such a remarkable church."

Living up to its reputation as an important heritage site, the old building threw up some fascinating insights into its past when during the restoration work, human remains dating back to the time of the Siege of Derry, as well as remnants of pipes and crockery typical of the period were discovered when the old pews were taken out of the floor of the church.

The Northern Ireland Environment Agency was informed and an archaeological dig carried out, after which the remains were preserved in situ and the excavation trenches were backfilled.

"Thankfully, it didn't hold up work as we were able to work in different areas while the dig was going on," said Richard. "It's just the nature of the job - you don't know what you're going to find in these old buildings." In fact, the church site at Magazine Street has much historical significance. Some time after the lifting of the Siege of Derry in 1689, a new Presbyterian meeting house was built within the walls, on the site that continues to be occupied by the present church.

The current First Derry Presbyterian Church was first opened in 1780, and is believed to be on the site of an earlier Presbyterian Church of 1690. It is also believed that the car park between the church and the rear of the Apprentice Boys Memorial Hall could be the site of a mass grave or graveyard, possibly containing human remains from those who perished inside Derry's walls during the 105-day stand-off between the Williamite supporters and opposing Jacobites. There are no plans to build on top of the car park.

REBUILD

Adjoining the church is the refurbished Blue Coats School, now home to the Blue Coats Museum and Interpretation Centre. This was another part of the restoration work carried out by Woodvale Construction Company.

"The old school building pre-dates the church and we virtually had to rebuild it to ensure it was structurally sound," explained Richard Smith.

The new facility now tells the history behind the church, along with the history of Presbyterians in the city (and beyond) and the role they played in the great siege.

"The restoration project had its complexities, but the result has been so worthwhile," said Richard. "It's a beautiful building and our aim - which we believe we achieved - was to bring

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it back to its former splendour but in such a way as to ensure authenticity while at the same time creating a building that will be safe, clean and serviceable for many years to come."

The congregation of First Derry Presbyterian Church, which had been continuing to worship at Carlisle Road Methodist Church during the years of exile, must surely agree with that sentiment. Attention to detail has ensured a perfect restoration and refurbishment with even the old pews now looking freshly clean and scrubbed, the grime of years stripped away and the whole setting safe for worship once more.

"It was a privilege to have been involved in the work," said Richard. "It has been the latest in a growing line of restoration projects and each one throws up new challenges and rewards."