

CASE STUDY 2

EBRINGTON BARRACKS



Ebrington Barracks is situated on rising ground facing west on the opposite side of the River Foyle from the centre of Londonderry. The fortifications of the 1841 star fort still largely enclose the original barracks complex of white rendered buildings around a parade ground. The walls are visible across the river and indeed there is a clear view from the town walls of the Plantation city.

The site exhibits an early manifestation of the rapid reaction force concept. A ramp behind the walls allowed swift transport of soldiers from the barracks to river level and a ferry across the river.

The site expanded to the south and east in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century. Buildings to a standard military type were constructed. The introduction of families to barracks is clearly reflected with a school and family accommodation as far away from the parade ground as possible.

The site functioned as a standard army barracks until the Second World War. Then with the importance of the city to the Battle of the Atlantic it was used to house American 'Technicians' and in 1942 incorporated into HMS Ferret - the wider naval base in the city. Squid mortars –an improvement over depth charges- were developed on site and training facilities in anti submarine warfare were developed. This role was continued after the war for the training of NATO troops with the site renamed as HMS Sea Eagle.

In 1972 the barracks reverted to the Army (and its old name) and became the headquarters of 8th Brigade. This was responsible for the military command of a quarter of Northern Ireland during the 30 years of the Troubles. The site was extensively refortified and suffered a number of attacks during the period.

In 2002 it was announced that the site would close due to the reduced level of threat. Under the Reinvest and Reform Initiative it was given to the Northern Ireland Assembly to help with regeneration. They set up an urban regeneration company (Named Ilex – Latin for oak. Derry is an Anglicisation of the Gaelic for oak grove) to take forward the development of this and another former military site which is cleared of buildings.

Conservation Issues

As with many other large and complex sites the issues of appropriate protection, identification of wider heritage value and clarity of assessment arose. It became clear following initial discussions that a likely approach of the new owners would be to seek to clear the site to maximise return with the exception of the identified listed buildings. Six years before the military had replaced almost all of the historic windows on the site with Upvc imitations this significantly reduced individual heritage merit of the buildings

Consideration of Site

The Environment and Heritage Service (now NIEA) was invited to consider the site for protection by the Army before they left.

Initial investigation led to the conclusion that a traditional listing survey and separate scheduling survey would not do the heritage interest of the site justice. Historic interest lay as much in the character of the area as in the merits of individual structures.

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NIEA departed from its traditional approach and conducted a holistic survey of the site which was backed up by a detailed report. This identified heritage interest and explained in detail the reasons for this interest. It refrained from identifying buildings for statutory protection. Instead it identified the most significant buildings, the important buildings and the buildings of least importance. Some structures which detracted from character were also identified.

The report was backed up by detailed records of buildings of note following the approach of NIEA's Second Survey and a photographic survey deposited in our MBR. Copies of the report were sent to Ilex and to Planning Service who are responsible for the designation of Conservation Areas. The report emphasised the importance of clear management for future development of the site.

Ilex responded well to the report. They were persuaded to include a Conservation Architect as a requirement in commissioning a master planning team. EHS (now NIEA) deliberately held back statutory protection to emphasise the holistic nature of the site to Ilex but also to help them by avoid undue public attention while the master plan process developed.

Planning Service were supportive of the approach taken. They did not have allocated resources to consider the CA designation in the short term. They were content that area protection evolve from the master plan.

The star fort was scheduled in 2004. 14 buildings were proposed to HBC and Derry City Council for listing in 2005. Ilex confident of its approach to the site only opposed the listing of one building- a store behind the main parade ground building. NIEA agreed to DCC's request to defer a decision on this pending publication of a site master plan.

Master plan.

The master plan published in early 2007 uses the heritage interest of the site as a fundamental part of its organisation. It seeks to enhance the key listed buildings and to retain another six non listed 'important' buildings. It proposes a mixed use development of offices, residential and civic functions with improved connections via a footbridge to the city centre and to an adjacent public park. It also proposes a clear management structure. Since its publication a scheme of demolitions and improvements have been taken to prepare the site and restore the historic structures. Floodlighting the repainted buildings has dramatically highlighted the potential of this heritage to the city. Public events have been held in the main parade ground and funding for the footbridge was announced in December 2008. At the present time planning applications are being prepared for a number of buildings and sites.

Conclusion.

At the time of writing there are still issues in regard to road access to such a large development and the scale and quality of the final buildings, still up for discussion, will have a major bearing, but there is a real chance that this redevelopment will become a good example of heritage led regeneration. The owners Ilex are to be complemented for their stewardship to date and for seeking to fulfil this potential.

<http://www.illex-urc.com/index.cfm/do/home>

