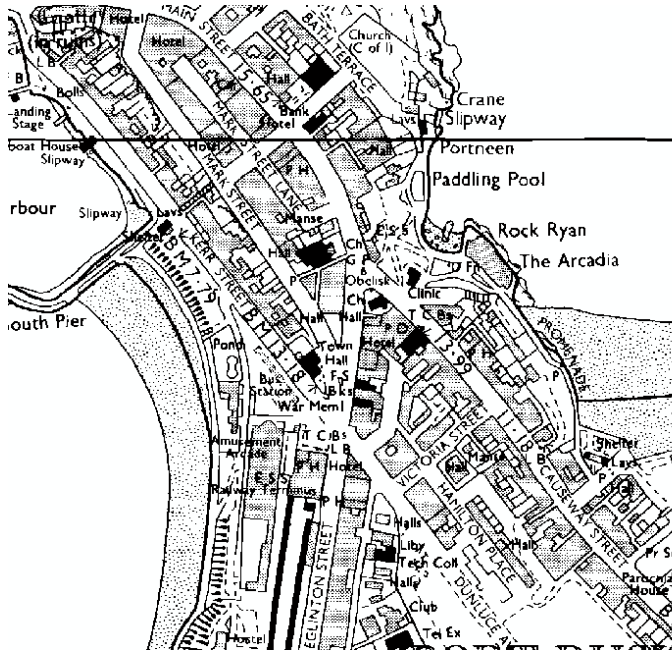


## Case Study. Portrush Town Hall.



Portrush is the main seaside holiday resort in Northern Ireland. Situated on a promontory projecting into the sea it is blessed by a sheltered harbour to one side and a fine sandy beach to the other. Located on the north coast it grew to prominence in the late nineteenth century with the coming of the railways. The architecture of the town is similar to that of many sea side resorts in Britain and Ireland with hotels and guest houses interspersed with businesses catering to tourists.

The town hall was erected in 1877 in a central location directly opposite the train station. It is a modest building of red brick and turrets which never the less projects an air of civic gravitas. Its function as a focus is reinforced by a war memorial directly in front.

From the early 1970's however the fortunes of the resort declined as tourists took advantage of the availability of cheap package holidays and visitor numbers declined. The town hall exposed to prevailing Atlantic winds for almost 100 years also visibly decayed.

By 1999 the building was in very poor condition with much of the façade very badly weathered. Coleraine City Council (now owners of the building) took a decision to seek its demolition.

## The Socio Economic Impact of Heritage Investment (2).

Consent is required in Northern Ireland for the demolition of a listed building. The Department of the Environment refused this on the grounds that the building was capable of restoration. Following a difficult Planning Appeal the Department's view prevailed.

Hearth Hearth Revolving Fund, a charitable building preservation trust, is a not for profit organisation which gave expert evidence at the appeal in support of restoration. The Council approached them after the appeal and agreed to donate the building to them for restoration. With grant assistance from the Environment and Heritage Service of the Department of the Environment (now NIEA) and from the Heritage Lottery Fund of the UK National Lottery and the Council they completed a full restoration of the building with minor alterations in 2006.

The total building cost of the project was just over £1.3m of which £119k was grant assistance from NIEA and £961k grant assistance from HLF. A further £0.2 m was required for fitting out the building giving a total cost of £1.5m plus VAT. The remaining £420k came from the Council. Hearth have now let the building back to the Council who use it for civic events, exhibitions and hire it out to interested groups including the long-established Portrush Summer Theatre season which provides a platform for amateur drama groups from across the province.

The total cost of the project compares very favourably to the estimated cost of demolition and replacement of £1.75m which was given at the appeal. This clearly disputes the often held assumption that while restoration of the heritage may be worthy it is more expensive.

### **Economic and Social Benefits of the public investment.**

The benefits of the investment in reuse can be isolated as follows:

1. Hearth would not have been able to restore this building had it not been for the availability of government and Lottery grant assistance. As a not for profit organisation they do not have major reserves of cash. The Council having been advised that the building was in very poor condition were reluctant to undertake the full refurbishment of the building. Government support helped them agree to a solution.
2. The symbolism of the restoration cannot be over emphasised. From an image reflecting the decline of the town it has become a symbol of regeneration. The most visible building in the town has now been restored to a high standard. This combined with other developments is helping to increase confidence.
3. Increased economic activity. While the work is not responsible for a restoration of economic fortunes in the area it has visibly contributed to

this impression. The owner of the listed station opposite is now actively considering refurbishment. Nearby shops report an increase in trade which has also lengthened due to evening activities in the hall.

4. The value of the building has risen from a negative value (when potential repairs are considered) to An estimated £2.5million. Though there has been a general rise in property prices in Northern Ireland in recent years Estate Agents report that the refurbishment has also helped with nearby property prices.
5. Increased Employment. The refurbished building has made a modest contribution to local employment (one full time caretaker and enhanced roles to existing Council staff) as it is used by the Council for a variety of uses. In addition to Council staff it provides a venue for craft fares and evening events with related employment not previously required. It has also become popular for weddings with significant employment in catering as a result.
6. Tourism numbers have not increased as a direct result of the refurbishment but they have increased since its completion. The town hall can be seen to contribute to the draw of tourists in two ways:
  - a. By providing a high quality focal point at the entrance to the town centre and
  - b. By providing a high quality venue for events.
7. Local residents have benefited from a new venue for cultural events and activities.
8. The building is integral to current strategies by the council to continue the revival of the town.
9. An important part of the civic heritage of Portrush has also been restored for the appreciation of present and future generations.
10. Environmental Benefits. The refurbishment has substantially improved the energy efficiency of the building by providing insulation. Statistical evidence from elsewhere in the UK\* has suggested that the restoration of a building and its refurbishment is up to 70 times better than demolition and replacement in terms of over all carbon emissions.

\*'Value Added' The Princes Regeneration Trust 2007.