

IRELAND

Heritage at Risk and in Economic Crisis

Ireland's built historic environment comprises a wide range of assets, including two World Heritage sites and more than 20 Historic National Properties, 800 National Monuments in State Care, 38,000 Protected Structures and over 120,000 Recorded Monuments protected under the National Monuments Act. In addition, Architectural Conservation Areas cover a range of historic townscapes and urban ensembles and there are some 175,000 buildings constructed prior to 1919, many of which are maintained using traditional materials and craft-based labour skills and which, although undesignated, contribute greatly to the historic and cultural environment and landscape.¹

The State Sector

Since 2011, key elements of heritage protection and management in Ireland fall under the remit of the renamed Department of Arts Heritage and the Gaeltacht. This includes both Built and Natural Heritage, although 80% of the heritage is neither owned nor designated by the State. Another section of State management, notably the day to day care of State-owned properties, visitor facilities and World Heritage sites, falls under the Office of Public Works, which, with its own junior minister, is a semi-autonomous part of the Department of Finance.

Heritage has been at the mercy of year on year cuts made as part of Ireland's national austerity programme, with built heritage capital allocations bearing the brunt of the 2011 cuts (-38%) and with the DAHG funded Heritage Council similarly cut (-34%), while natural heritage has seen a small increase in Capital allocation (+7%). The arts and culture sector, also under the remit of DAHG, has suffered almost equivalent cuts in 2011 of a cumulative -32%, although they have not been subject to the year on year cuts experienced by built heritage. Between 2008 and 2011, heritage has experienced a reduction in its budget from 26 million to 2 million euros, mainly borne by the built heritage sector, with a cut in 2011 itself of 75%.²

In February 2012, the Irish Government's planned restructuring of the public sector saw the loss of 40% of the country's senior heritage professionals, overnight. The details of the programme restrained participants from notifying colleagues until the day before. The impact of their unplanned departure left an enormous vacuum and a situation of near chaos. Added to recent public sector decentralisation, the restructuring has meant that the Heritage Sector now has to deal with a public service that is very fragmented across the country.

World Heritage, one of the principle advisory remits of ICOMOS, has been the responsibility of a number of different personnel over the past two years. It has only recently been



Former Military Barracks, Nenagh, Tipperary North, 2013

assigned as a function between two officers, each with a responsibility for one of Ireland's two inscribed World Heritage sites. These personnel are dealing with a call to advance nominations to the World Heritage List from the Irish Tentative List, and to review the Tentative List itself. Physically and geographically, those responsible for World Heritage are separated from the associated Departmental Division, thereby reducing the benefit of professional proximity and administrative support.

Funding for Heritage

The Structures At Risk Fund (SRF) 2012 appears, from the DAHG website, as the only fund administered by them that is still in existence in 2012. The Heritage Council, which administers its own Conservation Grants scheme, however receives DAHG support.³ The SRF, with an application deadline of April 2012, commenced in 2011 as a two-year continuum of a Civic Structures Conservation Grants Scheme and is limited to a maximum of two schemes per local authority. The Conservation Grants system previously administered by Local Authorities on behalf of the DAHG has also been terminated, one can only hope temporarily.

Irish Local Authorities also have responsibility for our medieval walled towns. The reorganisation and loss of funding to local authorities has affected protection and management (not to say presentation and repair) of all aspects of heritage.

The former LEADER funding, provided under the Rural Environment Protection Scheme (REPS), provided a much valued source of funding for vernacular heritage, which has been terminated and replaced by Axis 3 & 4.

However, the application process has proven to be cumbersome, extremely onerous and a significant deterrent for many

worthy recipients, while the transfer of administrative staff responsible for the programme has broken the chain of knowledge at a crucial stage in the programme.

Owners

There is widespread disaffection among the owners of Protected Structures at the removal of grant support, with the prognosis being bleak for the ongoing repair and preventative maintenance of many historic buildings.

Changes in insurance companies' perception of risk associated with historic buildings, and in particular, a negative perception of the cost of conforming to regulations in reinstating damaged protected structures, has also caused rises in the premia for these buildings. This is having a negative effect on the perceived value of old buildings in the property market, and is leading to dramatically increased unanticipated costs associated with maintaining insurance cover for the asset in accordance with the terms of mortgage agreements.

Ironically, the removal of Conservation Grants as a corollary tacit obligation to designation on the statutory Record of Protected Structures (RPS) designated and maintained by local authorities under planning and development legislation, may remove one of the existing impediments to local authorities, – competing for dwindling budget allocations, of adopting National Inventory for Architectural Heritage (NIAH) recommendations for incorporation of sites into the Register of Protected Structures (RPS).

The Heritage Council

Within such a seismic environment, one should be comforted to know that at least one grant giving organisation remains with the interests of heritage as their remit, albeit with cruelly diminished funds. The Heritage Council, established in 1995 under an act of parliament as a public body working in the public interest, has operated with a voluntary Council of 15 and a staff of 18. Up to recently, it disbursed funding to the heritage sector, supporting more than 25,000 jobs directly, 40,000 full-time equivalent positions indirectly, or 2% of overall employment and contributing over 1.5 billion euros to GVA in 2011 alone.⁴ However, in the aftermath of the cuts sought in the 2011 budget, a review of the Heritage Council was announced, which envisaged its merger with the DAHG.

The Heritage Council survived the review but, for the first time in its 17 years of existence, the Heritage Council is not in a position to offer grant support to the public for the maintenance, conservation, presentation or promotion of cultural or natural heritage. It remains, however, an effective and transparent mechanism already in place and with a track record of delivering effectively, which might be utilised to great effect, in the event of other funding streams coming on line. Its continued existence is an acknowledgment of the value of the heritage sector to the Irish economy in a time of crisis.

The Private Sector

The private sector in particular, archaeologists previously engaged in development-led projects and heritage management and architects accredited under the RIAI Accreditation Scheme

to work on conservation projects, have been experiencing major difficulties. The application of the European Procurement System, following the cataclysmic decline in the Irish construction industry has had a huge impact.

Despite guidance suggesting the use of e-tenders generally only over 50,000 euros, e-tenders is introduced in the Operating Rules for LEADER funding, as a compliant and cost effective process, satisfying 'national advertising and publicity requirements', available 'at no cost to the contracting authorities'. This ensures that etenders.gov.ie is the first and perhaps only choice for the multiple community organisations seeking funding under the only remaining funding programme available to heritage regardless of scale of project.⁵

Moreover, for tiny jobs, sometimes even of less than 1500 euros in value, architects are being required to submit evidence of turnovers appropriate to major firms operating on large-scale projects. Moreover, evidence of such turnover is required for the last three years of operation, which includes the sudden death of the economic 'crisis'. Turnover that few of the smaller practices enjoy.

Moreover, separate tenders are frequently sought for projects to planning, then tendering and finally, for contract management and administration, costing time and precious resources and losing the benefit of the often very considerable knowledge acquired during the project lifetime.

The frequently small heritage accredited practices are the very epitome of the conservation professional and like conservation as a whole, are a sustainable and effective means of mobilising the economy and maximising the economic multiplier of indirect and induced benefits and spend. For every euro spent by the Heritage Council, the Irish Tourism industry benefits by 4.40 euros.⁶ Overall, the historic environment is estimated to provide a return on public sector investment equivalent to 16 euros per one euro.⁷ The skills that are supported by the heritage industry are typically small-scale and craft-based and the lack of funding for this sector threatens the very existence of these skills themselves and with them, the end product that they maintain.

The Future

Since 2009 funding for heritage in Ireland, in line with global experience, has been decimated. The Irish 2012 budget virtually eliminated funding provision, leaving the beleaguered heritage sector scrambling to pick up the leavings of other sectoral funds, such as LEADER, administered by the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food.

Other issues facing the country and the heritage sector include

- the impact of a government-led 'retrofit' programme known as PAYS (pay as you save), which carries the risk of increasing indebtedness, leading to, rather than solving fuel poverty, while at the same time damaging our vernacular heritage irreparably;
- the introduction of 2300 next generation wind farms in the midlands, which risk being an unregulated 'step change in technology and scale', to sell energy to a UK market – with little consideration thus far given to the cultural landscape impacts;⁸
- the restructuring of EU farm payments, to induce farm enlargement and development which will inevitably impact on the

(cultural) rural landscape, field monuments, traditional farms and their farm buildings, and landscape character generally;

- the termination of ‘turbury’ rights on raised bogs set to come into effect over the next year, where the traditional hand cutting of turf for fuel which has been a way of life for over 400 years and which has given way to mechanised semi industrial, commercial extraction, including the mining of 2.5 million cubic metres of horticultural peat moss, mainly for the export market and has accounted for a loss of 47% of the original area of peatlands in Ireland.⁹ Although heritage positive, the delay in implementing these unpopular changes is likely to see a hefty fine imposed by the EU for delays to date, to a country already floundering in austerity.

In the face of the above hiatus, the message of maximising the economic benefit of our heritage does not seem to have reached

our elected representatives, in spite of the continued efforts of ICOMOS and other heritage bodies and organisations. Recent ICOMOS annual lectures (2011, 2012) and conferences have presented the case for judicious management of heritage to this end.¹⁰ Heritage protection and management cannot be regarded as an add-on luxury and an easy target when times are economically tough. It is a fundamental sector of the Irish economy and identity and essential to the delivery of geographically dispersed, sustained and sustainable growth.

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¹ Ecorys, *Economic Value of Irelands Historic Environment*. Ecorys 2012, p. 7.

² Minister Deenehan opening *Your Place or Mine*, a conference on the theme of World Heritage: The role of Local Communities, in support of the International Day of Sites and Monuments 2012, jointly organised by ICOMOS Ireland and the Heritage Council: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dMVHJdTx518&feature=player_embedded>

³ DAHG Structures at Risk Fund Circular SRF 1/2012 March 2012

⁴ Ecorys, op. cit., p. 8.

⁵ Dept of Community, Equality and Gaeltacht Affairs, Axes 3 & 4 Rural Development Programme Ireland 2007–2014, Operating Rules, p. 31.

⁶ Michael Starrett, CEO, ‘Chief Executive’s Report’ *The Heritage Council Annual, Report 2011*, p. 5.

⁷ Ecorys, op. cit., p. 34.

⁸ Michael O’Regan reporting on Dáil (parliamentary) debate between the Taoiseach Enda Kenny and opposition leader Micheál Martin. ‘Planned turbines put the wind up locals’, *Irish Times*, 20 June 2013.

⁹ <http://www.ipcc.ie/a-to-z-peatlands/peatland-action-plan/over-exploitation-of-peatlands-for-peat/>

¹⁰ http://icomos.ie/activities/maura_shaffrey_lecture
<http://www.heritagecouncil.ie/events/past-conferences/your-place-or-mine-april-2012/>