



*"Exploring the Past:  
Inspiring the Future"*  
**together**

## **Annual Report for the Charity Commission NI (April 2024 - March 2025)**

During this year MoTaP successfully applied to the World Monuments Fund (WMF) to have the historic Belfast Assembly Rooms nominated for their "Watch List". This has resulted in the Assembly Rooms being brought back into public ownership through its purchase by Belfast City Council. We are now actively working with a number of coalition partners on a plan for the Assembly Rooms to be utilised as a multi-purpose space for cultural, heritage and artistic uses. This would include the Assembly Rooms becoming the physical home of the Museum of the Museum of the Troubles and Peace (MoTaP).

Below is a copy of the press release with the details announced in January 2025:

### **2025 Watch Announcement**

Press Statement | Belfast, 15 January 2025:

The inclusion of Belfast's historic Assembly Rooms in the World Monuments Fund (WMF) 2025 "Watch" is a game changer. The announcement on 15 January by World Monuments Fund of its support for the rescue of the Assembly Rooms is a game changer! Amongst 25 heritage sites world-wide selected as part of the 2025 Watch, this is the only one in Ireland. WMF have clearly been convinced by the importance of the building but also by our ambitions for its future use as a multi-cultural arena; a place to explore our enlightenment heritage, and as a home for the planned Museum of the Troubles and Peace. This is an international imprimatur for what is proposed.

Established in 1996, the WMF Watch is a biennial program that advocates for heritage places in critical need of protection, galvanising action and support for their preservation. WMF will work with the Assembly Rooms Alliance, supporting the campaign to secure, repair and repurpose one of Belfast's oldest civic buildings.

Why are the Assembly Rooms so important? It is Belfast's most historic building. Originally built as a single storey market house in 1769, an additional storey was added in 1776 transforming it into the Assembly Rooms. It lay at the very centre of the 18th century town and became pivotal in our cultural life during the enlightenment era. It was here that Henry Joy McCracken ran a short-lived Sunday school for destitute children, here too that in 1786 the proposal to set up a Belfast-based slave trading company was defeated. In 1792 it was the venue for the last assembly of the blind harpers of Ireland, when, famously, Edward Bunting

transcribed their music, a source even today for the repertoire of traditional music. It was here that the Ballast Board, forerunner of Belfast Harbour Commissioners was established. Here too in 1798 the United Irish leaders, including Henry Joy McCracken, were court-martialled prior to their execution.

In 1845 it was converted into a bank which has left us the legacy of a magnificent banking hall designed by Sir Charles Lanyon, Belfast's leading 19<sup>th</sup> century architect. It closed as a bank in 2000 and has remained vacant ever since. Despite its Grade B1 listing it had to be placed on the Ulster Architectural Society's at risk register in 2003. In the following years it was used for concerts, exhibitions, and theatre, an indication of its future potential. But by 2012 its deteriorating state put an end to such use. Today dry and wet rot are rampant and the building is imminently endangered.

The Assembly Rooms Alliance which has brought together key individuals and organisations was formed in February 2023 and has led the campaign to save the building for appropriate public and cultural uses. During 2025 the Strategic Policy and Resources Committee of the City Council has made clear its intention to acquire the building whether by purchase or vesting, a very welcome development. In making an offer to purchase the City Council is restricted by a valuation made by the District Valuer. The Assembly Rooms Alliance has argued that the current owners should donate the building to the city. Failing that they should accept the City Council's offer. Whichever way, the deal must be done as a matter of urgency.

While the Alliance favours acquisition of the building by the City Council it then proposes to raise the funds for the restoration and development of the building at a cost of c. £15 million, and to assume responsibility for its subsequent management.

### **Proposals for the Building:**

The magnificent banking hall with an audience capacity of up to 300 can fulfil the original enlightenment role of the building as a multi-cultural venue for concerts, conferences, exhibitions, theatre etc. Its limited use in this way between 2000 and 2012 demonstrated this potential.

In the rest of the building there will be scope for a display on the history of the building and an exploration of Belfast during the enlightenment.

The main proposed use of the remaining space is for the Museum of the Troubles and Peace. This will make use of the latest technology to explore all our experiences 'without fear or favour'. The proposed siting of the Museum at the Assembly Rooms has the advantage that this is a central and neutral location. The objectives are to explore the period of the Troubles from a variety of viewpoints – there is no single narrative – and to celebrate the Irish Peace Process. Northern Ireland can speak to a wider world. We are confident that there will be significant demand for the use of the banking hall for an extensive range of events. We are equally sure that there is a demand by our own citizens and from visitors from afar for an accessible way to explore the history of our troubles and how we managed to emerge from them.

We believe that our proposals will provide a significant additional visitor attraction in Belfast city centre. The renovation and revival of the Assembly Rooms which lie at the entry point to the Cathedral Quarter and the Tribeca portfolio will also lead to increased footfall in the area and increase the potential of properties in the neighbourhood. Let us have the ambition in the two years in which we will have the benefit of the support of WMF to secure the building and have plans in place for its restoration and development.

**Assembly Rooms Alliance:**

The Assembly Rooms Alliance was established in February 2023 with the stated objective ‘to preserve the Assembly Rooms and to secure them for public use as a facility for arts and heritage purposes and for other community uses.’ The Alliance was formed on the basis of a Memorandum of Understanding with the Museum of Troubles and Peace, and those involved informally include a range of cultural organisations and individuals with particular expertise. Reclaim the Enlightenment, a charity founded in 2017, acts as administrator for the Alliance.

**Museum of the Troubles and Peace (MoTaP):**

The vision is to bring into being a People’s Museum of the Troubles and the Peace Process that addresses the conflict in all its complexity, that celebrates the resilience of people in their everyday lives during the conflict, and that pays tribute to the courage and creativity of those who delivered the peace.

**World Monuments Fund:**

World Monuments Fund is the leading independent organization devoted to safeguarding the world’s most treasured places to enrich lives and build mutual understanding. For 60 years, working at more than 700 sites in 112 countries, it has applied proven and effective techniques to the preservation of important architectural and cultural heritage sites around the globe. Through the World Monuments Watch—a biennial, nomination-based program—WMF uses cultural heritage conservation to empower communities and improve human well-being. In partnership with local communities, funders, and governments, WMF seeks to inspire an enduring commitment to stewardship for future generations. Headquartered in New York City, the organization has offices and affiliates worldwide. World Monuments Fund helped Belfast City Council to purchase Assembly Rooms.

Meanwhile, we continue to be actively engaged with community groups across Belfast and beyond to advance our peace agenda and to promote reconciliation.

Recently, MoTAP has appointed a new prestigious board member, Mr Dominic McCoulough.

**Dominic’s bio:**

Former head of the European Union division in the Department of Finance, Dominic led the team responsible for the Department's role in developing, approving and implementing the EU PEACE PLUS programme.