

Belfast Harbour

# The Harbour Office

A VISUAL GUIDE



harbour Commissioners  
est. 1847



## Introduction

For more than 150 years, the Harbour Office has been the headquarters of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners, the body charged with the operation, maintenance and development of the Port of Belfast. The first section of the building, designed by the Commissioners' engineer George Smith and erected at a cost of some £8,000, was opened in 1854. A subsequent extension, by the celebrated Belfast architect William Henry Lynn, was completed in 1895 at a cost of £14,349. The architectural style reflects that of an Italian palazzo.

The ground floor of the building is currently used as office accommodation, whilst the grandiose rooms on the upper floor are reserved for business meetings, including the Commissioners' monthly board meetings, and special functions. These rooms, heavily ornate in typical Victorian fashion, also provide an ideal setting for the Commissioners' impressive fine art collection. To herald in the new Millennium, the building was refurbished by the Commissioners, who are committed to maintaining its historic fabric in its original glory.

These pages aim to take the reader on a short pictorial tour of the interior of the Harbour Office, from reception through to the Titanic Room, highlighting the grandeur of the décor which Harbour staff and visitors can enjoy.

## The Titanic Table

**Circa 1911/1912, this group of furniture was commissioned for the White Star Liner R.M.S. Titanic for use in the private quarters of the Captain and Master, Captain Edward Smith.**

It was intended that these pieces would be finished and installed in time for the vessel's maiden voyage, departing from Southampton on Wednesday, April 10th, 1912. Unfortunately, at the time, the furniture was not quite ready and the ship left for Southampton, bound for Cherbourg, Cork and then New York, without these items on board. In a matter of days the furniture became available and was in storage to await the first homecoming of the Titanic later that month. In the aftermath of the tragic sinking of Titanic, the furniture was no longer considered of any relevance and lay in storage – forgotten and undisturbed – for many years until it was eventually retrieved by its owners, Harland

& Wolff. It is only a consequence of the slightly late delivery that these items did not go to the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean in Titanic, rendering their survival most remarkable and poignant.

The sideboard designed for Captain Smith's cabin is currently on display by Belfast City Council in the newly refurbished City Hall. In 2009, the table was a centrepiece of the Antiques Roadshow visit to the Titanic Quarter development within the old Harland & Wolff Drawing Offices. The expert valuer from the programme found the craftsmanship of the table to be quite unremarkable; however, the story of Titanic and the mythology surrounding the ship across the globe meant that a value couldn't be placed on the table.



## Heritage Room

**The Heritage Room details Belfast's emergence as a major port and the city's subsequent growth and development as an industrial hub. As well as interactive displays examining the Harbour Office and its unique art collection, the space also includes artefacts from the Harbour's past.**

The centre piece of the new heritage space is a 3.6m high stained glass window by local artist, Ann Smith which depicts major events from the Harbour's history. The piece which took seven months to create uses handcrafted, antique English, French and German glass. The window also includes images of Belfast dockers, references to Belfast's role during WWII, the Tall Ship visits of 1991 and 2009 and more modern developments such as the emergence of the offshore wind energy industry and Titanic Belfast.

The new Heritage Room also includes details of famous past Chairmen and Senior Commissioners of Belfast Harbour including William Pirrie (1847 – 1858) who opened the Victoria Channel and laid the basis for the development of the modern port, and Robert Thompson (1907 – 1918) who oversaw the Harbour's investment in dry docks which allowed Belfast to develop into the world's largest shipbuilder.





## Harbour Commissioners' Uniform

It's not every day you are paid a visit by the Monarch and it is only natural that an organisation would want to look smart for such an occasion. The Harbour Commissioners were no different back in August 1849, when Queen Victoria visited Belfast. At a meeting held the month before the visit, the Commissioners arranged to present an address to Her Majesty and that they should be dressed appropriately for the function.

Their dress was to be as follows: blue dress coat with a plain collar and gilt buttons, the buttons to be designed with a fowl anchor and crown and with the words "Belfast Harbour Commission" in a raised circle, white cashmere waistcoat, blue trousers, black stock and a round hat, the coats to be lined with white silk. A last minute alteration saw the dress lined with white silk at the breast as well as the skirts. Furthermore, it is not known why, but the words on the button were altered to "Belfast Harbour Corporation". It was agreed that this attire would henceforth become the uniform which Harbour Commissioners would wear in their corporate capacity and when on public duty. However, as fashions change with time, this somewhat elaborate uniform became less and less appropriate and was modified accordingly, eventually morphing into the uniform worn by Harbour Commissioners on public or ceremonial duty today. This consists of ordinary trousers, white waistcoats with the buttons already described, blue ties and morning or frock coats with a small badge pinned on, the badge consisting of a gilt anchor and the letters "B.H.C." on a piece of blue ribbon.



## Ground floor stained glass window

Similar in colour and style to the windows of Belfast's Crown Bar and City Hall, the Harbour's ground floor stained glass window comprises of a main centrepiece flanked by two wings. The centrepiece depicts Neptune, the god of water and sea in Roman mythology, holding the "world" in his hand and with the "horn of plenty" by his side - symbolizing prosperity.

Flanking Neptune are four images representing the industries synonymous with Belfast at the time the Harbour Office was built - (left, from top to bottom) the nautilus shell representing Navigation and Belfast's connection to the sea, the spider's web for Spinning, the bird building her nest, representing Weaving, and the Canadian beaver which represents Engineering. The Canadian reference is interesting because the majority of the timber used for shipbuilding in Belfast at the time was imported from Canada.



## The Flax Flower

The prominence of the flax flower throughout the Harbour Office is reflective of the crucial role this simple plant played in the dramatic rise of the Belfast economy during the mid-19th Century.

The cotton embargo imposed during the American Civil War from 1861 to 1865 saw textile merchants turn to linen as they sought alternative materials to sell. This boom in demand saw the Northern Ireland industry begin to thrive, with local linen merchants making a lot of money exporting their product around the globe. Linen is made from the fibres of the flax flower, which is why it can be seen in many areas of the Harbour Office, such as the carpet and railings of the main stairwell, in many of the architraves and in one ceiling of the Barnett Room.



## The Veiled Lady

The Veiled Lady is part of a collection of five marble sculptures – known as the Dunlambert Collection – currently residing in the Belfast Harbour Office, all by unidentified artists who were working in the sculpture workshop of Pietro Bazzanti & Son in Florence in the mid-to-late 19th century.

Located on the first floor to the right of the stairwell, the Veiled Lady was presented to the Harbour in 1943 by Captain Douglas Cork, grandson of Henry Martier, a Harbour Commissioner from 1882 to 1886. The carving of veiled figures became popular in the 18th century, when the Venetian baroque sculptor Antonio Corradini (1668-1752) made it his speciality. By the mid-19th century, veiled figures were being used for major display pieces, small busts and as models designed to be reproduced in Parian ware.

## The Old Market House Bell

Now resting on the first floor of the Harbour Office, having been presented to the Harbour Commissioners by the Marquis of Donegall in 1857, the Old Market House Bell was originally located in what was Market House, in lower High Street.

The bell tolled to tell the Belfast public of any significant events - one of the most notable of which was the hanging in nearby Corn Market of Henry Joy McCracken, a founding member of the Society of United Irishmen.





## The Barnett Room

One of the jewels in the Belfast Harbour Office's crown, the Barnett Room is a truly magnificent site, heavily ornate with typical Victorian fashion and a floor made from genuine Irish Oak. The Barnett Room plays host to many of Belfast Harbour's major functions, with his Royal Highness, The Prince of Wales, former Prime Minister Tony Blair and Hollywood actress Meryl Streep among the long list of invited dignitaries who have enjoyed its splendour in recent years.

On one of the semi-circular stained glass windows close to the ceiling is the Union flag, with the phrase 'Tria Juneta in Uno' written above it. This is the motto of the knights of the Military Order of the Bath. It signifies faith, hope and charity, and represents the union between England (The Rose), Scotland (The Thistle) and Ireland (The Shamrock). On the same window is the Latin phrase 'Imperium et Libertas', which translates as Empire and Freedom - none shall divide.



## Review of the Belfast Yeomanry

It may not be the first thing to catch your eye amongst the grandeur of the Barnett Room, but the story behind this painting is worth retelling. Belfast artist Thomas Robinson displayed an entrepreneurial flair by deciding to charge the movers and shakers of 1840s Belfast society for the opportunity of featuring in the picture.

All went according to plan until the subjects refused to depart with their guineas after the painting was completed. Robinson therefore altered the image, changing the original background of Donegall Place in Belfast to include Nelson's Column in Dublin, hoping notable members of Dublin society might pay to have their faces in the painting. Again, payment was not forthcoming, so the artist was left with a piece of work he could not sell. The painting remained in the Robinson family until 1852, when it was donated to Belfast Harbour.





## The Retiring Room

So called because it is where a Harbour Commissioner retires to when his or her position is being discussed in the Boardroom, the Retiring Room décor is an example of one of the Harbour Office's few obvious touches of femininity. A close look at the drapes on the curtains will reveal they are made of Chinese silk, carefully tied in sailor's knots along the top. The room also serves as a private dining area and is used as a private reception point for dignitaries.



### The Retiring Room Grandfather Clock

Situated beside the fireplace in the Retiring Room, the clock plays host to the Harbour's resident ghost, George. That is, of course, if the revelations of a security guard locking up after a Harbour function in the 1980s are to be believed.

The security guard claims that on entering the Retiring Room to make a final check before locking up, he saw a man sitting down, whom the security guard assumed was perhaps the worse for wear and didn't realise the function was over. When told it was home time, the security guard said the man simply got off his seat and walked into the grandfather clock - never to be seen again. (Editor's note: the security guard insisted he had not availed of a different type of spirit being served at the function).



## Moreland Room

The smaller of the Harbour Office's two public rooms, the Moreland Room underwent an extensive refurbishment at the turn of the Millennium, overseen by Robert McKinstry, who masterminded the most recent revamp of Belfast's Grand Opera House. The Moreland Room plays host to a painting of the Holywood Lighthouse, erected in 1844 by the famous blind engineer, Alexander Mitchell, who lost his sight completely at the age of 22. The picture was painted in 1860, 31 years before the lighthouse was demolished after it became obsolete when the Victoria Channel was extended through the Holywood Bank.

Another portrait of note which resides in the Moreland Room is that of William Ritchie, the Scotsman who established shipbuilding in Belfast after being invited to the city by Belfast merchants with the aim of transferring his shipyard from Saltcoats, Ayrshire, to Belfast. On his first visit in March 1791, Mr Ritchie found only six jobbing shipcarpenters in the city, who were in need of guidance and were by no means constantly employed as the vessels belonging to the town were purchased and repaired in England and Scotland. Remarkable, really, considering the shipbuilding industry was to provide employment for hundreds of thousands of Northern Ireland residents in years to come. The maxim 'Mighty oaks from little acorns grow...' is obviously true. A portrait of George Smith, the Harbour Commissioners' engineer who designed the first section of the Harbour Office building, can be found in the Moreland Room, as can a painting of Arthur Chichester, Lord Chichester of Belfast, who became Lord Treasurer of Ireland.



## First floor stained glass windows

More practical in design than their counterparts on the ground floor, the two stained glass windows on the first floor contain many different features, each with their own message.

The window below depicts the coats of arms of the four main major cities in the UK at the time – Dublin, Glasgow, Liverpool and London.



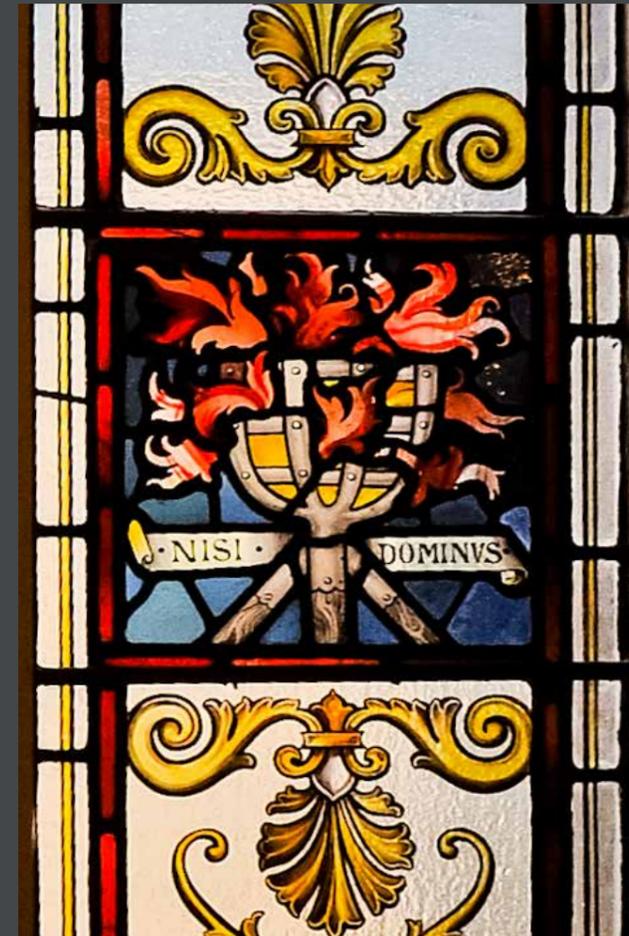
## Nisi Dominus

Look closely at the stained glass window with the words 'Nisi Dominus' written on it – is the fire emerging from a torch or a beacon? Is it possible that we are looking at tongues of fire and, therefore, a subtle reference to the Holy Spirit? Perhaps it isn't a torch, but rather a chalice, which was the symbol of the followers of Jan Huss in 15th Century Prague, or is it a reference to the Cathars of France? Perhaps there is some religious significance to the glass – Nisi Dominus is actually the start of Psalm 127. Dominus can mean Lord or Master.

- 1 (Canticum graduum Salomonis.) Nisi Dominus œdificaverit domum, in vanum laboraverunt qui œdificant eam.
- 2 Nisi Dominus custodierit civitatem, frustra vigilat qui custodit eam.

### Roughly translated as:

- 1 Except the Lord build the house: their labour is but lost that build it.
- 2 Except the Lord keep the city: the watchman waketh but in vain.



## The Argo

On the window to the left is a picture of The Argo, the ship which Greek mythology tells us that Jason and the Argonauts sailed from Iolcus to retrieve the Golden Fleece. Built by the shipwright Argus, the Argo and its crew was specially protected by the goddess Hera. According to a variety of sources of the legend, the ship contained in its prow a magical piece of timber from the sacred forest of Dodona which could speak and render prophecies.

After the successful journey, the Argo was consecrated to Poseidon in the Isthmus of Corinth. It was then translated into the sky and turned into the constellation of Argo Navis. It is generally imagined that the Argo was a Greek warship, a Galley, with authors hypothesizing that it was the first ship of this type that had gone on a high-sea voyage.



# The Boardroom

Originally office space for Belfast Harbour staff, the current boardroom assumed this role in 1980s, until which time what is now the Moreland Room was where the Commissioners held their board meetings. Hanging in the Boardroom is a portrait of former Belfast Harbour Commissioners chairman Sir Ernest Herdman. Presented to Sir Ernest by his fellow Commissioners in May 1934 as a mark of the personal esteem in which they held him, and as permanent memorial to his eminent services to the Trust, Sir Ernest presented the portrait back to the Commissioners on the same day.

His highly distinguished business and public career saw him become a Harbour Commissioner in January 1904 and elected Chairman in May 1926, serving in this role until September 1945 - during which time he received a knighthood in 1934. It was during his Chairmanship that the ambitious new channel and dock scheme, eventually to be known as the Herdman Channel and the Pollock Dock, was initiated. The new works were opened in October 1933 by the Duke of Abercorn (then Governor of Northern Ireland) and named in honour of Ernest Herdman and the Rt. Hon. H.M. Pollock, Princess Alice, Countess of Athlone.



# The Library

The library, as one would expect, is packed full of books, manuscripts and other important historical documents mapping in great detail the history of the Harbour from as far back as the early 17th Century. Eileen Black of the Ulster Museum has carefully catalogued every document in chronological order, producing a collection which has proved of great research assistance to numerous historians.

Sat atop the fireplace in the library are miniature statues of Edmund Burke and Oliver Goldsmith, two of Trinity College's most famous graduates, life-size statues of whom adorn the entrance to Trinity College in Dublin. These miniatures were presented to the Harbour by the Dublin Port Authority in the 1980s. Respected local author and journalist, Alf McCreary, set up residency in the library for almost two years as he penned an updated history of Belfast Harbour Commissioners and the Port of Belfast. Entitled 'Titanic Port', the book takes the reader through the centuries of the organisation's history, highlighting the significant contribution of the Port to the development and progress of the City of Belfast.



# The Watercolour Room

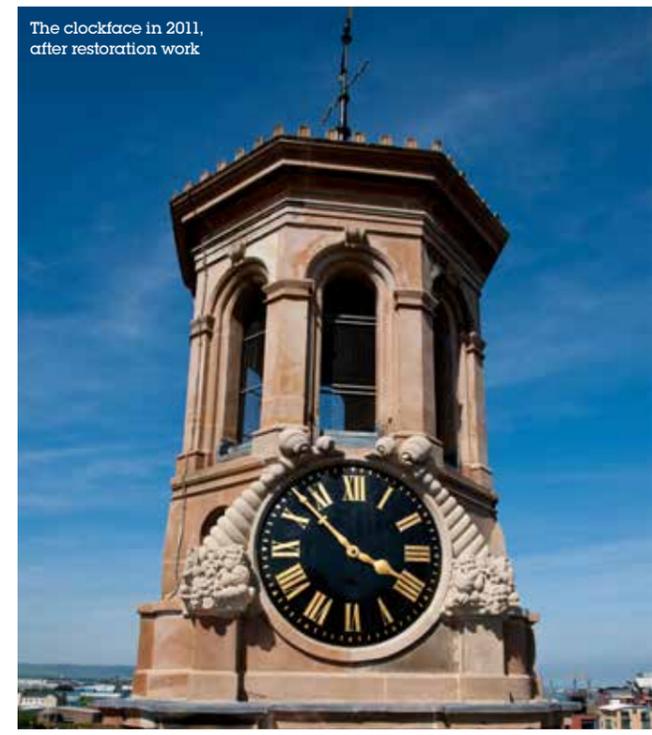
Paintings in the room show the development of the area around the Harbour Commissioners building with the construction of the Presbyterian Church post 1858.

Watercolours include a painting of Wm. Ritchie's original shipyard and of the original Harbour Commissioners Office, then known as the Belfast Ballast Board, which is the present day site of the Customs House. The glass door in this room forms a link between 19th and 20th Century Belfast.

# Clock Tower

Constructed as part of the original 1854 Italianate Harbour Commissioners' Office, when the Belfast skyline was free of the numerous high-rise buildings which abound today, the four faces of the Clock Tower for many years played a vital role in letting the citizens of Belfast know the time. And, if you knew the time, you had a good idea of the position of the tide and of sailing times - something which was of vital importance to everyone involved with the shipping industry in the 19th Century.

Full external restoration work took place in Autumn 2011 and the clock faces were repainted black with hand painted gold leaf roman numerals applied. New stone detailing around the clock was also added, in keeping with the original detailing. The stone rope moulding that originally wrapped the top of the clock was restored and although there was no record of the detail of the sculptural stonework around the clock, it is likely that it had a nautical and maritime theme similar to the artwork and sculpture within the interior of the building.



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