

# BELFAST CIVIC FESTIVAL TRAIL



Belfast City Hall

1. City Centre Southwards to Shaftesbury Square

**Distance:** 1½ miles approx.

**Time:** allow an hour not counting stops.



Grand Opera House



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The expressionless exterior gives no hint of the turbulent history of the Belfast Chamber of Commerce. The story is a fascinating one. The 59 entrepreneurs who formed the chamber in 1783 were not stuffy city-suited gents. One, who rejoiced in the name of Narcissus Batt, was only 16 years old. Many of the founder members were active in the Volunteers (the liberal movement in Ireland at the end of the 18th century). Their first president was commander of the Belfast Volunteers, and some were United Irishmen. Several went to prison and the grandson of one founder-member was leader of the United Irishmen — and went to the scaffold for it. They lived in stirring times.

Continue down the left side of the street past the cinemas, avoiding the worst of the traffic swirling along the

one-way system. The rugged, rather glowering building of blackened Scottish Tudorstone with a short tower, to your right, is the Presbyterian Church House and Assembly Hall built in 1905 for £70,000. As well as angels, it has somewhat incongruous stone eagles and dragons on the outside. Inside there are some good examples of the Irish stained glass school.

And now on your left, in College Square East, across a restful green lawn — the first bit of greenery since the start of the trail at City Hall — is the well proportioned facade of the Royal Belfast Academical Institution which opened in 1814.



Royal Belfast Academical Institution ('Inst')

Like some other Belfast 'squares' College Square isn't a square at all. Only the east and north sides were built on the four acres of land given by the second Marquis of Donegall for a college. Lord Kelvin (William Thomson) was born in a house (demolished) in College Square East and his father taught mathematics at the Academical Institution ('Inst'). It was Kelvin (1824-1907) who invented the Kelvin Scale (the absolute scale of thermodynamics).

Thomas Russell, first librarian of the Linenhall Library, is said to have first thought of the interdenominational college. He was another United Irishman to be hanged — at Downpatrick gaol in 1803. Dr. William Drennan, founder of the United Irishmen Society, saw the new





Thompson Memorial Fountain



Both No. 28 and its neighbour, the Ulster Hall, were designed by W J Barre, a young architect from Newry, noted for his Gothic detailing. Opened 1861, the Ulster Hall (unusually plain for Barre) was meant for grand balls but was more used for 19th-Century political rallies. Lloyd George, Lord Randolph Churchill, Pamell and Patrick Pearse all spoke here. Today's crowds come mostly for concerts and boxing contests. The Group Theatre next door became known during World War II for plays in an Ulster idiom. It's still a stage for new Ulster playwrights.



Pub Sign

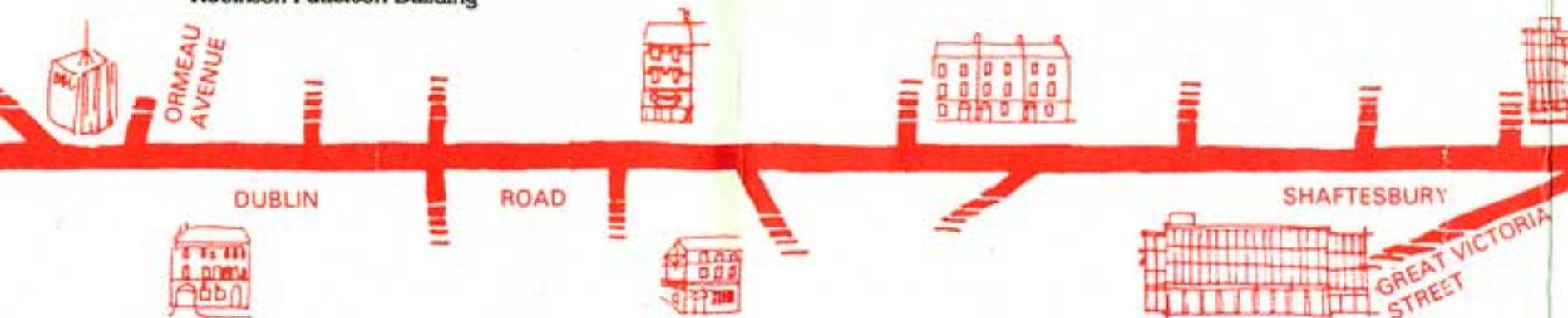
The view to your left, down Clarence St. is filled by the tall towers of St Malachy's Roman Catholic Church which dates from 1840. Go along to have a look at its lacy fan-vaulted ceiling, passing on the way the striking end bay of No. 17, a nineteenth century warehouse boldly transformed into architect's offices. Then retrace your steps to Bedford St. and turn left to the BBC building, recently greatly extended. Opposite the front door is a melancholy **memorial fountain** to one Dr. Thomas Thompson, tireless physician at the Home for Incurables. His sad death followed the deaths of three of his four children. His surviving daughter erected the fountain in 1885.

Keeping right, you enter Dublin Road, this end commercial in character and further down originally a Georgian residential area where furnishing companies abound.

Behind it across the Dublin Road is the carefully restored Victorian Building adjacent, now a pizza restaurant, recently cleaned to reveal its original pink and buff hue. Sink into a plush seat for a Black Bush whiskey at No. 49 in the Elbow, facing the Salvation Army Public Relations Department. Next to the Reformed Presbyterian Church on the corner of Pakenham St is a solid red house (NOs. 74-76 Dublin Rd) that was Belfast's first school for girls (now Victoria College, situated 1 1/2 miles further south, in Cranmore Park). Opposite Pakenham Street are a number of interesting shops where you can browse among the stamps, theatre costumes and props, old books and prints.



Robinson Patterson Building



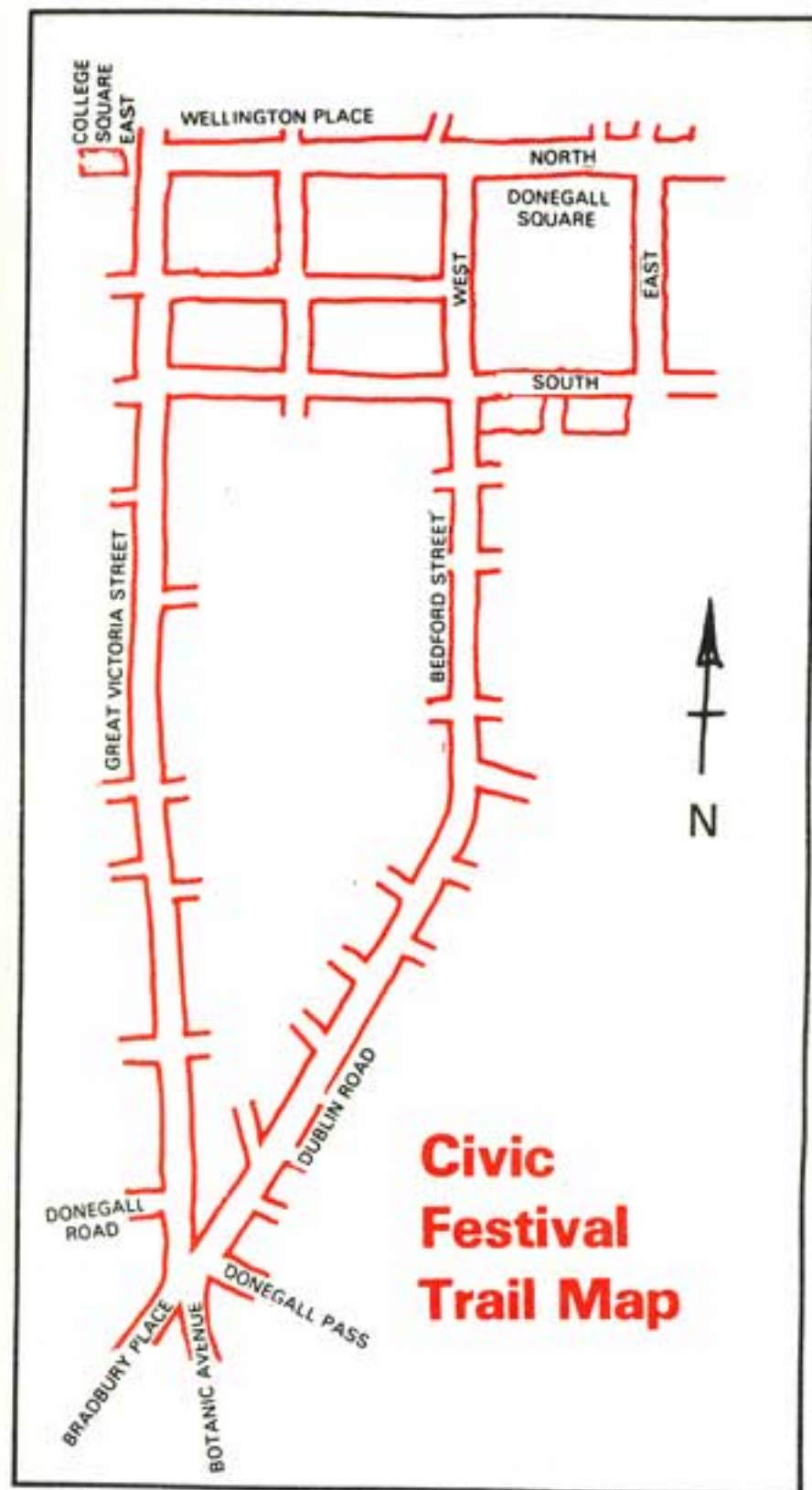


And now into Shaftesbury Square, Belfast's equivalent of Piccadilly Circus, complete with electronic sign over the Northern Bank that brings the latest news to commuters stuck in the evening traffic jam. Mrs. Robert Montgomery, wife of minister of Great Victoria St Presbyterian Church (just visible on the west side, painted cream-and-mushroom), named the square after the philanthropic Earl of Shaftesbury, the east side, you cross Donegall Pass, one of the 17th century 'passes' - six wide avenues laid out by the third Earl of Donegall across his estate. The Donegalls once owned the whole of Belfast. The family's bankruptcy coincided with the end of Great Famine and, while unfortunate for the Donegalls, greatly benefited the citizens who became freeholders instead of tenants.

The square marks the beginning of the lively university area, with lots of small shops and places to eat in Bradbury Place and up Botanic Avenue towards the railway station and the Arts Theatre. There are the walled sculptures, locally known as 'Draft and Overdraft' because of their close attachment to the Ulster Bank. The curious cul-de-sac to the right of the electronic sign is an example of a Belfast street that went missing. Formely Albion Lane it was a long leafy lane that ran all the way up to the university - until it vanished, crushed out by the new railway. Now it leads only to the rear bar of Lavery's 'gin palace'. Cross on the zebra to the west side of Bradbury Place and look south at the row of old residential terraces strangely obscured by shops. This used to be Albion Place, built in the 1830's.



Statuary in Shaftesbury Square



Sponsored by Belfast Civic Trust,  
 Feergus Bell Esq.  
 and





## Great Victoria Street Baptist Church

Now cross on the next zebra down towards Great Victoria St past the Presbyterian Church. Once a superior residential area, this now commercial thoroughfare is undergoing redevelopment and lacks aesthetic harmony. Nevertheless there are interesting things to see along its 1/3-mile length of pop music shops, secondhand bookshops, charity shops and restaurants (Indian, Cantonese, Italian, French), punctuated by garages, car-parks, churches and vacant lots.

The 'streaky bacon' brickwork across at No. 116, the Ophthalmic Hospital (now a hostel), is another W J Barre design, 1867. Eye doctor Samuel Browne persuaded a Lady Johnson to part with £5,000 for the town's first eye-and-ear hospital. As you continue down Great Victoria Street you pass the mosaic front of La Belle Epoque restaurant and then the Royal Naval Association — a delightful "ship" apparently bound for the hills beyond.



Spare a glance right for the sober little red brick Baptist church as you walk towards the steel, glass and concrete Europa Hotel coming into view on the left. The arrival of the railway in 1839 led to rapid development in this area.

The Grand Opera house opened in 1895 and from the start was immensely popular with the community who had easy access to the railway at the former station (now a car park) just beside today's hotel; the Crown and Robinson's bars opposite were formerly railway hotels.

Whether or not you are thirsty, step into the Crown Liquor Saloon to feast your eyes on the flamboyant interior. Built c1885 by Patrick Flanagan, a Banbridge student of architecture who was greatly influenced by what he saw on his travels in Spain and Italy, it has brilliant tiles and stained glass on the outside, an amazingly rich red-and-yellow ceiling, wooden arches and columns along the marble-topped bar and a row of panelled snugs with lions and griffons on the tops of the doors and painted glass decorations. This is the pub John Betjeman found irresistible! The National Trust has restored it in every detail, including the gas lamps that cast a warm light over the whole extravaganza.





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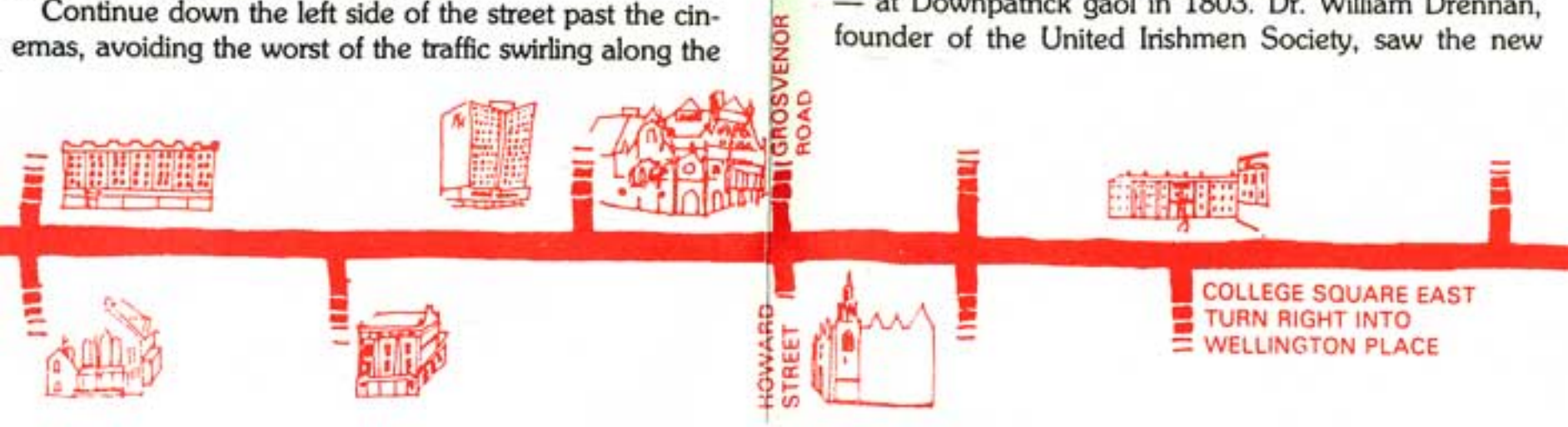
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institution as one where 'the youth of Ireland might sit together on these benches and learn to love and esteem one another'. Support also came from 300 Presbyterian ministers who wanted ordinands for the ministry to be trained here at home in Ulster instead of having to go to Scotland. 'Inst' opened as an interdenominational school and has remained so.

The present building is much simplified from Sir John Soane's original design, the cost of which proved to be too much for the college governors. A chronic lack of money obliged them in 1900 to lease the land at the front to the city council at a rent of £1,350. The resulting building, the Technical Institute (opened 1907), completely overshadows 'Inst' and spoils the vista. This second seat of learning on the site has been described as 'the largest and most ornate cuckoo's egg ever laid in songbird's nest'.

The statue of the Rev. Henry Cooke in the middle of the road at the top of Wellington Place has its back to the Royal Belfast Academical Institution. This formidable Presbyterian minister (1788-1868) campaigned remorselessly against the theological 'errors of the time' — including some that lurked within the Divinity Faculty at 'Inst'. If he unbent just a little and looked to his left he would have a marvellous view of the profile of Cave Hill.



58 Wellington Place

Now you're nearing the end of the trail. Turn right down Wellington Place, back to the starting point (Linenhall Library), observing the richly decorated exterior of No. 58 on the right, surviving cheerfully among the banks and insurance companies. Note the charming houses at Nos. 7-11 before making your way to the Linenhall Library where you began.

