



Report

Belfast Visit: 19th – 21st of February 2011

This was a three-day conference and visit that took place on the first weekend of the mid-term break. Forty-six teachers (17 male and 29 female) took part in the visit.

Aims

- a) to give teachers on-site experience of the places and events relating to the history of Northern Ireland as it features in our History Curriculum at both Junior and senior levels.
- b) to enable teachers to assess these same places and events with a view to taking groups of their students to Belfast and the North, to visit these same places for on-site learning
- c) to foster contacts with academic, teaching and tourism personnel in Belfast.

Saturday 19th February

City Hall

On the afternoon of Saturday 19th, the group visited Belfast City Hall. Our guide described the various features of this magnificent building and its place in the history of the city.

We attended a reception in the Lord Mayor's parlour at which the **Lord Mayor, Cllr. Pat Convery** (SDLP) welcomed us and spoke of the development of Belfast as a modern city and its exciting future plans. He cited the success of the HTAI Derry visit last year, which resulted in 800 students travelling to that city. It was the single most successful initiative of the DVCB in the past year. Belfast would do even more!

Political Tours of Shankill and Falls

Following that we went to the **Shankill Road** where we were taken on a walking tour guided by Loyalist ex-prisoners. We then crossed the Peace Wall to the Falls for a similar walking tour of the **Lower Falls**, conducted by Republican ex-prisoners. Both Loyalist and Republican ex-prisoners were forthcoming and candid in response to any of the group's questions. As one teacher commented: 'It was an amazing experience to walk down the Shankill on a sunny Saturday afternoon and ask our guide some of the *hard questions*'

The visit continued with a guided tour of **Milltown Cemetery**, where we saw the Republican Plot, scene of the attack on an IRA funeral by Michael Stone in 1988.

From there we went to the **Culturlann** on the Falls Road for a reception. We had a talk on Belfast City Cemetery by **Cllr. Tom Hartley** (SF), former Lord Mayor of Belfast and author of

'*Written in Stone*', a history of the cemetery. It was most surprising to learn that the cemetery, on the Falls Road was, ironically, for many years the main 'Protestant' cemetery in the city. Buried there are many captains of Belfast industry and prominent Orangemen.

Sunday 20th February

The Ulster Museum

In the morning, we visited the Ulster Museum on the Stranmillis Road where we had a guided tour of its varied and various exhibitions. This afforded the teachers a great opportunity to assess the suitability of the museum for different cohorts of students. It would ideally be visited in conjunction with the Transport Museum in Cultra.

Friar's Bush Cemetery

Adjacent to the Ulster Museum is Friar's Bush Cemetery, described as one of Belfast's best kept secrets. Closed in 1869, it had been the main Catholic cemetery in Belfast prior to the opening of Milltown. We were guided by **Dr. Éamon Phoenix** of Stranmillis College. As well as guiding us through the cemetery, Dr Phoenix drew on the cemetery to illustrate the history of the city of Belfast and indeed nineteenth-century Irish History as a whole. His presentation was erudite, illuminating and entertaining.

Titanic Quarter

In the afternoon we had a guided tour of the 'Titanic Quarter'. We visited the site of Harland and Wolff's shipyard, the old boardroom, the drawing office, the massive Thompson Dry Dock where the Titanic received her final fitting out and the adjacent Pump-house where the pumps could empty the water from the dry dock in eighty minutes. This area is undergoing rapid development in preparation for the centenary in 2012.

The Case Studies

After the visit to the Titanic Quarter, we had talks on two of the Case Studies for the Documents Based Question on Northern Ireland. **Gordon Lucy**, a member of the Apprentice Boys of Derry, detailed the history and point of view of the order.

He was followed by **Dr. Gordon Gillespie** of the Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University, who spoke of the Sunningdale Agreement from its negotiation through its weaknesses and the reasons for its eventual collapse.

Monday 21st February

Parliament Buildings, Stormont

At Stormont, we were met initially by **Cllr Paul Maskey MLA** (SF). In the old Senate chamber we had a question and answer session with **Cllr William Humphrey, MLA** (DUP). This was a unique opportunity to exchange ideas with MLAs from both sides of the political divide. Teachers were particularly impressed by Cllr. Humphrey's frankness and openness.

In the grounds is the mausoleum of James Craig, the first Prime Minister of Northern Ireland. Our guide, **Ken McElroy**, spoke of the history of the building and of the views of James Craig

Linen Hall Library

The last destination on our itinerary was the Linen Hall Library on Donegall Square. It has been in existence since 1788 and is the oldest library in Belfast and the last subscribing library in Ireland. It is renowned for its unparalleled Irish and Local Studies Collection, ranging from comprehensive holdings of Early Belfast and Ulster printed books to the 250,000 items in the Northern Ireland Political Collection, the definitive archive of the recent troubles.

Dr Gordon Gillespie guided us through the Library's collection of political posters. The librarian, **John Killen**, gave a talk on the use of cartoons in the history of twentieth-century Northern Ireland. This was based on a current exhibition in the library, *'The Unkindest Cut: From Carson to Adams'*.

Outcomes

The visit was an outstanding success. It opened up aspects of the history of Northern Ireland for the first time, thereby illuminating areas of the History syllabus.

Teachers gained very useful insights into the places and events that would be of most interest to groups of students. As one teacher observed: "I now have the experience to choose the most useful venues for my students and the confidence to take them there"

Teachers were very impressed by how far both sides of the divide have travelled to bring peace to NI. As history teachers, it is unique to be able to hear the testimony of living witnesses from both sides of the peace process.

HTAI has forged very useful links with both academic historians and tour organisers in Belfast, particularly the Belfast Welcome Centre. We were most pleased to renew contact with Catherine Thompson of the Northern Ireland Inspectorate who was present for part of the visit

Sponsors

We acknowledge the part played by the following in contributing to the success of the visit:

NST Travel Group	Epic / Coiste Tours
Stormont Hastings Hotel	Belfast Visitor and Convention Centre
Department of Education and Skills	Belfast Welcome Centre
Titanic Tours	

HTAI is most appreciative of the generous support of the Department of Education and Skills in making the visit possible

From the HTAI, particular thanks must go to the President, Maureen Cooney, for all her sterling work in initiating and bringing this project to fruition.

Terry Dolan

National Secretary, HTAI