

Dunoon Burgh Hall Options Appraisal



Executive Summary

This appraisal was commissioned by Strathclyde Building Preservation Trust (SBPT) and has been undertaken by the Trust working with Austin-Smith: Lord Architects (A-SL), Mott MacDonald Structural Engineers, Morham & Brochie Quantity Surveyors, Icosse Historical Researchers and Allied Surveyors Valuation Surveyors. The report was funded by the building owners Fyne Homes Ltd and the Architectural Heritage Fund.

The Burgh Hall in Dunoon is typical of a genre of buildings constructed by local authorities in the second half of the 19th century to provide a public hall alongside municipal offices. The buildings were more than just practical facilities, they represented civic pride and Dunoon Burgh Hall is typical of the architectural quality that resulted. Designed by an up and coming architect Robert Alexander Bryden about whom comparatively little is known, the Hall was opened in 1874 to celebrate the conferring of Burgh status on the town. Bryden is an architect who has not been studied extensively but he seems to have undertaken a number of commissions in Dunoon, of which the Burgh Hall was probably the first. His other work includes most notably many of the buildings at the Quarriers Village in Bridge of Weir.

The Burgh Hall continued in its designed use until the cost of operating the public hall and the need to update facilities, encouraged the Council to close the upper floors in the 1980's. The competition provided by the Queen's Hall built in the mid 1950's had finally rendered the public hall redundant. The Council continued to occupy offices on the ground floor until selling the building to Dunoon and Cowal Housing Association in 1993. The D&CHA put forward plans to convert the upper floors of the building to residential accommodation whilst maintaining their own offices on the ground floor. For reasons that are not clear now, this proposal was never put into action and when the D&CHA ceased operations in 2001, the Burgh Hall was transferred to Fyne Homes along with the rest of their housing stock. Fyne Homes, a registered social landlord, took up the idea of a residential and office mix and submitted an application for conversion of the building. The public outcry at the

potential loss of the public hall was such however that they withdrew and assisted the emerging Burgh Hall Steering Group both practically and financially to undertake a feasibility study into the possibility of bringing the Hall into community ownership with a mix of arts and performance based uses accommodated there. In spite of this study suggesting that the use was marginally viable, the group failed to meet the requirements of funders and dissolved with some bad feeling.

By this time, the funding that Fyne Homes had secured for the conversion proposal had been withdrawn and there followed a period of increasing uncertainty about the future of the building which it was hoped that this Options Appraisal would conclude.

The appraisal has included a preliminary condition assessment of the building which shows it to be in poor condition and accelerating towards irrecoverable dereliction. It is still capable and certainly worthy of repair and retention but action is needed soon. Consideration has also been given to external influences from the planning situation to provision of similar space elsewhere in the locality. Public consultations have been undertaken and various potential partner organisations, key stakeholders and funders have been consulted.

The resulting options for repair and re-use have been analysed to assess their likely viability in use and the potential for raising funding for the capital project. From this analysis, three uses have shown potential for viability, these are:

1. conversion to provide office space
2. conversion to provide 8 residential units
3. minor alterations to provide office accommodation on the ground floor with community arts / performance space above

For each however, there are concerns about the funding of the capital project but the third use is considered the best in terms of public benefit and conservation and is likely to have the best chance of attracting sufficient grant funding to overcome the conservation deficit. It does however, rely on a strong and properly constituted

community group to become involved at this stage and ultimately to take on the running and management of the building and unfortunately this appraisal has found no sign of such a group coming forward. An alternative might be that Argyll & Bute Council takes a lead in the project and until now this possibility seemed unlikely also. It seems now however, that an emerging initiative: 'Destination Dunoon and Cowal' might be developed to include the Burgh Hall project as a key aspect of the wider regeneration effort for Dunoon town centre. This initiative is in its early planning stages however and while this is of value to the Burgh Hall because its involvement in the long term project can be properly considered, it does not assist this appraisal in producing a positive recommendation to SBPT as to future involvement in the project.

The Trust has decided that the Options Appraisal has gone as far as it is possible to go at this stage. It is therefore proposed to bring the formal appraisal process to a conclusion now and to continue discussions with the Local Authority and other potential end users including the community over the next few months to see if a viable and fundable project can be developed. While this study will remain inconclusive it is believed that it has been instrumental in bringing the perilous state of the Burgh Hall to wider attention and that this will ultimately give the building the best chance of survival. The study has also provided an objective base of information on which further efforts to develop a successful repair and re-use project can be based. The process has therefore been of considerable value.