



Our Belfast

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LINEN HALL LIBRARY

The Linen Hall Library is the oldest library in Belfast. It was founded in 1788 and houses the greatest archive of documents on the troubles within Northern Ireland. There are 250,000 books in this collection alone!

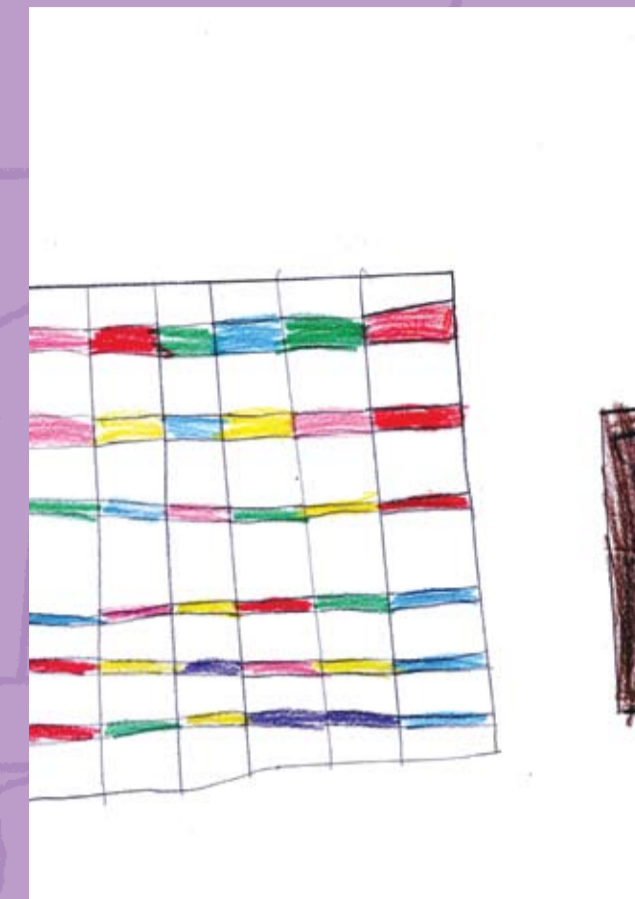
The library began its life as the Belfast Reading Society and after attracting the interest of some of the more prominent members of Northern Irish society, it became known as the Belfast Society for Promoting Knowledge in 1792. The aim of this society was threefold – to build an extensive library, to acquire a collection of different artifacts connected with the development of knowledge, and also to develop a programme of adult education for those less privileged within the city. As the library grew, the group developed a particular interest in material that was relevant to their own Northern Irish history.



A The original entrance to the library
B Cuisle glides down the central staircase from the Irish section
C Vertical Gallery exhibition space



Claire, age 11



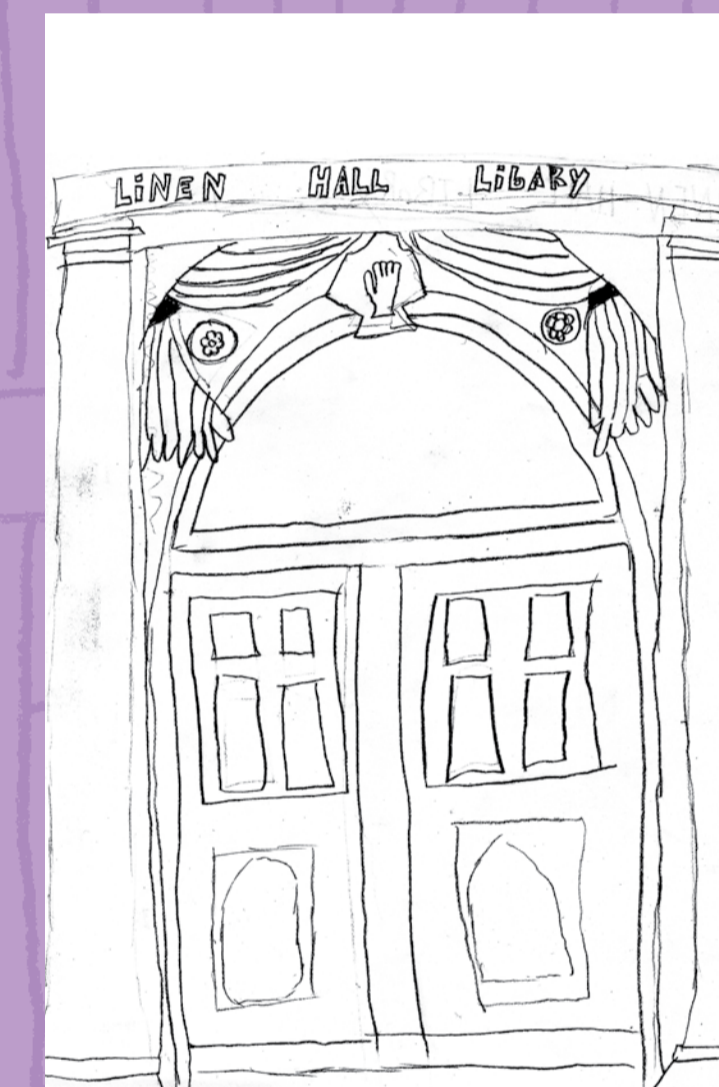
Alanna, age 5

While we refer to the building on Donegall Square as the Linen Hall Library, the name itself refers to the society rather than the building and during its early days, the society found that their search for a permanent residence was difficult.

The society has had its part to play in the political history of Northern Ireland. Some of the leading members of the society were revolutionaries and members of the Society of United Irishmen who rose to rebellion in 1798. The second Librarian, Thomas Russell, was a leading United Irish activist and he was arrested on the Library premises in 1796. Despite its connections to the politics of the country, while the society was allowed to purchase books 'on political and theological subjects', it was 'prevented from discussing them within the society'. The library's original location was not where it currently resides but in some rooms below the clock tower of the white linen hall which was located on the site where Belfast City Hall resides. The library finally managed to a secure permanent home in a Linen Warehouse – where it still resides today.

“No institution in Northern Ireland has done more to promote enlightenment and represent a better future for all our citizens.”

Of the library, nobel prizewinner, Seamus Heaney



Oonagh, age 11



Meibh, age 9



Jessica, age 6

Enduring two world wars and the recent troubles, the membership of the library went into decline during the 1960s and 1970s until, at the threat of closure, a campaign was launched in order to save the Linen Hall. The library opened its doors beyond its membership and developed a number of community programmes. As the membership began to rise, it became evident that the lack of space in the existing warehouse would be a problem and an extension was planned following the acquisition of some neighbouring property. The new extension highlights the position of the library today as one, which is firmly placed in the present, yet still maintaining its links to history.

Spatially, the new extension to the library provides a link between the main building and a number of disparate rooms in the adjoining building. The existing warehouse space acts as the main public arena for books, while the other spaces the staff offices and a meeting room, which can also be completely blacked out for presentations.