Back to the old school

A hard-working group is hoping to breathe new life into the iconic Old School building in Lockerbie with ambitious plans to transform it into a community hub, with a café, entertainment and performance space, business and office units.

WORDS CAROL HOGARTH  PHOTOGRAPHY ALLAN DEVLIN

From a school to council offices and the nerve centre for the Lockerbie Disaster investigation, a landmark Victorian sandstone building at the north end of Lockerbie has had a rich variety of past lives.

It has been at the heart of the community for 142 years and, after lying empty since 2010, a new incarnation is on the horizon.

A hard-working group is hoping to save Lockerbie Old School from dereliction, take it into community ownership, and transform it into a community hub, with a café, entertainment and performance space, business and office units, and possibly accommodation.

“It’s really all about the building. It’s such an iconic building for Lockerbie. People identify with it and have memories of it,” says project chairwoman Catherine Lacey.

Secretary Gillian Moffat adds: “People are always asking me what’s happening with it. They don’t want it to be destroyed; they have a fear that it will be knocked down.”

Built as Dryfesdale Public School in 1875, the building has been a secondary school, a primary school and was part of Lockerbie Academy before it became the base for investigations into the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie in December 1988.

Latterly, Dumfries & Galloway Council used it as offices for architects, social work and community education departments until, in 2010, they declared it surplus to requirements.

Inside, the building is in a sorry state. Puddles have formed in the dark, empty corridors where the roof is leaking in places. Wall and ceiling panels are missing, litter has collected in filthy corners and, in some rooms, it looks like its occupants left in a hurry, notices are still pinned to cork boards, papers strewn on the floor.

The building’s exterior has, however, been given a bright new look with murals painted onto the boarded up windows last year.

“We’d been doing all this work behind the scenes but people were thinking nothing was happening,” says Catherine. “The murals made them realise something is going on.”

“People love them, they’re bright and positive to look at,” Gillian adds.

With funding from The Holywood Trust, Dumfries & Galloway Regional Arts Fund and community wind farm funding from Muirhall Energy Ltd, the committee commissioned artist Lewanna Stewart, who was living in nearby Boreland at the time.

She worked with primary school pupils from Applegarth, Hutton and Lockerbie, who came up with designs based on what they like about Lockerbie and what they would like to have in the town.

Lewanna transposed the children’s designs onto each side of the building.
Social history co-ordinator Kirsty Strang organised the Citizen History scheme and added panels featuring her own designs at the front.

Sixty people turned out for the unveiling event last August which followed the success of Big Lunch ‘neighbourhood get togethers’ in 2014 and 2015.

The community has been supportive of the project since its inception and Gillian stressed the importance of that for funding applications: “We had a favourable response when we did on-street surveys for our feasibility study and we have 50 members. Our Facebook page has almost 1,100 followers.”

However, she wants to see more members signing up: “It would show funders the massive backing we have. Membership is free and they don’t have to do anything; just show their support. They get voting rights and regular updates.”

Members of the public have also been encouraged to share their memories of, and stories about, The Old School. It’s such an iconic building for Lockerbie. People identify with it and have memories of it.”

Catherine Lacey, Gillian Moffat and Samantha King want to breathe new life into the Old School.
Lockerbie Old School

“Our project is also about empowering young people to become historians themselves”

School for an oral history project, funded by The Holywood Trust.

Organised by social history co-ordinator Kirsty Strang, the Citizen History scheme involved senior pupils from Lockerbie Academy interviewing older residents about the building, to create an archive of videos and recordings, a publication and a pop-up exhibition. Community groups were also involved in the project which was unveiled Lockerbie’s Dryfesdale Church Hall in May.

“I have experience of working in old buildings and am passionate about preserving them and their histories,” says Kirsty. “Our project is also about empowering young people to become historians themselves.”

The Lockerbie Old School committee hopes the asset transfer will be completed this summer, giving the community formal ownership of the building. They are working with the Big Lottery Fund on an application and hope to have sufficient funding in place within a year, to confirm whether the project will definitely go ahead.

The first stage of architects’ plans are already complete. Phase one would involve addressing problem areas and making the building watertight, establishing a café, with training kitchen, a social area at the front and units for start-up businesses and social enterprise.

The second phase would involve creating space to lease out to bring in revenue, and the creation of a multi-purpose theatre/cinema/performance space.

The committee is open to ideas for the third and final phase which could incorporate social housing, visitor accommodation or business units.

“We want it to be for everyone,” says Catherine. “We want a building people can just walk into and sit in for a while. Lockerbie doesn’t have a place like that, where everyone can feel at home.”

Lockerbie Old School is taking part in the National Get Together on June 18 as part of The Big Lunch initiative, with an afternoon in the car park. To support Lockerbie Old School, email Gillian: gillyoldschool@hotmail.co.uk.