

Described by the architectural historian Sir Nikolaus Pevsner as the greatest neoclassical building in the world, St. George's Hall in Liverpool, England, had been a source of civic pride since its construction in the mid-nineteenth century, housing the city's law courts, along with a town hall and concert room. Yet, by the close of the twentieth century, it had fallen into decay, a process that accelerated following a moving of the law courts to an alternative venue in 1984.

Upon receiving WMF's Hadrian Award in 1990, HRH Prince of Wales drew attention to the plight of the building in his acceptance speech, in which he outlined an ambitious plan for the complete overhaul of the hall, which would cost an estimated £23 million. In doing so, the prince hoped to enlist WMF's support for the project.

St George's Hall, Liverpool

**AFTER A DECADE OF
RESTORATION,
A NEOCLASSICAL
ICON WILL SHINE
AGAIN AS THE CITY
MARKS ITS 800TH
ANNIVERSARY
THIS SPRING.**

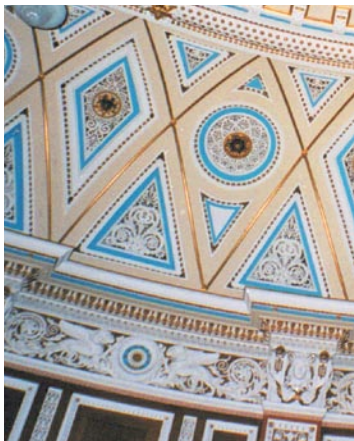
At that time, funding such as restoration seemed far beyond the means of the organization. Nonetheless, WMF pledged its support, choosing the Small Concert Room as a focus for its fundraising efforts and their first British project. WMF in Britain was instrumental in raising funds for the project, while \$500,000 from the Robert W. Wilson Challenge to Conserve Our Heritage encouraged more than £200,000 in matching funds donated by trustees of the St. George's Hall Charitable Trust. Many other donations from trusts and foundations were received through WMF in Britain, including £150,000 from the Esme Fairbairn Foundation, and grants from the Hemby Trust, BBC Radio Merseyside, The Holt Trust, Aon Company, and PKE Lighting among others. These in turn were substantially augmented by support from the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Liverpool City Council.

Built at a time of mercantile prosperity in Britain, St George's Hall was designed by Harvey Lonsdale Elmes (1814-1847) who was appointed architect in 1840 following his winning of a design competition for the hall. In 1841 the foundations were laid and exterior walls began to rise. Unfortunately, Elmes died in 1847 when the building was only half finished. The Town Surveyor continued building until 1851, when Charles Robert Cockerell (1788-1863) was appointed architect and charged with completing the construction. The Law Courts opened in 1851, followed by the Great Hall in 1854, and in 1855 the Small Concert Room and the rest of the building were completed. Construction of the entire building cost £300,000.

In designing the Small Concert Room, Elmes took his cues from the Calidarium of the Baths of Caracalla in Rome, while

by KATHERINE BOYLE





OPENING SPREAD: THE ORIGINAL COLOR SCHEME OF THE CONCERT HALL HAS BEEN RESTORED AND ITS DAZZLING CHANDELIER IS NOW BACK IN PLACE, FOLLOWING MAJOR REPAIRS, THIS PAGE TOP. ABOVE, THE BRIGHTER COLORS WHICH WERE USED TO REPAINT THE CONCERT HALL DURING AN EARLIER RESTORATION. THE NORTH ENTRANCE HALL, TOP RIGHT, FOLLOWING REFURBISHMENT.

Cockerell was responsible for the interior decoration. Described as the most beautiful interior of the Early Victorian period, it is the finest interior of Cockerell's career. The concert room, which measures 22 by 24 meters, can seat 1,100 people and accommodate an orchestra of 60. With its excellent acoustics, it is considered one of the choice concert rooms in Europe. The Liverpool Culture Company and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra are discussing ways to ensure the successful long-term future of the space.

The architects Purcell Miller Tritton carried out the extensive refurbishment of the space necessary to bring the structure up to code. Prior to restoration, people with impaired mobility had no access to the upper floors of the concert room. Work began with the re-leveling of exterior paving to overcome stepped access, and new ramps and handrails were installed. The original bench seating had been replaced with theater tip-up seats during the 1940s, which had become

worn and dilapidated. These have been repaired, and new loose seating has also been designed—modern-style chairs covered in the same fabric as the fixed seats. These can be loaded onto trolleys and stored away when not in use. Air conditioning and cabling for audio visual equipment have also been installed.

During historical research into the decorative scheme, Jane Davies Conservation discovered that the room has been re-decorated on at least four, if not five, different occasions—the last in the 1980s—and altered considerably from Cockerell’s original design. Alterations to the scheme had introduced a blue paint in the ceiling panels, which was brighter and “less green” than the original color, while the off-white used for picking out the ornamentation had been replaced with a stark white.

Among the highlights of the project was the restoration of the chandelier, which weighs more than 750 kilograms. Created by the glass firm Osler of Birmingham, the chandelier was in poor condition and had been crudely converted to electrical power. After a generous grant from Swarovski Crystal, it was carefully dismantled and transported to the Wilkinson glass workshop in London, where all the parts were sorted and repaired, and new glass was cut as appropriate. The crude electrical wiring was removed and replaced with a low-voltage scheme based on the arrangement of the earlier gas jets. Now back in its original position, the chandelier’s 2,824 crystal pieces are glittering once more and provide a beautiful focal point for the room.

As Liverpool celebrates its 800th birthday, events and ceremonies to commemorate the completion of the project are planned for April 23rd—St. George’s Day. This civic icon has been restored in time for the city to claim its title of the European Capital of Culture 2008. Moreover, the project is spurring further regeneration of the area known as the Cultural Quarter, which is expected to see an investment of £120 million by 2009. ■

THE CLASSICAL GRANDEUR OF ST. GEORGE’S HALL, BELOW, OUTSIDE AND IN, HAS MADE IT A LIVERPOOL LANDMARK. LEFT, A PAINTER RESTORES THE HALL’S CEILING PANELS TO THEIR ORIGINAL COLORS.

