

The historical roots of the street and the city date back around four hundred years, when James I granted Faulk Conway the manor of Kilultagh, with sixty thousand acres in South West Antrim.

Conway built a fortified manor house overlooking the River Lagan. He encouraged the town's first inhabitants to build their houses in two streets leading to a market place: one from his house (now Castle Street), and the other from a new wooden bridge over the River Lagan (Bridge Street). A weekly market was established by royal charter in 1628.

Form and Function

Bridge Street was laid out as a main thoroughfare on the hillside connecting the Market Square with the bridge over the River Lagan, a function which it retains to this day. We can still see evidence of its two phases of building development. The first phase at the upper end on both sides of the street, dates from the early 18th century, the time when the town was entirely rebuilt after the great fire of Lisburn in 1707. The second phase, which dates from the mid 19th century, can be found at the lower end on the North side, where the street steps back. Here an intact terrace backs on to Castle Gardens, the former Lisburn Castle Demesne. The terrace at the upper end of the South side is largely intact, but for one infill set-back building.

While Bridge Street has no listed buildings, the Cathedral on its Northern flank is listed, and there are several scheduled monuments in the Castle Gardens. At the western end of Bridge Street sits the Market House and Assembly Rooms (now the Irish Linen Centre and Lisburn Museum). This well proportioned building was originally a late seventeenth century open arched market house, a survivor of the great fire of 1707. Its very fine neo-classical dressed cupola was designed by David McBlain in 1804, and in 1888 the building was given its present Italianate exterior, with



additions designed by John McHenry, surveyor to the Wallace Estate in South Antrim. Inside, the elegant first floor Assembly Rooms was restored in 1985 to designs by Robert McKinstry, whilst in 1994 the building was adjoined by the award-winning Irish Linen Centre.

Years of Neglect

By the 1990s this once thriving street had suffered years of neglect and decline, to the extent that its very fabric was in danger of being lost either through redevelopment or collapse. Vacancy levels of 60-70% were contributing to this increasing spiral of neglect and corresponding economic failure.

Furthermore, as Bridge Street was the main entrance to Lisburn City Centre from the M1 motorway via Sloan Street, the first view that visitors received of the historic and supposedly thriving urban area was a vision of decay and dereliction.