

The Briggait

One of Glasgow's most enduring and endearing landmarks, the Grade A listed Briggait Fish market has been a part of the River Clyde skyline since the Nineteenth Century.

A city funded public building; the fish market was designed by architects Clarke and Bell and opened in 1873. The term Briggait can be loosely translated as "Bridgegate" or gate towards the Clyde. One of the oldest areas of town the roots of the road from the Clyde to the Cathedral can be dated back to the 14th Century.

The area the Briggait is situated in is notable as being one of the more historic parts of Glasgow; indeed the triangular lines of medieval property are still largely discernable from the Briggait to the Saltmarket.

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Briggait Buildings

The main hall was a purpose built fish market offering a spacious and hygienic solution to the problems of external markets in Victorian Britain.

Additional buildings were added in 1889, 1903 and 1914 respectively as growth demanded.

The Briggait complex also incorporates the 1650s Merchants' Halls "Merchants' Steeple", notable for being one of the few remaining parts of Medieval Glasgow.

Bearing an attractive similarity to the famous Les Halles markets in Paris (completed 1854) the main hall or 'courtyard' of the Briggait is of considerable historical interest, as it has remained largely unchanged since its inception. Being a design of form and usability, this simple and classical hall has been able to undergo several rebirths, from fish market, to shopping centre, to its latest incarnation as a new cultural space for the city.



Above, clockwise: View of The Briggait from across the River Clyde. Pre-redevelopment - location map. Fish Market - Weighing Saloon 1955 (Glasgow Museums). Clyde Street facade 2010. Main Hall (1873 Courtyard) 2005.

Below: Clockwise: Merchants Steeple, post redevelopment - new Briggait entrance, new studio interiors in 'Gulley Court' atrium, artist Angharad McLaren in her studio.



Glasgow: *the changing City*

The River Clyde has historically provided Glasgow with much of its success and wealth. The merchant boats bringing in their new found trades encouraged the growth of a City of commerce, as reflected by the various mercantile buildings in Glasgow such as the Trades Hall and Merchants House.



For a wider variety of reasons - age, history, familiarity, even notoriety etc - the Bridgegate (or rather the Briggait), is, whatever its condition, an integral part of the Glaswegian view of what makes Glasgow 'Glasgow'. Its name crops up again and again not only in the city's many histories, but in poems, songs, jokes, anecdotes and reminiscences. Arguably, it is not merely a street, but a place of distinct character essential to the Glasgow psyche.

Dorothy Bell, Conservation Architect



Clockwise: The Briggait in 1834 looking southward towards the Clyde; Guildry Court in about 1850s (now Guildry Court Atium Studios); Paddy's Market 2009 and Paddy's Market in 1960s (Andrew MacDonald); Briggait images pre-redevelopment in 2005; Fish Market 1959 (Glasgow Museums)



Clockwise: View of site from Glasgow Green 1806; Briggait and Old Merchants House Steeple from Calton Place 1955 (Glasgow Museums)

As the Clyde also provided access to fishing boats, and the local ship building industry, a ready populace of people existed locally for whom a fish market was an integral part of the community.

The site on which the Briggait was built was ideally placed being near to the River Clyde, the local populace, and the existing fish market at Great Clyde Street.

Following a period of decline the Bridgegate, Saltmarket and adjacent lanes had become a slum area with a rapidly swollen population. In 1866 the City Improvement Act was passed and a period of demolition and building followed overseen by the City Improvement Trust, a body charged with cleaning up squalid living conditions in Glasgow in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

The area's fate as a residential site was sealed when the Union Railway built a line straight through the region and across the Clyde. However as the triangular area between Clyde Street, Bridgegate and the Saltmarket was relatively unscathed, space remained for a new purpose built-enclosed fish market by the improvement trustees.

Covered markets were becoming part of Glasgow's civic improvement, with an emphasis on controlling space and trade within a regulated environment. City fathers viewed open markets with the suspicion that they encouraged crime and immorality. The fish market based at Glasgow Green had moved to Great Clyde Street in 1867 adding to the throng of "Paddy's Market" and the general chaos. Trustees believed that visitors to Glasgow could only be dismayed by such sights, an argument which raged on for many years until Paddy's closure by the City in 2009.

In Glasgow's architectural circles, it was hoped that such buildings could bring the classes together for a common purpose.

Glasgow's covered markets were notable in that they were not mere enclosures, but ornate and built with the peculiarly Victorian view that symmetry and clean lines of building could impose a similar order on peoples' moral views! In Glasgow's architectural circles, it was hoped that such buildings could bring the classes together for a common purpose.

The Briggait design can therefore be seen as a continuation of the Glasgow Market Hall tradition, as also visible in Candleriggs Fruitmarket and the Cheese Market in Albion Street.

The form of the new building was functional and clean, with bright glazed tiles, good ventilation and adequate drainage to the river, all contained under a pleasing glass canopy. The façade of the building followed the Glasgow tradition of making such spaces imposing yet attractive. The existing Merchants' Steeple remained to the rear of the building as yet relatively unhindered, as did the remaining tenements of Guildry Court.

Opened on 9th December 1873 by the Lord Provost the new Fish market was praised for being an admirably elegant solution to an awkward site. The building proved its functionality almost immediately, being quickly taken up by the local trade and serving its intended use for 100 years.

A building for All Eras: *extension and change*

1893, 1903 and 1914 Extensions

In 1878 the City of Glasgow bank collapsed putting an end to the previous building boom. It wasn't until 1889 that the Improvement Trust had resumed a new building and clearance program. Indeed the population of the Bridgegate area and its surrounding wynds dropped from 14,000 to 4,000 between 1875 and 1905. By 1910 some 20,000 houses had been vacated in Glasgow City as people moved to the tram connected suburbs.



However the purpose-built fish market had been a success and as soon as trustee funds were available an extension was built into the vacated land. The second hall was a utilitarian and unassuming addition whose emphasis was based on practicality and a desire not to impinge too heavily on the remaining domestic properties of Guildry Court. To this extent, it had a low roof and was relatively unadorned with ornamentation.



In 1903 a further extension was built and the tenements of the Lane behind were demolished to provide more space. Facing the Clyde, it was a slight pastiche of the original that enveloped the Merchant Steeple and the one remaining tenement.



1914 saw the final addition to what had now become a complex. The last of the Guildry Court tenements was replaced with a block of two story offices. Designed in the then current Railway building style this was another approximation of the main hall's style and once again encroached further on the view of the medieval Merchants' Steeple. An unusual corner turret completed the asymmetry.

Plans of 1893, 1899 and 1903 work
(Dean of Guild Court Reports, 1949)

In this form the Briggait complex remained relatively unchanged and survived through two world wars. However, much as the 19th century had seen a policy of clearance and redevelopment so too did post-war Glasgow. Compulsory council purchase and a rising unemployment rate saw the area changing again. The Clyde had traditionally been the artery that fed Glasgow, with its access to commerce, fishing boats and shipbuilding, but in a changing world of global competition and international imports, Glasgow was becoming depressed. A decline in rail transportation also led to the closure of St Enoch's Railway Station and the removal of the local railway lines. In 1977 the fish market was moved to Blochairn nearer the road networks and after a century of service the Briggait building joined the list of unused Glasgow properties.

On the 22nd July 1980 a notification of demolition was placed.



From left to right: Briggait 1889 Hall, Briggait 1904 Hall photographed in 2005



From left to right: View of the Shopping centre from the 1990s; view of the Courtyard in 2005

The Briggait Shopping centre

Within a year a voluntary body called The Bridgegate Trust had formed to try to save the building. It managed to purchase a long-term lease from the owners Glasgow City Council. With considerable dedication, and through the negotiation of grants with various bodies the fish market was reopened within a few years as a shopping centre.

Utilising the features of the halls for different purposes the shopping centre boasted small shop units (courtyard), a food court (second hall) with stalls ringing the floor space. Shops were also reintroduced along the Bridgegate and partition walls helped separate the spaces. This even included the introduction of stairs between the levels but no changes were made that would prove irreversible to the building's fabric.

The steeple was still enclosed but the third extension was not used and was kept for future expansion.

An advertising campaign followed which in many ways typifies Glasgow's attempts to reposition and regenerate itself in the eyes of the world as a city of enterprise. Tired of being seen as a hard living and deprived city the 'Glasgow's Miles Better' campaign summed up the efforts made to show that Glasgow was more than capable of moving with the times.

However by 1986 an appraisal of the shopping centre already doubted its feasibility. The initial intention was a low-key, community based, centre but what emerged was far more costly and upmarket than the area could really support. Given that the building was located in an area, which by now, was unlikely to attract the passing shopper and in addition to the costly upkeep of the building, the Briggait faced an uphill struggle.



By the 1990s The Briggait shopping centre had failed and the building had sadly become disused again.

*"50 Shop, One Stop,
Shopping Complex!"*

Slogan from the 1985 Briggait shopping centre advertising campaign

Rebirth *and* the Future

In 1990 Glasgow was chosen as the European City of Culture and, coupled with the 1988 Garden Festival, Glasgow had begun to reassert itself as a city. Glasgow quite rightly could be proud of its cultural, industrial and artistic history. The neighbouring Merchant City had shown shoots of regeneration with the ongoing repair and renovation of its magnificent buildings. Glasgow has also shown itself time and again to be at the forefront of artistic, musical and intellectual endeavour. Like other cities in Britain, Glasgow grew from mercantile and industrial roots, as a city of magnificent trade buildings, which experienced industrial slump and then a reawakening as a cultural capital.

In this respect it is wholly appropriate that the building is now under the custodianship of Wasps Studios, a highly successful and home-grown arts organisation who supports 750 visual artists over a variety of 18 locations across Scotland. Wasps Studios and partner charity, The Wasps Trust, have been responsible for organising and overseeing the mammoth redevelopment project, which falls within wider regeneration plans for the Merchant City.

Phase 1: The Redevelopment

Designed by Dundee based architects, Nicoll Russell Studios, the redevelopment was divided into two phases. The first phase has transformed the building into 5,500sq.m. of public and private space including 69 studio and office spaces.

The distinct fabric of the main hall has not been altered in its return to a working building, fortunately the modifications made in its guise as a shopping centre had not damaged the integrity of the fine structure. The architects broadly split the Briggait into 4 distinct areas.

- 1873 Courtyard (open to the public)
- The Merchants Steeple Atrium
- The Briggait Studio Complex
- The Guildry Court Atrium with Studio Insertions.

These areas now provide:

- 1900 sq.m. of affordable workspace for the cultural sector
- 45 studios for visual artists
- 24 offices for cultural organisations
- 5 shop front units
- A new public space within the historic main hall
- An internal gallery surrounding the C17th Steeple

Leased for 80 years at £1 a year the building has been beautifully renovated for this purpose at a cost of £6.5 million. The Project was funded by Glasgow City Council, Scottish Arts Council Capital Lottery Fund, Scottish Enterprise, Heritage Lottery Fund, Historic Scotland, The Mickel Fund, The Hugh Fraser Foundation and loan finance from Triodos Bank.



Images: Initial designs by Nicoll Russell Studios in 2006

Some of the Sources consulted

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Images: Views of the Briggait during and post redevelopment



waspsstudios.org.uk/briggait

This Briggait was redeveloped with the support of



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Historic Scotland

Triodos Bank