



● Roscommon's Harrison Hall.

Bank saves historic landmark from the bulldozers

A bank has saved a landmark from destruction and preserved an unique link with a town's past.

Harrison Hall, built as a courthouse in Roscommon town, became in turn a church, social centre, theatre, circus, amusement arcade, badminton hall and is now getting a new lease of life as a Bank of Ireland branch.

It was built in 1750 and many convicted prisoners were taken through its still existing side door to be hanged or deported to Van Diemen's Land.

When the town got a new

courthouse in 1836, Father John Madden, the then parish priest, converted the old one into a church.

With the dedication of a new church in 1903, the building remained unused for seven years. After the death of a popular local physician, Dr. John Harrison in 1890, a fund was started

to perpetuate his memory but opinions as to its use were divided.

When Canon Cummins became parish priest in 1910, trustees of the fund were appointed and the old building was bought and named the Harrison Memorial Hall.

Mr. Paddy Burgoyne and others who founded Roscommon Catholic Young Men's Association in 1911, converted it from a social centre into a recreation centre and theatre.

Those were the heyday days of theatre in Roscommon and eventually led to the annual Drama Festival, recalled Mr. Paddy Guerin, who, with Miss Finola McCrann and Miss Vera McCarthy, founded the Social and Dramatic Society in 1950.

Highlights included a Percy French Golden Years presentation involving Priomsias O Duinn, now conductor of RTE Symphony Orchestra, and Mervyn Wall, former director of the Arts Council, and the appearance of stars such as Noel Purcell, Milo O'Shea, Anew McMaster and Jimmy O'Dea.

As a new community centre, a gymnasium and a ballroom began to cater for social needs, Harrison Hall was abandoned once more and fell into disrepair.

"Many people wanted it pulled down and the whole square where it stands turned into a car park," said local historian Mr. Brian O'Carroll, who was prominent in the campaign to save it.

"But it is a magnificent building and part of the town's heritage and it would have been a shame to see it go."

A parish priest, Canon Thomas Hanley, took the initiative, new trustees were elected and the hall put on the market with the proviso that its facade must be preserved.

The Bank of Ireland gave the undertaking, bought the building and is now spending an estimated £200,000 on renovating the interior. The money from the sale has been invested to provide recreational and cultural facilities for the people of Roscommon.