

BIRKENHEAD: THE LAIRD ENTERPRISE TRUST

A Space of Hope?

At the end of 1992, less than 18 months after the Enterprise Trust were forced to vacate the building, it was transferred into private ownership.

Documents in the Wirral Archive show that the council sold the building and land freehold for £10,000 (£20,000 in today's money). Wirral Borough

Council also supplied the new owner, Stanton Marine, with a substantial grant to 'assist in the refurbishment of the former Laird School of Art'.

New lease of life for historic building

ONE of Birkenhead's most important historic buildings is set to become a lasting tribute to the town's founding fathers.

The Laird School of Art in Conway Street has recently undergone a £250,000 facelift after falling into disrepair following its closure as an art school 17 years ago.

It has now been renamed the John Laird Centre after the man described as "the father of Birkenhead".

Name

John Laird presented the building, Britain's first purpose-built art school, to Birkenhead in 1871 when he was the town's first MP.

Stanton Marine, the Birkenhead firm of marine surveyors and consultants which masterminded the facelift, say they are determined to keep the name of the Laird family alive.

They plan to put a wide range of artefacts connected with the Laird

By Anne Harrison

family and the Cammell Laird shipyard on show at the centre.

Stanton director Bill MacDonald said: "We believe this part of local history should be retained for future generations."

Stanton received grants from Wirral Council and the borough's government-backed City Lands initiative to revamp the old Victorian building.

Its decorative facade has been carefully restored while its light and airy rooms on three storeys have been converted to 5,600 sq ft of office space.

It will be officially opened next Friday.

John Laird was the son of Scottish philanthropist William Laird who set up Birkenhead's famous shipyard in the 1820s. He ran the yard with his father.



Historic site . . . Bill MacDonald outside the John Laird Centre

Make Birkenhead

Despite being a short-lived and fragile initiative, the Laird Enterprise Trust is interesting for many reasons. It engages key socio-political issues of capital and class, and the shifting concept of 'enterprise'. It raises questions about the notion of community 'assets' and the support, skills and finance required to ensure sustainable community ownership.

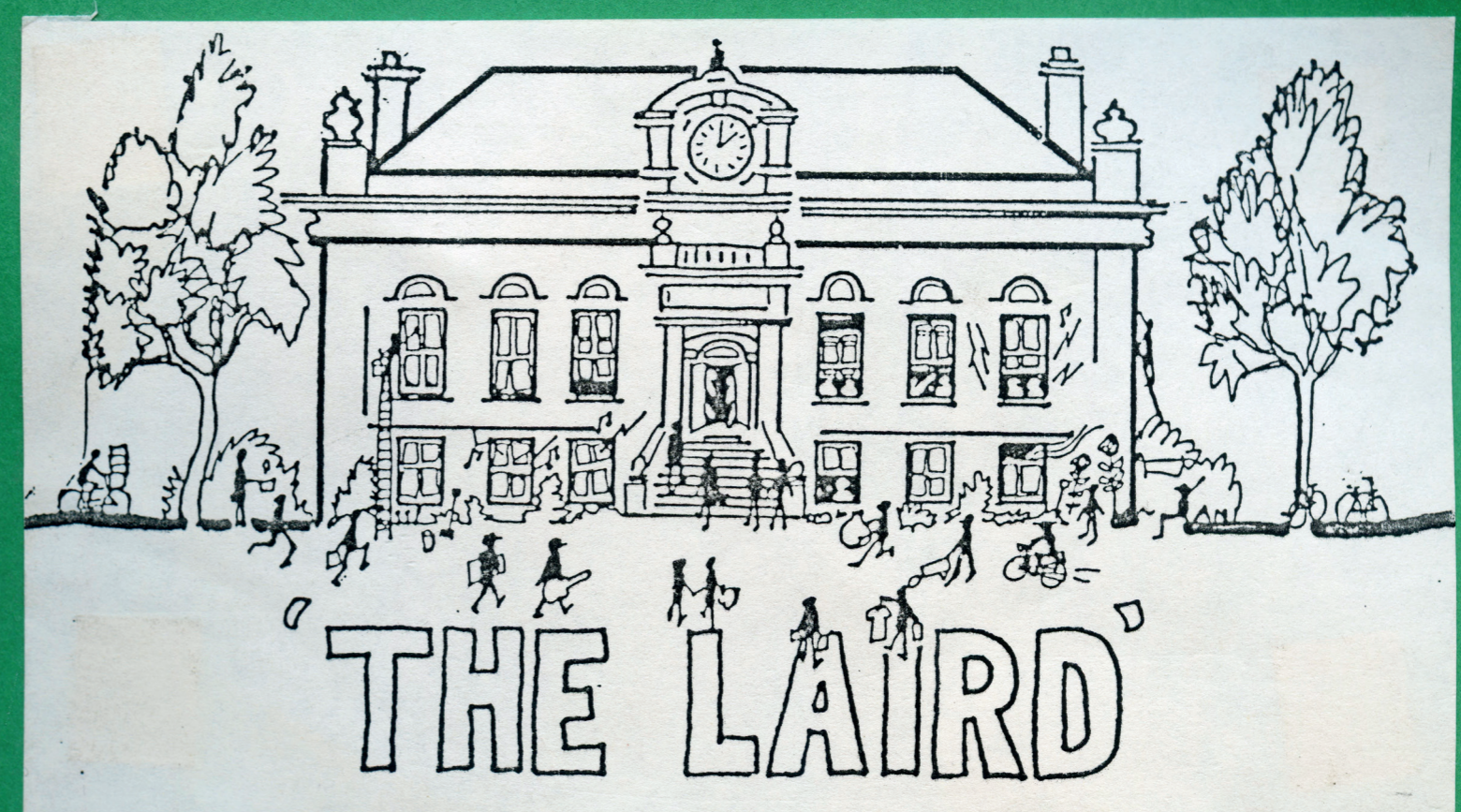


Image of the Laird Building by long-time Gibson collaborator, Jonathan Bean. Used with permission.

Changing attitudes

It was about changing attitudes via hope and the boosting of civic pride, and encouraging people to realize their potential. These feelings are pertinent in present day Birkenhead, which is developing similar plans with a focus on culture-led, community enterprise, and an explicit attention to local senses of pride.

