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Richard Oram: leading conservation architect

Richard Oram was a leading conservation architect in Northern Ireland. He joined the Department of the Environment's Historic Monuments and Buildings Branch, later part of the Environment Agency, in 1977. There he handled listed building consent matters and provided advice on the repair of historic buildings. After retiring from the public service in 1998 he advised on the conservation of the Waterford Cathedrals and a host of churches and chapels. He wrote, contributed to and edited key books on the preservation of historic buildings.

Richard (Dick) William Coxhill Oram was born in Oxford in 1938, the son of William Reginald and Marjorie (née Parker) Oram. He was educated at Canford School (near Wimborne in Dorset) and Christ Church, Oxford, and must have been inspired from an early age by the glorious architecture of the university town and Canford's early/mid-19th century Gothic pile (by Edward Blore and Sir Charles Barry), and the adjacent medieval John O'Gaunt's Kitchen.

Oram studied architecture at the Architectural Association in London. After a few years in practice he first travelled to Northern Ireland in 1967 to work in the public sector on the Craigavon new town development. As his post took shape his work included the evaluation of the existing building stock within the development area, and a relationship grew with the newly formed Ulster Architectural Heritage Society.

Oram moved back to England and into private practice in Tunbridge Wells in 1970-76. But he returned to Northern Ireland in 1977 to work as one of only a handful of conservation architects in the Department of the Environment's Historic Monuments and Buildings Branch alongside Colin Hatrick.

The branch dealt with listed building consent matters and grants programmes, and gave out technical advice on the repair and re-use of historic buildings to any and all who needed it. The team grew in responsibilities (but not resources), and later merged with complementary skill sets to become part of the department's Environment and Heritage Service, now the Northern Ireland Environment Agency.

Oram was the Northern Ireland representative on the British Isles Technical Forum hosted by English Heritage. He was a member of the British Standards Institute's drafting committee that prepared BS 7913:1998 — Guide to the Principles of the Conservation of Historic Buildings. He also co-chaired and managed the first British-Irish government cross-border initiative on the historic environment that led to an investigation into historic thatch and thatched roofing techniques, the first survey of its kind on the subject carried out in Ireland.

He retired from public service in 1998. A deeply religious man with a warm heart, his farewell day in the Civil Service started with a service of thanksgiving in a local Belfast church, followed by the formal receiving of parting gifts and speeches from his work colleagues before repairing to a club with many friends for drinks and happy banter.

Thereafter Oram never really stopped working. Acting as an architectural consultant, he advised on the repair and conservation of churches and chapels in Balligan, Leitrim, Kilcoo, Cobh and Armagh as well as the Waterford cathedrals. He was an adviser to the Ulster Historic Churches Trust and consulted on projects involving the modest vernacular houses of Irish villages and the countryside, including those of the Mourne Heritage Trust, the regeneration of South Armagh and work for the Irish Landmark Trust and Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

He was a founder and committee member of the Ulster Architectural Heritage Society and pioneered Irish interest in the European Council for the Village and Small Town. He was vice chairman of the all-Ireland

Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites, a member of the Conservation Committee of the Royal Society of Ulster Architects, a trustee of the Irish Architectural Archive, and a founder-trustee of the Irish Follies Trust.

Oram also had strong ties to local groups such as the Friends of Down County Museum, the Upper Ards Historical Society, the Armagh Visitor Education Committee, and was a member of the Buildings Committee of the Armagh Observatory. In his spare time he was editor of the Upper Ards Historical Society's journal and a regular contributor to Lecale Historical Society's journal.

He also arranged building conservation seminars and assisted several architectural conservation courses. Oram was a member of the Historic Buildings Council for Northern Ireland and sat on a local panel of expert advisers to Heritage Lottery Fund. In 1999 he was appointed MBE for services to conservation in Northern Ireland.

A modest, quietly-spoken character with a quick wit and contagious laugh, Oram had an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, and loved an occasional "wee drink" with like-minded souls. He inspired not only the professionals, but also many of the owners of historic buildings with his friendship and generosity.

He is survived by his wife, Mary, and three sons.

Richard Oram, MBE, architect, was born on April 9, 1938. He died from motor neurone disease on December 21, 2008, aged 70

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