

VOTE 42.- AN ROINN EALAÍON, CULTÚIR AGUS GAELTACHTA

47. Hunt Museum

The Hunt collection consists of about 3,000 objects, the core of which is based on decorative arts from the medieval period. The value of the collection has been conservatively estimated at about £50m.

It was the wish of the Hunt family that the collection should be donated to the State if it could be permanently housed in the Limerick/Clare area. In the 1970s the State acknowledged the importance of the collection and was willing to have it taken into the care of the National Museum but, on grounds of inadequate resources, was not prepared to give a guarantee as to its permanent residence in a museum in the Limerick area. The offer from the Hunt family was then withdrawn. The NIHE (later the University of Limerick) assisted the family by permitting the collection to be housed there until a permanent home was found.

In 1991, a group led by local business interests proposed that the collection should be housed in the Custom House, Limerick which was being vacated by the State. The Government responded to the proposal by deciding that the building should, in principle, be leased by OPW to Limerick Corporation for the purposes of the Hunt collection being housed there. The handover of the property to Limerick Corporation for this purpose was formally sanctioned by the Department of Finance in October 1991.

A legal structure for the management of the collection was put in place as follows:

- Ownership of the collection to reside with the Hunt Museum Trust whose trustees include two members of the Hunt family and representatives drawn from both national and local interests.
- An independent company, known as Hunt Museum Ltd., to take charge of the day to day management of the Museum.
- An executive management committee of Hunt Museum Ltd. to manage the permanent housing of the collection and to plan for the financial arrangements. This committee comprised members drawn from SFADCo, Limerick Corporation, the University of Limerick and other education and business interests.

When EU structural funds became available for major infra-structural cultural facilities, the conversion of the Custom House and fitting out of the building to house the Hunt collection was identified as being suitable for EU funding under the Operational Programme for Tourism.

The capital project was to cost £2.9m financed as follows

£1,275,000	all in EU aid from SFADCo
£900,000	from the Department's allocation under the Operational Programme of which 75% represented EU funding
£200,000	from Limerick Corporation
£400,000	from OPW in respect of basic refurbishment work
£125,000	from the private sector

The funding arrangement provided that any additional or unforeseen costs must be met by the company and/or the Trust. In addition, a commitment was to be provided by the promoters of the company and the Trust to put in place an endowment fund of £2m during the first five years of the operation, 1995-2000, to ensure the ongoing sustainability of the project.

In November 1995 the Department of Finance sanctioned the payment of the £900,000 grant on condition that the Department limited any payment to the company in respect of non-capital costs to a maximum of £100,000 per annum (1995 prices) for the following five years.

In early November 1996 the Department was advised that extra costs of £312,452 had arisen on the project and the Department was asked to meet these costs. The explanations for the cost overruns were that no provision had been made for the conservation of the collection prior to its removal to its new location, unforeseen restoration costs had to be met and higher design fees materialised.

SFADCo and Limerick Corporation could not provide any further funding and the project promoters saw no hope of getting private sector donations in the short timescale needed if the project was to be completed. The Department had already paid out £857,918 of the approved £900,000 capital grant and a further grant of £215,130 was paid in December 1996 with Department of Finance sanction towards the extra costs incurred. The balance of £139,404 of project costs is being funded by bank borrowing pending final determination of how it should be funded.

The Department paid current grants to the company of £10,000 in 1992, £40,000 in 1993 and £100,000 in each of the years 1994 to 1996. The Department has been advised by the company that commitments totalling £270,000 for the endowment fund have been received and the company believes it is close to securing additional commitments. Since 1994 the Department has in effect met 88% of the Museum's current expenditure.