

BELFAST CITY HALL  
CELEBRATES

100 years

# Former Lord Mayors

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Pictures: Diane Magill

**P**ERHAPS the best way to judge a former Lord Mayor of Belfast is by their portrait in the City Hall. In each case, the first citizen of our capital has full control over the piece that will long hang in the halls after their term has finished.

Of the more recent portraits, some have gone for a simple capturing of them in their chains, some more casual, some incorporating aspects of their political ideology and one even went for a basic photograph outside the City Hall.

It is these portraits that give us a glimpse into the men, and one woman, who have held the highest office in Belfast.

Many are over 100 years old and the most recent to go up is former Alliance Lord Mayor Tom Ekin's, which was unveiled in February.

Fittingly, the largest portrait in the entire collection belongs to Sir Crawford McCullagh, Belfast's longest serving Lord Mayor with a total of 16 years in the top job.

Before the last review of local government in 1973, Lord Mayors were given a three-year term and it was almost always a man from a unionist background, often being a wealthy landowner or major employer in Belfast, who was appointed.

At that stage they had to pay for their own portrait, that also changed from 1973, hence Sir Crawford getting the largest. He could afford it!

Sir Crawford also has a stained glass window telling the story of all that happened during his different spells in office.

Considering he was in the top job during both world wars and the building of Stormont, the window on the first floor of City Hall makes interesting viewing.

His wife, Lady McCullagh, also has a window chronicling her extensive work with Belfast charities while her husband was in office.

Since 1973, a lot has changed, with the Lord Mayor's role now being rotated between all the parties. Grace Bannister became the first woman to become Lord Mayor in 1981, with more people holding the post because of the shorter terms. It is now very different than the early years when John Vesey became the original holder of the position, when it was still called Sovereign of Belfast.

That was in 1613 and the title remained until 1842 when it became Mayor, then the first 'real' Lord Mayor in 1892 was Sir Daniel Dixon.

'They all have different attributes. Some are better than others.'

The 'Lord' was added after Queen Victoria visited Belfast, took a shine to it, and designated it a city in 1888.

Since 1929, it has even stretched to the Right Honourable Lord Mayor of Belfast.

No one knows the corridors of City Hall better than tour guide Diane Leeman and during her three decades in the role she has got to know many of those to have reached high office.

Diane refused to be drawn on any unpopular or unlikeable former Lord Mayors and preferred to focus on those who left her with good memories.

"They all have different attributes. Some are better than others," she said.

Others, from a range of parties and backgrounds, have also got the thumbs up over the years.

"Eric Smith was the one who raised the most for charity.

He was a big help to Spina Bifida and he didn't get the credit he deserved.

"Hugh Smyth was an interesting character. They were planning the Anglo-Irish Agreement at the time. We had lots of visitors at the time.

"Mo Mowlam, long before she was Northern Ireland Secretary, came in and kicked off her shoes when taking to him. That was very different then, there was still lots of protocol.

"It was a good year and a very colourful one."

The current Ulster Unionist leader, Sir Reg Empey, was also popular with Diane, as was Belfast's first Sinn Féin Lord Mayor.

"Reg was terrific. A true gent. A good communicator with all sorts of people of all ages.

"You could see he was going to reach a position of influence," she remembered.

"Alex's was a very different year.

He was the first Sinn Féin Lord Mayor. I think it gave some people hope.

"He was very open to everyone. As Lord Mayor they have to step out of their party and work for everyone."

That's the modern Lord Mayors dealt with.

As for those who are now answerable to a higher office, you can only judge them by a picture they paid for out of their own pocket.



Cllr Grace Bannister, Lord Mayor 1981-82

Sir Otto Jaffe, High Sheriff 1901.  
Lord Mayor 1899 and 1904

Cllr Ian Adamson, Lord Mayor 1996-1997

## Sammy Wilson

Lord Mayor 1986-1987 and 2000-01



**W**HEN Sammy Wilson was first elected Lord Mayor of Belfast in 1986 he was the first DUP member to hold the post. He served again in 2000-01 but, as he explained himself, an awful lot had changed in the intervening years.

"The two terms were totally different. the first one was very, very political. I had taken over at the time of the Anglo-Irish Agreement," said the current East Antrim MP.

"Councils were right at the centre of the protests. Councils were adjourning. In my full year I actually sat in the chair for about an hour and a half!

"The second year was more about doing the ordinary things. The nicest accolade I got was actually from Geoff Hill who wrote in the News Letter that I was the first Lord Mayor who appeared to enjoy the job. You're out and about meeting people and getting involved in things you wouldn't normally get into."

One anecdote best reflects Mr Wilson's thoughts on the differences between his two terms. In 1986, he held a party at the City Hall to celebrate the newly opened late night shopping on a Thursday. As a group of punks gathered at the gate he went over to talk to them and ended up signing one of their denim jackets.

In 2000, fulfilling his role as Lord Mayor at a function in west Belfast he was handing out community awards when a well-dressed man came up and asked him if he remembered him.

"It was the guy whose coat I signed. I thought to myself 'how times have changed'," said Mr Wilson.

"He used to be a hood and now here he's getting an award for helping the community."