



Clockwise from above left, the fancy facade of The Harrison; beer flights at The Deer's Head; beetled linen at Kindred of Ireland; The Butcher's Building; pan-fresh bites at The Muddlers Club; the Banana Block "living museum"

Artisans are crafting new identity for grand old city

Belfast is more than just a multiple Oscar-nominated film. Lucy White fills her boots with its shopping opportunities

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It's Day-Glo budgie-smugglers, not 'X', that marks the spot of my destination. Google Maps may have brought me to The Butcher's Building in Belfast city's Smithfield, but next time I'll know to look for the beautiful Art Deco buildings on Royal Avenue – ye olde Bank of Ireland, and a Caffè Nero – followed by an 'adult shop' on Gresham Street whose facade is so knackered it actually looks like a film or stage set.

The Butcher's Building, opposite, is in better nick. It's a handsome Victorian corner building, restored as part of a regeneration scheme to "be bold to save the old", and houses some of the city's loveliest independent retail brands after a successful pop-up pilot. One such is Dollybirds Art, aka native illustrator Eimear Maguire, who fizzles with excitement, relief and gratitude at having a permanent premises after the uncertainty of the pandemic.

Her hand-drawn Irish birds, mammals, ferns and woodland leaves are simply delightful, and echo the ethos – wholesome, slow crafts with a modern aesthetic – of Sinead Black's Bricolage upstairs, where off-cut cloth and local Irish linens have been transformed into striking contemporary quilts and homewares.

Black honed her craft at Conran Design Group in London, and has lectured on design at the Glasgow School of Art and Ulster University in Belfast. She too is happily ensconced in The Butcher's, and looking forward to resuming quilt-making workshops after the pandemic curtailed her teaching.

Her pieces are stunning, and if hand-hewn bed linen or large-scale wall hangings are out of your price range, there are colourful linen napkins and drawstring bread bags. Linen, I learn, as well as being environmentally friendly, is antibacterial. Could there be a more zeitgeist-y fabric?

Fellow linen fiend, Amy Anderson of Kindred of Ireland, shares the same building, as does creative consultancy Haller Clarke, and also Bound Concept, which takes up the ground floor with covetable homewares. Keep your eye out too for pop-up concessions, such as Ursa Minor Bakehouse's lip-smacking sourdoughs and pastries.

It's a mini department store of dreams: the sort of community-facing project you would love to see rolled out across the island of Ireland, dynamic life breathed into old, or derelict, buildings. I slip out into the rain as the artisans toast their new digs,

confident they'll triumphantly navigate the gentrification tightrope with a programme of community art, music, fashion and food events within its storeys.

If you like Bound Concept, head south-east toward Waring Street, where lifestyle store Art Loves HQ is a recent addition to the ground floor of the Merchant Hotel. Here local brands such as Myrtle & Mary's vintage pin-up and chintzy prints explode across georgette scarves, silk kimonos, tableware and luggage, and Pop & Dot's pleasing geometric wall prints await a good home.

Keep heading south and a five-minute walk takes you to Born & Bred, a self-styled three-storey 'studio souk' where island-made gifts tug the purse strings, from jewellery and clothing to Wild Atlantic Surf Co organic lip balm and Taste Joy's Irish stout infused peanut butter.

Go west for Envoy, a chi chi womens-wear boutique (Simone Rocha, Dries Van Noten, beautiful brogues by Tricker's), and Belfast's last remaining independent bookstore, Keats & Chapman – a methodic madness of second-hand books in more than 80 different genres (it also sells vinyl, CDs and DVDs). Another piece of Northern Irish heritage is Robinson's Shoes, established in Carrickfergus in 1954, and still walking the walk in Queen's Arcade.

Shopping is a thirsty business, so get



caffeinated at Pocket coffee shop in the handsomely refurbished Flat Iron Building on Upper Church Lane. For something stronger, look out for beer and fromage tastings at Mike's Fancy Cheese (head

Quilty pleasures – Sinead Black of Bricolage, whose studio is based in The Butcher's Building, Smithfield

northwest into the Cathedral Quarter) or The Perch Rooftop Bar to raise a toast to the longer daylight hours.

Craft beer enthusiasts can head to the Deer's Head brewpub, whose saloon was smartly refurbished last summer to include a fully functional Bell's Brewery incorporated into the design. Bell's itself dates back to 1778 but there's nothing old hat about these high-tech copper tanks. Try a beer flight for a cross-section of its ales, pilsners, stouts and lagers (my money's on the Star & Garter ale) or liquor fans may prefer to head up to Deer Head's recently opened rooftop cocktail bar.

If you've any appetite left after all those pit stops, make room for a superlative seven-course tasting menu at The Muddlers Club, headed by Tyrone-born master chef/owner Gareth McCaughey, where a smart teal dining room, affable staff and a leisurely procession of satisfying dishes await without a whiff of pretension or formality.

Laid-back nightcaps? The traditional Duke of York pub, tucked away on Commercial Court, Victorian snugs for the win at The Crown Liquor Saloon on Great Victoria Street, or mezcal cocktails (or whatever's your poison) at Liquor XXX on Dublin Road, whose faux adult shop facade is distinctly snazzier than the real thing on Gresham Street.

Continued on next page

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Continued from previous page

Head further south, toward the Queen's Quarter, where the eponymous university resides and also the Botanic Gardens, which is but a few weeks away from bursting into springtime splendour. And, sure, if it's raining – or sleeting, as per my February visit – warm up in the elegant Victorian-era Palm House and Tropical Ravine conservatories, the latter reopened in 2018 following a £3.8m refurbishment and brimming with exotic flora all year round.

Queen's Quarter is also the site of our B&B, the inimitable Harrison Chambers of Distinction on Malone Road, which is a trove of vintage and antique furniture, kitsch prints and playful curios thanks to the discerning eye of its garrulous owner Melanie Harrison. Its 16 rooms are named after writers and artists with a link to Belfast (Jonathan Swift, the Brontës, Beckett, Seamus Heaney, WB Yeats), each one with its own character and due respect to the building's 19th century bones.

My partner and I stay in the exquisite Ruby Murray Suite, where natural light – dual aspect – floods through a bay window, past velvet mustard curtains, on to a regal chaise longue. At the far end of a four-poster bed is a clawfoot bath and somewhere in between, a record player and vinyl LPs, including one by the aforementioned Ms Murray. She is best known as Cockney rhyming slang, but in her 1950s heyday was a Belfast singer who made history by having five singles in the top 20 in a single week – a record only matched by Madonna four decades later.

Harrison has succeeded where so many fail on the retro, maximalism front. An instinctive flair and attention to detail shines through every bygone map, crystal sherry glass, plush chair and leopard print

cushion. In lesser hands it would be a hot mess, but in Melanie's, it's delightful. Delights can also be found in The Harrison's neighbourhood: pre-loved womenswear and accessories at Deja Vu and Red Cross Vintage; contemporary furniture and homewares at Maven; Blush boutique, primarily wedding party-oriented, but stocks the spiffing Co Down perfume brand Stories. Eats wise, there's casual Vietnamese hotspot Madame Pho (hotspot being the operative word, with its fiery chilli sauce) and great value authentic Thai at Bo Tree Kitchen.

Last but not least, make time for Banana Block in East Belfast, formerly Portview Trade Centre, a new multidisciplinary hub for art, retail, sipping and snacking on the site of a mill owned by linen merchant and lord mayor Otto Jaffe. In the 1930s it was at the cutting edge of manufacturing and technology – and also where Jaffe's head gardener William Richardson was the first person to cultivate bananas in the British Isles.

These days it's home to vinyl store Sound Advice, Indie Fude and Velocheese deli, and mycologists Hearty Growers, producers of mushroom-growing DIY kits, with pop-up art exhibitions, foodsters and music events on weekends, with an urban farm in development. Oh, and, of course, there are banana trees.

It's a regeneration project that, similar to The Butcher's Building, seeks to revive historic buildings by knitting local heritage with modern needs and wants. Also in the vicinity are Boundary Brewing, Flout! pizza, second-hand boutique The Wardrobe and high-end menswear emporium The Bureau.

Who knows whether the Gresham Street adult shop will survive Belfast's inner-city evolution. In the meantime there's plenty here for shopaholic visitors to flock to, budies and all.

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● Amy Anderson was inspired by photographs of her loom-spinner grandmother to set up Kindred of Ireland, a contemporary Irish linen clothing brand of natural-dyed investment pieces that combine old and new techniques, such as 'bee-ting' which gives the fabric a subtle sheen. Think ecru jumpsuits, tailored trouser suits, sculptural shirts and dresses. Based at The Butcher's Building in Smithfield. kindredofireland.com

● Also in The Butcher's is Dollybirds Art, the brainchild of artist and hobby ornithologist Eimear Maguire,



Northern stars – Eimear Maguire's Dollybirds artworks, FieldDay's 'Rain' scent evokes fresh, post-downpour niffs, and Sara O'Neill's new 'Dreamers' print

whose hand-painted native birds, flora and fauna will perk up any bare wall or sideboard, especially those with a pop-of-coloured background, such as the goldcrest and long-tailed tit. They're all printed on fine art paper in archival inks. dollybirdsart.com

● Based in Portrush, fashion



designer, illustrator and stylist Sara O'Neill – best-known for her billowing silk kimonos and scarves inspired by Irish myths and legends – used Belfast's Smithfield as inspiration for her new 'Dreamers' print featuring Millie, a fictional flapper depicted alongside Royal Avenue's Art Deco buildings. eadach.com



GETTING THERE

● Lucy was a guest of The Harrison townhouse B&B in the Queen's area of Belfast, which is on a handy bus route into the city centre, or a 10-minute cycle: register for a Belfast Bike at belfastbikes.co.uk, collect at nearby Queen's University or Botanic Gardens and get the first 30 minutes for free. chambersofdistinction.com

● Factor in a cobweb-blowing walk up Cave Hill, aka Napoleon's Nose, whose seeming silhouette of a sleeping giant was thought to be the inspiration for Jonathan Swift's Gulliver. Park at Belfast Castle and take one of three graded trails to reach incredible herring-gull views – 1,207 ft above sea level.

● Titanic Belfast marks its 10th anniversary this year. It remains in ship shape, with good springtime deals at the titular hotel beside it. titanicbelfast.com/ titanichotelbelfast.com

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