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TAKING MACKINTOSH'S COAT OFF – CONSERVATION OF THE HILL HOUSE REACHES A CRITICAL PHASE

Conservation charity the National Trust for Scotland has revealed the striking results of its ongoing work to rescue and restore the internationally famous Hill House designed by Charles Rennie Mackintosh.

Encased in a metal protective 'box' since 2018, the walls of the Hill House have dried out sufficiently from almost a century of moisture ingress to allow the troublesome render – the concrete 'skin' applied over the building which contributed to the problem – to be painstakingly chipped off.

With National Lottery Open Week between 7 and 15 March approaching, the Trust's Chief Executive, Phil Long OBE was joined in Helensburgh by Caroline Clark, Director for Scotland of The National Lottery Heritage Fund to inspect the works at close quarters.

The Portland cement render was originally applied between 1902-04 under Mackintosh's instruction when it was thought to be a 'wonder' product that would totally exclude the elements and allow the architect to achieve his vision of a building exterior without excessive ornament or detail, in a style that was revolutionary for the time.

Unfortunately, Mackintosh's faith was misplaced and decades of soaking west of Scotland rainfall found its way into the walls of the building and threatened irreparable damage.

The work to conserve and restore the Hill House is part of the National Trust for Scotland's *Mackintosh Illuminated* project which is generously supported by the players of The National Lottery through £1.1 million in development support from The National Lottery Heritage Fund. Launched by the Trust in 2024, the project's aim is to spotlight Mackintosh and Macdonald, sharing, celebrating, and inspiring as many as possible with their creative genius and the beauty of their designs.

The National Trust for Scotland's Chief Executive, Phil Long OBE said: "It's difficult to overstate the international importance of Mackintosh and Macdonald and of the Hill House – and so delivering this project is of vital importance in preserving Scotland's and the world's design heritage.

"From the moment they were realised, Mackintosh's designs had a profound effect on the development of early 20th-century international architecture and design, and more than a century later they remain startling. The Hill House is one of the architect's greatest remaining masterpieces, and in its breathtaking interiors, realised in collaboration with his wife, the artist and designer Margaret Macdonald, their combined

vision reached its peak. This is why restoring this building is of such vital importance to Scotland's and the world's creative heritage.

"Thanks to The National Lottery Heritage Fund's generous support, the project has reached a critical juncture. The removal of the render allows us to explore the detailed construction of the building and gain further insight into Mackintosh's architectural innovation, as well as the constraints he was overcoming.

"The protective box has controlled the drying out of the building, which if done too fast may have caused further damage. After expert analysis, it was clear that full replacement of the often-patched Portland cement render was the only tenable option for enabling the restoration work that ensures the building's long-term survival.

"With National Lottery Open Week coming up, it will be an opportunity to thank the players who have supported this vital conservation with the offer to see the work in progress and the emerging 'naked' structure as the cement coat is removed.

"In the coming months, we will continue our work with internationally recognised specialists to finalise a replacement surface render that will maintain the integrity of Mackintosh's vision but will have the ability to 'breathe' - so ensuring moisture is not trapped and that the Hill House is fit to survive many more decades of west coast weather without the need for a protective box."

Commissioned in 1902 by a wealthy Glasgow-based publisher, Walter Blackie, the Hill House was carefully designed by Mackintosh to accommodate his patron's family and their lifestyle.

Mackintosh paid just as much attention to the building's interior spaces as to its overall architectural form, designing furniture, textiles, stencilling and more to create complete designs, collaborating on this with his wife and professional artist and designer, Margaret Macdonald (1864–1933).

The A-listed Hill House has been in the care of the National Trust for Scotland since 1982.

Liz Davidson, the National Trust for Scotland's Project Director for *Mackintosh Illuminated* said: "The Hill House's restoration is just one aspect of the *Mackintosh Illuminated* project which we aim to roll out over the next two to three years. By 2028, on the 160th anniversary of Mackintosh's birth, the Hill House should no longer need its protective box and ahead of that, with The National Lottery Heritage Fund's support, we will be completing internal conservation work and developing new and accessible interpretative and learning materials, as well as a programme of community engagement.

"I have been so glad to work with such a team of enthusiastic experts, such as David Bradley and his team of masons, and we're discovering new things every day as we peel

away the render, such as an unused entrance way and a window space we were unaware of.”

ENDS

Images: <https://www.flickr.com/gp/133918740@N04/gBL5U5BN7Q>

Notes to editors:

1. The National Trust for Scotland's *Mackintosh Illuminated* project, supported by The National Lottery Heritage Fund, will use innovative techniques to save and conserve the superlative heritage of the Hill House in Helensburgh and ensure the Mackintosh Tearooms in Glasgow are resilient far into the future. Training, learning and engagement programmes across these two consummate sites will drive forward skills development and inclusion of under-represented communities. We'll be partnering with a range of stakeholders, ensuring that our project celebrates, expands and diversifies global access to the legacy of Charles Rennie Mackintosh and Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh, in so doing growing awareness of their significance, influence and unique creativity.
2. The Hill House, located in Upper Colquhoun Street, Helensburgh, was constructed between 1902 and 1904 for Walter (1860 – 1953) and Anna (1867 – 1957) Blackie of the Glasgow-based publishing firm and was occupied by the family until February 1953.
3. The Hill House was sold for £25,000 to the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland (RIAS) in July 1972 and then acquired by the National Trust for Scotland on an inalienable basis in 1982 with a £400,000 grant from the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF).
4. Mackintosh's radical design for the house was a great influence on German and Austrian architects, including Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus movement, and in turn can be said to have been pivotal for the direction of modern architecture in the 20th century.
5. Ground for the Hill House protective 'box' was broken in December 2018 and it opened to the public on 7 June 2019. Its 165-tonne steel frame supports 'walls' made from a chainmail consisting of 32.4 million steel rings – the gaps between the rings allow a minimal amount of moisture through while maintaining airflow – this prevents the Hill House from drying out too quickly and so causing more damage and has been so successful that it has allowed the project to progress to the next phase – to remove the compromised surface render and find a new coating that ensures the Hill House no longer suffers water ingress and yet adheres to Mackintosh's intention for the visual appearance of the building's exterior.

About the National Trust for Scotland

Established in 1931, the National Trust for Scotland is Scotland's largest conservation charity and cares for, shares and speaks up for Scotland's magnificent heritage.

Over the last 90 years the Trust has pioneered public access to and shared ownership of some of the most magnificent buildings, collections and landscapes in Scotland. It cares for more than 100 sites, from ancient houses to battlefields, castles, mills, gardens, coastlines, islands, mountain ranges and the plants and animals which depend upon them.

In March 2022 the National Trust for Scotland launched *Nature, Beauty & Heritage for Everyone*, its ten-year strategy which sets out the ambitions of the charity over the coming decade. From speaking up for Scotland's heritage which doesn't have a voice, to improving the lives and wellbeing of people across the country, and responding to the climate and biodiversity crisis, the Trust will build on its work in recent years to grow its impact and conserve and restore more of Scotland's heritage, as it moves towards its centenary in 2031.

Scotland's largest membership organisation, the National Trust for Scotland relies on the support of its members and donors to carry out its important work.

For more information on the National Trust for Scotland visit www.nts.org.uk.

The National Trust for Scotland is a charity registered in Scotland, Charity Number SC 007410.

About The National Lottery Heritage Fund

As the largest dedicated funder of the UK's heritage, The National Lottery Heritage Fund's vision is for heritage to be valued, cared for and sustained for everyone, now and in the future as set out in our strategic plan, [Heritage 2033](#).

Over the next ten years, we aim to invest £3.6billion raised for good causes by National Lottery players to bring about benefits for people, places and the natural environment.

We help protect, transform and share the things from the past that people care about, from popular museums and historic places, our natural environment and fragile species, to the languages and cultural traditions that celebrate who we are.

We are passionate about heritage and committed to driving innovation and collaboration to make a positive difference to people's lives today, while leaving a lasting legacy for future generations to enjoy.

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About The National Lottery

- National Lottery players raise around £30 million every week for Good Causes across the UK
- In the last 30 years, National Lottery players have raised over £50 billion of funding for more than 700,000 community, heritage, sport, arts and film projects
- From building community spirit and national pride to championing unsung heroes and encouraging creative flair or sporting genius; by saving species and preserving landmarks; The National Lottery has been a game changer for the UK
- For more information, please visit www.lotterygoodcauses.org.uk