

Speaker's Chair gifted to National Museums Scotland for posterity

If the 1979 devolution referendum on 1 March that year had voted for separation from the rest of the UK, Scotland's history would have been very different.

The Royal High School Building at the east end would have become the first parliament building, and the chair now acquired by the National Museums Scotland would have been used to seat several Presiding Officers.

None of that happened and the rest is, as they say, history.

Plans to furnish the building progressed and furniture was commissioned, but the Presiding Officer's chair was never used as a new Scottish Parliament building was constructed after devolution was eventually decided upon in 1997.

Georgia Vullings, Assistant Curator of Modern and Contemporary History, said: "We're very pleased to be able to acquire this object. The furniture represents a key moment in the story of devolution and the history of Scottish politics. This large, blocky chair and its futuristic design is emblematic of a confidence in significant political change for Scotland in the late 1970s, but which did not ultimately happen at that time. This generous donation will allow us to better tell the story of that fascinating moment in Scotland's history through our collections."

The former Royal High School building is now undergoing a major restoration to repurpose the Thomas Hamilton creation as the National Centre for Music. The Royal High School Preservation Trust (RHSPT) is leading the project and took possession of the building in March. The alternative plans to create a luxury hotel in the space were eventually unsuccessful following a lengthy planning process.

William Gray Muir, Chair of the RHSPT said: "We are delighted that this piece of constitutional history will have a fitting home in the national museum, where it can help tell the story of how modern Scottish politics encountered the legacy of the Scottish Enlightenment.

"The significance of the Thomas Hamilton building – the Old Royal High – and its symbolic importance to our national political and social ambitions is indisputable and its past, present and future form a critical part of Edinburgh's status in the world. The Trust's aim is that we add a new chapter to that story and the building's relationship with Scottish heritage and our national museum will continue."

Although the Scottish Assembly never occupied the building, the site of the Royal High School remained a focal point in the debate over devolution, with images of the building used in campaign material, and a Vigil for a Scottish Parliament was held outside the building for 1,980 days from 10 April 1992 until the 1997 referendum.

The tent from the touring campaign and related material are on display in the National Museum of Scotland. The chair is now at the National Museums Collection Centre where it will undergo conservation treatment.



The Presiding Officer's Chair is prepared for removal from the Debating Chamber in the Former Royal High School on Regent Road, Edinburgh. All images © Stewart Attwood Photography 2023.



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