

## Moravian Church Settlements – UNESCO World Heritage Site. Impossible, Difficult, Done!

By Dr David J Johnston, OBE MSc MMedSc FRCGP

The Moravian Church dates from 1457. In 1722 the renewed Church established a Settlement at Herrnhut in Germany from where they travelled around the world often founding new Settlements, based on their vision of a unified, coherent urban design, inspired by the concept of an “ideal city”.



Fig 1. Archival image of Gracehill. Courtesy D Johnston

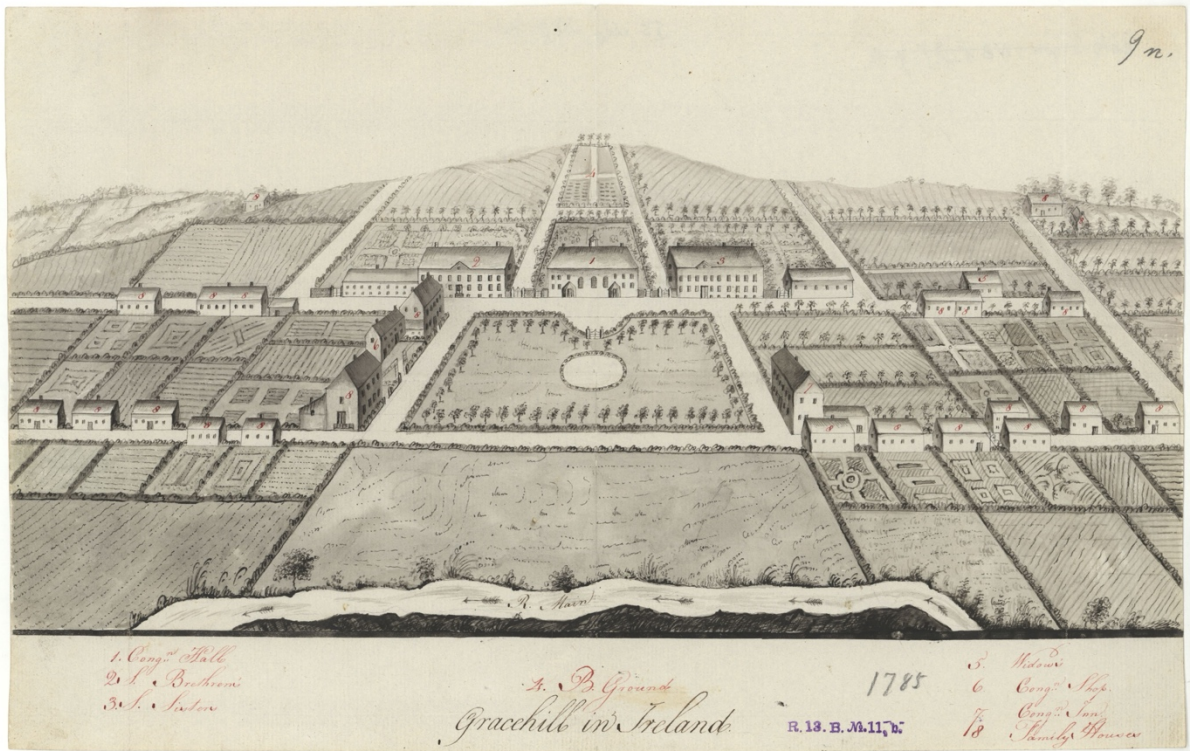


Fig 2. Archival image of Gracehill. Courtesy D Johnston

**Moravian Church Settlements**, is a transnational serial inscription, consisting of four such towns established in the 18th century: Bethlehem (Pennsylvania, USA), Christiansfeld (Denmark), Gracehill (UK) and Herrnhut (Germany). They are considered outstanding examples of the diaspora of a small denomination and its influence across the globe.





*Fig 3. Bethlehem, USA. Courtesy D Johnston*



*Fig 4. Christiansfeld, Denmark. Courtesy D Johnston*





Fig 5. Herrnhut, Germany. Courtesy D Johnston

Serial nomination allows the recognition of Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) in a series of related sites that share common themes and/or values. It provides a mechanism to encourage collaboration in their promotion, protection and management. As in this case, where the serial sites or component parts lie in the territory of different State Parties, the serial transnational nomination provides a catalyst for international co-operation and understanding, thereby promoting a central aim of the World Heritage Convention.

*“However, compared to single-site nominations, serial transnational nominations are faced with three common challenges: data handling is more complex; policies and heritage management might differ; and more stakeholders are involved.”<sup>1</sup>*

All of these issues were true for this nomination with the further complication of the involvement of many stakeholders in each individual component site; Church, community, charities, businesses and Government, both local and national.

From the beginning the approach, both locally and internationally, could be characterised as one of clarity, communication, co-ordination and co-operation. This was facilitated by clear frameworks and regular activities and meetings, both online and in person, which allowed friendship and trust to grow - the essential components of success thus far and the foundation for management post-inscription.



The approach from all parties involved might be best summarised by recalling the ancient saying that has been a motto of the Moravian Church over many centuries, “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty and in all things charity.”

At the outset of Gracehill’s World Heritage Nomination journey in 2002, despite being Northern Ireland’s first designated Conservation Area (1975) and the only complete Moravian Settlement in Ireland it seemed impossible that such a tiny village in a relatively rural area could be successful in such an undertaking. And so began a process of building local partnerships and developing international networks. Representatives attended conferences in Bethlehem in 2005, South Africa in 2006 and Gracehill hosted an international conference in 2007. Thereafter, the Settlements in each country focused on the first hurdle of getting on their national Tentative List.

Christiansfeld had already been on the Danish list for some years. In 2011, Gracehill Trust made an application to the Department for Culture, Media & Sport to join the UK Tentative List. While Gracehill was not immediately added to the list, importantly it was not rejected. The report stated, *“The Government should consider adding Gracehill to this Tentative List in the future if firm proposals for a transnational nomination should be developed, provided that it can be demonstrated that the site could make a substantial contribution to the OUV of the series as a whole.”*

Fortuitously, the Danes undertook significant research, including a comparative analysis of Moravian Settlements, which highlighted Gracehill. Christiansfeld was inscribed as a World Heritage Site in 2015. What once seemed impossible now seemed merely difficult!



Fig 6. Gracehill New Single Brethrens House –29. Courtesy D Johnston





*Fig 7. Gracehill Moravian Church – 94. Courtesy D Johnston*



*Fig 8. Gracehill Pulpit. Courtesy D Johnston*





*Fig 9. Gracehill Congregation Store and Pond – 130. Courtesy D Johnston*

Gracehill Trust and others continued with ongoing exchange visits and research to support a nomination. Gracehill Trust raised over £2.5 million to restore buildings and regenerate the central Square which importantly spotlighted the role of Gracehill as a centre of reconciliation during the 1798 United Irishmen's rebellion. The Trust also ran events and developed amenities such as pathways and interpretation resources. Gracehill Moravian congregation restored the Church, Manse and Warden's House and the historic pipe organ.

Christiansfeld's success brought renewed vigour to the international partnership and Herrnhut (Germany) joined with Bethlehem and Gracehill to develop the nomination entitled Moravian Church Settlements. More meetings, exchange visits and significant studies followed. The support of local and regional Government was

invaluable and particularly in a Northern Ireland context, it is noteworthy that Gracehill enjoyed cross-party political support throughout the process.

Happily, it was established that Gracehill *“could make a substantial contribution to the OUV of the series as a whole.”*

Gracehill, founded in 1759, featured a simple grid pattern with designated green spaces focused on a village square. The layout of the buildings and the Georgian style of architecture remain very much as originally conceived. It is an early example of town planning, reflecting the timeless values of education, equality, industry, tolerance, and spirituality that the Moravians shared wherever they went. Features include:

- Only Settlement in the British Isles designed on a traditional continental model grid plan with central square and integration of God’s Acre (Burial Ground).
- Exhibits exceptional symmetry related to Moravian societal and religious beliefs and practices with a “Gender Axis”.
- Neutrality and pacifism in the context of a turbulent religious and geopolitical past.
- Early and continuing international links, educational tradition, and an active Moravian congregation.

Early in 2022, Gracehill was added to the UK Tentative list and the Moravian Church Settlements nomination was submitted to UNESCO by the United States Government on behalf of all the partners that Spring. Following the assessment process Moravian Church Settlements was subsequently inscribed as a World Heritage Site in July 2024 at the 46th Session of the World Heritage Committee of UNESCO in New Delhi, India.

The real value of heritage is less in thinking about yesterday and more about planning tomorrow. A rich heritage is the foundation of a bright future. What seemed impossible and what was certainly difficult at times is now done. Moravian Church Settlements represent a unique international heritage of faith and service that has found physical expression in planned settlements and buildings and practical expression in unity, care, tolerance and reconciliation. Such a special heritage is perhaps more relevant and important to share than ever before.

**Author Biography:** Dr David J Johnston, OBE MSc MMedSc FRCGP, is a medical doctor but outside of work he is involved in Education, Community Development and Built Heritage. He is the former Chair of Ulster Architectural Heritage and also a foundation trustee and Chair of Gracehill Old School Trust, now Gracehill Trust, a community regeneration group, which spearhead the ultimately successful Gracehill bid for inclusion on the list of UNESCO World Heritage Sites. David is married to Sally Ann and they have three sons. They live in a listed building in Gracehill which, they open regularly on Heritage Open days.



### References:

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