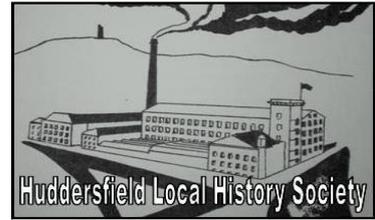


# BEFORE THE TOWN HALL ...



## *A short guide to Huddersfield's early civic buildings*

Huddersfield became a Borough in 1868, with an elected Council, and completed its Town Hall in 1881. In both respects it was a 'late starter', compared to the other major towns of West Yorkshire – though it would make up for lost time by pioneering many municipal services over the next twenty years. However, modern local government had been emerging in the town since 1820, operating from various other buildings until the Town Hall was finally built.

Before 1820 the governance of the growing town was in the hands of the lord of the manor and major landowner, Sir John Ramsden; the Justices of the Peace, appointed by the Government; and the parish vestry, which had civil as well as ecclesiastical responsibilities. The vestry elected several local officials annually, but there were no professional local government officers.



This began to change in 1820 with the establishment of the **Commissioners of Lighting, Watching & Cleansing**. For an area extending only 1200 yards from the Market Place, and stopping at the river, there were 59 of these Commissioners (compared with 69 Councillors today for the 160 square miles of Kirklees!). In theory all appointed by Sir John Ramsden but in practice self-selected, they introduced gas lighting, street cleaning and a small night-time police force. Their meeting place was the old George Hotel, in Market Place; it was taken down in 1850 to make way for John William St, but the facade still stands in St Peter's St (*fig. 1*).

In 1837 the vestry took advantage of new legislation to set up a **Board of Highway Surveyors**. This dozen-strong body had responsibility for road maintenance in the 'hamlet' of Huddersfield, a wider area than the Commissioners', and employed a



professional surveyor. Unlike the Commissioners, the Board was elected by ratepayers, and met in more humble surroundings at the Pack Horse Hotel in Kirkgate (*fig.2*).

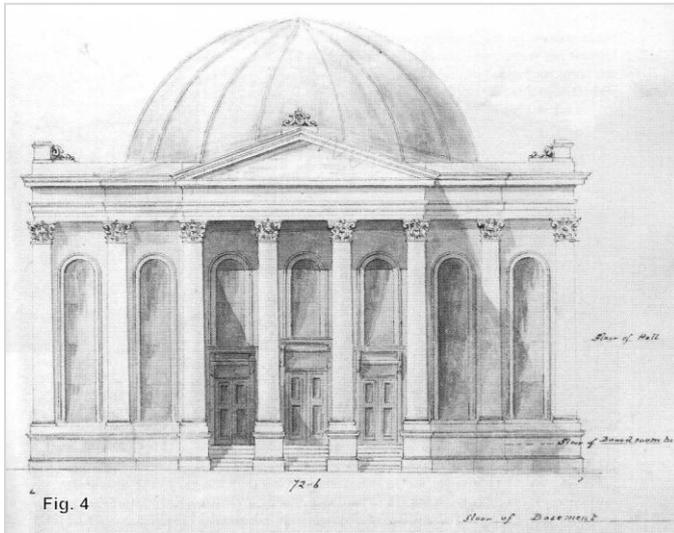
Neither body had adequate powers to cope with the public health problems of the fast-growing town, and there were some sharp

political battles between them. In 1848 both were swept away and replaced by the **Improvement Commissioners**. Eighteen of these were elected by the better-off ratepayers, plus three still appointed by the lord of the manor. The new body had much more extensive powers over highways, public health and policing – though still only within the 1200-yard radius - and established an elaborate system of committees and salaried officers much like the future Borough Council. It needed more than just a meeting place and established its offices at South Parade, now lost beneath the ring road at the top of Chapel Hill.

In 1859, however, the Commissioners moved to new accommodation in the Philosophical Hall on Ramsden St. This large public hall had been opened in 1837 by the Huddersfield Philosophical Society and was later rebuilt as the Theatre Royal (*fig.3*), standing where the Piazza is today until 1961. It housed the Improvement Commissioners until their replacement by the Borough Council in 1868. (The new Council also absorbed the recently-established Local Boards of surrounding areas like Lindley, Lockwood and Mold Green.)



By then the idea of a single town hall had been under discussion for at least 25 years. A ratepayers' meeting in 1843 had called for suitable rooms to be provided to accommodate meetings "for every department of the Town's business" and to house all its civic documents. Nothing came of this, nor of a more ambitious proposal ten



years' later for a grand Town Hall in St George's Square: plans for this (fig.4), were drawn up by J P Pritchett, architect of the parish church and railway station, but fell foul of poor relations between the town and the Ramsden estate, and the site was later taken for Britannia Buildings.

When the town was incorporated in 1868, therefore, there was no 'home' for the new Council, which

continued to operate from the Philosophical Hall for another 10 years. The present Town Hall was completed in two phases, the smaller Municipal Offices in 1878 and the larger Town Hall proper in 1881. The latter included the concert hall and the magistrates' court. Until then the Philosophical Hall/theatre had been the town's major venue for concerts and other entertainments, while the magistrates had dispensed justice at the court house in Princess St, which was also the county lock-up. Until 1858 they had been based at the Guild Hall, a privately-owned building behind Ramsden St Chapel (fig.5, Guild Hall on right), which had opened in 1838 and was, with the Chapel, demolished a century later to make way for the library.



The Guild and Philosophical Halls were on opposite sides of Bull & Mouth St, between today's library and Piazza. Also there when they were built in the late 1830s were a police house and town lock-up, and nearby in Queen St was the handsome (civil) county court of 1825, still standing today next to the Lawrence Batley Theatre. By the 1840s, therefore, a small 'civic quarter' had been established just yards from the site of today's Town Hall.

*Huddersfield Local History Society offers eight talks per year (on Monday evenings, September to May), an annual Journal and other events, for a membership fee of £7 (£11 for a couple). Applications to join should be sent to HLHS, 12 Station Rd, Golcar, HD7 4ED. Full details are at [www.huddersfieldhistory.org.uk](http://www.huddersfieldhistory.org.uk)*

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