

Assembly Rooms Edinburgh

The History

On 14th May 1783, the foundation stone for the Assembly Rooms was laid. This marked the beginning of an exciting and ambitious project that was to provide the aristocracy with a new establishment in the New Town.

A competition was decided upon as the best method for attracting first class designs for the new building. It did so with John Henderson securing himself a first prize win of 25 guineas. Building was to commence on the site in George Street that had been gifted by the Town Council. Midway through construction, John Henderson died and responsibility was passed to his father, David, a mason who had worked with Adam on Register House.

The Assembly Rooms opened its doors, in an incomplete state, on the 11th January 1787 for the Caledonian Hunt Ball, at a cost from public subscription of £6,300. Through further subscription in 1796, ceiling roses, fluted Corinthian pilasters, drapes, mirrors and the magnificent chandeliers were installed by John Baxter.

Finally completed by the beginning of the 19th Century, the Assembly Rooms exceeded that of the Great Room in Bath in its elegance and “just proportion”. The Ballroom comprised of a bow fronted tea-room and two card rooms that were all reached through side entrances on the east & west of the building. Two principal staircases lead into a central square salon, known today as the Crush Hall.

The first Edinburgh Music Festival in 1815 was housed in the Ballroom, and a year later Sir Walter Scott “supervised” a banquet bestowed on the Black Watch. In 1827, the Assembly Rooms played host to the annual dinner of the Edinburgh Theatrical Fund Association during which Scott chose to reveal his identity as the “The Great Unknown” author of the Waverley Novels.

Further Development

Realising that the role of the Assembly Rooms was subtly changing, it was recognised that a change and a second major phase of redevelopment was necessary. Two of the great figures of 19th Century Scottish Architecture, William Burn and David Bryce became involved and so the second phase began.

Opening to acclaim in 1843, the Music Hall held a week of performances that included Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. Any hopes of money-making the Directors had were dashed, possibly due to poor ticketing arrangements, when a loss of up to £600 was reported. By now, the Assembly Rooms had established itself as a venue that, whilst still catering for both public and private balls, was now equipped to accommodate public meetings, concerts, recitals, music festivals, dinners, banquets, Royal occasions and public readings by celebrated authors such as Dickens and Thackeray. The Assembly Rooms was now a principal performing arts venue vital to social and artistic life within the City.

The Way Forward

Over the years the building has undergone further developments and improvements such as:

- 1833 Gas lighting introduced
- 1865 The extension of the existing portico for a new band platform in the Ballroom and the shell headed doorway was created based on a previous design by Bryce in 1857
- 1879 Alterations made to Music Hall stage and room redecorated
- 1883 Gas lighting converted to electricity and a vestibule was created at ground floor level with depressed arches

- 1907 Redevelopment of the Supper Room and the addition of the East & West drawing rooms above the lanes
- 1922 The Music Hall organ and the gallery columns were removed
- 1950 Redevelopment of the foyer with the removal of the two shops and redecoration of the Ballroom and West Drawing Room

The Guest Book

Since opening in 1787, the Assembly Rooms has played host to many distinguished guests and historical events such as Sir Walter Scott, King George IV's visit in 1822 (a painting by Turner of this event hangs in the Tate Britain), a public banquet held in the honour of Charles Dickens in 1841, and the first music festival held in the Music Hall in 1843. 1879 saw the first of many visits by Gladstone, and more recently Seamus Heaney, Norman McCaig and J.K. Rowling have all read excerpts from their best selling books. Prime Ministers and Presidents attended the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in 1997 and in 1999 Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II was guest of honour at a Regimental Dinner.

The venue also hosts major annual events such as the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, the celebrations at Hogmanay, Fiddle Festival, Christies Auction and CAMRA Real Ale Festival.