

## Liverpool Town Hall

### History

The history of Liverpool's various Town Halls on or near to the present site has been well documented in the past,, for example, see the rewrite of the 'Pevsner Architectural Guides' edition related to Liverpool produced in 2004 by Joseph Sharples of the University of Liverpool\*. However, it seems appropriate to say a little about the present building here.



**The Liverpool Exchange in the Early 18<sup>th</sup> Century**

It was normal up to the 18<sup>th</sup> Century for the Town's Elders to meet on the same site as the main 'exchange' or market and commonly the 'exchanges' would be conducted in an open sheltered area of the ground floor of such a building with the Meeting Room above on the first floor. Buildings like this can still be seen in the centre of many of the traditional 'Market' towns of the UK. The previous Town Hall in Liverpool, built in 1675, was such a building. However, by the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century Liverpool was beginning to expand and become very prosperous so the Council felt that an Exchange on a grander scale was required. This decision may have been influenced by the fact that Bristol, at that time the second largest city in the UK and Liverpool's main rival as a West Coast seaport, had a new Exchange built in 1743.

*\*Pevsner Architectural Guides, Yale University Press, New Haven & London. LIVERPOOL – Joseph Sharples 2004*

Not surprisingly, the architect for the Bristol building, John Wood, was approached and asked to design a new Exchange for Liverpool. One can only surmise that he was instructed to make it much grander! The Foundation Stone was laid in 1749 but the work was actually supervised by Wood's son, John Wood Junior. Again, this building had the 'exchange' on the ground floor with the Council Room and other Public Offices on the first floor. It would seem from a contemporary illustration that the Council Room was at the centre of the front (South) elevation and that it was surmounted by a small dome and cupola with what appear to be ventilation slots.



**The Liverpool Exchange in the Late 18<sup>th</sup> Century**

The building was square with a central courtyard although not all elevations were similar because of adjoining buildings but during the later years of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century various alterations were made including the demolition of the adjoining buildings and the 'completion' of the four elevations. When it was decided that the adjoining houses at the North side were to be demolished, around 1790, John Foster Senior (1758-1827), who was by now Corporation Surveyor, surveyed the building and made various proposals but the Exchange Committee felt that he was not properly qualified to be entrusted with such an important commission and he was instructed to send his drawings to a number of well-established architects. In the end it fell to James Wyatt to design the alterations to the North side. James Wyatt was probably second only to Robert Adam as the most famous architect in the land at the time

Foster was entrusted to oversee the construction of Wyatt's design, which included a dome over the square central courtyard. This now covers the grand staircase, but soon after work started on the revamped North Wing there was a disastrous fire and the whole of the interior of the rest of the building was gutted, the new part was mysteriously untouched by the fire. Suspicions were actually raised in Liverpool at the time about whether the fire had been started deliberately and Foster was a very slippery customer who would eventually be removed not only from his position as Corporation Surveyor but also as Dock Engineer after large sums of money mysteriously disappeared. The Times (Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> January 1795) reported that the fire had started at 5am on Sunday morning (18<sup>th</sup> January) and comments:

*'It is much to be apprehended, this melancholy accident was not the effect of chance, but design; for it is almost impossible a building of its size could be so completely gutted in so short a space of time.'*

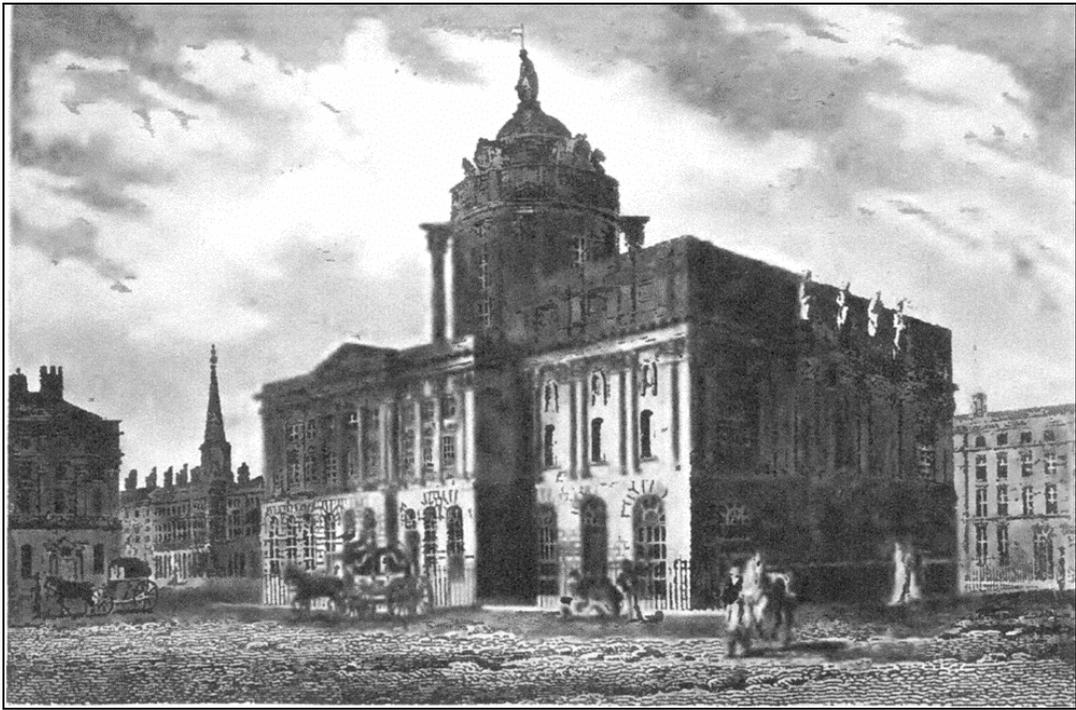
It further reported (Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1795):

*'We are sorry to learn that about half past nine on Sunday evening, the fire at Liverpool broke out again with redoubled fury and when the Mail Coach left that place on Monday morning at four o'clock the flames were got to such a pitch that it was impossible to imagine where the desolation would end. The Exchange was insured to the amount of £30,000.'*

However, there was an official enquiry into the fire and it appears that there had been strange emanations of smoke from around a fireplace in the Council Room two days before. These were noted by Elias Jones, the Exchange Keeper. In fact the smoke and smell were so great that the Revenue Committee had to adjourn to another room. The following morning the grate was taken out, the chimney was swept before the fire was lit again and it had gone out by 3.30pm. Thirteen hours later Elias was woken by his wife coughing 'consequent on the presence of smoke' and he got up to investigate.

The enquiry also noted that the timbers in the building had been treated on the instruction of the Architect (John Wood Junior) with 'a composition chiefly Turpentine' as a preservative. This would most certainly explain the 'extraordinary rapidity of the flames which arose' and answer the accusation in the Times. Considering the inadequate and primitive means for dealing with such an outbreak it is astonishing that any part of the building was saved and it says much for the determination of those involved that the main structure of the building survived.

The result of the fire was that the Council now entrusted Foster to build new interiors within Wood's external shell which was largely undamaged. Foster's new design, which had the approval of James Wyatt, not surprisingly incorporated a grand office for the Corporation Surveyor! The front Reception Rooms, Dining Room and Small Ballroom all now have false internal walls.



**Liverpool Town Hall in the Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century with Open-Air Exchange to Rear**



**Side View of Town Hall Today Showing the Late 18<sup>th</sup> Century Addition on the Left.**

## The Foster Family

The mode of operation of the Foster dynasty in Liverpool in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries is very difficult to believe in modern, democratic times. The following extract from the autobiography of Samuel Holme, written in 1869 but only recently transcribed, gives a flavour for what went on.

'In the Town Hall are numberless orders such as this.

To the Treasurer of the Corporation of Liverpool. Sir, I hearby certify that there is due to John Foster the sum of £.... On account of work in .....Street. Signed. John Foster !! And when building was finished, John Foster, the builder sent his account to John Foster the Corporation Surveyor who examined it and then John Foster the Secretary certified that the account had been examined by John Foster the surveyor and John Foster the surveyor's signature being appended, certifying for the payment, John Foster the builder sent to the Treasurer's Office and received his money. This was also the case with the Dock works and to read it now [*ie in 1869*] is very laughable.'

Foster Senior had six sons and five of these worked either for him or for the Corporation or, indeed, were *members* of the Corporation. The oldest son, Robert was described by Holme as 'wild and reckless'. He married young against his father's wishes and when his young bride eloped with another, he took to drink and eventually lost his mind. The second son, John Foster Junior (1787-1846), trained as an architect and was responsible for a number of important Liverpool buildings, eventually becoming City Surveyor.

The third son, William was Secretary to the Dock Estate and was another who had a drink problem. The fourth son, Thomas trained as an Attorney and worked as a clerk for the Corporation Solicitors, Stanistreet & Eden, he later became Dock Solicitor and eventually Town Clerk. The fifth son, James, was a partner in an iron foundry. This particular iron foundry, surprisingly, was never short of work from both the City and the Dock Estate! The sixth son, Richard, did not enjoy good health and would become secretary to his father.

John Foster Senior became Corporation Surveyor by discrediting the incumbent, John Eyes, to whom he had originally been apprenticed. He had earlier become Dock Engineer by discrediting Thomas Morris and later was appointed Secretary to the Trustees of the Docks. Much of his eventual fortune was made by using 'insider' knowledge gleaned from the Corporation Solicitors through his son, Thomas. He was able to buy important land 'before' it was earmarked for development and then sell it to the Corporation.

St Luke's Church, (The Bombed Church) is a typical example of how the family operated. The original design was prepared by John Foster Senior in 1802, however work did not commence until 1811. The main contractor was the family firm of Foster, William Foster was contracted to provide all the glass, the masonry was done by Grindrod & Heatherington, who worked closely with the Fosters for many years, the ironworks were provided by James Foster and the architect who completed the building was John Foster Junior!

*(At the time St Luke's Church was being built it inspired a young clerk, whose office overlooked the site, to take an interest in, and eventually practice, architecture. That man was Thomas Rickman and he would become the first person to categorise different styles of British medieval architecture ie perpendicular, gothic etc.)*

John Foster Senior seems to have been so incensed by his second son over the latter's acceptance of the post of Corporation Surveyor, the very post from which he himself had been sacked, that there must have been a very acrimonious parting of the ways because John Foster Junior was totally disinherited in his father's will!

*(For a thorough description of the buildings and other works associated with the Fosters see 'John Foster and Sons, Kings of Georgian Liverpool' Hugh Hollinghurst, 2009, Liverpool History Society.)*

## **Liverpool Corporation**

To understand the way Liverpool Corporation was 'elected' and operated at the time of the Fosters it is necessary to imagine life before the Representation of the People Act (sometimes known as the Reform Bill) of 1832 and the Municipal Reform Act (also known as the Corporation Reform Act) of 1835.

At this time, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century, out of a population of about 200,000 only about 11,000 residents of Liverpool were allowed to vote, essentially the 'Freemen\*' (see footnote) of the city. To become a 'Freeman' you had to be the son of a 'Freeman' or apprenticed to one and the most likely route to being a member of the Corporation appears to have been to follow your father! (Until the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century it had been possible to 'buy' Freeman status and Foster's father did just that in 1773 for 12 Guineas, he was a carpenter from Cumberland who had moved to Liverpool in about 1758.)

New members of the Corporation could only be elected by existing members of the Corporation. The Reform Bill was supposed to change all of this but it had little effect in Liverpool and a petition was presented to Parliament in February 1833, signed by 3000 inhabitants, complaining of 'systematic bribery and corruption, both in the election of a chief Magistrate of that city and in the election of Members of Parliament.' It appears to have been quite common practice for MPs and even Mayors in Liverpool to bribe sufficient Freemen to assure their election to office.

Corruption was so endemic in the politics of the city that there was even the presentation of the Liverpool Freemen Bill in Parliament in March 1834 which would have disenfranchised ALL Liverpool Freemen. However this Bill did not even reach Committee Stage because there was discontent amongst MPs about the fact that not all Freemen of the City had been proved to be capable of taking bribes. It has been reported that there was 'considerable unrest' when the results of the first post-Reform Bill election were announced and Lord Sandon was elected as an MP for Liverpool by a majority of only 164 votes. Needless to say he was vociferous in denying in Parliament that there had been any bribery, although he was prepared to admit that previous elections in the City had been corrupt. There was also disquiet amongst MPs about the fact that those who had taken bribes were being seen to be punished but those who had offered them were not!

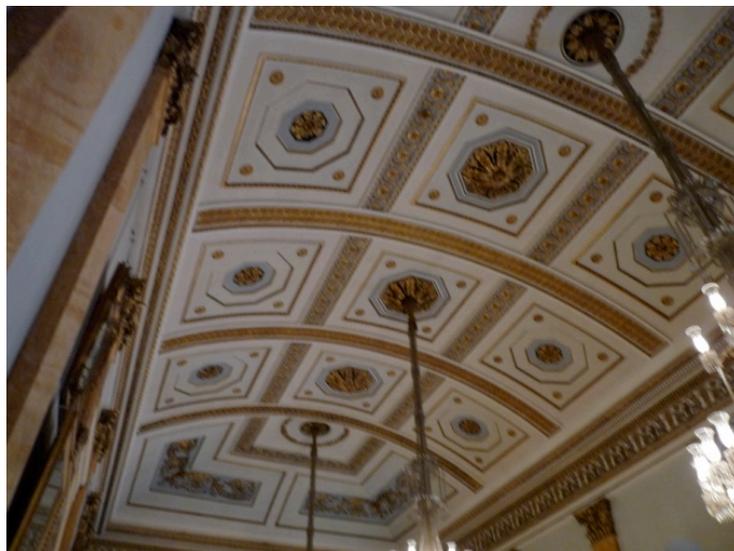
It should be emphasised that the Representation of the People Act (1832) still did not give every man a vote. To qualify to vote in a borough, such as Liverpool, you had to live in (not necessarily own) property worth more than £10. The qualifying requirements were slightly different for voters in County constituencies. (A second Representation of the People Act was to be passed in 1867 when the Earl of Derby was Prime Minister and this did give the vote to all 'male householders'.)

*\*Freemen – the original Freemen of Liverpool were the burgesses ie. those who took burgages (plots of land for rental) which King John encouraged after granting the Royal 'Charter' in 1207 (to be strictly accurate this was not actually a Charter it was Letters Patent). Essentially being a Freeman meant that you paid no tolls and no levy for trading in the town and you could not be compelled into agricultural service for a Lord. The Freemen were also entitled to join the Merchant Guild which Henry III allowed to be formed in 1229 (when the first true Royal Charter was granted) and the Freemen of the Merchant Guild imposed tolls and fines on those wishing to trade in the town.*

## Heating and Ventilation

It is not really possible to comment about what provisions John Wood made for heating and ventilation because only part of the external shell now remains but the illustration (above) of 1773 shows a dome over the Council Room, which appears to incorporate ventilation slots. Chimneys can also be seen extending above the roof ridges.

By the time the North Wing with its Grand Ballroom was being built and the rest of the building was being redesigned at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, there was a much better understanding of the necessity for ventilation provision where people congregated and there appears to have been consideration given to this. The ceilings of all of these spaces have perforations to allow vitiated air to escape into the roof-space. Inlet grilles are also visible around the outside of the Grand Ballroom. However, as was common at the time, these do appear to be hopelessly inadequate. It was only after the pioneering work of Dr David Boswell Reid (see Chapter on St. George's Hall) that architects began to fully understand the area of inlet and outlet required for adequate air movement.



**Ballroom Ceiling Showing Outlets for Vitiated Air**



**Ventilation Inlets to Ballroom**

A recent inspection of the main roof-spaces revealed that there is a very good provision of dormer-type ridge ventilators which appear to be original or, in obvious cases, copies of the original. For example, the roof over the Grand Ballroom was destroyed during the blitz and rebuilt in the 1940s. There are also some unusual ventilation ‘slots’ in the sloping face of most roofs. The origin of these is not recorded but it could be that there were windows at these points since access would have been required to these attics for cleaning and so admission of daylight seems likely.



**Typical Outlet into Roofspace**



**Internal View of Ventilation ‘Dormer’**



**External View of Ventilation 'Dormer'**



**Ridge Ventilator at Corner of Roof**

## **The Heating Stoves**

The most interesting features in the Town Hall from the point of view of Building Services Heritage are undoubtedly the heating stoves. These are no longer in use but, fortunately, have not been removed or destroyed. There are two on the ground floor at the bottom of the Grand Staircase and two in the central Reception Room on the first floor. We know that Wyatt's Dome and Grand Staircase were completed in 1802 so it seems likely that the two stoves there would have been installed around that time.

It was suggested by a French Heating & Ventilation Historian, Dr Emmanuelle Gallo, when she saw these, that they might have been designed by Louis-Francois Ollivier, because they are similar in appearance to illustrations he had produced. However, information in the City Treasurer's Ledger for this period indicates that they were almost certainly designed by Joseph Michael Gandy. Gandy was an architect who did much work for Sir John Soane and these may well be the only stoves he ever designed. He is known to have been active in Liverpool at this time and he produced the original design for \*St George's Church, Everton (the 'Iron Church').



**One of the Two Stoves Situated Either Side of the Grand Staircase**

*[\*The design of St George's Church was eventually revised by Thomas Rickman. John Cragg (Ironfounder) and Rickman then went on to collaborate on St Michaels Church, Aigburth, which actually used more cast iron in its construction.]*

Two further heating stoves can be found in the Central Reception Room on the First Floor. These are connected into the same flues as the blue stoves on the Ground Floor, which might suggest that they were installed at the same time. They have now been converted into lamp supports! The integrated cinder guards might suggest that they were designed specifically to burn coal and they incorporate swivelling, curved doors.



**Heating Stove in Central Reception Room**

The Treasurer's Ledgers# clearly indicate that payments totalling over £438 were made to Gandy for 'Designs &c' between October 1811 and March 1813. There were also payments to Moser & Co 'on account of stoves' totalling £1900 between June 1812 and August 1814 and then a further £965 9s 10d between April 1815 and October 1815. This would appear to suggest that all four stoves were designed by Gandy and manufactured by Moser & Co. Surprisingly, the iron manufacturer, Thomas Dove & Co, in which James Foster was a partner, does not appear to have been used on this occasion!

*[# I am indebted to Joseph Sharples for allowing me access to his personal notes related to his findings in the City Treasurer's Ledgers]*