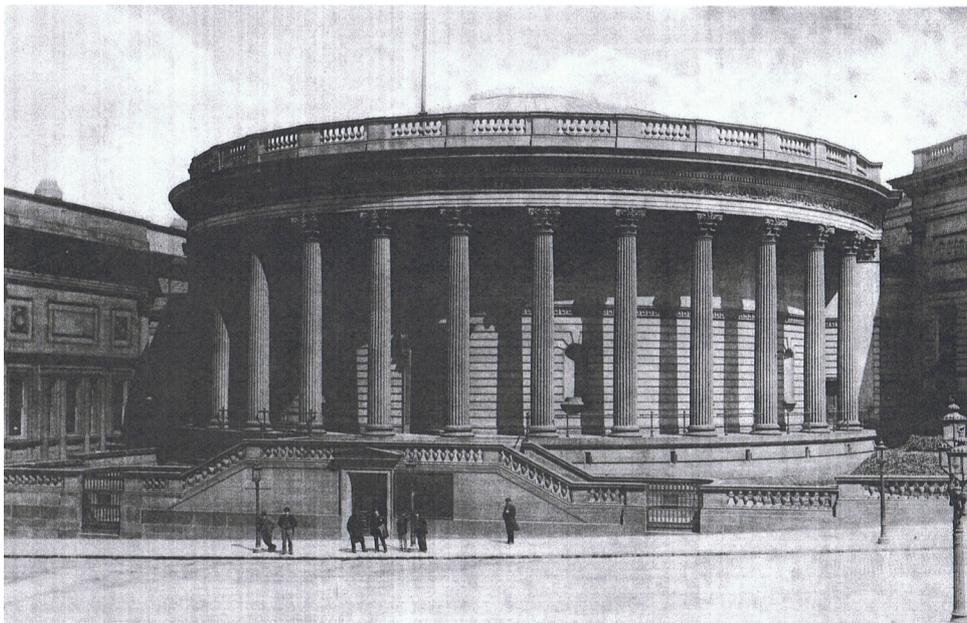


Picton Library, Liverpool

History

Sir James Picton was the driving force behind the construction of Liverpool's first public library. He had been elected to the Council in 1849 and was made the first Chairman of the Library and Museum Committee, formed at his instigation, in 1851. An Act of Parliament allowed the city to raise funds for a public library but without the generous help of William Brown, a wealthy local merchant, there would have been insufficient funds to start the project. He paid for the building on the proviso that the City Council furnished the interior. Following his generous contribution, the City renamed the street (formerly Shaw's Brow) in his honour.

A competition was held for the design of the new Library and Museum and was won by Thomas Allom. However, his winning design proved to be too costly and it was a revised version, designed by the City surveyor, John Weightman, which was actually built and opened in 1860. The Picton Library (or, more correctly, the Picton Reading Room) was added to the William Brown Library in 1879. The architect was Cornelius Sherlock.



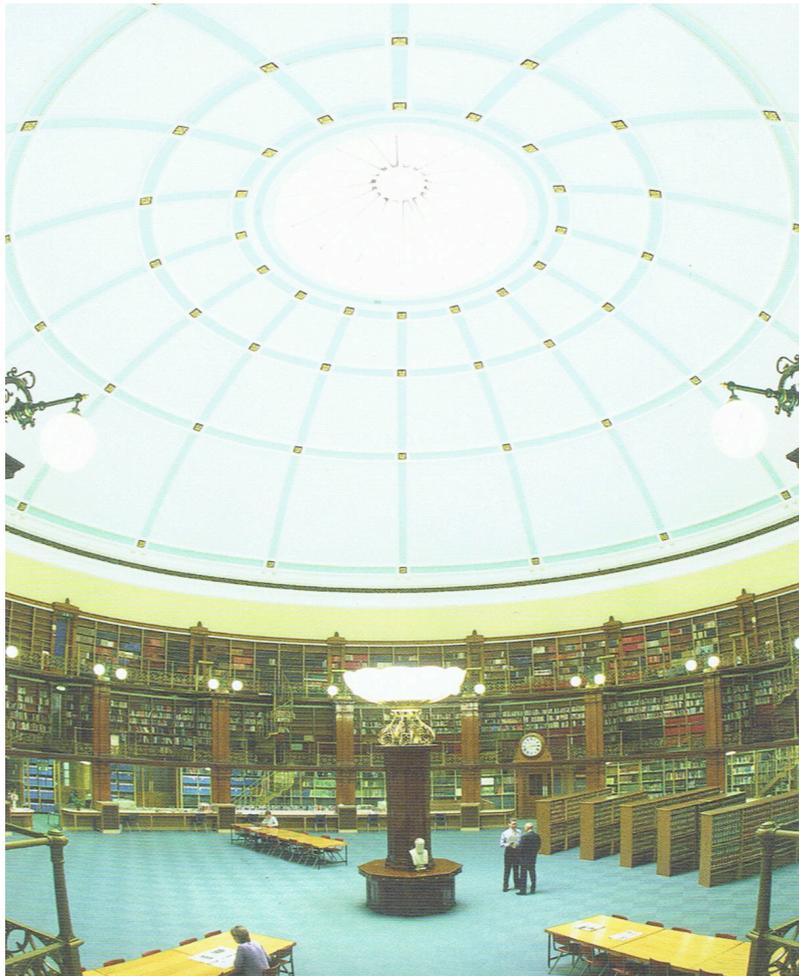
PICTON READING ROOM, 1890.

Firth's Series

To some extent the circular Reading Room (30m in diameter) would appear to be a three-quarter scale replica of the Reading Room at the British Museum built in the 1850s. However, the Picton Reading Room has what was originally a theatre immediately below it whereas the space below the Reading Room at the British Museum is an elaborate thermal labyrinth and plenum chamber. In order to keep the theatre column-free the Reading Room floor is supported by an ingenious structural system involving eight major radial curved beams and eight minor ones. An octagonal key at the centre holds all of these in place. The theatre tiers were hewn from the solid sandstone on which the building rests and, although this has now become the International Library, the flat, lowest level can still be used for lectures and informal talks.

Lighting

The most important aspect of the Picton Reading Room from the point of view of Building Services Engineering was the lighting. The Reading Room was lit by three carbon-arc lamps operating as uplighters and housed in a twelve-segmented glazed dish mounted on an octagonal wooden support at the centre of the room, which is still very much in evidence. This was the first public building in Liverpool to have electric lighting and, almost certainly, the first Library in the country to be lit with electricity. It is interesting to note that a gas supply was also laid on to the Reading Room in case the Electric Lighting proved to be unreliable or inadequate.



Original Uplighter Column still in use

Sources

Liverpool Record Office