



ROYAL HALL RESTORATION TRUST HARROGATE

2001 – 2023 and Beyond

On 22nd January 2008, a triumphantly restored Royal Hall was formally opened by the then HRH The Prince of Wales, Prince Charles, as Patron of The Royal Hall Restoration Trust (RHRT) – the culmination of a campaign to save the Royal Hall from demolition and for its restoration.

2001 – 2008

In 2000 a section of the ceiling of the basement had collapsed, by 2001 with knowledge of structural weakness arising from deterioration of the clinker concrete used in its construction, partial closure had occurred. The Royal Hall was on the English Heritage 'Buildings at Risk Register' and a long process of debate, often turbulent, was instituted with the survival of the Royal Hall at times very much in doubt.

In December 2001 RHRT had been formed as a charity with Lilian Mina as Chair, in order to spearhead the campaign to save the Royal Hall from demolition and to raise funds towards its restoration, a project eventually agreed by Harrogate Borough Council in 2005. A staggering figure of c.£2.8 million was raised by RHRT towards the total cost of c.£11.4 million, Heritage Lottery Fund providing £6.6 million and Harrogate Council £2 million. This amazing sum was decisive in funding the authentic recreation of all the front of house areas to the standard and patterns of 1903 achieved by Frank Matcham (the renowned theatre architect), the restoration of the Dress Circle and Heritage Lounge areas thus enabling the seating capacity to be 1,100 (rather than 800 if the Dress Circle had not been incorporated), the carpets and drapes throughout the building to the original designs, refurbishment of the dressing rooms and renewed Green Room, restoration of the six stained glass clerestory windows in the auditorium (blown out in a 1940 bombing raid), and reinstatement of the rear terrace and ambulatory glazed screens and stained glass (largely destroyed in a fire in the 1960s).

With reopening achieved in 2008, a decision was considered as to whether to wind up the RHRT with restoration successfully undertaken or whether to continue in being.

The campaign to save the Royal Hall from demolition and to raise funds had revealed a great love of the Royal Hall and a genuine recognition of its role in the life of Harrogate residents and visitors. There had been a number of very large and generous donations which had ensured the target funds were raised, but it was striking how the local community had reacted – local individuals and local community groups throughout the area had responded, raising funds of large and small amounts in every conceivable way. As those who had taken the original decision over a hundred years earlier had envisaged, the Royal Hall remained very much an integral part of the life of the town – a place for entertainment and enjoyment in every form from plays and concerts to dances



dinners, school speech days and Mayor making. It is the 'Harrogate village hall' as well as a venue for performances by national and international stars and professional companies.

It was concluded that there was a legacy which still needed to be protected and it had not yet been possible to complete the full restoration scheme originally proposed. The RHRT decided there was a continuing role which needed to be fulfilled and it is encouraging that pre-Covid the occupancy of the Royal Hall for events of all kinds, including commercial, had built up to around 170 performance days per annum.

Since 2008

So it was decided that the RHRT should continue in being – as a local independent charitable Trust – to safeguard the legacy of the campaign to preserve the Royal Hall and its place in the life of Harrogate – a campaign led by Lilian Mina whose personal role was recognised by the award of an MBE and being made a Freeman of the Borough of Harrogate.

Being pragmatic has characterised the approach adopted. One of the aims of the RHRT resulting from the grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund had been that arrangements should be made for public access to the building – trustees had concerns that this was not happening and in 2013 they promoted an Open Day to celebrate the 110th anniversary of the opening in 1903. The two organising individuals were invited to become RHRT trustees and with the cooperation of the council a series of free Open Days and Tours was set up. As the arrangements developed into a year-round series of Open Days and Tours, two further individuals who evolved into the key organisers also became trustees. Pre-Covid attendances topped 2,900 in 2019 with 914 people taking a guided tour, with donations and memorabilia sales, generating funds; post-Covid, Open Days and tour numbers have built up steadily.

It had always been envisaged that there would be a need for continued investment as the 2008 restoration had not been completed (the original total scheme had been for £17 million). Since 2008, the RHRT has fundraised to carry out further improvements including: designing and constructing the bar counters in the two ambulatories (using elements from the original Royal Baths servers' counter and decorative paneling); a star dressing room with ensuite was created along with other dressing room facilities; touch screen interpretative AV screens and display cabinets including in the Heritage Lounge were installed; For safety more guard rails were installed by steps or stairs; a mural in the southern ambulatory was commissioned. Working with the then Harrogate Borough Council's Museum Service, it was agreed that busts of the town's great benefactors and artistes of national and local renown (being removed from the council's former offices) would be displayed in the Royal Hall. More recently, the Trust arranged for the removal of unsightly blinds from the clerestory stained glass windows in the auditorium which had proved unsatisfactory. They were replaced with theatrical blackout curtain drapes. Pressure was applied for routine decoration, repair and maintenance work, and forward schedules to be undertaken for the building and a mutually collaborative arrangement has been established with the local authority to achieve this. A list of other improvements has been drawn up to implement over a period as finance and circumstances allow.

So, the role continues – lobbying for improved auditorium and ambulatory lighting (shortly to be undertaken) with an RHRT contribution to the lighting of the auditorium caryatids and reorganising displays in the renamed Malcolm Neesam Heritage Lounge (to honour the outstanding contribution to Harrogate's heritage knowledge by the celebrated late local historian). Plans have been commissioned by the RHRT for the floodlighting of the building frontage and a fundraising campaign is likely to be launched towards the installation costs.

The RHRT has long wished to see associated facilities recreated which were lost when the adjacent Assembly Rooms were demolished; for example the former dining and catering facilities, and so an imaginative scheme was generously drawn up pro-bono by the national award-winning



architect, Julia Barfield MBE for the area at the rear of the Royal Hall which it is hoped the Harrogate Convention Centre might adopt in some form as part of their redevelopment plans. In the meantime, the occasional associated use of the adjacent Hall A has demonstrated effective flexibility – which is further made possible by the use of Hall M which is on the site of the original Assembly Rooms and has two original direct internal level access points.

On 27th May 2023, the 120th anniversary of the formal opening of the Royal Hall was marked with an ambitious anniversary open day full of activity – a celebration of the Royal Hall as a place of relaxation, enjoyment, and entertainment by and for the local community.

Since 2008

A further challenge – which the RHRT regarded as an opportunity – has emerged in the guise of local government reorganisation. The public owner of the Royal Hall, Harrogate Borough Council, was abolished in 2023 and its assets passed to a new unitary authority, North Yorkshire Council. This asset transfer included the Harrogate Convention Centre which continues to manage the Royal Hall and the question arises as to whether the building is seen as part of the new council's future business offering. Therefore, the future management and ownership of the Royal Hall is likely to be determined in conjunction with that of the Convention Centre. Particularly relevant to the larger picture is that the new North Yorkshire Council also acquired upon reorganisation a number of other publicly owned iconic heritage buildings and gardens in the immediate vicinity of the Royal Hall: i.e. the Mercer Art Gallery, the Royal Pump Room Museum, the Valley Gardens with its Sun Pavilion, Colonnades and Spa Pump Rooms, Crescent Gardens, the Turkish Baths: along with the former North Yorkshire County Council's ownership of the freehold of the Royal Baths complex. Ideas have been floated in the past for extensions or developments, not just of the Royal Hall, and there is a certain ground swell in the town for the creation of some form of heritage centre, the town's development being a significant example of late Victorian and Edwardian urban planning. The RHRT's sister charity, the Harrogate and District Improvement Trust, is currently promoting the creation of a Community Arts and Heritage Visitor Centre.

It is to be hoped that local government reorganisation will be seen as an opportunity for the full potential and public benefit to be assessed and realised from the outstanding collection of heritage buildings centred on Crescent Gardens. There are a number of well-tried models which could be considered –council led; the formation of a public interest company or companies; the reconstruction or amalgamation of existing charities; the creation of a new charitable grouping.

A new cultural arts museums and heritage charity would be an attractive model which could harness the pent-up commitment of the local community, seizing the opportunity for a bold and imaginative development of the latent need for a dynamic Cultural and Heritage Quarter, along with other developments which would contribute to the resilience of the town centre and preserve its attractiveness for residents and visitors alike.

The Royal Hall Restoration Trust as independent guardian of the Royal Hall is clear that it wishes to have a continuing voice in the future of the Royal Hall, given its importance not just in the heritage of the town but critically to its contemporary community life.