

The Tiled Hall

Leeds' magnificent new Municipal Buildings were opened on 17th April 1884 by the Mayor, Alderman Edwin Woodhouse, after a competition was held to design them. It was won by George Corson, whose plans included dividing the buildings into the 'business' side, which fronted onto Calverley Street, and the 'popular' side which led onto Centenary Street, now the Headrow.

The popular side was occupied by the Free Public Library and took up less than a third of the whole building. This consisted of a reading room, lending library and reference library. The reading room was sited in the Tiled Hall at the front of the building. *The Yorkshireman* described the reading room on opening as 'a magnificent place. The floor is the finest parquetry in oak, walnut and ebony..' The roof was so magnificent it was feared that 'people will be continually gazing up at it, instead of quietly reading the magazines and newspapers'.

The Reading Room was used for the opening ceremony. A report of the opening noted that 'inside the edifice a select company assembled to participate in the opening ceremony. On a slightly raised dais were seated the Mayoress and other ladies of note. Behind... stood a mixed group of politicians, barristers, clergymen, magistrates, merchants and manufacturers. Here and there in various parts of the handsome reading room were well known local dignitaries and would-be dignitaries.'



The newly refurbished tiled hall

The Tiled Hall Continued..

The original reading room or tiled hall at the front of the building is 80 ft x 40ft. It is divided into a nave and aisles by arches supported by granite pillars. The tiled walls have medallion portraits in relief and include Homer, Dante, Burns, Scott, and Macaulay. The tiles are made by E. Smith & Co. of Coalville, Leicestershire. The vaulted ceiling is covered in mosaic with hexagonal bricks of various colours with golden bosses. These ceiling bosses were part of the Victorian ventilation system, which is still working today.

The Art Gallery was erected as an extension to the Municipal Buildings and was opened on 3rd October 1888 by the Mayor, Alderman Scarr. The Tiled Hall, formerly the Reading Room, was then converted to a sculpture gallery and the Reading Room was transferred to the Art Gallery and renamed the News Room. The Commercial and Technical Library was established in the News Room in 1918, but in cramped conditions.

In 1955 it moved into the Tiled Hall. The Commercial and Technical Library was then able to expand and have both a lending and a reference collection. A gallery/mezzanine level for staff use was also created in the Tiled Hall where further book stock was shelved and work space was created for the typists from the cataloguing department. The ceiling and walls of the Tiled Hall were then hidden for nearly fifty years behind a false ceiling, bookcases and panelling. The Music Library was moved into the Tiled Hall space in 1998 but was only there until 1999, when the Central Library building closed for refurbishment and rewiring. The 1950s panelling and bookcases were removed, along with the false ceiling, to once more reveal the Tiled Hall and the inevitable damage caused by work done in the 1950s.

Now fully restored to its original magnificence after a programme of work in 2006/7, under the guidance of English Heritage and funded by Yorkshire Forward as part of its £1.5m support of the refurbishment of the Art Gallery, the Tiled Hall is again at the heart of this important complex of Civic Buildings which stretches from the Library on the west-side, the Gallery at the centre, and connected to the Henry Moore Institute on the east, in what must be one of the most significant interlinked groupings of cultural buildings in the country.