

City of Leicester
MUSEUM



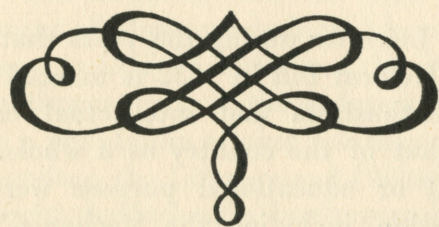
1849



1949



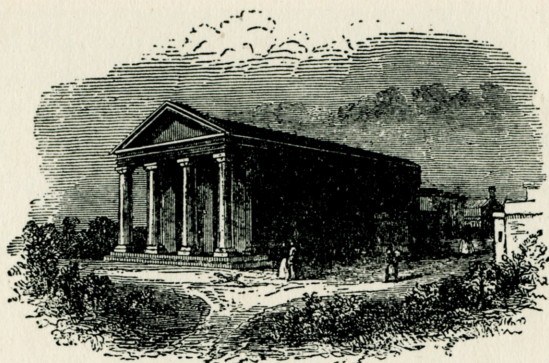
City of Leicester
MUSEUM



1849 - 1949

Compiled by the Archives Department and published on
the occasion of the Museum Centenary, 21st June, 1949

DERBYSHIRE EDUCATION COMMITTEE,
MUSEUM SERVICE.



Proprietary School, Leicester.

THE history of Leicester during the years that followed the passing of the Reform Bill in 1832 is marked by the same philanthropic enthusiasm and intellectual earnestness as characterised that of the country as a whole. Institutions with a cultural or educational purpose were established in quick succession, including the Mechanics' Institute in 1833, the Literary and Philosophical Society in 1835, the General News Room and Library in 1838 and the Athenaeum in 1840. At the same time the growing material prosperity of the town was evidenced by the planning of new streets and the setting up of new factories. The New Walk was originally laid out in 1785 as a public promenade, along the line of a Roman road and mediaeval field boundary, to enable the inhabitants of Leicester to escape from the confusion of the main streets. It soon came to be surrounded by a residential area and was, in 1840, crossed by the Midland Counties Railway Company's new line to Rugby. The Proprietary School building, later to become the Museum, was begun at the corner of the New Walk and Waterloo Street in 1836.

The chief part in the negotiations leading up to the foundation of the Town Museum was taken by the Literary and Philosophical Society, which succeeded in arousing considerable public interest in the project. Its members had, indeed,

been concerned with the formation of a collection of specimens since the question of establishing a museum in connection with the Society was first raised in March 1838. As early as 4 October, 1839, curiosities and specimens were exhibited at a meeting of the Society, and, in 1842, members of the public were admitted to see the collections. In the following year the Roman milestone was removed from Belgrave Gate to the Society's museum, representations having been made by the Society to the Town Council as to the need for securing its safe preservation. The Council stipulated that it should remain the property of the town and that the public should have free access to it. But the growth of the collections raised problems of accommodation which were unsolved when the "Act for encouraging the establishment of Museums in large towns" (8 & 9 Vict., c.43), was passed in 1845. It authorised the application of the amount of a half-penny rate to the maintenance of a museum in towns with a population of over ten thousand persons. In July, 1846, therefore, the Literary and Philosophical Society, in conjunction with the Mechanics' Institute and the Athenaeum, presented a memorial to the Town Council praying that its provisions should be put in force in Leicester. The Society offered to transfer its collections to the town on a suitable building being provided, pointing out, in the words of their memorial, that "the Museum, being the only scientific exhibition freely opened to the public, has been visited during the last year by upwards of ten thousand persons. Your Memorialists, having in their possession more articles than the limited space of the room they now occupy enables them to display, are anxious to have their Museum removed to a more suitable building, which it is not in their power to provide. Your Memorialists are fully confident of the good their limited Museum has already effected, and, influenced by the desire of advancing the cultivation of art and science amongst all orders of society, they are most anxious that the means to this end should be carried out to their fullest extent."

A special Committee of the Town Council was formed to go

into the question of procuring suitable premises. The possibility of utilising the Theatre in the Market Place, the Amphitheatre in Humberstone Gate, or a site near the Post Office, was in turn considered and rejected. It was decided, however, that the premises of the Proprietary School, which had failed to secure adequate support and had been closed down in December, 1847, would be suitable. The site had originally belonged to the Corporation, forming part of their allotment on the enclosure of the South Field in 1804. The School, with its furniture and fittings, was finally purchased by the Corporation for £3,300 in January, 1848. The necessary alterations and arrangements for improved lighting, heating, and ventilation, bringing the total cost of purchase and repair up to £4,212, were then put in hand. The collection of specimens was transferred from the New Hall, Wellington Street, the meeting place of the Mechanics' Institute, to the new Museum building early in 1848, and the Society held its first meeting there on 22 January, 1849. It had not hitherto enjoyed a regular meeting place, but from that date has continued to meet in the Museum. The opening ceremony, at which Lord John Manners was the chief guest, took place on 19 June, 1849, when the collections of the Literary and Philosophical Society were formally presented to the Mayor, on behalf of the Corporation by the President. The public were first admitted to the Museum on 21 June, 1849. Leicester thereby became one of the first towns to establish a rate-aided Museum.

A scheme for the control of the Society's collections had begun to take shape many years before they were handed over to the town. Three members of the Literary and Philosophical Society were appointed Honorary Curators to superintend the Museum in October 1842. A step towards association with the Corporation was taken when, by a deed of 6 June 1846, the management of the collections was vested in twelve trustees, the Mayor of Leicester and the Chairman of the Quarter Sessions for the time being to be of their number, the remainder to be members of the Society. During the course of

negotiations between the Museum Committee of the Town Council and representatives of the Society in 1847, it was agreed that the museum collections should be presented to the town on condition that their ownership should revert to the Society under the provisions of the Trust deed, if the Town Council ceased to provide a public Museum. The Society was to have a Committee Room and Lecture Room in the new building, and to elect and pay the Curator. The appointment of the Curator was to be confirmed by the Town Council and his salary was to be 50 guineas per annum. The first Curator of the town Museum was Mr. Nathaniel Plant. The Museum was to be open to the public from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. daily, except on Fridays and Sundays, and from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. in the evenings between 1 May and 1 October.

A definition of the scope of the museum collections was also made in 1842, when it was decided to recognize the departments of Archaeology, Geology, Botany, Entomology and Ornithology. The Society no doubt had this decision in mind when, in 1849, it formed special sectional Committees to study the subjects of Geology, Zoology, Botany, Archaeology and Fine Art. The five Honorary Curators, who continued to be responsible for the collections of the Town Museum, were the chairmen of the five sections. The Museum Curator was required to work under their directions. All departments were active in acquiring specimens whether by donation or purchase. One of the most important was the large fossil *Plesiosaurus macrocephalus*, seventeen feet long, purchased from Mr. Lee of Barrow-on-Soar in October, 1851, together with an *Ichthyosaurus*, for £100. A second *Ichthyosaurus* was presented to the Museum by Mr. Lee. (The problem of accommodating these specimens in the Museum owing to their unusual size was the direct cause of alterations being made to the Museum premises!) Other specimens difficult to display were the Roman pavements excavated by the Archaeological Section of the Society on the site of a villa in the "Cherry Orchard", a property to the south of the present King

Richard's Road. Five pavements were found and removed to the Museum by 9 January, 1852, at a cost of nearly £55. In February, 1853, the Society arranged the purchase of the Roman pavement in the house of Mr. Willey in Jewry Wall Street, which the Crystal Palace Company had sought to obtain and to remove to London. Under the will of Mr. Henry Bickley of Melton Mowbray, the Museum received, in 1870, 645 specimens of birds and animals in 78 glass cases. A catalogue of the collections was published in nine parts between 1864 and 1869.

Meanwhile the Museum and those connected with it was exercising a growing influence on the life of the town. In the winter of 1864 it was decided to hold a series of lectures in the Museum on Saturday evenings. These lectures have continued to the present time except for an interval during the last war. An exhibition of 488 works by local artists was held in the Museum in November, 1862, and in August, 1863, the members of the British Archaeological Association, attending a Congress in Leicester, were entertained at a Soirée in the Museum by the Literary and Philosophical Society. Evidence of interest in the Society and Museum was supplied by the erection of a monument to J. F. Hollings, one of the earliest members of the Society, an original trustee of the Society's museum, and the second headmaster of the Proprietary School, by public subscription in the Museum grounds in 1865.

A new era in the history of the Museum began in the decade after 1870 when its status was better defined. Close though the relations of the Literary and Philosophical Society with the Town Council in its administration had been up to this time, they were vaguely stated, and in consequence, difficulties arose. The matter came to a head in 1871, when a Committee of the Society presented a report to the Society and the Town Council, complaining that though the Literary and Philosophical Society contributed to the upkeep of the Museum and to the salary of the Curator, its share in the management of the institution was decreasing, the Curator

was becoming too independent, and difficulties had arisen about the Society's property, books, and rooms. The Curator, Mr. Weatherhead, replied that his work was hindered by the activities of the Honorary Curators and that he spent too large a proportion of his time on the Society's clerical work. This state of confusion could not be allowed to continue, and, after some discussion, new rules for the management of the Museum were adopted in 1872. Instead of contributing to the salary of the Curator (the original 50 guineas being then augmented by a grant from the Corporation,) and having charge of his appointment, the Society was to pay the same sum as rent for their rooms in the Museum, and for the future, all officers of the Museum were to be appointed by the Town Council. However, this did not mean that the Society gave up its close association with the Museum it had founded, for it was to recommend four co-optative members of the Museum Committee, which was to consist of ten members of the Town Council and six non members. The Honorary Curators were to be selected from the Committee.

The connection of the Museum and Libraries, which began in 1871, had been anticipated by the support of leading members of the Literary and Philosophical Society during the sixties for proposals to establish a free library, which would cater for the rapidly expanding reading public. Various subscription libraries and Societies, partly supplying the need, were founded during the early nineteenth century and a small library was formed in connection with the Museum. (A public library had actually existed in the Old Town Hall since 1632, but it consisted chiefly of theological works and had ceased to receive any important accessions after the middle of the eighteenth century.) The municipal library was finally opened on 9 January, 1871, in the building formerly known as the New Hall, Wellington Street. The Museum and Library were thereafter jointly supported by a rate of a penny in the pound, increased later to three half-pence when a permanent Art Gallery was established in 1885. The connection with the

Libraries became even stronger at a later period when, in 1916, the Museum and Art Galleries Committee was amalgamated with the Libraries Committee. One Committee, which now allows for ten members of the Council and five non members, has administered the three institutions ever since.

The Museum staff was small while the system of honorary curatorships remained in action, and the paid Curators had to prove themselves men of great versatility in dealing with all types of collection. Moreover, since the salary of the Curator was not high, the earlier Curators found it necessary to supplement it by other activities. Mr. Harrison, Curator from 1873 to 1880, gave regular science lectures. He was also an expert meteorologist, and the energetic work of that section of the Literary and Philosophical Society resulted in the opening of a Government Meteorological Station at the Museum in 1873. His successor, Mr. Montague Browne, did much to develop the institution during his twenty-seven years at the Museum. He pursued a vigorous policy of expansion, holding firmly that the Museum should be of general and not merely of local interest; indeed, on account of this, he had many disagreements with some of his Honorary Curators. As a result, the system of administering departments through Honorary Curators was abandoned after 1890, and more paid assistance was employed. The active interest on the part of the public is reflected in the columns of the local newspapers of the period, where Museum exhibits are vigorously discussed. Mr. Browne's skill as a taxidermist won great praise, especially in his notable group of two tigers fighting over the body of an elephant. Its acquisition represented the Museum's gain at the expense of a local circus, three of whose animals died in the same week and were presented to be displayed!

On Mr. Browne's retirement Mr. E. E. Lowe succeeded him in 1907, and he too had a long tenure of office at an important period of the Museum's existence. The growing lists of yearly accessions indicate the expansion of the collections, and larger staff and buildings were necessary so that greater specialisa-

tion could be attained. The Museum Reports of 1908 set out the policy applied to these collections, to combine a record of the geology, botany, zoology, and history of Leicestershire with their more general aspects, and to illustrate the fine and decorative arts in a way to appeal to both the general public and the student. This aim of combining general with local, and educative with scholarly interest has always been pursued. There was, of course, an interruption in the normal course of the Museum's development during the First World War, when it lost several of its staff. It was used for many exhibitions directed towards encouraging the national effort and provided classes for medical and scientific students. At the end of the war, further responsibility was placed on Mr. Lowe and he was appointed Director of the Museum, Art Gallery and Libraries jointly. A new departure, which brought the Museum even more into contact with the public, was the introduction of a guide-lecturer in 1926, the first to be appointed in a provincial museum. A further extension of the educational work of the institution in 1931, was the organization of circulation collections for schools, which has since developed into a large Schools Service Department. Another aspect of public participation in the Museum is shown by the generous gifts which have been contributed to the Friends of the Museum Fund, instituted in 1930 by Alderman Charles Squire, Chairman of the Museums Committee, to help in purchases for the Museum.

Dr. Lowe did not relinquish his post until 1940 and so saw the beginning of the effect of another World War on the Museum. On his retirement the directorship of the Museum and Art Gallery was separated again from that of the Libraries though all three institutions remained under the same main Committee. Under his successor, Mr. Trevor Thomas, the Museum was again deprived of staff and many of the more valuable exhibits stored away in safer keeping. However, it enhanced rather than lost its position as a centre of education and culture in the city, as may be instanced by the success of

the courses in art appreciation held during the war, or the lunch-time concerts which have flourished since their inception in 1940. In 1947, Dr. M. B. Hodge succeeded Mr. Thomas and the work of the Museum is proceeding under his direction.

The connection of Leicester Museum with the Museums' Association, founded in 1889, dates back to the early days of the Association. Leicester Museum has thus always been concerned with the wider aspects of Museum matters and has latterly played an important part in the Association. Dr. Lowe was its President when the Association met in Leicester in 1922. Alderman Charles Squire, who had inspected Mediterranean Museums for the Carnegie Trust in 1932, was also President in 1936. The connection was maintained by Mr. Thomas, who was a member of its Council, and Dr. Hodge, who has been Honorary Secretary of the Association since 1942.

An account of the Museum is not complete without some mention of the Art Gallery, since the two institutions have always been in very close conjunction, both as regards buildings and activities. The idea of instituting an Art Gallery was suggested by the School of Art, which had for some time held its classes in the Museum buildings. For the first four years of its life the Gallery was wholly supported by private subscription, but the Town Council soon took a hand in the matter and a Committee was constituted to raise a fund for its development. It was duly opened to the public in 1885 when the Corporation began to defray the expenses out of the rates. It has been greatly enriched by various bequests of money and pictures and has always been a subject of lively public interest in Leicester. From the first suggestion of its establishment in 1881, controversies raged about the kind of pictures which should be bought or displayed. John Ruskin, asked to advise on the matter in 1880, was not sanguine about the success of such a scheme, considering public taste too ill-formed. He remarked "no-one nowadays can appreciate pictures by the old masters, and everyone can understand Frith's Derby Day . . .". It must be admitted that a rather high proportion

of the pictures acquired during the first forty years of the Gallery's history seems to us to justify his criticism. In 1934, however, the decision to appoint a fully qualified assistant in charge of the Art Department inaugurated a new policy, and as the result of new acquisitions and frequent loan exhibitions, the Gallery has taken an increasingly important place among the City's cultural assets.

The growth of the Museum buildings reflects the development of the institution, as need for expansion has been continually felt. The first addition was proposed in 1873 and completed by 1877. It was achieved largely by the efforts of the Literary and Philosophical Society whose members felt the need for a new lecture hall for their meetings. Though half the cost was provided by the Corporation, the other half was raised by public subscription. The building, when completed at a cost of about £8,000 consisted of a lecture hall and accommodation for the School of Art, which had hitherto had premises in Pocklington's Walk. However, actual Museum accommodation was not thereby increased, nor did the Literary and Philosophical Society find itself sufficiently well provided for, so it again suggested that another extension be made. By 1892 a new wing was completed, consisting of a Council room and three other rooms. At the same time the School of Art moved to new premises in the Newarke. This still did not mean more room for the Museum, as the Mayor took over the accommodation vacated by the School of Art, now known as the Mayor's Rooms, to use for civic receptions and meetings. A more ambitious plan to reorganize the whole building was soon put under way, and when the new extension was opened in 1912, the ground plan of the Museum had been much altered. A large entrance hall was made, and a new wing on the north-west side, with a staircase leading up to a gallery. Basements for stores and workrooms extended under the buildings. In spite of this addition, however, pressure on available space still continued, and as a result of persistent efforts on the part of the Committee, another extension was

added,—a three-storey block adjacent to the previous wing, which included a muniment room for the preservation of local records. The latter was opened in 1930 by Lord Hanworth, the Master of the Rolls, and the whole block two years later by Dr. Cyril Fox, Director of the National Museum of Wales.

No other building has yet been undertaken, but branch museums have been set up in other buildings in the city, which it has been desired to preserve for their architectural and historical value. The Guildhall was restored and handed over to the care of the Museums Committee in 1926, and the Roman Forum site, then under excavation by Miss Kathleen Kenyon, in 1937. In the same year, Belgrave Hall, an early eighteenth century house, was furnished as a period museum. Finally, in 1940, the City undertook responsibility for carrying out a trust under which the seventeenth century Newarke Houses had been acquired for development as a Leicester and Leicestershire Museum.

Leicester Museum is constantly adjusting itself to the needs of changing times and fresh avenues of development are being sought out and followed. It has passed from the care of gifted amateurs to that of a professional staff and a specialised technique for the preservation and display of specimens has been developed. In contrast with the early policy of acquiring specimens of all kinds, increasing emphasis has come to be laid on the importance of the Museum as a centre of the cultural life of the surrounding region, and on the value of its collections as illustrations of the local in relation to the general type. The position Leicester Museum occupies in the life of the community today is the happy result of the co-operation of all concerned in its development. The wisdom and authority of the Leicester Corporation and the Literary and Philosophical Society, the generosity and interest of the public, and the technical skill of successive members of the staff have together been responsible. The progress of the Museum during the past hundred years may be held to have justified the hopes of its founders and to inspire confidence for the future.

