The Music Hall

What has the Music Hall to do with science? Is it famous for its acoustics? Well it may have good acoustics but it earns its place in this selection of scientific places because it opened as the principal venue of the 1859 visit of the British Association for the Advancement of Science.

The Music Hall building runs from the fine granite stepped terrace on Union Street with its imposing façade of 6 ionic columns through to Golden Square but the actual hall itself is a new build to the pre-existing Assembly Rooms. These rooms were erected at the beginning of the 1820s to the design of Archibald Simpson (see also the Aberdeen Mechanics’ Institution building). At the end of October 1857 a meeting was convened by the Lord Provost proposing setting up a Joint Stock Company with a capital of £5000 to build a music hall somewhere central suitable for ‘public meetings and other large assemblages’. The Music Hall Company was incorporated in January 1858, subscribers quickly acquired and they chose the site and the architect James Matthews (Simpson was no longer alive). The plan involved modifying and re-furbishing the Assembly Rooms and building a new hall at the back that would be 150 feet long, 68 feet wide, 50 feet high internally and able to accommodate some 2400 people. [The current seating capacity is about half this – modern concert-goers clearly expect more space].

It was said at the time that what gave Aberdeen the Music Hall was the prospect of being able to hold the 1859 meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (the BA) at Aberdeen. By the time the BA had to make their decision at Leeds the previous year, the Music Hall project was in hand and work had begun, enabling the Aberdeen delegation to promise the as yet un-built hall for the 1859 meeting. Without the hall, it is almost certain that the BA would not have come to Aberdeen, for at that time Aberdeen did not have a hall that could seat 1000 people. The BA had grown since its foundation in 1831 to become a substantial and prestigious affair attracting much larger audiences.

What made the 1859 Aberdeen meeting unique in the BA’s history was that the Presidency was to be taken at Aberdeen by HRH the Prince Consort. Albert had shown his genuine interest and support for technology and science by his active campaigning for the 1851 Great Exhibition that opened in the Crystal Palace. He had clearly followed the rising profile of the BA and was pleased to be asked to be President. The location of the meeting at Aberdeen would also have pleased him since he had taken a lot of interest in the building of the new Balmoral Castle, completed only three years previously.
The opening of the ‘New Hall’ was the opening ceremony of the BA meeting. A week before the planned day of 14th September visitors started pouring into the town. The BA would utilise the Mechanics’ Institution’s new building and the whole of Marischal College had been put at their disposal as a meeting venue and as the location of an extensive public museum display. The list of well-known names in the sciences attending the BA would fill this page. They included in astronomy, the Astronomer Royal and the Astronomer Royals for Scotland and Ireland, the Earl of Rosse, Thomas McLear, Warren de la Rue and William Lassell; Natural Philosophers (though many had multiple interests) David Brewster, James Forbes, John Tyndall, William Thomson, Clerk Maxwell, Balfour Stewart, Neil Arnott, Johnstone Stoney, Admiral Fitzroy; Engineers, Macquorn Rankine and Fleeming Jenkin, Geologists Roderick Murchison, Charles Lyell, Archibald Geikie, James Tennant, James Nicol; Chemists, Michael Faraday, Lyon Playfair, Thomas Graham, Vernon Harcourt; Natural Historians, Thomas Huxley, Richard Owen, John Lubbock and, indeed many more in all disciplines. The attendees included 60 FRSs and some 30 FGSs and FRGSs. Over 2500 tickets were sold.

The opening ceremony in the Music Hall included an hour long speech from HRH the Prince Consort to a packed audience. (An illustration of the opening ceremony is included in the piece in this series on Clerk Maxwell at Marischal College). The speech was reported at length in the press and subsequently published. Clerk Maxwell announced the only law of physics firmly associated with Aberdeen, namely the distribution of velocities of molecules in a gas, now known as ‘the Maxwell distribution law’. Charles Lyell gave the first public intimation of the imminent publication of a work by Charles Darwin on the origin of species “the result of twenty years of observation and experiment in Zoology, Botany and Geology, by which he has been led to the conclusion, that those powers of nature that give rise to races and permanent varieties in animals and plants, are the same as those which, in much longer periods, produce species, and, in a still longer series of ages, give rise to difference of generic rank.” James Bowman Lindsay gave a demonstration of telegraphing without wires across the river Dee, watched by Faraday, Thomson and other electricians of the age. Over the parallel sessions, 361 papers were read and many other events enjoyed by the participants. In summary, there is no reason to doubt contemporary descriptions that the week long 1859 BA meeting at Aberdeen was the largest and most successful meeting the BA had had to date.

Returning to the topic of the new hall itself, building it used up most of the Company’s £5000 but since a music hall without an organ was considered an incomplete undertaking, a second subscription was launched to raise £1000 for an organ by Henry Willis with ‘upwards of 1100 pipes’. The Music Hall Company could probably not have chosen better, for Willis is seen as the premier organ builder in mid-century Britain, later supplying organs to the Royal Albert Hall, St Paul’s Cathedral, Salisbury Cathedral and many other prominent buildings. [The organ at St Machar’s Cathedral in Old Aberdeen is a later Henry Willis organ of 1891]. The Music Hall’s 3-manual Willis organ was renovated in 1889 and 3 further times in the 20th century. The original organ was finally ready at end September 1859 and to a packed house Henry Willis himself gave a short concert on the 29th showing off his creation to much praise. The inaugural concerts ‘under the patronage of Her Most Gracious Majesty the Queen, His Royal Highness the Prince Consort, &c., &c., &c.’ took place on the 12th and 13th followed by a full-dress ball on the 14th and a popular concert on the 15th. The Music Hall had then been truly launched as a music venue.

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