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# THE LEEDS ASSEMBLY ROOMS

Peter Brears

Today most visitors to Leeds could be forgiven for believing that it was of little importance before it flourished as one of the great manufacturing centres of Victorian Britain. The grandeur of its Town Hall, Corn Exchange, Infirmary and numerous other buildings appear to confirm this view, but those who look more closely may perceive evidence of earlier affluence, for late-18th-century Leeds was the sixth largest town in England, and for its size, by far the most prosperous. This wealth was derived from the marketing of locally woven woollen cloth, which merchants bought in an unfinished state in the cloth-halls. After completing the finishing processes, they then sold it to merchants in virtually every part of the known world, over £1.5 million's worth being exported annually in the 1770s. This process established vast fortunes, and the most elegant of lifestyles, every civilised amenity, including a theatre, a concert season, a subscription library, a racecourse, a hunt and the subject of this paper, an assembly rooms, all being available here.

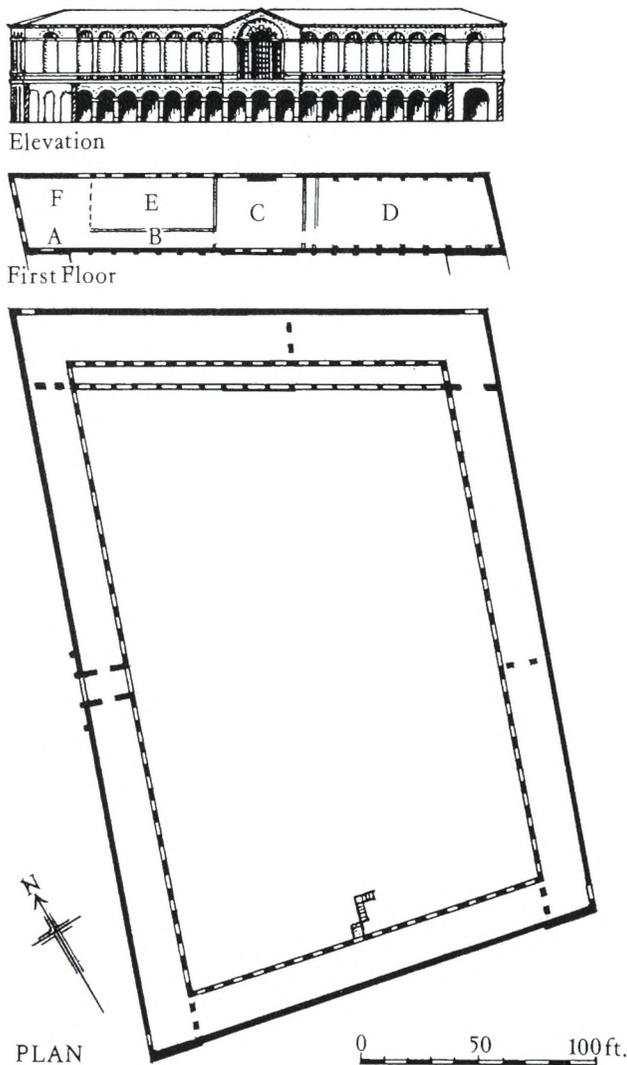


Fig. 1. The Third White Cloth Hall and the Assembly Rooms, Leeds. The plan of the first floor shows the position of (A) the entrance staircase, (B) the entrance passage, (C) the card room, (D) the ballroom, with the musicians' gallery at its western end, (E) the supper room, and (F) the probable site of the kitchen.

Between March and October 1775, the Leeds merchants built a Third White Cloth Hall to serve their rapidly expanding trade. It was a vast quadrangular structure, whose five major rooms or "streets" housed 1,213 stalls where manufacturers could display their pieces of cloth for sale (Figs. 1 and 2).<sup>1</sup> Its architect is not recorded, although it might have been William Johnson, who was paid £14 9s 3d in 1786 for removing the cupola here from the Second White Cloth Hall.<sup>2</sup> As the new hall was rising from its foundations the committee decided that it should incorporate a new Assembly Rooms. There had been assembly rooms in Leeds since before 1726, those housed in the First White Cloth Hall since 1756 now proving "incommodius in point of situation as well as extent".<sup>3</sup> By erecting an open loggia of brick arches one bay in front of the northern wing, it proved possible to add a very impressive suite of rooms at first-floor level, their dimensions being 205 by 33ft, and their cost £2,500.<sup>4</sup>

The entrance appears to have been at the western end of the wing, completely independent of the Cloth Hall gates. Here a staircase would have given access to the long passageway just within the south facade, a row of thermal windows providing illumination just below the vaulted plaster ceiling (Fig. 3). Presumably the kitchens lay close to the head of the stairs, in order to serve the supper room,

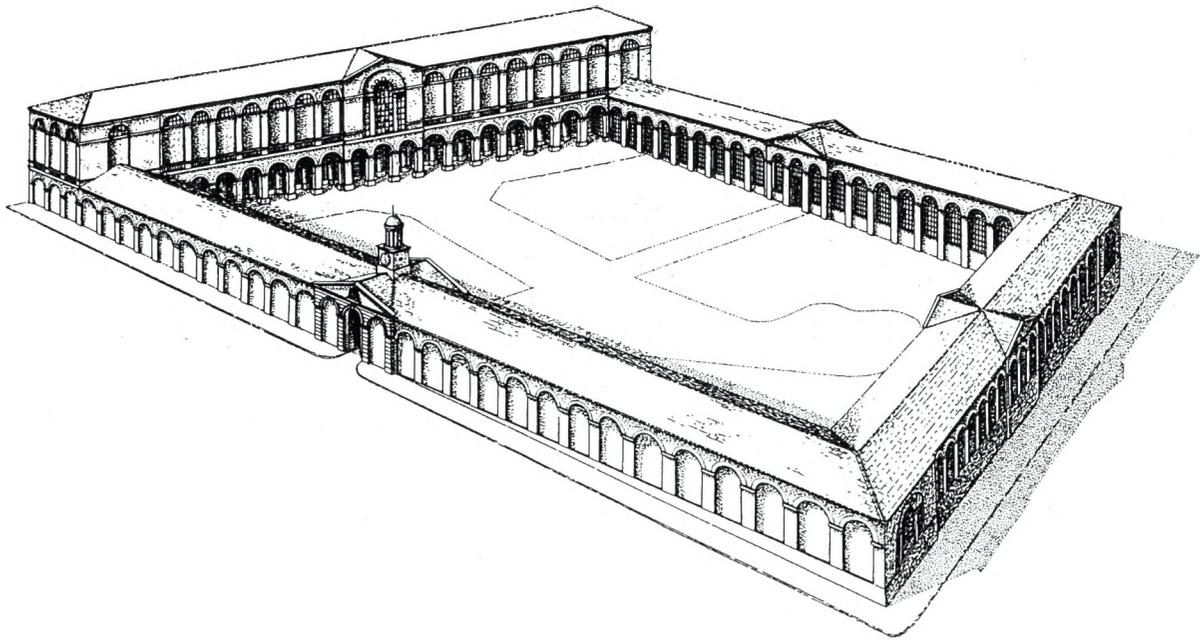


Fig. 2. The Third White Cloth Hall at Leeds was built as a large quadrangle in 1775, the Assembly Rooms being added on top of the north wing in 1776-77, as seen in this reconstruction drawing.

which lay between the passage and the northern wall. The supper room ceiling is quite plain, but has an attractive swagged frieze.

A door at the end of the passage led into the card room, almost square in plan, heated by a fireplace on its northern wall, and lit by an enormous Ionic Venetian window directly beneath the pediment of the south facade. Here the ceiling rose is extended by swags, wreaths and bands of husks, all issuing from rams heads in tribute to the woollen industry. The musicians' gallery for the ballroom was located in the eastern wall of this room, but regrettably all evidence of this feature was removed in the alterations of the 1920s.

Beneath this gallery lay the entrance to the ballroom, which occupied the remaining nine bays of the building (Fig. 5). This was, without doubt, an extremely impressive climax to the whole suite of rooms. Around the walls Composite columns (Fig. 6) supported a deep entablature, all of excellent workmanship and design, and painted a uniform light stone colour. Above, the deep cove of the ceiling is penetrated by arches which allowed light from 21 Thermal windows to flood down onto the floor during daylight hours, while large iron hooks at the centre of the three major ceiling panels were provided for night-time illumination by chandeliers. It is regrettable that the architect cannot be positively identified today, for this is an interior of considerable quality (Fig. 7).

The Assembly Rooms were opened On June 9, 1777 "by the most brilliant appearance of genteel company, that were ever before assembled together here, upon any occasion". The ball was opened by the Hon Sir George Savile Bart, and the Countess of Effingham, there were besides upwards of 200 gentlemen and ladies present, who all appeared to be competitors in behaviour,

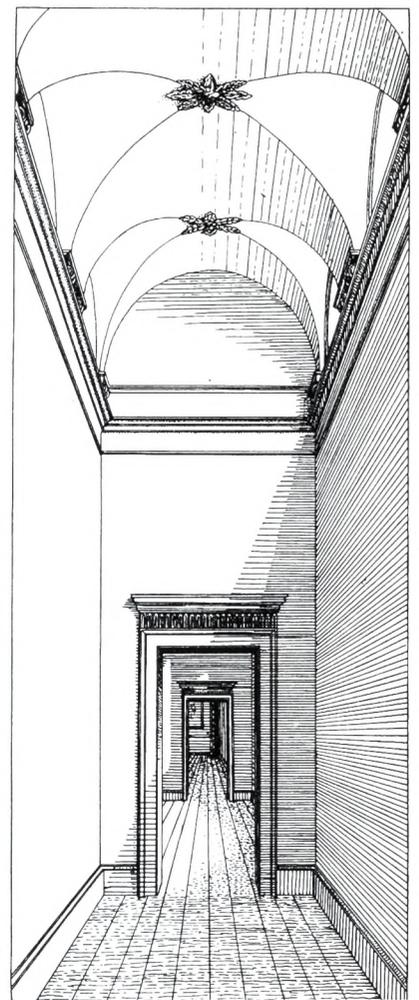


Fig. 3. Leeds Assembly Rooms. The entrance passage. The ceiling and the doorway into the card room shown here both survived the alterations of the 1920s, although the wall on the left has been removed, and opened up into the supper room.

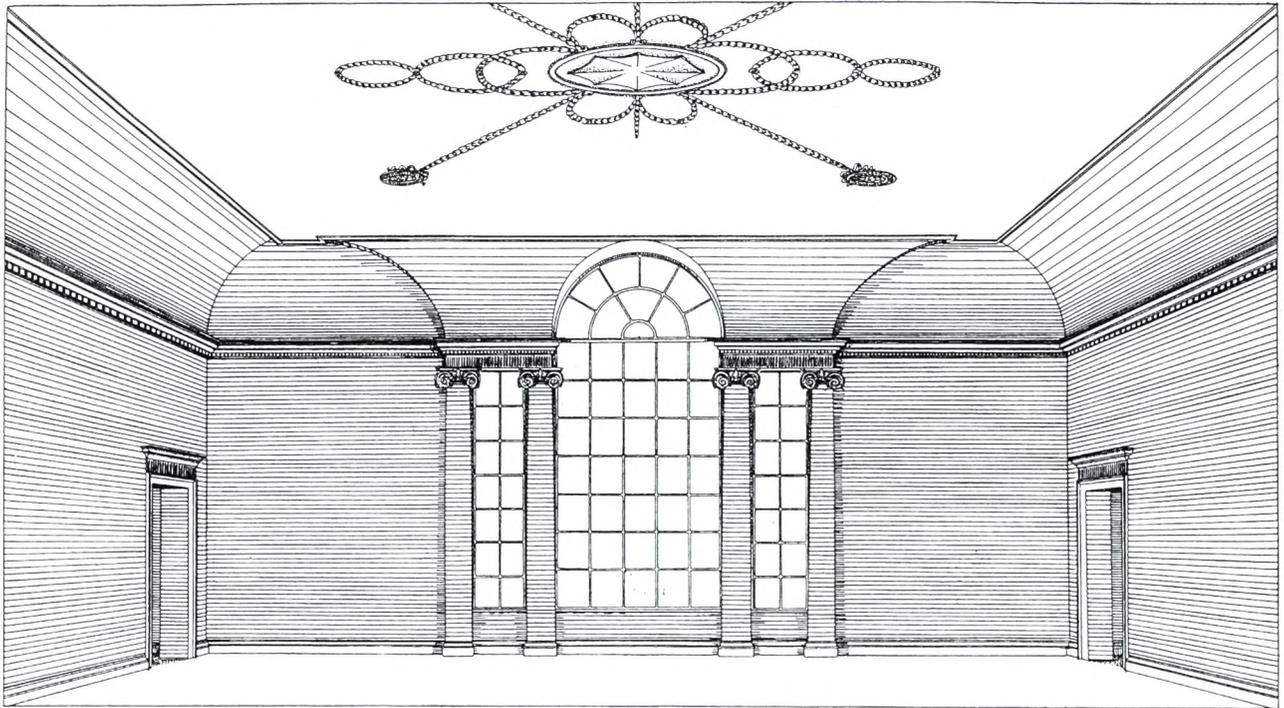
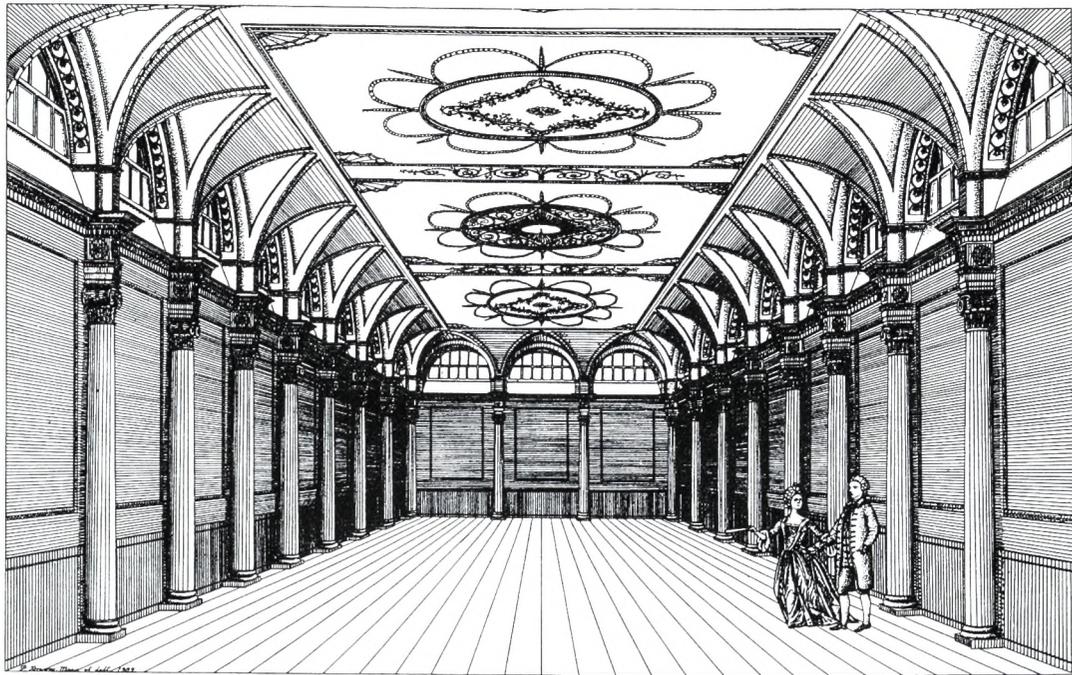


Fig. 4. The Card Room. Although the left-hand wall, and a major section of the right-hand wall, were removed in the 1930s, the ceiling, Venetian window, and right-hand doorway into the entrance passage are still intact today.

gentility and complaisance. The company in general were very agreeably surprised by the neatness and elegance of the different apartments, which are allowed on all hands, to be as complete and highly finished as any set of rooms of that kind in the whole Kingdom.<sup>5</sup> Admission for one gentleman or two ladies cost half a guinea. The following account of the Yorkshire Archers Ball of October 26, 1790 captures the magnificence of these occasions.<sup>6</sup>

The company consisted of 200 ladies and gentlemen of the first rank and fashion in the country. The ladies appeared in white, with green ornaments, and afforded the greatest display of taste and elegance. The ball was opened at nine o'clock by a minuet danced by the Earl Fitzwilliam and the Countess of Mexborough . . . Country dances commenced at ten, and the supper room was opened at 12 o'clock. It would be impossible to describe the decorations of the table . . . the propriety and brilliance with which they were ornamented reflect the highest credit on Mr. Vickers of York. The effect of festoons of coloured lamps was particularly pleasing. Dancing continued till three o'clock in the morning, soon after which the company began to retire, highly gratified with their evenings' amuzement.

The regular assemblies, directed by an annually elected master of ceremonies, were held fortnightly from October through to June.<sup>7</sup> Subscriptions were taken for the whole season, the dates of the dancing assemblies and the card assemblies being routinely advertised in the local newspapers.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the rooms were used for a variety of concerts, balls and dinners.<sup>9</sup> Further entertainments included aeronauts ascending from the courtyard, Mr Lundardi's balloon enriched with its Persian silks and gold lacing creating great interest in 1786, as did Mr Green's "stupendous Aerostatic Machine" of blue, red, and yellow striped silk in 1823.<sup>10</sup> Between 1794 and 1814, during the war with Revolutionary France, the rooms were also used by the Leeds Volunteer regiment, who held their drills, inspections and ceremonies here. On June 4, 1794, for example, their King's Birthday parade terminated with an elegant cold collation, loyal toasts with rousing cheers, and a brilliant ball in the Assembly Rooms.<sup>11</sup>



*The Leeds Assembly Rooms, 1777.*

Fig. 5. The Ball Room. This reconstruction drawing shows the appearance of the room at the time of its opening in 1777. In 1864-65 the railway viaduct sliced off the far right-hand corner, while in the 1930s the shafts of the columns were removed and a warehouse floor inserted. However, sufficient remains above the capitals to justify its contemporary claim to be as complete and highly finished as any such room in the whole kingdom.

In 1835 it was noted that the Assembly Rooms had rarely been opened in recent years, and that the seasons of entertainment had come to an end, the young, gay and wealthy now patronising other establishments.<sup>12</sup> Final closure took place in 1864-65, when the North Eastern Railway Company's great brick viaduct swept diagonally through the White Cloth Hall, removing one end of the ballroom, and the majority of the cloth hall wings, to leave the Assembly Rooms as a completely detached block. It was apparently at this time that the open loggia along the south facade was glazed by moving the windows from the original cloth hall one bay forward, to increase the usable space. The first Working Men's Institute in Leeds now became established here, where washroom, canteen, games, library and reading room facilities were available on payment of one penny each week.<sup>13</sup> From the 1870s the property was sub-divided and tenanted by Solomon Ash, hatter and tailor; J.W. Bean, printer and paper bag maker; Athol Dixon, engineer; Samuel Thaker, japanner and enameller; William Towler, Globe Foundry Warehouse, and James Wadsworth, butter importer, the ballroom being used as the Christadelphian Central Hall.<sup>14</sup>

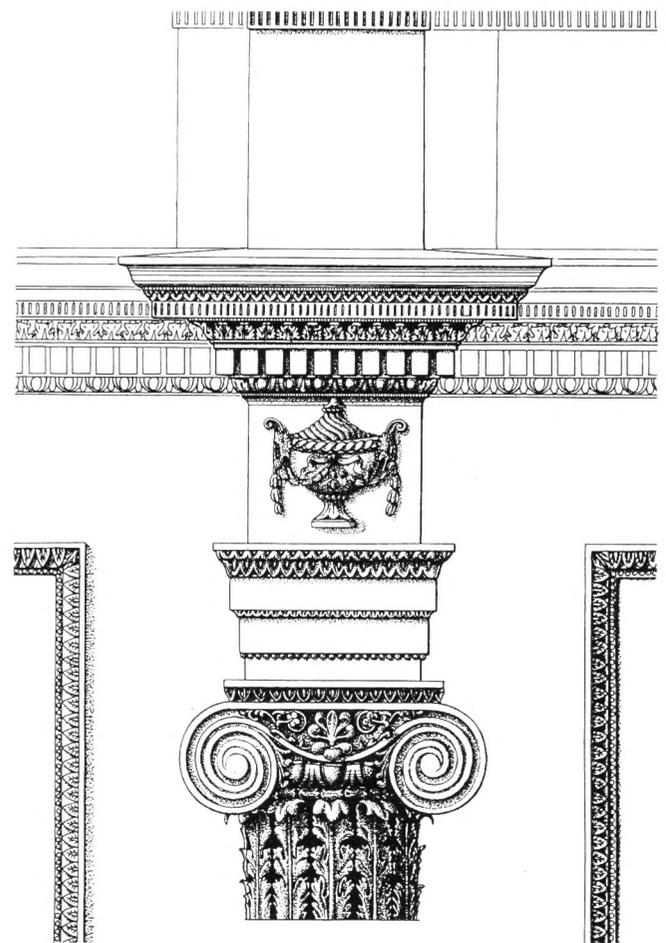


Fig. 6. As this detail shows, the Composite capitals and entablature in the ballroom were designed and executed to the highest standards, suggesting the involvement of a major architect.

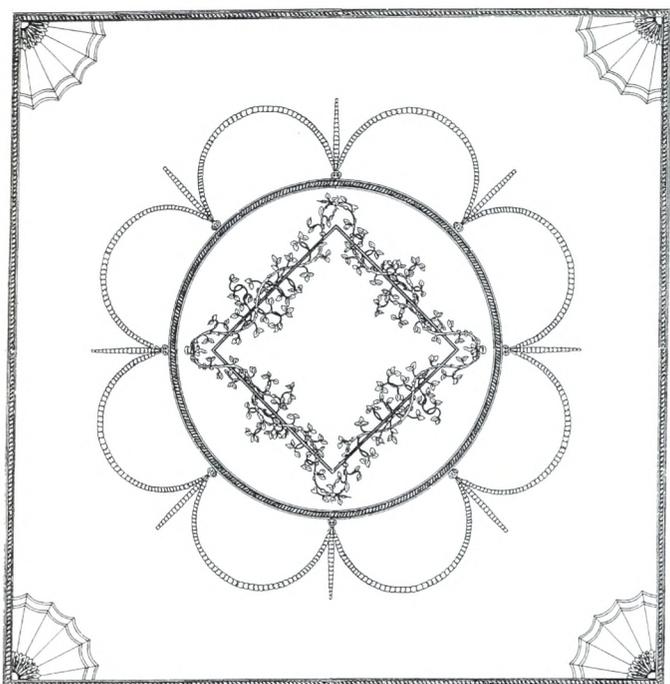


Fig. 7. The eastern and western panels of the ballroom ceiling. Although competently executed, the design of the ceilings of the Leeds Assembly Rooms is decidedly provincial, having nothing of the qualities demonstrated by Carr and the fine York craftsmen he employed on most of his major buildings.

original furniture survived there. These were early-18th-century oak chests of drawers which had been remodelled with bracket feet presumably when they were removed here from the old assembly rooms in 1777.<sup>16</sup>

In 1988 the new owners of the Assembly Rooms, Crown Exchange Construction Ltd., generously permitted the writer to measure the building, this evidence enabling a series of reconstruction drawings to be prepared. Since that time the Rooms have been used as the Waterloo House Antiques Centre, incorporating a small museum of Georgian Leeds. It is hoped that this distinguished building may soon recover from its century and a half of neglect, and regain its original reputation as the most complete and highly finished set of rooms of its kind in the whole Kingdom, a fitting tribute to the wealth, elegance and culture of its builders, the merchants of Georgian Leeds.

## NOTES

1. H. Heaton, "The Leeds White Cloth Hall", *Thoresby Society* XXII, Leeds, 1915, 131-71, and P. Smithies, *The Architecture of Halifax Piece Hall*, Halifax, 1988, 31.
2. D. Linstrum, *West Yorkshire Architects and Architecture*, London, 1978, 284, 330 and 379.
3. K. Grady, "The Georgian Public Buildings of Leeds and the West Riding", *Thoresby Society* LXII no.133, Leeds, 1987,
4. *Ibid.*, 163.
5. *Leeds Intelligencer*, June 17, 1777.
6. *Leeds Mercury*, November 2, 1790.
7. E. Raines, *Directory of Leeds*, Leeds, 1817.
8. E.g. *Leeds Intelligencer*, September 17, 1792.
9. E.g. *Leeds Mercury*, October 14, 1777, December 16, 1777, March 24, 1778, June 26, 1779; *Leeds Intelligencer* February 3, 1778, January 21, 1793 etc.
10. *Leeds Mercury*, December 12, 1786 and August 30, 1823.
11. P. Brears, *Thomas Lloyd of Armley Mills*, Wakefield, 1988, 26.
12. J. Heaton, *Walks Through Leeds*, Leeds, 1835, 28.
13. D. Green, *Handy Guide to Leeds*, Leeds, 1868, 34.
14. Local directories, Leeds Local History Library.
15. G. Hirst, Assembly Room papers, West Yorkshire Archive Service, Leeds District Archives.
16. These were acquired by Leeds City Museum, and are currently displayed in the Assembly Rooms.

In 1919 the Rooms were purchased for £8,500 by L. Hirst & Co., an old established Leeds tobacconist, who commissioned G.F. Bowman of Greek Street to carry out a full restoration. This was largely restricted to remodelling the western end of the block, where an 1860s Tudoresque facade was replaced by the present neo-Georgian pediment and a porch leading to a staircase up to the first floor. Here the removal of all the dividing walls presented a remarkable prospect along the whole suite of rooms. In 1923 the premises re-opened as Waterloo House, this being the title of Hirsts' former premises in Waterloo Street. As the volume of their trade expanded, the rooms were considerably mutilated by the installation of a new floor throughout the card and ball rooms in 1930, and by the erection of massive steelwork in 1953.<sup>15</sup> However, when Hirsts removed from the building in the late 1980s, it was discovered that not only was the fine plasterwork substantially intact, but also that two pieces of apparently