

Our Heritage

A look at Harrogate's rich history



With

Malcolm Neesam

ackrill.news@ypn.co.uk

Tracing the history of Harrogate's museums

The Pump Room museum celebrates its 60th anniversary later this month, but establishing a museum in the town was not an easy task explains historian Malcolm Neesam



May 22 2013 is the 60th anniversary of the opening of the Harrogate Museum in the Royal Pump Room Museum.

So far as I am aware, the history of Harrogate's Museum has never been told, so this week's anniversary is a good reason to reveal extracts from my detailed history of Victorian and Edwardian Harrogate, still a few years from completion. Harrogate had several small museums by the early years of the 19th century, being "cabinets of curiosities" which were usually provided by tradesmen as an attraction within a larger business concern.

One of the first buildings on the Esplanade was William Williams' Cabinet of Curiosities and Novelty Shop at Providence Green, the Esplanade's earlier name. This seems to have been a display of items of geological interest, plus a few abnormal natural history specimens, and general curiosities (Napoleon's handkerchief, etc!).

All these little "museums" were typical of their period, and had hardly any relevance to the history of their localities, largely because they were intended for visitors, rather than residents. As Harrogate developed, one or two artefacts, such as Betty Lupton's table and ladle, were preserved by a few enthusiasts, some of them eventually passing into the hands of William Wheater, a keen historian who wrote the monumental but flawed Knaresborough and its rulers.

It was probably through Wheater's canvassing that the council began to consider the idea of a museum for Harrogate, although initial support seems to have been fragmented, and dependant on no council expenditure being necessary. In May 1903 the papers reported that the council was about to "take up" the proposal of a Harrogate Museum, and on May 27 *The Herald* published a letter from William Wheater, asking for donations or loans of artefacts connected to the iron mines of Knaresborough Forest. Given that Mr Wheater volunteered his services as curator, and no expenses were being sought for the purchase of exhibits, the council allowed Mr Wheater to set up his museum under the stage of the Winter Gardens, but refused by only one vote to give him a grant to enable him to buy display cases to protect the artefacts.

This mean spirited decision infuriated the *Harrogate Advertiser*, whose owner, Mr JH Ackrill, wrote to Samson Fox asking his help. Samson Fox, unlike most industrialists, took a great interest in history and had purchased some of Harrogate's historic buildings when they were threatened with demolition, such as the Old Victoria Baths, or the stone arch from the Dragon Hotel, re-erecting them on his Grove House estate. He had long supported the idea of a museum and agreed to give funds for the purchase of display cases, subject to the canny clause that the cases would remain the property of Mr Wheater and Mr Ackrill until they jointly

agreed that they could transfer them to Harrogate Corporation.

Samson Fox's gift enabled the museum to establish itself, and Mr Wheater's museum was set up in the Wintergardens. The outspoken former Mayor, Alderman Fortune, described the collection as "a filthy rag-shop, and not a credit to the corporation", which from so powerful a source did the museum no good at all. The following week Alderman Fortune's explanatory letter appeared in *The Herald*, whereby the alderman explained that he was concerned at the special demands of the museum in the already crowded Winter Gardens.

By April 1904, the council had decided to ask Mr Wheater to remove his curios to the (Old) Magnesia Well in Bogs Field until "better arrangements could be made". Mr Wheater may not have been displeased at this request, as the following month he was reminding the council that his artefacts were still stored in the Winter Gardens laundry in an atmosphere not conducive to their proper storage. At the same time, the papers advised the public that the council had offered to restore the Old Magnesia Well in Valley Gardens and let Mr Wheater use it for the museum.

Shortly afterwards, Harrogate's first public museum opened in the Old Magnesia Well Pump Room, a photograph of which, thanks to Mr V Lokie, appears with this article. Next week I will continue the story of the museum and its installation in the Royal Pump Room 60 years ago.