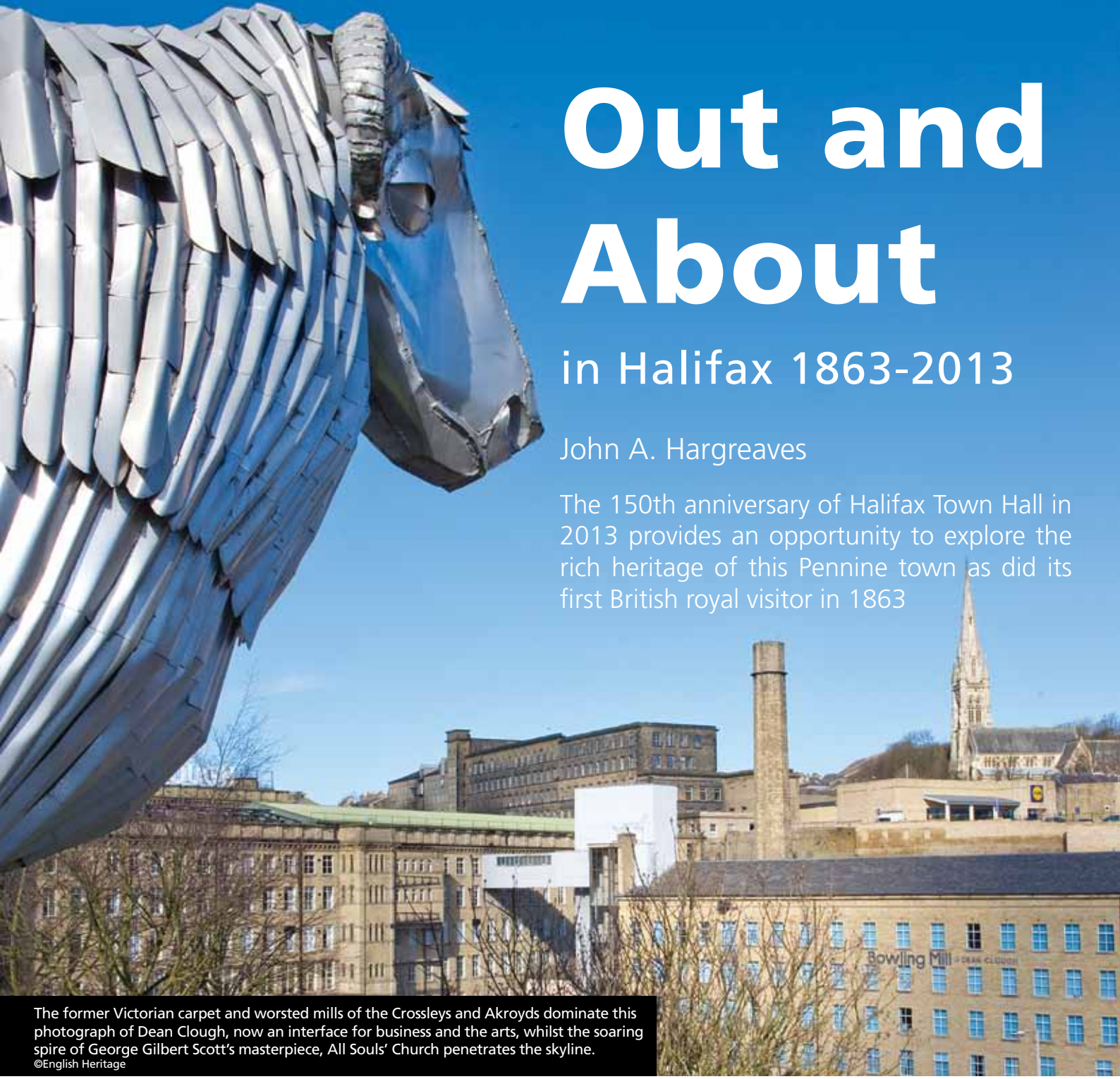
Out and About

in Halifax 1863-2013

John A. Hargreaves

The 150th anniversary of Halifax Town Hall in 2013 provides an opportunity to explore the rich heritage of this Pennine town as did its first British royal visitor in 1863



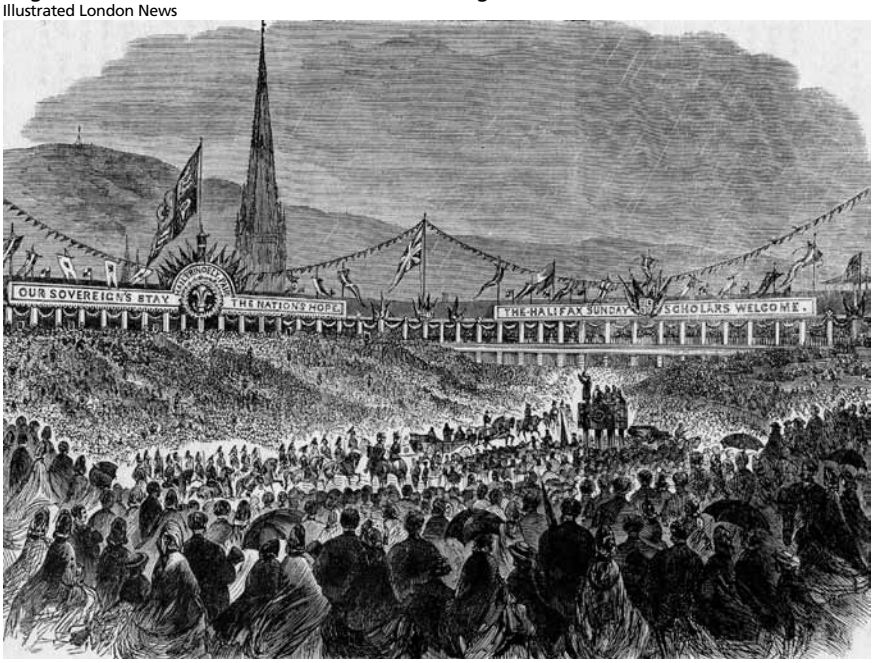
The former Victorian carpet and worsted mills of the Crossleys and Akroyds dominate this photograph of Dean Clough, now an interface for business and the arts, whilst the soaring spire of George Gilbert Scott's masterpiece, All Souls' Church penetrates the skyline.

It was unusual for the national press to descend on Halifax, as they did on 3 and 4 August 1863, but *The Times*, the *Illustrated London News* and the *Illustrated Times* were determined to cover the first official visit to a northern mill town of the newly married Prince and Princess of Wales for the opening of Halifax's magnificent new Town Hall. This imposing neo-renaissance building had been designed by no less a figure than Sir Charles Barry, the architect of the reconstructed Palace of Westminster, but had been completed by his son Edward Middleton Barry after his father's death in 1860. The *Illustrated London News* had last covered a Halifax story in depth during the Plug Plot disturbances of August 1842 when, in the view of the Chartist historian F.C. Mather, regular troops had come nearer to being overwhelmed by the rioters in Halifax than anywhere else in the Chartist era. Indeed, twenty-one years later, a superintendent of police was imported from London with twelve inspectors, 200 hand-picked officers and additional police reinforcements drafted in from across the West Riding and the North West to strengthen security for the royal visit, which occurred just ten years after the final Chartist demonstration in Halifax at the funeral of the veteran Halifax Chartist Ben Rushton in 1853.

In 1863, fifteen years after Halifax had achieved municipal status in 1848, the town was still viewed somewhat circumspectly by the metropolitan press with the *Illustrated London News* reporter commenting disparagingly on the muddy streets surrounding the Piece Hall. Indeed, *The Times* reporter was prompted to opine that Halifax might be considered to have been 'deficient, as a general rule, in what Londoners would call streets' except perhaps for those recently improved by the carpet manufacturer, John Crossley, the Mayor of Halifax, in the immediate vicinity of the Town Hall. However, *The Times* reporter pronounced Halifax nonetheless 'a picturesque and busy town', observing that Halifax's spectacular valley location was comparable only to that of Edinburgh, an oft-repeated comparison made, for example, in a classic

Halifax Piece Hall, the dissenting gothic spire of the former Square Congregational Church financed largely by the Crossleys and Beacon Hill providing a spectacular backdrop to Halifax's outstanding Georgian and Victorian architecture.
©English Heritage

The Prince of Wales's carriage arrives in the midst of the vast assemblage of rain-soaked singers and musicians at Halifax Piece Hall in August 1863.
Illustrated London News



television documentary in 1975 by the architectural historian Ian Nairn.[1]

In the event there was disappointment from both the media and the thousands who travelled to Halifax on 226 regular and special excursion trains to witness the royal visit when it was announced shortly before the Prince's arrival that the young Danish-born Princess Alexandra was not well enough to accompany her husband on the distant and demanding two-day visit, notwithstanding that Halifax Corporation had already named one of the recently upgraded streets Princess Street in her honour. She was in fact probably suffering from morning sickness arising from her first pregnancy. Moreover, Halifax was experiencing some of its worst August weather in living memory with continuous torrential rain for twenty-four hours before the arrival of the royal visitor and continuing poor weather throughout his visit. Given that most of the spectacle of the royal visit had been planned to take place in the open-air, the event proved to be a huge challenge to its municipal organizers who had never previously hosted a royal visit.

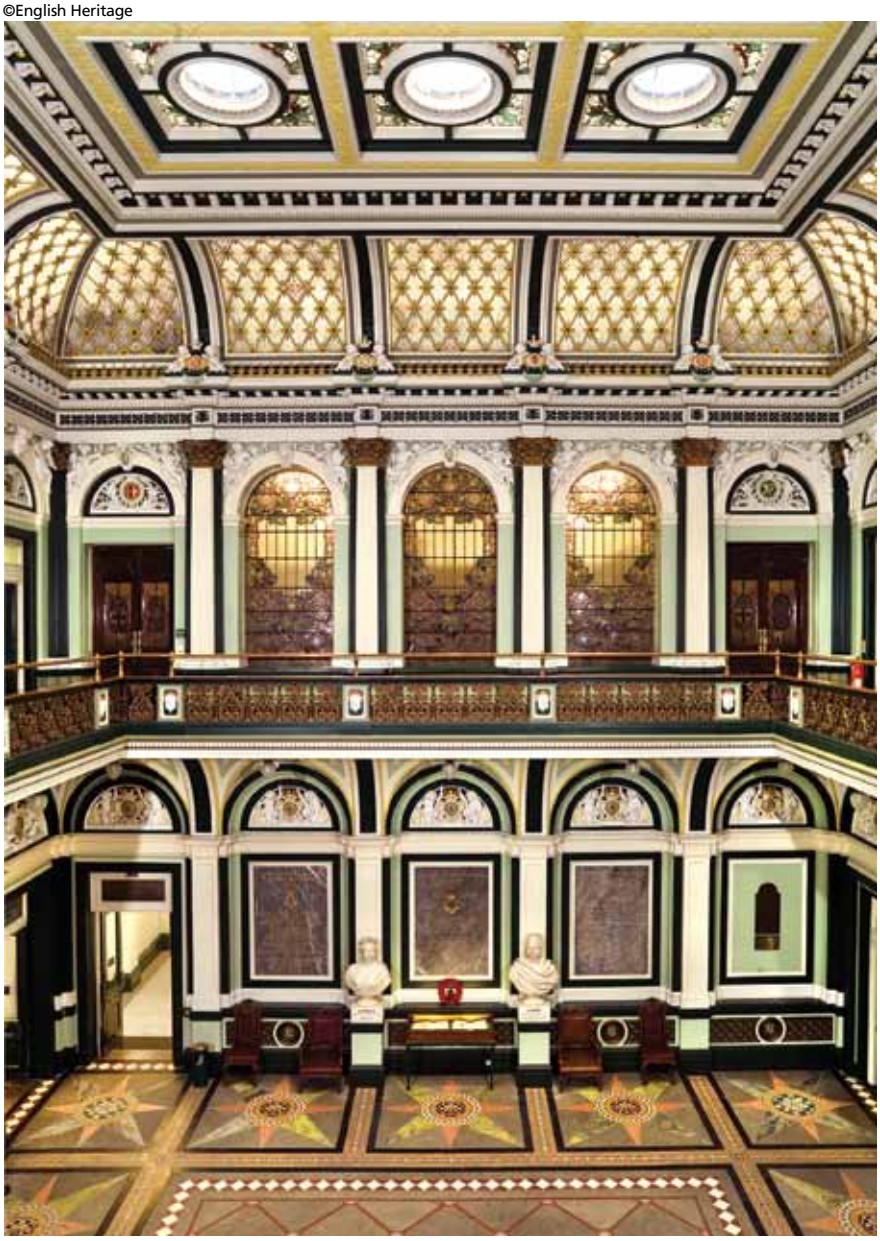
There were some disconcerting hitches. A contingent from the Heckmondwike Volunteer Artillery Corps stationed high on the hillside overlooking the town with their two 32-pounder guns mistakenly greeted one of the cheap excursion trains with a premature royal salute much to the amusement of its passengers. Moreover, on its arrival the royal train, which had had an extra carriage carrying the Directors of the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway Company attached at Wakefield without any consideration of its impact on the availability of platform space at Halifax, came to an abrupt halt considerably short of the raised platform party of female dignitaries. They consequently remained bewildered about whether the royal visitor attired relatively inconspicuously in morning dress had actually arrived long after he had in fact departed from the station. To add to the municipal embarrassment, the welcoming red carpet also failed to arrive at the station on time. So the prince was whisked away by carriage to the newly built mansion of the mayor of Halifax at Manor Heath on the southern perimeter of the town to recuperate from his seven-hour rail journey, where he was serenaded in the afternoon with glees and madrigals by a concert party including the Calderdale Nightingale Mrs Susan Sunderland and in the evening by a hundred choral singers in the illuminated grounds of the mansion.

The next day the Prince's busy itinerary took in the features of Victorian Halifax which have been acclaimed

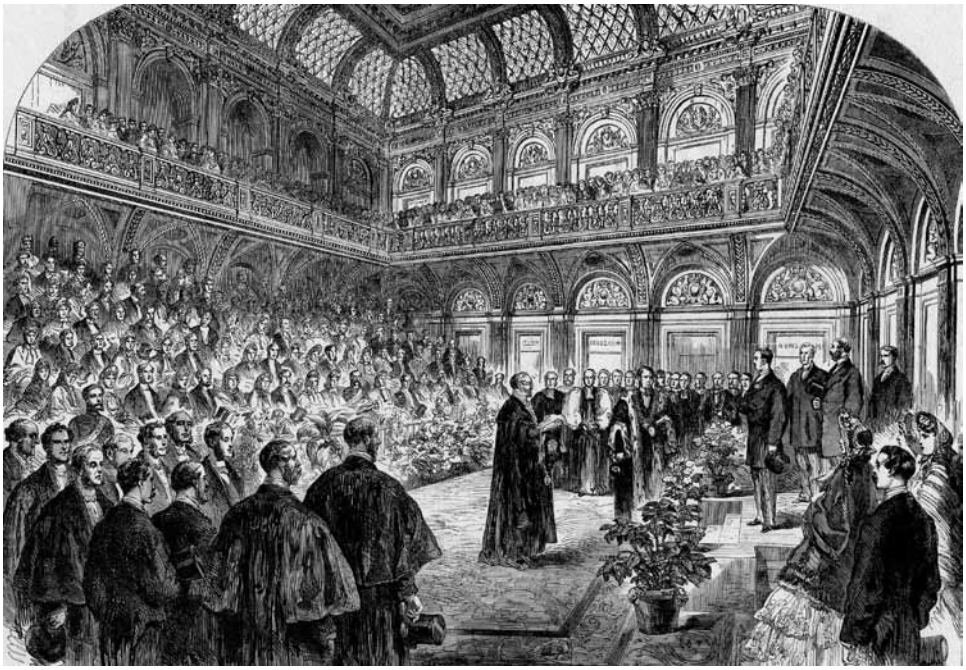
by discerning visitors, architectural historians and Victorian enthusiasts ever since and which continue to attract tourist visitors to the town today. They included the suburban People's Park on the western perimeter of the town, which *The Times* reporter enthused 'has been laid out in the most tasteful manner by Sir Joseph Paxton, and enriched with fountains and statues'. Opened in August 1857 and encompassing over twelve acres of previously barren land, it was landscaped by Sir Joseph Paxton, architect of the Crystal Palace, the London home of the Great Exhibition, where the Crossleys and other local manufacturers had displayed their finest products. Its benefactor Francis Crossley was the MP for Halifax from 1852-59 and the youngest son of John and Martha Crossley, the founders of the Halifax carpet dynasty, which at its peak became the largest carpet manufacturing business in the world. The vision for the park in the heart of industrial Halifax was inspired by a visit by Crossley to the White Mountains in North America in September 1855 where he resolved to provide a means of recreational improvement for the working people of Halifax. The Italianate pavilion in the park proclaiming such uplifting scriptural texts as: 'The rich and poor meet together and the Lord is the maker of them all' and 'Bless the Lord, who daily loadeth us with benefits' revealed the evangelical nonconformity which sustained his vision. Serpentine lakes, a terraced promenade and rockeries complemented the pavilion, as well as fountains and statues of classical divinities and heroes. They were the finest Italian Carrara marble statues presented to a public park in the country, but 'such was his confidence in the good conduct of his fellow townsmen that he did not listen to the advice of those who tried to persuade him not to do so'. A drinking fountain, donated by temperance advocate Joseph Thorp inscribed 'Thank God for Water' and 'Water is best' emphasized the links between the park's founder and the temperance movement.

The royal carriage procession also viewed an impressive orphanage under construction by John, Joseph and Francis Crossley, at a cost of £65,000, which continues as the twenty-first century Crossley-Heath Academy; well-appointed almshouses for their retired workers and spacious model housing for their employees. All remain in use despite the dramatic closure of the vast Crossley carpet-making operation in Halifax in 1982. Based at the monumental Dean Clough Mills, occupying a narrow ravine of the

The interior of the Victoria Hall, Halifax Town Hall, named after the Prince of Wales's mother, Queen Victoria.
©English Heritage



The opening ceremony, Halifax Town Hall, August 1863.
Illustrated London News



The imposing clock tower of Halifax Town Hall which Halifax Civic Trust has proposed be re-named the Elizabeth Tower in honour of Queen Elizabeth II's Diamond Jubilee.

Hebble Valley on the northern edge of the town, they were also included in the royal itinerary. After their sudden abandonment in 1982, they re-emerged, transformed into a business park and centre for education and the arts, by entrepreneur and musician Sir Ernest Hall. Another towering monument in Halifax, which was also a recipient of Crossley largesse, was the new Square Congregational Church. Designed by London architect Joseph James, its foundation stone had been laid by Francis Crossley who financed the building of its 235-foot octagonal spire soaring above the neighbouring Piece Hall at a cost of £1,500. An early example of Dissenting Gothic opened in 1857, it was often described as a miniature cathedral and replaced its predecessor, a classical red-brick Georgian chapel, which continued in use as a Sunday School and today is an arts centre. Having surveyed the nonconformist Crossley imprint on the town, the Prince of Wales also visited the mills of their Anglican counterpart, worsted manufacturer, Colonel Edward Akroyd and his 'exquisite' neo-gothic All Souls Church, regarded by its architect Sir George Gilbert Scott as his finest church, which complemented the model housing development and park bearing his name at Akroydon.

The emergence of a new philanthropic industrial elite personified by the Akroyds and the Crossleys was facilitated by Halifax's rapid industrial expansion after the construction of a waterway link to the Aire and Calder navigation in 1828, which has not survived, and trans-Pennine railway links culminating in the construction of a magnificent new Italianate baroque station in 1855, designed by Thomas Butterworth. It is now linked to the Eureka Museum for Children, an interactive museum funded by the Clore and Vivienne Duffield Foundations and opened by a later Prince of Wales in 1992 as a response to the twentieth-century decline of Halifax's manufacturing industries. The new canal and rail links stimulated a four-fold growth of the population of the new municipal borough from 25,159 in 1851 to 104,936 in 1901 as Victorian Halifax gained an increasing reputation for its textiles and carpet manufacture, engineering and machine tools, confectionery and financial services. Fortunately it retains, despite the devastating financial crisis of 2008, its former headquarters of the world's largest building society opened by Queen Elizabeth II in 1974 which continues as an important operational centre of the Lloyds Banking Group.

But the Prince's itinerary also included the town's Georgian Manufacturers' Piece Hall opened on New Year's Day 1779, whose dimensions *The Times* reporter compared with those of Trafalgar Square. However, by 1863, as in 2013, it was searching for a new economic future. Indeed, as *The Times* reporter remarked, it was by 1863 an obsolete 'huge square enclosure where in the days of hand-loom weavers the masters used to come and sell the proceeds of their looms piece by piece'. For the prince's visit, however, it was packed with an immense specially assembled orchestra and over 10,000 children gathered to welcome the royal visitor with carefully synchronised singing 'in perfect time and tune' as it was for the quinquennial Sunday school sings held there from 1831 to 1890.[2] In 1876 it was purchased by the municipal borough and was destined to develop obscurely as a fruit and vegetable market until 1974, when it was opened as a tourist attraction. Described today by Colum Giles as 'perhaps Yorkshire's most important secular building' with a recently awarded Heritage Lottery Fund grant, it intends to develop as a town square, retail and business centre supplemented by a range of cultural attractions and a youth centre located around its perimeter.[3]

Later in the nineteenth century exuberant new borough markets designed by the Halifax architects John and Joseph Leeming, who also won prestigious commissions for public buildings in central London, Glasgow and Edinburgh, replaced an earlier red-brick Georgian market, whilst the Victoria Hall, a new concert hall on the southern edge of the town, added a facility lacking in Barry's Town Hall. It provided a venue for the concerts of the Halifax Choral Society founded in 1817, the oldest amateur choral society with a continuous record of performances anywhere in the world. It occupied a site bordering the grounds of Halifax's finest Georgian town house designed by the York architect, John Carr, and built by John Royds, a Halifax woollen merchant in 1766. The construction of the Victoria Hall completed the newest and grandest of Halifax's late Victorian thoroughfares, Commercial Street. This included several impressive banks and building societies, a splendid new General Post Office commemorating Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee, imposing new tramway offices for the management of the new tramway system inaugurated to celebrate the town's municipal jubilee in 1898, and now part of Halifax's thriving independent departmental store, Harvey's of Halifax. The southern façade of John Royds' mansion, however, remained concealed by a parade of nondescript lock-up shops on Rawson Street until revealed and transformed into a bistro restaurant, Le Metro, in 2009. Formerly it provided overnight accommodation for King Christian VII of Denmark travelling as Prince George on his tour of western Europe in 1768 and the square to its north was named George Square in his honour.

Halifax is not only a major destination for connoisseurs of Georgian and Victorian architecture. One of its delights is that its buildings reflect the town's evolution from its emergence as a centre of textile manufacture and marketing from the late Middle Ages to its focal point as the administrative centre of the metropolitan district of Calderdale since 1974. Halifax Minster, the oldest surviving building in the town, which unsuccessfully challenged Wakefield for cathedral status when a new diocese was carved out of the diocese of Ripon in 1888, was created a new urban minster in 2009. It provides a rich tapestry of Halifax's history. A medieval grave cover with inscribed cropper's shears dating from 1150 provides the earliest reference to the cloth industry in Calderdale, pre-dating textile occupational names in the Wakefield Manorial Court Rolls. A pre-Reformation font canopy; exquisitely carved Jacobean communion rails; distinctive geometrically patterned,

clear glass, leaded windows of the Commonwealth era; a painted carved wooden effigy of a late-seventeenth century beggar, Old Tristram and a magnificent east window commissioned by Edward Akroyd from George Hedgeland, who won first prize for his stained glass at the Great Exhibition of 1851, are just some of the numerous treasures displayed in the building. The line of the medieval routeway from Wakefield, visible from the east meandering over the shoulder of Beacon Hill, skirted the church and continued westwards through Woolshops, which has given its name uniquely to a modern shopping development, which preserves a half-timbered seventeenth century house at its junction with Southgate.

Sir Nikolaus Pevsner's criticism in 1959 that there had been few notable twentieth-century contributions to the townscape of Halifax was subsequently rectified by the addition of a spectacular flyover spanning the Victorian north bridge and the construction in 1974 of a new head office for the former Halifax Building Society, once the only headquarters of a major financial institution situated outside London. The former poet laureate,Ted Hughes, whose early childhood was spent at Mytholmroyd in the neighbouring Calder Valley which inspired his awesome perception of the natural world, appeared dismissive of urban Halifax for its lingering evidence of industrial pollution when he described it graphically, if tersely, as 'Black Halifax boiled in phosphorus'. Apart from Halifax Minster, which more than any other building in the centre of the town still bears the scars of industrial pollution upon its blackened sandstone exterior, the impact of clean air legislation after 1959 has transformed dramatically Halifax's townscape from 'the devil's cauldron' of its industrial era when it exhibited a forest of mill chimneys to the honey-coloured stone facades now revealed in so many of its heritage buildings. The timely development of a strong conservationist lobby in Halifax after 1962, headed by the Halifax Civic Trust, succeeded in preventing the wholesale redevelopment of the town along the lines experienced by some other neighbouring West Yorkshire towns and cities. Halifax's townscape, therefore, remains perhaps the most complete surviving testimony to both the pre- and post-industrial economic and social history of a northern urban community in the third millennium.

Sir John Betjeman discerned the quality of the town's built environment when he wrote in 1979:

Halifax Minster, the oldest building in Halifax and one of the largest medieval parish churches in Yorkshire. Restored by the Victorians and George Gilbert Scott, it was designated a new urban minster in 2009.

> Halifax is full of character and hidden beauty. The Piece Hall is symbolic of its hidden and great worth. The skyline of Halifax, its churches, chapels, mills and warehouses, is something never to be forgotten, and gives Halifax its identity.[4]

The architectural historian Colum Giles commented more recently that 'the many fine buildings in the town … combine with its setting to give distinction to the environment'.[5] Its spectacular setting had impressed even the hard-nosed London reporters who travelled 200 miles to Halifax in 1863 to cover its first royal visit and the most auspicious event in its municipal history, the opening of its magnificent Town Hall, which celebrates its 150th anniversary in 2013. *The Times* reporter concluded optimistically and generously, despite the appalling August weather, that:

> Halifax is just now at its best and busiest and apart from the magnificent scenery around the town, which makes its situation second to none other in the kingdom, save Edinburgh, while it is second to no other town at all in the magnificence of the public gifts with which the munificence of its great manufacturers – Crossleys and Akroyds – have adorned it.[6]

References

1. *The Times*, 4-5 August 1863.
2. *The Times*, 5 August, 1863.
3. C. Giles, *The Building of Halifax*, Calderdale Council/English Heritage, 2010, p. 16.
4. *Halifax in Calderdale. A Strategy for Prosperity*, Civic Trust, 1984, p. 1.
5. Giles, *Building of Halifax*, p. 41.
6. *The Times*, 4 August 1863.

Further Reading

John A. Hargreaves, *Halifax* (Edinburgh University Press/Carnegie Publishing Ltd, 1999, second edition, Carnegie Publishing Ltd, 2003); Colum Giles, *The Building of Halifax* (Calderdale Council/ English Heritage, 2010); Richard de Z. Hall, *Halifax Town Hall*, Halifax C.B., 1963; Philip Smithies, *The Architecture of the Halifax Piece Hall 1775-1779*, Philip Smithies, 1988.

John A. Hargreaves is Visiting Research Fellow in History at the University of Huddersfield, author of an acclaimed history of Halifax and joint editor of *Slavery in Yorkshire. Richard Oastler and the campaign against child labour in the Industrial Revolution*, University of Huddersfield Press, 2012 and numerous articles in the *ODNB*. He is currently working on an edition of the Wakefield Court Rolls for 1812-13, a history of the Halifax Choral Society and a new history of Huddersfield.