

200 YEARS OF THE ATHENÆUM BUILDING

PLYMOUTH INSTITUTION

The Plymouth Athenæum is a charity dedicated to the promotion of learning in the fields of science, technology, literature and art.

It was founded on 17th October 1812 as the Plymouth Institute, but was soon renamed the Plymouth Institution.

The first meetings took place in Catherine Street and later Frankfort Street Art Gallery.

FOULSTON'S GREEK WISDOM

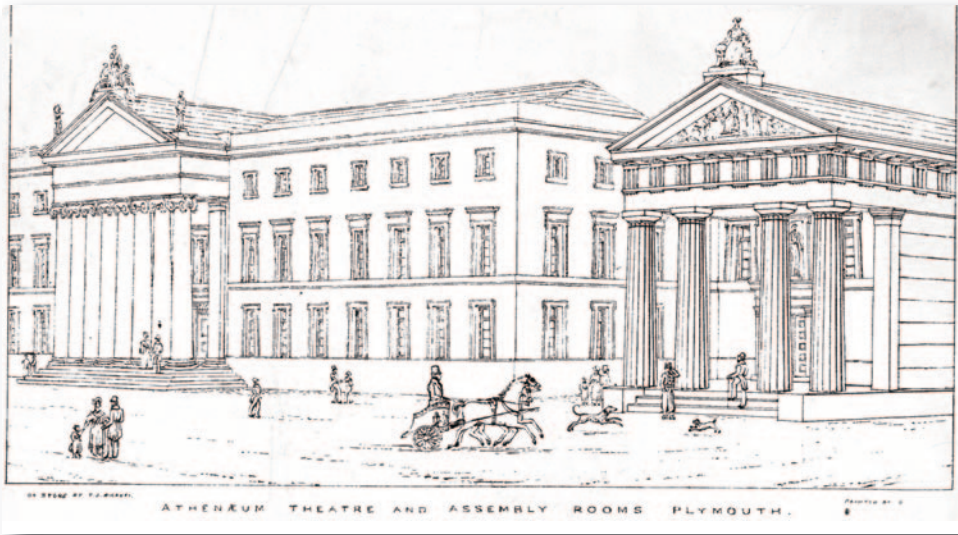
On December 16th 1817, the Plymouth Institution resolved to build an 'Athenæum' on a site next to the Royal Hotel and Theatre in George Street, Plymouth.



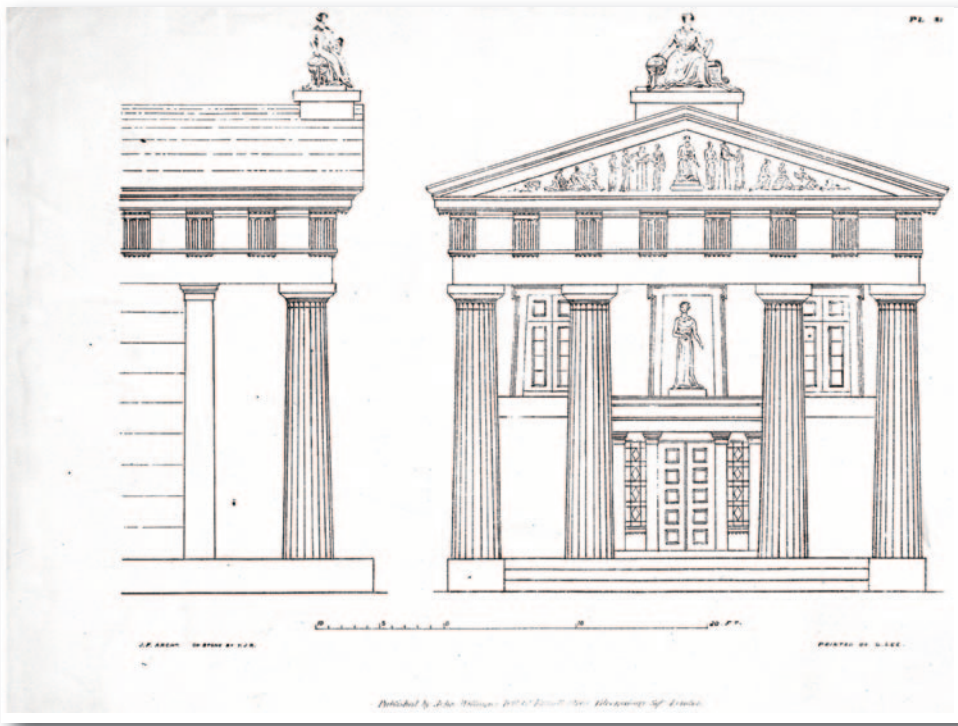
Architect John Foulston

In 1810 John Foulston, architect and town planner, who had worked with John Nash in London, had been appointed to design and build the Royal Hotel and Theatre.

Foulston had become an early member of the Plymouth Institution and gave his services freely to the Charity. He designed the 'Athenæum' to match the classical facades of the adjacent hotel and theatre.

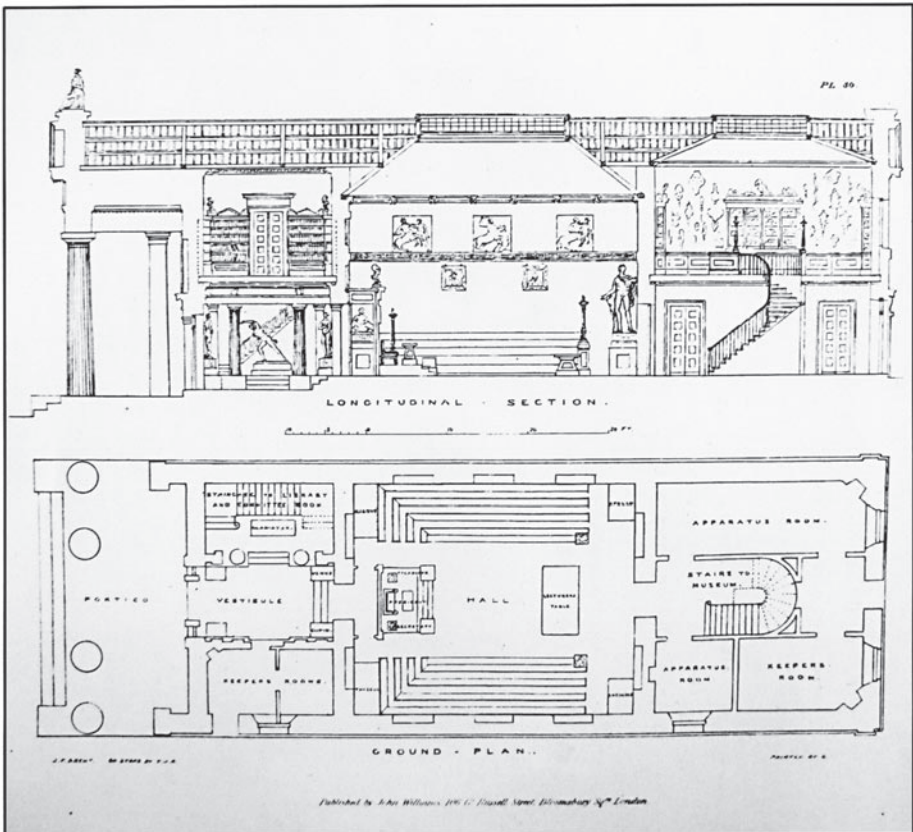


On Thursday 11th February 1819, Henry Woollcombe, founding father of the Plymouth Institution, presided at the opening of The Athenæum, when the Opening Discourse was delivered by Rev. R. Lampen.



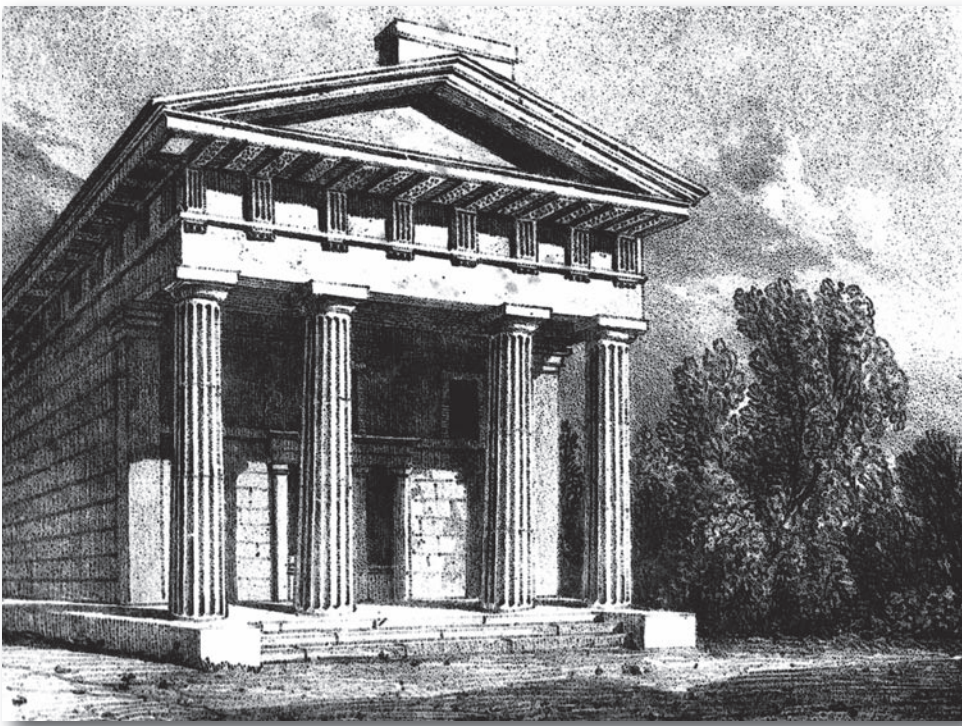
Original drawings of the frontage of John Foulston's Athenæum (above), showing the intended adornments

The facade of the building was in the simple Doric style and thus it was known as the Society's 'Athenæum'.



Plans for the First Athenæum. Architect John Foulston. 1722 - 1841

These plans were not to be realised. It was some years later that the main building was enlarged to include a museum, an art gallery, a scientific library and a lounge.



A drawing of the unadorned Athenæum (above), by George Wightwick, John Foulston's architectural partner

Though on a smaller scale, tetrastyle instead of hexastyle, it was modelled on the portico of the so-called Temple of Theseus in the Agora of Athens – 'but rather better' said architect and partner of Foulston, George Wightwick.

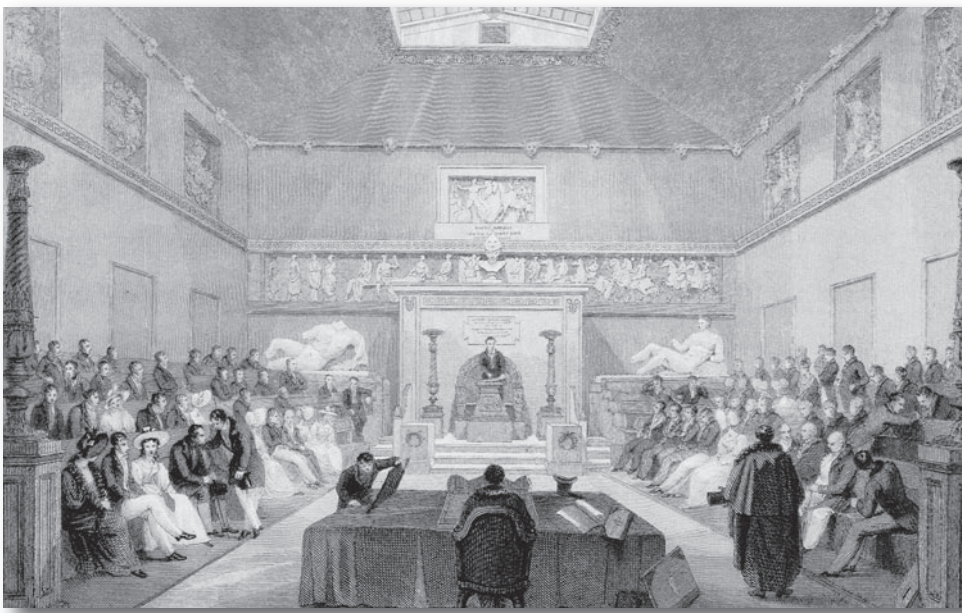
The figures Foulston planned for the pediment were omitted, as was the statue of a seated woman (Britannia, presumably) with shield and globe, which would have masked the chimney.



The Athenæum, pictured on the right, stands alongside the Royal Hotel and Theatre in the old George Street

The dimensions of the building were a breadth of the portico, nearly 36 feet, the sides, nearly 78 feet. Each column was three feet nine inches in diameter.

The great doors led into a vestibule with a small porter's lodge on the right and stairs on the left leading to an upper room, in turn used for apparatus and experiments, museum and library.



George Wightwick's drawing of The Athenæum's original Lecture Hall

Doors on each side of the end wall led into the Lecture Hall, lighted from above, with tiers of benches arranged in parliamentary fashion.

The officers sat on a rostrum under a bust of Minerva; the speaker faced them from the other end. Although the benches were later replaced by chairs, the arrangement stayed the same.

The rooms were adorned with casts from Greek statuary, including the marbles acquired by the British Museum four years earlier from Lord Elgin.

NEXT DISPLAY

EXPANSION, CHARLES DARWIN AND NEW ARRIVALS

