

200 YEARS OF THE ATHENÆUM BUILDING



In these photos of the original Lecture Hall at The Athenæum, the officers' rostrum under a bust of Minerva remains, but the parliamentary style benches have been replaced by chairs. Minerva was the Roman goddess of wisdom and strategic warfare and the sponsor of arts, trade and strategy. From the second century BC onward, the Romans equated her with the Greek goddess Athena



As shown in the photographs, rooms were adorned with casts from Greek statuary, including the marbles acquired by the British Museum from Lord Elgin

EXPANSION

When John Foulston first prepared plans for the Athenæum, he proposed to include a museum. In 1829 that concept came fully to fruition on land behind the Lecture Hall, where Edmund Lockyer had obtained extra space for the organisation.

Caretaker's premises were provided below the museum and an 'Elaboratory' included. At that time there was nothing similar in Plymouth, nor many in the country. The museum was open to the public for a small charge.

In 1883 an appeal was launched to extend the building. The Prince of Wales donated £50.

This time a special Art Gallery was created to the west of the lecture hall, the Museum was enlarged and an upstairs gallery provided plus basement offices. A new caretaker's cottage was also provided.

From the completion of the first building in 1819, The Athenæum contained a library. The purpose was to assist members in their research, primarily for lectures.

THE SAILOR KING

Sir William Snow Harris, nicknamed Thunder & Lightning Harris, was a pioneering scientist, specialising in lightning conductors. He was also a member and later President of the Plymouth Institution.

Snow Harris' lightning conductors system was fitted on the British and Russian navies and on the Houses of Parliament and Buckingham Palace.

In July 1827, the Duke of Clarence, in his role as Lord High Admiral, inspected the Royal Dockyard at Devonport. On 17th July, the Duke, later to become the Sailor King, William IV, and his entourage came to The Athenæum to hear Snow Harris lecture on the subject.



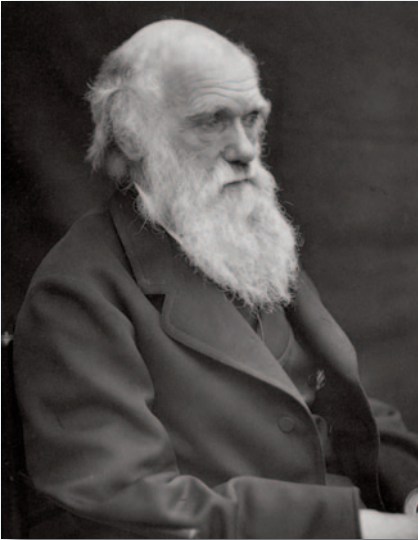
The scene of the Duke of Clarence's visit to The Athenæum was captured for posterity when Woollcombe commissioned John Ball to paint a picture of the event. The painting was finished in 1832 and now hangs in the Athenæum Lounge

DARWIN AT THE ATHENÆUM

The great scientist, Charles Darwin, was a regular visitor to The Athenæum in October and November 1831 ahead of his five-year voyage of discovery aboard *HMS Beagle*.

Darwin calibrated equipment in The Athenæum's garden and attended a lecture by Snow Harris.

The Beagle was one of the first trial vessels for Snow Harris' lightning conductors for ships system, and survived lightning strikes unharmed during Darwin's voyage.



Charles Darwin

Darwin socialised with Snow Harris and other members of the organisation during his stay in Plymouth.

Darwin later became a member of the organisation and its members - including William Pengelly, Charles Hamilton Smith, Charles Spence Bate, Albert Gunter and Baron Avebury - formed part of Darwin's 19th Century world wide web of information and collection sources.

NEW ARRIVALS

During the 19th century, the Institution strengthened through mergers with The Devon and Cornwall Natural History Society in 1851 and the Mechanics' Institute in 1899.



Extentions were added to the building in the 19th and early 20th Centuries

By 1898 the Scientific Library had become more important to the members than the Art Gallery and hence the two were amalgamated.

Soon afterwards, the £2,000 brought by the Mechanics' Institute would be put to the creation of additional space, opened by the Earl of Morley in 1901.

The extension included a large Reading Room, Lending Library, Committee Rooms, Offices and Dark Rooms. Access was from Athenæum Street. The architect was A.S. Parker.



Charles Darwin was a regular visitor to The Athenæum in late 1831. The great scientist calibrated equipment in The Athenæum's garden, shown in the painting above and the photograph below during the Great Blizzard of 1891



NEXT DISPLAY

THE BLITZ AND RISING FROM THE ASHES

