

THE REBUILDING OF THE ATHENÆUM

By J. S. ALLANACH

TWENTY years to erect such a modest building as the Athenæum must surely be considered a long time for any generation; and for those intimately concerned with the rebuilding the frustrations and the delays became at times almost unendurable – right up to the very day the new building was opened the thwarting twists and turns of fate continued.

The Council of the Plymouth Institution showed the same forward-looking spirit as did the City Council of their day. Even before the war was over a request* was sent to the Town Clerk for the allocation of a site for the new Athenæum. On this occasion the Town Clerk replied that it was impossible to grant the Institution's request until such time as Parliament had given the Local Authority power to acquire land in reconstruction areas.

As early as 1944, by invitation of the City Council, representatives of the Institution were given a private view of an exhibition illustrating the proposals for redeveloping Plymouth. These proposals had been prepared by Professor Abercrombie and the City Engineer (Mr. J. Paton Watson), and were later to become the basis of the design for rebuilding the city. In June of the same year the City Engineer gave a lecture to members of the Institution on the proposals.

THE MAJOR PROBLEMS

In April 1941, at the time that its building was destroyed, the Institution was not in a very strong position financially. It had a building in the centre of the town and possessed a valuable collection of items in its museum and scientific library, but its annual income was only about £900. This income was derived from the subscriptions of about 400 members, supplemented by lettings and rent. It is not surprising, therefore, that in the Council's deliberations on the rehousing of the society, financial considerations were always a major factor.

In addition to the financial problems, three other problems continually cropped up. These were: (1) the location or site for the new building; (2) the functions it was to cater for; (3) its shape and form. To these problems were added innumerable difficulties created by regulations and legal matters and, finally, by technical and practical difficulties in abundance; all of which had to be surmounted before the building as we know it became a reality.

The financial considerations revolved mainly around the payments that might be received as compensation for War Damage. The first payment to be received was for the value of the chattels destroyed in the building. This was settled with the Board of Trade at £14,388. 3s. 4d.

* *Ann. Rep. & Trans. Plymouth Inst.*, Vol. XIX, p. xvi.

There was considerable difficulty in arriving at an agreed figure because of the lack of adequate inventories of the contents of the museum and scientific library, etc., and because the value of the contents was not supported by insurances for commensurate sums.

In 1953 a further £8,000 was raised by selling to Andrew's Garage that part of the Athenæum site which they leased from the Institution.

The amounts received from these transactions were invested in long-term Government securities, but with the decline in the selling value of Government securities it became a policy of the Athenæum to delay selling their securities until as near their redemption date as possible; and in turn this affected the type of building erected and the time of its erection. Apart from those just mentioned, the only other assets remaining to the Institution were its ruined building and the important site it occupied.

WAR DAMAGE NEGOTIATIONS

Whether a 'Value Payment' or a 'Cost of Works Payment' was made by the War Damage Commission for their ruined building was of considerable importance to the Institution.

Broadly speaking, a 'Value' payment was made when a building was totally destroyed or when it was not to be reconstructed on its original site, and the basis for payment was the 1939 value of the property destroyed.

On the other hand, a 'Cost of Works' payment was made for repairing or reinstating a building in its original form on its original site, and the basis of payment was the actual cost at the time of making the repairs. This latter type of payment was generally considered to be safer and more favourable to the building owner because the compensation paid took greater account of the constantly rising prices of labour and materials.

Under a 'Cost of Works' payment, modifications and improvements to the building could be made by negotiating first a 'Permissible Amount'. Broadly speaking, this was the upper limit of the amount that could be paid to the building owner and represented the cost of reinstating the building to its original form, omitting the cost of replacing any redundant features and also omitting the cost of any proposed improvements.

As early as 1951 the Institution negotiated a tentative 'Permissible Amount' with the War Damage Commission for £61,927*; and the first schemes prepared by the architects, Messrs. Walls & Pearn, were based on a building that would cost an equivalent sum.

ALTERNATIVE SOLUTIONS

As an alternative to erecting a new building, serious consideration was given to the possibility of buying existing premises and adapting them for the Institution's use; and in 1955 negotiations were commenced with the object of purchasing 25 Woodland Terrace, Greenbank. Under this scheme a small proportion of the moneys received as a 'Value Payment' for the old building and by the sale of the old site would be spent on purchasing

* Letter from War Damage Commission dated 4th June, 1955.

Woodland Terrace and adapting it. The remainder of the moneys would be invested to maintain the premises and to make the Institution financially secure for an indefinite period. Many of the Council felt that the Institution would slowly atrophy under these conditions, and in consequence preparations for the erection of a new building on the George Street site were never abandoned.

RATES EXEMPTION

Because it was registered under the Scientific Societies Act of 1843 the Institution was exempted from rates on its original building and on its temporary premises at 13 Alexandra Road. However, it was always worried lest heavy rates would be levied on a new building. In 1955 the Town Clerk gave the opinion that the Athenæum Council should base its plans on the assumption of exemption from rates. In spite of this, soon after they took possession of their new building the Society was the recipient of an unwelcome assessment of £1,764 as the rateable value of their property, which meant that the rates would have been about £2,000 a year, including water charge.

REVENUE

To increase the revenue derived from members' subscriptions and the interest on investments in meeting the heavy costs of upkeep, it was suggested that the new premises should include accommodation suitable for letting.

The principal idea put forward in this connection was that the new building should contain a lecture theatre, suitable for the Society's own lectures but also equipped and arranged for letting to the town's many amateur dramatic societies, with the hope also that possibly an occasional professional show might be staged. The costs of equipping such a theatre and the difficulties of controlling the running of it without its becoming a financial burden instead of an asset were debated again and again in the Council, and as late as January 1956 a resolution that the Institution should abandon building a theatre was carried, but another resolution, at the same meeting, that rebuilding should *not* be carried out on the [original] George Street site was lost; the Council at this meeting was about equally divided on the issue of having or not having an auditorium with a sloping floor and a stage in the new building.

However, the proposal to erect a new building incorporating a theatre gained ground, aided by the reappraisal of the situation by the Hon. Treasurer in April 1957 in favour of a 'utilitarian' building on the George Street site which would allow a considerable proportion of our investments to remain undisturbed for the maximum period. Repeatedly the Hon. Treasurer emphasized the need for preserving adequate financial resources to support the Society and to maintain the new building during the first difficult years in getting re-established.

Another suggestion to strengthen the new Athenæum was to erect one building to house both the Athenæum and the Proprietary Library – both societies owed their origin to the same group of people and both had lost their premises in the bombing – but no agreement was reached.

Unsuccessful attempts were also made to get financial support from the Pilgrim Trust, the Gulbenkian Foundation, and the Arts Council. In the end, and to its credit, the Institution managed to erect its building entirely from its own resources; but the strict financial control this necessitated created an architectural problem and the solution is reflected in the design of the new building.

BUILDING LICENCE

Obtaining a building licence was just as difficult a hurdle to get over as all the other legal permissions and formalities. Although the Institution had asked for a building site even before the war was over, they were refused a building licence in December 1952 – seven years after it had ended.

Two months after this the Institution learnt that the Reconstruction Committee of the City Council would be unable to sponsor an application for a building licence until permission had been secured to deal with the Guildhall and the Public Library; but by July 1953* the Reconstruction Committee agreed to support the Institution's application.

Four months† after this the Ministry of Works deemed it impossible to sponsor even the first stage of the Institution's project, and it was not until January 1959‡ that permission for development was finally obtained.

PLANNING

The first plans prepared for the Institution in 1952 were for a large commodious building that would be a fitting successor to their original historic building. It became evident, however, that there would not be sufficient financial support to carry this ambitious project through, and it was abandoned at some considerable expense to the Institution.

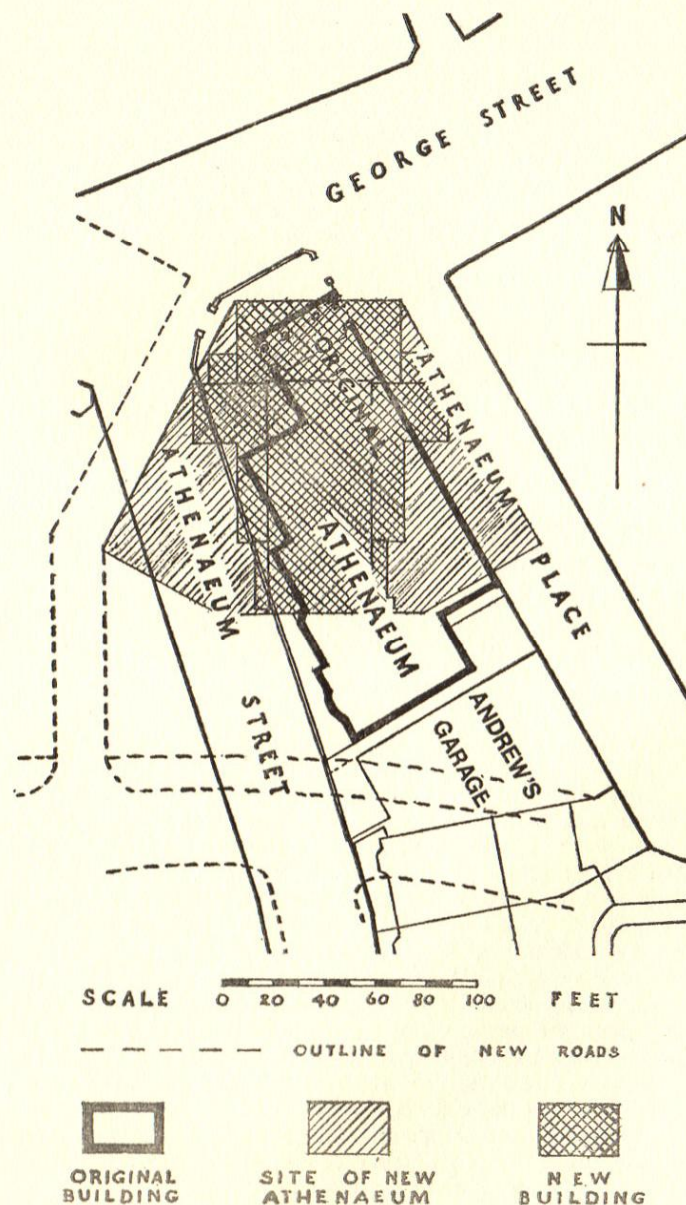
Yet still another financial setback befell the Institution to curtail its plans severely. As already explained, the Institution had negotiated a tentative permissible amount of £61,927 with the War Damage Commission in 1951, and the Institution had expected to receive, in addition, a substantial allowance to cover the increase in building costs that had taken place since 1951. But in 1957 the Commission asked that the negotiations be reopened, and in November of that year offered as the Permissible Amount – £41,000! Subsequently this was increased to £44,700, to be based on building prices ruling at September 1957, and this was accepted by the Institution.

Active examination of alternative designs for the new building prepared by Messrs. Walls and Pearn began in December 1957, and continued in the early months of 1958. In September 1958 a Building Committee was set up which continued to examine all details connected with the rebuilding until the building was completed.

* Council Minutes, 6th July, 1953.

† Council Minutes, 2nd November, 1953.

‡ Letter to Bond, Pearce, Elliott and Knape, 4th February, 1959.



Plan of the original Athenæum site with the position of the new site and the new building superimposed

SALE OF OLD SITE AND LEASE OF NEW SITE

Under the Abercrombie-Watson Plan for Plymouth part of the Institution's original site was to be used for new roads, and the Local Authority would never agree to the Athenæum being rebuilt to occupy precisely the same-shaped site as formerly. The Annual General Meeting of the Institution in 1951 had authorised negotiations for the surrender of the freehold of the George Street site and the acquisition of a site of increased area (an extension of the existing site). At this time the City Valuer offered the Institution a site of 33,825 square feet in area at a proposed rental of £507 per annum. Many on the Council cherished a hope that the freehold might be retained by the Institution and that the Corporation might depart from their inflexible rule of compulsory purchase of all sites in the reconstruction area.

By January 1959 all negotiations and plans for rebuilding the new Athenæum began to crystallise. In January the Council of the Institution agreed to accept a lease for 99 years of a site of 14,600 square feet at a ground rent of £700 per annum, with the proviso that the Plymouth Corporation purchase the freehold of the Institution's site in George Street for £13,700 and reimburse to the Institution various costs involved in the transactions, and also that the Corporation clear all structures and debris from the new site and provide vehicular access to and from the front portico of the proposed new building.

At the same time the Institution appointed as its solicitors Messrs. Bond, Pearce, Elliott & Knape to deal with the transfer of the George Street site, the building agreement, and the ground lease.

VEHICULAR ACCESS

Getting vehicles to and from the proposed site of the new Athenæum posed an awkward traffic problem. The original Athenæum had had a small forecourt in front of its pillared entrance and the Institution fervently desired that visitors to their new building might retain the right to be set down at the entrance, underneath the proposed portico in fact, where they could alight sheltered from the weather. The Institution took up this matter most energetically with the City Council, and as a result met the Special Works Committee of the City Council and the newly appointed City Engineer, Mr. J. Ackroyd, on the 24th April, 1959. Subsequently the proposals put forward at this meeting by the City Engineer* were accepted. These proposals allowed vehicles conveying patrons to reach the portico, not from the front (north) of the building but from the rear of the building via the west side, the vehicles to pass under the portico and return via the east side and the rear of the Royal Cinema. A road bay was to be provided in front of the building to enable cars to get close to the portico. Goods vehicles were to be allowed to get to and from the door at the east end of the stage by approaching from the rear to the east side of the building.

* Letter from City Engineer, 19th June, 1959, to Messrs. Bond, Pearce, Elliott and Knape.

TENDERS FOR REBUILDING

From the beginning of 1959 every effort was concentrated to get a physical start made on the new building by the early summer. The plans were completed and bills of quantities prepared and sent out to contractors to tender for the work. The tenders were received and opened on the 26th May, 1959; the lowest was from Dudley Coles Ltd., for £47,333.

The Institution did not wish to commit itself to building operations until the financial arrangements were settled with the City Corporation. The legal formalities progressed very slowly and the Institution's Building Committee fretted at the delay, especially as it became apparent that completion would not take place before the holiday month of August arrived, when the City Council would go into recess. The Town Clerk was equally careful to ensure that legal formalities were completed before allowing the old Athenæum to be demolished. Not until the 4th November, 1959, did the Institution give instructions to the architects to accept the lowest tender, which had been received over five months previously. Almost immediately (on the 10th November) the architects received an intimation from the contractors that, because of the delay in starting the work, the basis of the tender and of the contract should be varied to reimburse them for the additional costs involved through the delay.

The Institution's Council, on the 5th October, 1959, accepted the terms negotiated for the legal agreements, and the Institution's seal was duly affixed to the documents on the 24th November, 1959. Under the Building Agreement the Institution was authorised to enter on the site and commence building work on the 4th December, 1959. At last! The Building Contract with Dudley Coles Ltd. was sealed by the Institution on the 7th December, 1959.

DESIGN OF THE NEW BUILDING

In designing the new Athenæum the architects were confronted with two major problems, namely: (1) the shape of the building site; (2) the steep slope in the land from the Crescent in the south down to Derry's Cross in the north. The shape of the site on plan was awkward, being an irregular hexagon symmetrical about its north-south axis. The north end of the site facing Derry's Cross provided the best position for the main entrance and front of the building. The stage, with its wings, would normally be the widest part of a theatre building, and to suit the sloping floor of the theatre the stage would also be at the lower end of the building. Unfortunately, the natural slope of the Athenæum site was towards its narrowest end and thus prevented the economic use of the slope in the design of the building. In the final design the difficulty was overcome by the introduction of the short flight of steps at each side of the building between the entrance foyer and the side entrances to the theatre auditorium.

FIRST SKETCH PLAN

The first sketch plan prepared by Messrs. Walls and Pearn in March 1955 was for a hexagonal-shaped building to occupy the whole of the site, with a total floor area of about 22,500 square feet. The plan showed

(1) a lower ground floor extending from Derry's Cross for half the depth of the building; (2) an upper ground floor occupying the whole site, with entrances from the rear (south) and with caretaker's flat and dressing-rooms over.

'Society' rooms lined the external walls to Derry's Cross and the two side roads producing at the centre a hexagonal auditorium to seat 232, with a hexagonal stage 18 feet deep and an 18-foot proscenium opening. There were also library and reading rooms of ample size, a lounge, and four other large rooms for general use, two as large as the present lecture hall. The plan was criticised for the large proportion of floor space devoted to cloakrooms, passages, staircases, foyers, etc. As events turned out, the building would have been bigger than the Institution could have afforded, for, as already stated, the sum anticipated from the War Damage Commission was reduced. This plan, however, served a most essential function, for it enabled the Institution to crystallise its ideas and to formulate in practical terms their functional requirements of the new building.

ACCOMMODATION REQUIREMENTS

In December 1957 the Council of the Institution set forth to their architects the accommodation to be provided in the new building as: (1) Lecture Hall to seat 250 (with level floor); (2) Scientific Library; (3) Reading Room; (4) Lounge; (5) Committee Room; (6) Two Dark Rooms with, if possible, a club room adjacent for the Photographic Section; (7) Catering Facilities; (8) Cloakrooms; (9) Caretaker's Flat. They stipulated that this accommodation was to be provided within the limits imposed by the Agreed Permissible Amount of £44,700. They also asked if it would be possible to provide a lecture theatre in addition to accommodation similar to that listed above; the lecture theatre to be built to leave provision for the completion of a stage and an orchestra pit at a later date and to be a self-contained unit except for occasional access from the remainder of the building. The Council also asked the architects to give consideration to: (a) the size and grouping of rooms to facilitate lettings – that is, for examinations, trade demonstrations, and the use of small societies; (b) a design that would minimise the cost of maintenance and cleaning.

PLAN COMPARISONS

By January 1958 active consideration was being given to alternative plans and their examination in detail. A plan for a building with a large lecture hall (1,800 square feet) and caretaker's flat was compared with one with a lecture hall of half the size but with a theatre for 350 having sloping floor and no caretaker's flat. The plans considered had total floor areas of 9,500 and 11,000 square feet respectively, and it was considered that the smaller building could be erected for not more than £44,000.

PLAN REVISIONS

By February the Policy Committee recommended a compromise plan which included the smaller lecture hall, a theatre, and a caretaker's flat but

left for future development the library which had been included in both of the earlier schemes. This plan was the basis of the building we know and was in general outline very similar to it, but the Lounge was to occupy only half of its present area, and the remaining half was sub-divided into a Reading Room and a Committee Room. The stage was but 17 feet deep behind the proscenium opening, without any communication under the stage, and there were no Terrace Rooms or Library.

STAGE DEPTH

A suggestion was received in March 1958 from Lord Mount Edgcumbe that the stage should be increased in depth and that a passage should be provided so that actors could get from one side of the stage to the other without crossing it. This suggestion was subsequently adopted and incorporated in the plans.

MODIFICATIONS BY THE BUILDING COMMITTEE

From September 1958 the Building Committee, working closely with the architects, made many modifications to the plans on which the tenders received in May 1959 were based. A library, two 'offices' near the main entrance, an open promenade terrace on each side of the building over the dressing-rooms, two spotlight boxes, and a projection box at the back of the auditorium were all added to the design. Other modifications included: the raising of the level of the fly galleries by a foot to accommodate the storage of taller scenery; the raising of the structural beam over the proscenium opening so that the sound-reflecting canopy could be removed altogether if it were not successful; and the formation of a duct connecting the projection-box with the dressing-rooms to facilitate the use of the theatre by the BBC.

MODIFICATIONS BY LOCAL AUTHORITY

During this same period consideration of the plans by the Local Authority produced a most unwelcome demand for modifications, some involving considerable expense. These included the introduction of numerous self-closing fire-resisting doors, the separation of the boiler-house and fuel-store from the main building, and the moving of the stage door farther away from the site of the adjoining building. All of these modifications were incorporated in the design. The Authority also asked for other modifications and restrictions, which were vigorously opposed and successfully resisted by the Institution. These included a central gangway through the auditorium seating and a wider gangway in front of the balcony; the former would have reduced the seating capacity considerably as well as eliminating seats from the best possible viewing position, and the latter would have affected the sight lines from the balcony so that its balustrade spoilt the view of the stage for everyone. In addition, a 'haystack' lantern over the stage was asked for and vehicular access to the front entrance denied.

PROCEEDINGS OF THE PLYMOUTH ATHENÆUM

BASEMENT MODEL ROOM

Just before tenders were invited for the new building Mr. Gordon Monk asked if space could be provided for exhibiting engineering models, offering to meet the cost. The Building Committee suggested that a space under the Library could be provided at an estimated cost of £1,000. A sum of £1,000 was included provisionally in the Bills of Quantities sent out for tender to cover the cost of this room, although it had not yet been designed.

BUILDING COSTS

There was a recession in the volume of new building work in Plymouth at the time that tenders were made for building the Athenæum. This created a situation where the tendering was keen and the figure of £47,333 was considered a low price, at the time, for a building of the size of the Athenæum. This figure did not cover by any means all the costs of a building ready for occupation; it did not include any sum for movable furniture, theatre seating, or stage lighting and equipment.

With the receipt of a tender for an amount that could be afforded, an early start to the actual building was everyone's hope. But, alas, as already explained, the legal arrangements held up the actual start until December.

During the period of waiting the controversy with the City Council about the means of vehicular access to the site and to the front portico was settled; the 'model room' was designed and incorporated in the plans; schemes and tenders for electrical lighting for the stage and for the work and goods of various other sub-contractors and suppliers were approved.

ANDREW'S GARAGE

The Athenæum was the first building to be erected in the new development area north of the Crescent. When work commenced the adjacent sites had not been allocated to new developers, so that the rear wall of the Athenæum stage was exposed to view from the proposed new Western Approach Road extending eastwards from the Crescent.

Concern for the external appearance of the large plain rear wall of the stage was expressed by the Planning Authorities, and they suggested that it should be decorated with a design of diaper brickwork. Eventually coloured facing bricks to match the remainder of the building were accepted, much to the relief of the Athenæum and its architects. Great care was taken in appalling wet weather conditions to keep the new brickwork of this wall covered with polythene sheets and prevent the unset mortar oozing out and running down and marring the face of the wall. However, the simple beauty of this careful brickwork was never appreciated, for new developers built Andrew's Garage close up against it, completely hiding it from view.

MODIFICATIONS FOR WESTWARD TELEVISION

The site to the west of the Athenæum was allocated to Westward Television Ltd., a newly-formed commercial independent television



THE ATHENÆUM, 1961

[Courtesy Messrs. Dudley Coles Ltd.]

The front entrance with, above, the lounge window across the full width of the building



LECTURE HALL, 1966

The platform with Presidential Chair, side chairs, table and lectern. A projection screen lowers in front of the blackboard

[Photo: D. Tope]



THEATRE AUDITORIUM, 1961

Photographed from the stage. Projection box under clock

[Courtesy Messrs. Dudley Coles Ltd.]

THE REBUILDING OF THE ATHENÆUM

company, whose drive to get their programmes transmitted at the earliest date soon produced far-reaching effects for the Athenæum.

Physical work on building the new Athenæum had only just got under way when, early in February 1960, a representative from Westward Television asked to see plans of our auditorium. Within a fortnight* they suggested that we should make modifications to our building so that they could hire it for television purposes. The newly-formed Executive Committee welcomed the prospects of obtaining substantial lettings for the theatre, and negotiations to make mutually satisfactory arrangements were commenced immediately.

A scheme was evolved, the basis of which was that the Institution would make and pay for the modifications required to their building, and in return Westward Television would guarantee to hire the premises, so that over a period of four years the rent they paid would in total be not less than the extra cost expended by the Institution on the modifications.

The main alterations required were the installation of a stage revolve and a compound orchestra lift; these, together with minor alterations, were expected to cost about £3,000. By June quotations for the new equipment had been obtained and the estimate of the cost of the various alterations had risen to £6,200. This, the Institution felt, was as much of their funds as they should invest in the modifications and that the cost of any further items requested by Westward Television should be outside the hiring arrangement. Although any other alterations would be ordered and paid for by the Athenæum in the first place, their cost should be recovered in full from Westward Television.

In the end the Institution, at its own expense, installed the stage revolve and the compound orchestra lift and had five seats in the centre of each row of the stalls altered so that they could be removed. By moving these seats a central aisle could be created to allow television cameras to move closer to or farther away from the stage.

Other alterations to adapt the building for television which were paid for by the Institution included widening the projection-box and enlarging its glass port to accommodate two television cameras; constructing cable ducts from the projection-box to the side of the stage; installing two additional lighting bars; altering the floor of the stage from deal to maple; and lowering the level of the floor of the passage under the stage to give head room under the new revolve (this last resulted in construction of an undesirable slope to the floor at one end).

Westward Television required the maple floor to the stage to ensure that the television cameras would roll smoothly when in action. This meant that nails and screw-fixing to the stage floor could not be allowed and necessitated the purchase of weights and stays to prop up stage scenery.

The following alterations were also made, but the costs were recouped from Westward Television:

- (i) A tunnel connection to Westward Television's premises under the road, to permit artistes to cross from one building to the other in the dry.
- (ii) The size of the incoming electric mains cable was increased to provide an additional 50 kw. for supplementary television lighting.
- (iii) Two recesses in the ceiling over the auditorium were constructed, wide enough to accommodate two additional lighting bars with their lamps. Two winches with cabling for raising and lowering the bars, together with pulleys, switch-board, etc., were installed.

* Letter from Westward Television, 16th February, 1960.

DELAYS IN BUILDING

The alterations for Westward Television brought about delays in the building quite disproportionate to the amount of work involved.

Excavation for the original orchestra pit was stopped on the 9th March, 1960, while revised plans were prepared and the Local Authority's approval obtained. All construction at the south end of the building had to be delayed until the new orchestra pit could be completed, because the floor-level of the pit was below the foundations of the rest of the building. Work on this new pit did not get into full stride again until the steel reinforcement bars, which had been held up for so long, were delivered to the site on the 1st September.

So the construction of the north end of the building was much farther advanced and out of step with the south and, as events turned out, progress in the reverse order would have proved much more convenient.

IMPROVEMENTS

Apart from the modifications made for Westward Television, the Institution authorised a number of additional improvements. The most felicitous, perhaps, was the omission of the partitions forming three rooms overlooking Derry's Roundabout and making them into one long lounge the full width of the front elevation. Another alteration which subsequently proved most valuable was the conversion of the two open unroofed terraces into the east and west Terrace Rooms with adjacent toilets and connecting stairs to the stage. These rooms can be brought into service as extra dressing-rooms when the need occurs.

The arrangements made for Westward Television to use the theatre every Monday throughout the year completely altered the original conception that the theatre would be but little used during the summer months. The architects and the heating and ventilating engineers expressed concern lest the theatre would get uncomfortably hot for daytime use in the summer and the Institution authorised the expenditure of an extra £289* to improve the ventilation system.

The interest taken by Building Committee members in watching the work in progress brought about the construction of 'cubby holes' at each end of the orchestra pit, because it was noticed that the builder had excavated some additional ground in forming his foundations. When completed, one 'cubby hole' housed the baby grand piano and the other stored the movable front row of seating.

Further items were added to the stage equipment, such as six additional lighting bars, a light signal connection to the projection-box, a separate electric meter for the stage lighting, etc. As a result of a directive from the Local Authority, electric contact switches were inserted around the orchestra pit so that the lift could not be lowered below theatre floor level without the balustrading being in place, thus eliminating the possibility of patrons falling into an unprotected pit. The Building Committee spent a lot of time trying out models of theatre seats and having adjustments made to ensure that the seats would be as comfortable as possible without

* Building Committee Minutes, 10th May, 1960.

being excessively expensive; in spite of all their care, the original estimates were far exceeded.

Additional steel joists were inserted over the stage to strengthen the roof and facilitate the suspension of lighting bars and curtains.

The design of the roof over the auditorium was altered* from 2½-inch lightweight concrete on expanded metal lathing finished with ¾-inch asphalt to 2-inch woodwool slabs, cement screed on chicken wire with ¾-inch asphalt covering.

CHANGE OF NAME

The erection of the new building brought other changes to the Institution. A new constitution was drawn up, and on the 27th April, 1961, a special resolution was passed changing the Society's name from 'Plymouth Institution and Devon and Cornwall Natural History Society' to 'The Plymouth Athenæum'.

ADDITIONAL FIRE PRECAUTIONS

Although plans of the building had been approved by the Local Authority† and attached to these plans was a 'Schedule of Conditions' considered necessary in pursuance of Section 59 of the Public Health Act, 1936, in order to render the means of escape in case of fire effective at the Athenæum, Plymouth, further expensive amendments to the plans and schedule were insisted on before the Watch Committee was recommended to grant a licence for the theatre.

Thus, just two months before the date that the Athenæum had legally undertaken to have the theatre ready for Westward Television, they were faced with the expenditure of over £1,000 to install a safety curtain to the stage and the knowledge that the work could not be completed before the opening date.

A remedy for the immediate difficulty was obtained by the granting of a provisional licence for one day a week, after a written confirmation had been sent to the Fire Officer that a safety curtain had been ordered and would be installed. Thus, Westward Television were able to make their first transmission on the date planned.

Nor was this the only contretemps suffered by the Athenæum in connection with fire precautions, for even after the safety curtain had been installed, in June 1961, on the eve of the first amateur production in the new theatre, an ultimatum was received‡ that unless the Athenæum gave an assurance within twenty-four hours that the theatre seats would be made automatically returnable, the show would not be allowed to go on. Once again the Athenæum had to make expensive additions; this time an iron bar was attached at the back of each seat to act as a counter weight.

* Building Committee Minutes, 16th November, 1960.

† Official notice of passing of the plans under the Public Health Act, 1936, and the Town and Country Planning Act, 1947, and the Town and Country Planning and General Development Order and Development Charge Application Regulations, 1950, were received by the architects on 15th January, 1959.

‡ Executive Committee Minutes, 27th June, 1961.

OPENING DATE

In June 1960, when the erection of the new Athenæum was well under way, 1st March of the following year was chosen as the date for the commencement of the opening ceremonies. These ceremonies were to last for four days, and it was hoped to demonstrate the potentialities of the Athenæum with a lecture by an eminent scientist on the first evening, a concert by musical groups of Plymouth on the second evening, a film on the third, and a performance by a first-class theatrical entertainer on the fourth. At this time it was expected that the first transmission by Westward Television could not take place until the September of 1961; so that no clash with the Athenæum's opening ceremonies was anticipated.

As the year advanced, so the progress of the work on the new building lagged farther behind. The slowness in getting the steel reinforcement designed and approved and the delay in its delivery held up the construction of the enlarged orchestra pit for months, completely hindering the rest of the building work. At the beginning of September the builders enquired whether the opening date could be postponed for a month – that is, to April 1961 – and the Building Committee agreed to review the matter six weeks later. Further complications arose when, on the 1st September, 1960, notification was received from Westward Television, under the terms of their agreement, that their first transmission from Plymouth would be on the 29th April, 1961 (not September, as had been anticipated) and that they would require the Athenæum from the 24th April, 1961.

When the Building Committee reviewed the position at the end of the six weeks they were informed that the building could not possibly be completed before the end of March 1961, and that the opening of the building could not take place before May 1961.

Eventually the opening ceremonies were rearranged to take place on the 1st June, 1961; although, much to the Athenæum's regret, this led to the cancellation of some amateur theatrical performances which were to have followed the opening celebrations.

Such were the difficulties the Athenæum experienced in meeting their commitment to have the theatre ready for Westward Television by the 24th April, 1961, that they had to pay an additional £700 to get the work completed on time, with the builders working in a tremendous rush throughout the nights of the last week-end. Ultimately Westward Television did have the theatre on the date arranged and showed their appreciation for the efforts made by the Athenæum by agreeing to pay in advance the first £500 of rent and to increase the total of guaranteed rentals to be paid to the Athenæum by the same amount. Westward Television were experiencing similar difficulties in getting their own buildings and equipment in working order, and indeed their demand for carpenters and other craftsmen competed with the Athenæum's need for the same men at the same time.

Although workmen were still in the Athenæum finishing the decoration up to the evening of the 31st May, the opening ceremonies took place amidst great excitement on the 1st June, 1961, and the frustrations of the intervening twenty years were forgotten in the joy of the moment.

THE OPENING CEREMONIES

THURSDAY, 1st June, 1961, was a great day in the long history of our society. Shortly before 7.30 p.m. the President, Dr. D. P. Wilson, and Mrs. Wilson received the Lord Mayor, Alderman Arthur Goldberg, and the Lady Mayoress at our front door (Photo. opp. p. 46) and conducted them to the Library to meet Professor and Mrs. Pantin with others gathered ready to take part in the main proceedings (Photo. opp. p. 46). Precisely at 7.30 p.m. the President led the way through the east door into the auditorium of our Theatre and onto the brightly lit stage. The auditorium was packed with a large audience, including the Earl of Mount Edgumbe, City Dignitaries and Officials, a number of other distinguished guests and, above all, by our own Members, who had waited so long for this day.

It may be difficult or impossible for future generations to realise the excitement and the satisfaction of Members at this the opening of the new building. Twenty years had passed since the destruction of the premises designed by Foulston; the Doric columns and the ruins had long remained on the site, a pitiful reminder of a distant past. For years our Council had considered rebuilding, but had been unable to agree on plans, and when at last a design had been approved one circumstance after another had postponed the completion of the work. Now our new premises were ready for use and the society was about to embark on a new era, to which it was eagerly looking forward.

When those in the procession had reached the stage and taken their seats, bouquets were brought forward and presented to the Lady Mayoress and Mrs. Pantin. The President then rose and spoke as follows:

'My Lord Mayor, my Lady Mayoress, my Lord, ladies and gentlemen, one night in April 1941 our dearly loved Athenæum building, with all its irreplaceable contents, was totally destroyed by fire, caused I need not remind you how. Plymouth that night lost something she could ill afford to lose for the Athenæum was a focal point for the cultural life of the city. Bereft of a building, robbed of its contents, torn apart by war, the membership of the Plymouth Institution and Devon and Cornwall Natural History Society (as was our cumbersome title until a month ago) sank to a low level. But a remnant of devoted members carried on, held one Anniversary Meeting in the ruins,* and then met

* At this point the President said that he had that morning received from Mr. John J. Beckerlegge, Honorary Member and Past President, now living in retirement at Mousehole, Cornwall, the following message, written on a printed copy of the address Mr. Beckerlegge had given at the Anniversary Meeting held among the ruins of the old Athenæum 1st May, 1941 (*Trans. Plymouth Inst.*, Vol. XVIII). Mr. Beckerlegge had written, dated 30th May, 1961:

'Mr. President, I rejoice with you that twenty years later, thanks to the devoted services of loyal members in the interval, the new building now stands to inspire and to serve the present and the future generations. I regret my inability to be with you in person.'

In the concluding paragraph of his address, amid the ruins twenty years earlier, Mr. Beckerlegge had recorded his faith in the survival of the Institution.

for a time at premises of the Mutley Baptist Church, kindly put at our disposal by the Minister and Deacons. Some meetings were also held in Sherwell Church Hall, and then early in 1944 we acquired 13 Alexandra Road, which has served as our headquarters ever since, and has housed the beginnings of our new library. But most of our lectures and conversazioni since the war have been in the City Art Gallery, for which most helpful accommodation we shall always be grateful to the Plymouth Corporation and to its Curator and his staff.

'During the years of our wandering in the wilderness we have never lost faith that one day we should once again possess a building of our very own, and one worthy of the position we continue to hold in the cultural life of Plymouth. That building has been long delayed through false starts and many setbacks, through repeated disappointments and innumerable difficulties. These are now behind us and today we meet for the first time in our new and cleverly planned home erected on a site overlapping our old one. Our ingenious architect Mr. C. H. P. Pearn and our excellent builders, Messrs. Dudley Coles, have done a grand job within the limits allowed them. It is good to know that Mr. Pearn is an admirer of Foulston's buildings, among which the old Athenæum (completed in 1819) was such a fine example. But our new building is rightly very different from its predecessor, not merely in architectural style but also in the balance of its parts. Let me remind you of our old premises, where we had, besides the lecture hall and fine library, a very large museum, which was the largest single room in the building. Do you remember the stuffed birds and mammals, the dried fishes, the precious ancient relics from Mount Batten, the shrunken Maori heads, and the fine Mineralogical Collection Mr. Masson Phillips had been putting in order for us just before the whole lot went up in flames, with many other precious things? Even the old ducking-stool, which one passed on the way in to lectures through the museum, had gone—had it survived, how useful that might be! In our new building we have no museum, for we have felt that in the main that particular function has long been taken over by the municipality, and for financial and other reasons run with an efficiency we cannot hope to emulate. But there *was* a need for an auditorium with a big stage suitable for amateur theatricals, concerts, important lectures and other functions for which the smaller lecture hall would be unsuited. Dramatic performances, or play-readings, were not unknown in our old lecture hall, which on occasion was fitted at one end with temporary staging. And so there arose the idea of this theatre, which through the incorporation of first one suggested improvement and then another has grown into something larger and more fully equipped than originally envisaged. This theatre is something we have provided for the city as much as, if not more than, for ourselves, and it is something for which many a town and city in these islands will envy Plymouth. Often lately in Plymouth we have all heard the wish expressed for a small theatre suitable for amateurs, and for professionals as well. It is now up to Plymouth to support it. Let me say at once that it has cost a lot more than originally anticipated, and this has forced us to husband our resources and to economise in other directions wherever we could as, for instance, in the

THE OPENING CEREMONY

1ST JUNE, 1961

A pictorial record



[Photo: D. Tope]

The Lord Mayor and The Lady Mayoress greeted by the President and Mrs. Wilson in the entrance foyer



[Photo: D. Tope]

Professor C. F. A. Pantin, The Lord Mayor and the President in the Library before the ceremony



[Courtesy Western Morning News Co. Ltd.]

The Lord Mayor of Plymouth declares the building open

On the stage, left to right: Mr. A. L. Trott, Mrs. Trott, Dr. H. J. Hewitt, Mrs. Pantin, The Lord Mayor (Ald. A. Goldberg) speaking, the President (Dr. D. P. Wilson), The Lady Mayoress, Professor C. F. A. Pantin, Mrs. Wilson, Mr. E. R. Harris, Mrs. Harris

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decoration of the entrance hall and passages which are left relatively bare. We believe that our basic needs are met, but we shall for a time have to do without many things which would make our premises more comfortable or more beautiful, or which would aid our activities.

'Of course, the Athenæum does not exist to run a theatre or to let rooms to other societies. To quote the words of our new constitution, our objects are "to promote the cultivation of useful knowledge, to encourage habits of research, and to afford opportunities to persons of various pursuits to study and discuss with each other any scientific, literary or artistic subject". To further these objects we shall continue to hold, in the Lecture Hall, our regular Thursday evening lectures, covering a wide range of topics, and we shall hold our very popular conversaziones at the usual times of year. We have an active Photographic Section, for which we have provided two dark rooms and other accommodation, and it may well be that other sections will eventually be formed similar to our former science, literature, drama and music sections. We have the beginnings of a good library, while on the social side we have a very fine lounge with a catering room close by. And there are rooms for other activities in the building. So here people of all cultural tastes can meet and mingle; by so doing they will enrich their own lives and the life of the whole community.

'Long may the Athenæum flourish!'

After the applause, the President called on the Lord Mayor to open the building. The Lord Mayor rose (Photo. opposite) and delivered, without notes, a forthright, stimulating and amusing speech. Unfortunately, there was no transcript of this speech and only parts of it were recorded on tape by Westward Television, to whom we are grateful for the following fragments:

'When I was made Lord Mayor last Thursday – it seems already almost a year ago but, in fact, it is only a week – I included in the remarks which I made a reference to communications. I spoke – as some of you may remember – about our communications by air, by rail, by sea and by road. One matter which I did not refer to was the communication of knowledge from mind to mind, but the theme is the same, and I speak to you tonight about communications in a sense in the same way as I spoke last week. . . . [The speaker then recalled a visit to the rooms of the old Athenæum when he was a boy.] Over the doorway of one of them there were words written in Greek, and I need not assure you, ladies and gentlemen, they were Greek to me.

'I might have done better if they were written in Hebrew, but I was at least sufficiently interested to make enquiries as to what they meant, and I was told the words stood for "To the Unknown God". I may be right or wrong* about that, Mr. Chairman, but that is my recollection of many, many years ago, and it recalls now to my mind something that my old grandmother used to tell me frequently. She used to have a saying, "An ignorant person cannot be pious". It seems to me that the

* The speaker had been misinformed. The Greek phrase meant, 'For this generation and for those who come after'.

main function of your organisation is to disseminate knowledge, to communicate ideas and ideals from mind to mind.

'There was a time, and not so very long ago, when it was thought that the progress of science made religion something obsolete and out of date. That phase is long since past, and now the work done by societies such as yours, reaching as it does from the microcosm to the macrocosm, from the grain of sand and the crystalline structure of the snowflake on the one hand to the wonders of space stretching out millions of light-years away on the other, I think underlines the theme which I am trying to put before you. . . . In the last three hundred years man has achieved a degree of power over his environment which is unprecedented in the thousand years before that and in the thousands and thousands of years of pre-history; and so far as one can see the process is accelerating. The fear which is before us is that this new machine age which we have created, if we do not retain control, may yet destroy us. The problem is to make the machine our servant and not our master. . . .

'I declare the new Plymouth Athenæum open, and I trust that it will flourish for generations to come.'

Sustained applause having subsided, there followed the presentation (Photo. opposite) of Life Membership to Mr. E. R. Harris, B.Sc., who had been Honorary Secretary from 1947 to 1959 and President from 1951 to 1953, and who has for many years given (and is still giving in 1966) devoted service to the Athenæum. The scroll confirming Life Membership was handed to Mr. Harris by the President, and he was also presented with a radio set, which had until that moment been hidden on the stage behind a curtain and was now brought out by Mr. D. C. I. Powell, a member of our Council. Mr. Harris replied.

Introducing Professor C. F. A. Pantin, the President said:

'It is now my very pleasant duty to introduce to you Professor Pantin and to extend to him our very warm welcome. By accepting our invitation to give the Inaugural Lecture he honours us and brings to our proceedings a high level of academic distinction. We are grateful to him for undertaking what is, after all, an arduous task at no little inconvenience to himself, and in this I include Mrs. Pantin too. Before I call on him to speak let me tell you a little about him and explain why he, more than anyone else, is qualified to speak to us today.

'In 1926, when I first came to Plymouth to work in the Marine Biological Laboratory, I met for the first time a young man, not long out of Cambridge, who was already making an international name for himself through his studies of amoeboid movement. At that time the Director of the Laboratory was the late Dr. E. J. Allen, F.R.S., whom this Institution had already been proud to have as its President and who, over a period of many years, took an active part in the affairs of the Athenæum. Now, it was the habit of Dr. Allen to encourage all members of his staff to becoming Lecturing Members of the Athenæum: in my own case I had hardly arrived in Plymouth, hardly heard of the Athenæum, before I was being asked for 1½ guineas subscription – no



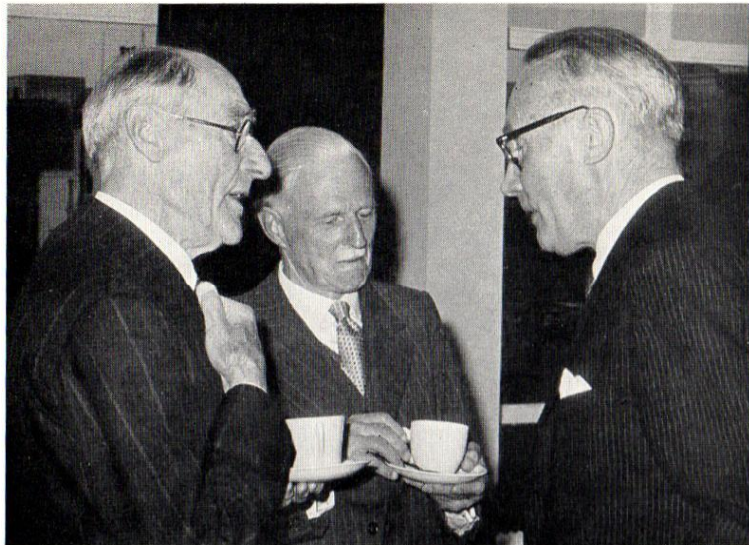
[Photo: D. Tope

Presentation of Life Membership to Mr. E. R. Harris
Left to right: The President, The Lady Mayoress, Professor C. F. A. Pantin,
Mrs. D. P. Wilson, Mr. E. R. Harris, Mrs. Harris



[Photo: D. Tope

Professor C. F. A. Pantin, F.R.S., delivers the Inaugural Lecture



[Photo: D. Tope]

In the lounge after the ceremony
The Earl of Mount Edgumbe, Dr. H. J. Hewitt and Professor C. F. A. Pantin



[Photo: D. Tope]

A lively group in the lounge
Mr. J. S. Allanach, Mr. E. R. Harris, Mr. G. Hamilton-Edwards

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small sum out of a total income of £180 per annum. I suspect that young Pantin was somewhat similarly roped in; I also suspect that, like me, he has never regretted it. At any rate, he quickly became Curator of Mammals, which office he held from 1923 to 1929. Unfortunately, he was so bright a lad that in this latter year Cambridge tempted him back to her fold, and there he has been, more or less, ever since. While in Plymouth he took an active part in the affairs of the Athenæum, lecturing on "Protoplasm", speaking on "The Evolution of Teeth in Mammals", and exhibiting at conversaziones. He left us plain Mr. Pantin, M.A.; today he returns to us occupying several inches of space in *Who's Who*.

'I cannot recount all the honours he has collected in addition to his occupancy of the Chair of Zoology in the University of Cambridge, but I must mention a few. First and foremost he is a Fellow of the Royal Society of London and he received their Royal Medal in 1950. He is a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge. He is a Trustee of the British Museum. He is an Honorary Member of the Royal Society of New Zealand, and he has received a high honorary degree and other distinctions in Brazil. He is a Past-President of Section D (Zoology) of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. He is the immediate Past-President of the Linnean Society of London, his three-year term of office expiring only on 24th of last month; on that day one of his last acts being to present the Society's Gold Medal in Zoology to another of our most distinguished members, Dr. F. S. Russell, F.R.S. Professor Pantin is the present President of the Marine Biological Association of the United Kingdom. All these honours derive from the very high quality of his researches into various fundamental aspects of the nature of living organisms, and from his great organising and teaching abilities. And for recreation he is a keen trout fisherman. What more can be said? Just this, that he is one of the most modest, kind, considerate and charming personalities I know. On your behalf I now invite him to give the Inaugural Lecture.'

Professor Pantin now addressed the meeting (Photo. opp. p. 48) and delivered an entertaining and erudite lecture, which is published in full on pages 51-56 of this issue.

The ceremony concluded with an expression of thanks to Professor Pantin by Dr. H. J. Hewitt, M.A. (President 1958-61) and an expression of thanks to the Lord Mayor by Mr. A. L. Trott (Vice-President and Hon. Treasurer).

The party left the stage and proceeded to the Lounge, where they were joined by the audience and refreshments were served. Many informal and lively discussions broke out between little groups of Members and their guests (Photos. opposite) and many now explored the building for the first time. The spaciousness of the Lounge and the view it commands of the City Centre, the modernity and comfort of the Theatre, the general usefulness of the other parts of the premises impressed members and visitors alike. It remained, and still remains, for members - and indeed the city

PROCEEDINGS OF THE PLYMOUTH ATHENÆUM

and surrounding region – to ensure that the artistic and intellectual purposes for which the Athenæum stands shall be fulfilled.

On the following evening a programme of films arranged by the Plymouth Film Society was shown: the French *Histoire d'un Poisson Rouge*, in colour, with music but without dialogue or commentary, and the Italian *Il Tetto*, a simple story revealing social conditions in post-war Italy.

On Saturday, 3rd June, the Theatre was again filled for a concert arranged by the co-operation of the Plymouth Orchestral Society, the Plymouth Choral Society and the New Plymouth Choir (Conductor: Rita Lang), with soloists Joan Newton (piano), Jean Truscott (soprano) and Frederick Harvey (baritone).