THE ASSEMBLY ROOMS
A Temperance Hall in Front Street, Shotley Bridge
by Geoffrey Fisher

The Assembly Rooms in Front Street, Shotley Bridge, bears its name and the date 1876 inscribed on the large stone tablet set above the entrance on the gable wall. The building, as seen from the village, stands out on the West side of the road from Shotley Bridge to Ebchester, where the ground on this side falls steeply towards Wood Street and the River Derwent. The Assembly Rooms were built as a Temperance Hall and were once the centre for much of the social life of the village. It was here that church bazaars, teas and suppers, dances and meetings of various societies were held.

The Assembly Room itself, on the main floor, was entered directly from Front Street, through doors which have since been replaced. On the floor below was a Reading Room and a Caretaker's Flat, both accessible from inside the building but also each having its own external door opening from a separate landing reached by stairs on either side of the building. For many years now it has ceased to be used for social functions and has become a storeroom and workshop. This account describes the building in some detail, with plans and illustrations, and then traces its history up to the present day.
THE ASSEMBLY ROOMS (TEMPERANCE HALL), SHOTLEY BRIDGE

MAIN FLOOR PLAN

Lower Floor Plan

Survey: April 1892, Scale: 1:100 approx.

[Diagram of the assembly rooms showing various rooms and their layout, including assembly room, kitchen, bedroom, and other spaces.]

Panoramic to front street
The external walls are built of sandstone masonry, buff yellow in colour and of a rough texture, except for the dressed stonework at the corners and around openings. The front gable wall, set back a few feet from the public footpath, is built of rather narrow stone blocks of a greyer colour than the other three walls, although this may be due to differences in weathering, this side being more sheltered.

The roof is moderately steep pitched, covered with dark grey Welsh slates and is hipped at the rear. The windows to the Assembly Room, at the front and two adjoining sides, are tall and narrow with pointed arches at the the top, making the building look rather like an old Victorian chapel. The windows to the lower floor are more domestic in character with flat heads and stone lintels above them.

Inside, the Main Assembly Room is impressive; the floor is of timber boarding, measuring 26'6" x 52'3" between external walls, an area of nearly 1400 square feet. The original entrance doors used to open into a small vestibule (as shown by the marks of the timberwork on the ceiling), with a pair of internal doors leading into the room, but these have been removed. To the left of the entrance a staircase leads up to a gallery, constructed in timber, and extending about ten feet from the front wall into the main room. It originally had ramped seating and was supported from the ground floor by two cast iron columns, but one of these was removed by a previous owner.

There was formerly a stage at the far end of the Room. A timber boarded partition, now partly dismantled, originally enclosed a small changing area and the stairs leading to the reading room below. These are steep and narrow, with two sets of tapered steps.

The walls have a vertical boarded dado with green painted plasterwork above up to an ornamental frieze below the sloping part of the ceiling. This wall decoration has largely survived. There are traces of two former fireplaces, now blocked, one near the centre of the rear wall and the other on the North side wall. The former solid fuel hot water heating system no longer operates.

The roof is carried by four timber roof trusses, strengthened by metal tie rods. The lower part of each truss including the unusual lattice beam just below the flat plastered ceiling, is stained brown and varnished. The ventilation grilles along the centre of the ceiling suggest that there were once roof ridge ventilators.

A cautious descent of the timber stairs at the far end of the Assembly Room leads to the former Reading Room. This has a timber floor, an open fireplace on the West wall and a door to the outside on the South wall, entered through a small lobby. In the centre of the room is a cast iron column supporting a timber beam which carries the floor above. The room is the same width as the Assembly Room above by 27'9" long with a considerable floor to ceiling height. It appears very spacious and well lit with windows on both sides.

Much less spacious and well lit is the former Caretaker's flat, reached from the Reading Room up a short flight of timber steps. The entrance door opens onto a corridor with a living room cum kitchen on
the North side. This room has a large kitchen range and an external door with a larder adjoining it. Behind this room is the fuel store opening onto the corridor. On the South side of the corridor is the bedroom and toilet accommodation, with a sink where the passage widens out at the end.

The sink and solid fuel range served the Caretaker and his wife and were apparently also used for the catering when teas and suppers were held in the Assembly Room above which was said to hold 300 people. It shows how times have changed that it was considered adequate in 1876 to have only a single toilet, and the washing and catering facilities described, in a public building of this size. Also, the only alternative means of escape in the event of a fire was from the Assembly Room through the narrow timber lined staircase to the Reading Room and so out to the external landing and steps.

The history of this building, built as a Temperance Hall, has not been easy to uncover as many of the relevant records are kept in specialist libraries in different parts of the country and much detailed information is yet to be discovered, if it still exists.

I would therefore like to acknowledge the help I have received and to thank the people working in the present-day Temperance Movement, and others in local government and elsewhere, who have generously given of their time and expertise; in particular the librarians and archivists of the institutional libraries concerned. The Temperance Movement has greatly declined in numbers and prestige from its heyday in the 19th and early 20th centuries, but what I have learned in the course these researches has led me to a new appreciation of its aims and a respect for what it achieved in its time.

I should also like to thank Mr. R. Lewins, the present owner, for his help and cooperation in my investigation of the building and its history.
SHOTLEY BRIDGE Co. DURHAM
MAP TO SCALE 1:5000
Showing places concerned with the History of Temperance in the Village.

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The Temperance Movement started by merely advocating moderation in taking drink containing alcohol and favouring the drinking of beer rather than 'ardent spirits', but by 1834-6 it had come to stand for total abstinence from alcoholic drink in all forms, unless prescribed for medicinal reasons. During the later half of the 19th century, strenuous efforts were made by large sections of the Movement to restrict the sale of alcoholic drinks by opposing the granting of public house licences and reducing opening hours generally.

To promote these aims more effectively the 'United Kingdom Alliance' was founded in June 1853, with a weekly paper, 'The Alliance News' as its official organ. In the North of England some 23 separate temperance bodies came together in 1858 to form the 'North of England Temperance League', with an office in Pilgrim Street in Newcastle and a quarterly news sheet, 'The Temperance Witness'. The Movement found many adherents within most of the denominations and societies were founded such as the 'Church of England Temperance Society' in 1873 and the 'Friends (Quaker) Union' in 1877. There were also independent organisations, often attached to particular churches and chapels, such as the 'Band of Hope' founded in 1847 and the 'Good Templars' which was introduced into this country from America in 1868 and adopted a type of regalia and ritual somewhat resembling that of the Freemasons.

The first specially built Temperance Hall was at Bradford in 1837 and was followed by others in this country, although some temperance workers, such as Thomas Whittaker, a local preacher and later Mayor of Scarborough, opposed this trend preferring to work within the churches. He paid several visits to Shotley Bridge, once arriving 'faint, cold and hungry' after a four hour journey of fifteen miles in a 'one horse Irish car' through snowdrifts. Another famous temperance advocate, who came from Northumberland, was Sir Wilfrid Lawson, a prominent figure in local affairs in Northumberland. The Temperance Movement in Shotley Bridge did not start with the building of the Hall in 1876; rather this was the outcome of many years of previous work by a number of people and organizations.

The 'Northern District Temperance Record' for May 1838 describes the 'Shotley Bridge Annual Festival' held on Easter Monday when 'a joyous multitude of hearty Tee-totallers gathered from the numerous villages around'. After a procession through the village carrying a banner, 'some 500 to 600 people took tea at the Primitive Methodist Chapel' (then a small building near the bottom of Cutlers Hall Road). In the evening there was a large public meeting in the newly enlarged Wesleyan Methodist Chapel in Wood Street (almost opposite Messenger Bank) of which only the outer walls of the lower part now remain. A Mr. N. Nicholson is described as 'the founder of the Cause in the neighbourhood'. The Nicholsons had been a prominent Wesleyan Methodist family in Shotley Bridge since the founding of the chapel there in 1814. In the year 1838 the number of members of the Temperance Movement in the village was stated to have been 692. The nearby village of Blanchland had 128 members plus two people described as 'reformed characters' but this category is not mentioned for Shotley Bridge!
In 1840, a similar Festival is recorded in the village with 800 people sitting down to tea - surely either an exaggeration or the tea must have been served in relays, considering the small size of the chapels and general lack of facilities. Here a newly formed branch, or 'tent' as it was called, of the Rechabites took part. This was, and still is, a temperance provident society, offering a form of insurance for its members. The local Methodist ministers and a Baptist minister also attended the Festival.

The number of people at this Annual Festival had, according to the Northern Temperance Advocate, increased to nearly 1000 by 1844, when the procession was headed by the Hexham Band and the meeting was held in the Market Place. This was at Achey Bank, the corner where Front Street joins Snows Green Road, which was an open space until approximately 1860, when the Town Hall and various houses and shops were built up to the site of the present Methodist Chapel in Front Street. This Festival appears from the account to have become somewhat rowdy, with drinkers from the neighbouring public houses joining in.

In Shotley Bridge a Committee for Temperance was set up in 1875 with the object of building a Teetotal Assembly Room for the village. Its overall membership is not known, but it included Edwin Octavius Tregelles, a prominent Quaker, who had come to live at Derwent Hill, a large house which still stands on Sheephouse Lane at East Law. He came from Falmouth, and had trained as an engineer, moving to this area when he married Elizabeth Richardson from Sunderland, in 1850. At the time of his marriage his occupation is described in the Quaker Dictionary of Biography as 'a Tin Plate Manufacturer at Shotley Bridge'. He was also concerned with a Templar Hall at Medomsley, which has since been demolished.

Work started on the building of the present Temperance Hall and the following account appeared in 'The Alliance News' for 18 November 1876:-

"At Shotley Bridge, in the County of Durham, on Friday, November 3rd, the cornerstone of a Temperance Hall and News and Reading Rooms was laid by A. Pease Esq., of Darlington. Great interest was taken in the event, some of the shops were closed and a large number of persons assembled to witness the ceremony. C. Wilson, Esq., presented Mr. Pease with a handsome trowel and mallet, with which he laid the stone. A box containing several documents was deposited amongst which was a copy of Alliance News with an account of the annual meeting proceedings. Mr. Pease delivered a very suitable address, and was followed by Mr. R. Swan, of Sunderland. A public tea was held in the Town Hall, which was largely attended. Afterwards a public meeting was held, Mr. Tregelles presiding, and addresses were delivered by A. Pease Esq., Councillor Swan, G. Charlton, Esq., J.P., of Gateshead and Mr. T. Carrick of Newcastle."

Arthur Pease (1837 - 1898) was president of both the North of England Temperance League and also of the Friends' Temperance Union. He was the grandson of Edward Pease, the promoter of the first passenger railway in 1825 from Stockton to Darlington.
The corner stone itself may have been unmarked, unlike ceremonial 'foundation stones', as no inscribed stone has been found at the front of the building. It is possible, of course, that such a stone exists and has been covered up by raised levels of ground at some time.

No record has so far been found of the opening of the Assembly Rooms, and it may be that there was no formal ceremony at all. The 'Alliance News' refers briefly to an open air Temperance Meeting at Shotley Bridge on 21 May 1877. This is followed some months later by a meeting held at Shotley Bridge Temperance Hall, and chaired by E.O. Tregelles, on 5 November 1877, so it would appear that the building was probably completed during the latter part of 1877. A Temperance Conference, of some kind, under the same chairman and addressed by a Mr. William Hoyle, was held in the Hall three months later.

The Temperance Hall became a popular place for social activities in the village and the Newcastle Journal has several accounts of events which took place there. When the Primitive Methodists wished to build what is now the Methodist Church in Front Street, they held a bazaar in the Hall on Easter Monday and Tuesday in 1894 which raised £160, a large sum for those days. Attractions included a set of curiosities from Australia and a Mr. J. Johnstone gave a lantern slide lecture. Various meetings, teas and suppers were subsequently held here in connection with the foundation stone laying and the formal opening of the chapel in 1895.

The 'Derwentdale Habitation of the Primrose League' (a popular Conservative Party organization) held regular meetings and social events in the Hall. In 1892 there was a ball at which the 'Dame President and Ruling Councillor were present and about 100 of the members and their friends,' according to the Newcastle Journal. The same paper in 1895 mentions a meeting at the Hall when a talk on 'The Colonies' was given.

From the pages of the 'Temperance Witness' for the years 1889 to 1895 it appears that interest within the village in the Temperance Movement was declining, outside the mainly non-conformist churches. The number of subscriptions (mostly only half a crown) paid by individuals to the League had fallen from four in 1889 to nothing by 1893 and the representation of the village at the Annual Conference from one 'Son of Temperance' to none by 1894.

The original Quaker concern had declined in strength by this time as local 'Friends' moved away, died, or in some cases joined the parish church of St. Cuthbert, so that the Meeting house in Snows Green (opposite the cottages there) had ceased to be used as such some year before 1886.

Temperance, in the form of total abstinence from alcohol, had been widely adopted by this time by the various Methodist and Baptist churches in the area. A photograph exists showing a gathering of Good Templars (distinguished by their large ceremonial collars) outside the former Quaker Meeting House which, since 1898, had been let for use as a Mission to the United Methodist Free Church.
The Reading Room at the Temperance Hall may have ceased to function some years before the building closed, as a new Reading Room was erected in Snows Green Road in 1910. However, the Hall continued to be used for social events during the 1920s. Several older residents in the village have memories of the public dances held there; 'quite lively affairs they were', to quote one. Mrs. Annie Miller remembers also going, when a child, to visit the family of Tommy Sanderson, the resident caretaker, in the early 1920s and sitting in the living room in front of the kitchen range. When she was six years old she was taken to see a travelling phrenologist at the Assembly Rooms. After he had studied the shape of her head she said that she should learn to play the organ! At that time she had not even begun to play the piano, but later had lessons on both instruments and became for many years the much appreciated organist at the Methodist Church in Shotley Bridge.

The Assembly Rooms were sold, as shown by a conveyance dated 29 July 1932, to a Mr. Leybourne Urwin, a master plumber in the area. Previously the land on which the building stood had been held on a copyhold tenure. This was a survival from the feudal customs of the Middle Ages, when land was held from the Lord of the Manor in return for military or other services. Later these feudal duties were commuted for a sum of money to be paid each year, but transfers of land between parties had to be carried out under the procedure of the Manor Court, where the lease of the land was first 'surrendered' to the Lord of the Manor and then the new tenant was 'appointed' by him. Many instances of copyhold tenure in Shotley Bridge are recorded in the Halmote Roll of the Lanchester Manor Court. In 1922 an Act of Parliament forbade new copyhold tenancies and the system was completely abolished in 1934.

According to this conveyance, the two men who sold the Assembly Rooms were Francis and Lewis Priestman, both prominent landowners in the area; the latter being well known as the Master of the Braes of Derwent Hunt and the proprietor of the Venture Stage Coach. There is no mention in the records of their acting as members of a Trust for the Assembly Rooms or to any company or organization which might have owned it. There is a strong possibility that from start to finish the Assembly Rooms site was personally owned by members of the Quaker family Richardson and their close relatives the Priestmans but this has not been confirmed.

Mr. Leybourne Urwin, who had bought the Assembly Rooms in 1932, died in 1940 and the property passed to his two sons and his daughter. They then sold it to the family firm of 'Leybourne Urwin, Ltd., Plumbers and Heating Engineers' who used it as a storeroom and workshop for the business.

In 1975 the area in which the building stands was designated a 'Conservation Area' and permission from the Council was (and still is) necessary before the building can legally be demolished. Such demolition nearly took place in 1976 when, after an earlier proposal had been made to convert part of this building into a house, a scheme for its demolition and the erection of a new house was submitted. The Council insisted that any new building on the site was to be in
keeping with its neighbours, i.e. particularly the two houses on the North side. By this time the firm of Leybourne Urwin was intending to move to its present location at Tanfield Lea Industrial Estate, near Stanley, and wished to sell the premises.

The Assembly Rooms had for a long time been affected by movement and had become 'rather far gone structurally' as one report put it. There was a serious crack at the junction of the external wall and the two chimney stacks had started to lean and become unsafe. In December 1977 the Council issued a Dangerous Structure Notice. There was also some damage from a tree growing on the North side of the building. It was saved by the present owner, Mr. Richard Lewins, who bought the building and repaired it sufficiently for the Notice to be withdrawn. He also inserted a small roof light into the rear slope of the roof to provide more daylight to the working area inside.

The building is used regularly by its owner at the present time and the writer has no knowledge of any plans concerning its future. As the former Assembly Rooms and Temperance Hall for the village, the building represents part of its heritage (as does the nearby Memorial Cottages building) and its long term prospect should be considered. It cannot, perhaps, claim architectural distinction; it is not a 'listed building' as is the former Town Hall in Snows Green Road (formerly Lloyds Bank building), but it is a valued part of the village scene and, if regretfully it cannot be permanently preserved, then it should, when the time comes, be replaced by a new building of suitable character, worthy of Shotley Bridge Village.

G.J. Fisher

The Temperance Hall - view looking north west

For references, see Appendix A at the back of this book.