



## MEA HOUSE

The lease at Percy House expires on 2 March 2021 but the good news is that the lease for the Society's new premises at Mea House, Newcastle upon Tyne has already been completed. The contractor should be on site as soon as possible to carry out the requested alterations and the move from Percy House will probably take place in the second half of January. As yet no date has been set for the reopening of the Research Centre as this will depend on the Coronavirus situation.

Mea House was built in 1974 designed by local architects Ryder & Yates (modernists who met when they joined Peterlee New Town Development Corporation in 1948 ). It is the first purpose built centre for voluntary charitable organisations in the country and houses charity offices and a public hall on a non-profit making basis, taking its name from the forenames of the three major benefactors of the Rothley Trust which founded it :

Mungo Campbell, Esther McCracken and Alastair Fyfe

The design draws influence from Le Corbusier with suspended floors, pedestrian decks, mirror cladding and brick facings providing a dynamic contrast with Ellison Terrace.

If you're not familiar with the building it's easily reached from Haymarket or Monument Metro stations, walk straight down Saville Row which is opposite Fenwick, Northumberland Street and you can't miss it.



## WILLIAM HARBUTT (1844-1921)

When I was a child a gift of plasticine was always very welcome, so many things could be crafted from those lovely coloured blocks with their rather distinctive smell.



William Harbutt, the inventor of Plasticine, was born in North Shields on 13 February 1844, at 63 Bedford Street, where he lived with his parents and five siblings, his parents ran a shop. He studied at the National Art Training School in London and eventually became an associate of the Royal College of Art. From 1874 to 1877 was head of the Bath School of Art and Design, and eventually opened his own art school in Bath with his wife Elizabeth (Bessie). William was 53 when he invented his non-drying modelling clay in 1897 to help his students and two years older when it was awarded a trade mark 1899. Originally grey, colour was added later.

He died from pneumonia while visiting New York in 1921. His body was returned to

England and he is buried at St. Nicholas, Bathampton, Somerset. Probate effects: £15,113 -15s-2d.

Though the original factory was destroyed by a fire in 1963 family members kept the business going until 1983. From then until 1986 it changed hands several times. Plasticine, a testament to flexibility, is now made in Thailand and the recipe is still officially secret.

Some brightly coloured seats designed to look like Plasticine were installed on Bedford Street in North Shields in 2009 intended as a tribute to William Harbutt but after complaints that they were cold, ugly and their shape stopped rainwater draining off, they were removed in 2011.



## CHRISTMAS IN THE TYNEMOUTH WORKHOUSE

Life in the workhouse was never a pleasant experience and Christmas didn't provide much in the way of cheer for the residents. However, there was some effort made to provide a Christmas lunch a bit better than the usual fare with a charitable gift for the children.



The provision of this Christmas meal exercised the Board of Guardians at their meetings and they seem to spend quite a lot of time discussing exactly what should be offered to the inmates. Charitable gifts for the children were quite acceptable and the local newspapers ran advertisements in November and December each year asking for donations and the clerk to the Board of Guardians was tasked with taking in gifts of toys and other articles for the children's treat. Those who donated were named in the newspaper and thanked for their generous gifts, mentioned were toys, sweets, oranges, nuts and a Christmas tree.

When the Christmas dinner was served at midday, the Board of Guardians presided over the event, then the visitors were shown around the building

But it was the dinner and the decision as to whether or not beer was served that concerned the Board of Guardians and provoked most letters to the papers. In 1865 it was reported that for the Christmas meal there was a plentiful supply of roast beef and beer which all 334 inmates enjoyed, the beer was presented by Messrs. Bartleman & Co. and the old men and women were also given half an ounce of tobacco each, the cost of which had been raised by subscription. The young people were given oranges and nuts. In 1885 beer was supplied by Messrs. Carr & Sons, Matthew Knott, A. Dodds and M. Cassidy.

But by 1890 the committee agreed a dinner of potatoes, roast beef and plum pudding would be served at the ratepayer's cost but there would be no beer because it was said that the previous year several of the officials and inmates had been intoxicated and the serving of beer had re-awakened a craving for drink. This provoked a flurry of letters to the press and 'A Ratepayer' said he strongly disapproved the dangerous mode of promoting Christmas cheer as this was the main cause of hundreds of people landing in the Workhouse, "what jobs they might have filled had drink not destroyed their reason". Another letter from 'Direct Veto' said it was a condemnation on society to provide drink to ruin-bitten paupers.



It was said that the inmates had been questioned and from 213 men only 8 preferred beer to tea, sugar and tobacco and from 194 women only 9 preferred beer to sugar. Various inhabitants of the town, including Mrs. Donkin the wife of the MP, were thanked for their donations of tea, sugar, tea cakes and tobacco instead of beer, also for gifts of sweets and Christmas cards. The Committee agreed that the usual dinner allowances would be provided on the understanding that no beer was served. The dinner apparently went without incident and the master and matron of the workhouse were commended for their good management.

The inmates of the Tyne Sailors Home were given a substantial dinner of roast goose and plum pudding as were the 300 Wellesley boys who in addition were each given an orange and a new penny.

In 1950 just a few random examples of charitable works in the area. St. Oswald's YMCA & YWCA at Cullercoats were hoping to give each child ill in hospital a Christmas gift, the Rosehill Club in Wallsend gave each retired member a gift of £1.00, the Chair of Whitley Bay Council presented gifts from the Christmas tree to each child resident in Dr. Barnado's Homes and in 1951 travellers at Tynemouth Station donated 108 parcels and gave £82-16s in donations for local hospitals and institutions. The journalist 'Collingwood' remarked "beneath the cloak of nationalisation a heart still beats". Make of that what you will !

Shields Daily News 12 December 1950



Toys of every description for all ages – Books- Train Sets -Dolls Prams – Games - Motor cars – to mention but a few – Slippers - Handkerchiefs – Gloves etc.

Shop Early – Shop Wisely at  
Howards  
North Shields Shopping Centre  
Saville Street  
Phone: North Shields 654

Shields Daily Gazette 29 Dec.1900

**THEATRE ROYAL, NORTH SHIELDS**  
Lessee & Manager Arthur Jefferson  
Monday 17 Dec. 1900 for 6 nights only  
**JACK O'HEARTS**  
Pit 6d. Side Circle & Stalls 1s. Circle 2s.



**NEW EMPIRE PALACE, KING STREET**  
**SOUTH SHIELDS**  
Special Attraction for Christmas Holiday  
Important & expensive engagement  
**BOISSETT TROUPE**  
**"BRICKLAYERS"**  
Funnier than any other pantomime  
Screams of laughter from start to finish  
**PRICES AS USUAL**

Shields Daily News 12 December 1950



## LOCAL ODDITIES 2. WANDERING WILLIE

No 41 Front Street, Tynemouth is the Turks Head public house and looking at the pub sign we can see it's a sailor's knot that looks like a Turkish Sultan's Turban, hence the name. However, this isn't just an ordinary public house it has a rather nice item inside, 'Wandering Willie', a stuffed dog in a glass case.



Willie was a sheepdog who became separated from his shepherd at the New Quay, North Shields in 1873. Desperate to find his master he wouldn't leave the ferry. The crew and passengers of the ferry took pity on him, suspicious of everyone at first, he became used to the crew and passengers and allowed them to care for him. He spent the rest of his life riding the ferries looking for his master, on 2 occasions just missing him. Willie died in 1880 and everyone missed him so much they had a collection to pay for a taxidermist and Willie ended up in the Turks Head.



So, when you're next in Tynemouth you can pop in and visit him, the dog that meant so much to so many people.



## A GHOST STORY

It wouldn't be Christmas without a ghost story and one such is  
The Silky of Chirton Hall.

Silkey's Lane is an unremarkable street in Chirton, North Shields and once the site of a grand house known as Chirton Hall. In 1672, Ralph Reed sold his land in Chirton to John Clarke, an agent of Josceline Percy, 11th Earl of Northumberland. After he died in 1675, Clarke's widow, Jane, married Philip Bickerstaffe (MP for Berwick in 1685) the same year and Chirton Hall became his seat. Jane also died in 1694. On 1 August 1699 Bickerstaffe surrendered his copyhold lands in Chirton to Sir William Blackett who sold the hall to Archibald Campbell, 1st Duke of Argyll. Argyll led a very irregular life, was separated from his wife and at Chirton he kept a mistress, Mrs. Allison. The Duke thought much of Mrs. Allison and in 1702 left a deed of settlement so that when he died the hall and furnishings were left in trust for her. In 1703 when he was dangerously ill, while at Chirton, he told his brother, his physician, his steward and three other witnesses that he had left his English estate to Mrs. Allison and he hoped they wouldn't dispute it.



Chirton Hall

He died on 28 September 1703. His breath had hardly left his body before the house was thrown in chaos. His brother began to rifle the house seizing clothes, horses, saddles, furniture, pistols and guns, which he afterwards sold. Mrs. Allison seized the Duke's gold watch, buckles and a quantity of plate.

She confronted the family and said she was quite prepared to leave everything to the Duke's son after her death if they would only leave her alone and not put her to any trouble or expense, but the family were determined to oust her from Chirton.

Not long afterwards Mrs. Allison disappeared without trace, never to be seen again.

The Duchess stripped the house and arranged for all the goods to be shipped back to Scotland, however the ship sank near Leith and all was lost.

Many wondered where Mrs. Allison had gone and it wasn't long before there were reports that a lady in a brown silk dress was seen gliding by night along a shady avenue near the outskirts of Chirton. Another man walking along the lane saw a lady clad in silk gliding towards him, a dog by her side. His own dog howled and ran off, he was about to speak to the woman when she turned right and he saw the moonlight shine right through her body.

Mr. Lilburn's father who lived in the lodge cottage in the 19<sup>th</sup>. Century was working late repairing a fence, he worked until moonlight when he heard a rustling sound, he looked up to see a lady standing watching him. He knew of the ghost stories of course but felt sure he had only heard leaves rustling and a trick of the light; he determined to lay the ghost story to rest once and for all. He would get his wife to come back to this spot, without telling her why, to confirm the rustling of leaves and trick of the light. He duly fetched his wife but when they got to the place she threw up her hands screamed 'Silkey's ghost' and ran off 'hell for leather' back home.

The house went on to have several more owners including the family of Admiral Cuthbert Collingwood. The last owners, the Robson family of coal mine owners, began to sell off the estate in 1870 the hall itself had fallen to ruin and was demolished. The rumours about the ghost persisted however with many more reported sightings and the lane became known as Silkey's Lane.

If you are walking in the vicinity best be home before moonlight else you too might meet up with the lady in the brown silk dress.

*Abridged from the tale re-told by T. R. Lilburn (1854-1941) who was a market gardener, local historian and one of the founder members of the Tynemouth Antiquarian Society.*

