

Doncaster Mansion House

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Introduction



Doncaster's elegant Mansion House, a focus for civic pride, has dominated the High Street for over two hundred and fifty years. It is one of only four surviving civic Mansion Houses in the country. The first was built by the corporation of Newcastle upon Tyne in 1691, but was demolished in the redevelopment of the town centre in the mid-nineteenth century. York began its own mansion house in 1725, followed by London in 1739 and finally by Bristol in 1783.

The Bristol mansion house was built solely as a home for the mayor and the mansion houses of London and York provided accommodation for the mayor as one of their functions. Doncaster Mansion House, however, was designed as a place for corporate entertaining and, although there were several rooms to provide living accommodation, the house was never intended as a residence for the mayor in his year of office, although a few mayors made use of the rooms for this purpose.

In these web pages, we take a tour of the Doncaster Mansion House and look into some aspects of its history. The pages use specially-commissioned photographs of the Mansion House, old engravings, and plates from the book which its architect published in 1751 to advertise his achievement. This book is James Paine's *Plans, Elevations, Sections and other Ornaments of the Mansion House belonging to the Corporation of Doncaster*. A copy of the book can be seen at Doncaster Archives. The book was reprinted in 2002 by Hull Academic Press. A copy of this reprint is to be found at Doncaster Archives and at the Local History Library in the Doncaster Central Library.

You can follow the tour in sequence, moving room by room through the ground floor and then through the first floor. If you prefer to look only at certain rooms, then you can click on the room you want to know about from the menu on the left.

A House for the Corporation



The Outer Building of the Principal Front of the Mansion House

To-day the Mansion House is a working local government building. It houses meetings of the council and its committees, a parlour for the chairman of the council and facilities for elected

members. Although the council chamber was moved here from the Guild Hall in 1914, a wartime measure which became permanent, the Mansion House has been used for civic business from the beginning.

Its origins, however, were far less serious-minded. Before the 1740s, entertainment by the borough council took place at a number of locations, usually the mayor's house or one of the larger inns, the Angel or the Three Cranes. From 1719 to about 1727, the corporation leased a house in High Street for this purpose. The corporation began to accumulate furniture, cutlery and other items needed by the mayors 'at their public feasts'.

After several decades of lodging in other men's houses, the council decided to build itself a suitable place for entertaining. It bought a site in High Street in 1738 but then made several false starts before James Paine, an architect at the beginning of what was to be a very distinguished career, was commissioned to take on the design.

This design, as we will see, followed the usual layout of what at that time were known as Assembly Rooms. These were places of public entertainment, the pivot of the local social scene, where the social elite of a town could find amusements, including dancing, card-playing and, more genteelly, tea parties.

The corporation of Doncaster, which commissioned the work, was a very different body from the present borough council. It had a mayor, twelve aldermen (senior council members, two of whom acted with the mayor as magistrates for the borough) and twenty-four 'common council men'. The council men were elected by the freemen of the borough whenever a vacancy arose.

The status of 'freeman' of the borough goes back earlier than any written records. It was enjoyed by a very restricted number of residents. Freedom could be acquired in any one of four ways. The eldest son of a freeman was recognised as a feeman, anyone who had served an apprenticeship with a freeman also obtained his freedom, the right to freedom could be purchased from the corporation and the corporation could grant this right to anyone it chose.

Council members were not elected on a regular basis, but only when a member stood down or died. This was because, once elected, they could remain council members for life. The constitution of the council had been established by the borough charter issued by King James I in 1604. Such arrangements were not unique to Doncaster, for municipal boroughs throughout the country were organised on a similar basis. They remained unaltered until 1835, when a national reform of corporations introduced councils elected on a frequent basis by the ratepayers (local taxpayers).

The Borough charters from 1194, the proceedings of the council from 1565 and all the other of the surviving archives of the corporation are to be found at Doncaster Archives.

James Paine The Architect



James Paine (1717-1789) was chosen as the architect probably because of the work he was already undertaking in the neighbourhood. He was working for Sir Rowland Winn on the rebuilding of Nostell Priory, (now a National Trust property) south of Wakefield and had designed Heath House in a village nearby. Paine was the son of a carpenter from Andover who had travelled to London to train as an architect. His talents appear to have caught the attention of the Earl of Burlington, an amateur architect with strong Yorkshire connections. It was probably Burlington who recommended him (at the age of 19) as the assistant to the gentleman architect in charge of the work at Nostell.

Paine's success with the Mansion House appears to have led to offers of work from the local gentry. In the Doncaster area, he was involved in the building or alteration of country houses at Cowick, Cusworth, Hickleton, Sandbeck and Wadworth. He subsequently enjoyed a long and successful career in London and around the country, but especially in the North of England.

He published his Plans of Doncaster Mansion House in London in 1751 to publicise his commission. The publication attempted to make the project even more impressive than it was. The published plans show the building flanked by two houses, one supposedly for the recorder (the judge of the borough court) and the other for the town clerk. These can never have formed part of the scheme he was commissioned to carry out, not least because the corporation never owned the land needed to build them. The town clerk was not a full-time employee of the corporation, but was a solicitor in private practice for whom the corporation was only one of his clients, so he would hardly be offered accommodation at public expense. The recorder of the borough at this date was Bryan Cooke of Owston, who had a house of his own in the locality - Owston Hall - that he would scarcely want to give up for the smaller house of Paine's design.

(Incidentally, Paine also deliberately made his work at Cusworth Hall seem more elaborate than it actually was when he published an engraving of the south front of the Hall in 1750. Paine's letters to William Wrightson, the owner of Cusworth Hall, and a copy of the engraving of the south front are to be found at Doncaster Archives.)

The Mansion House as it is today is not entirely as Paine designed it. It has been altered and extended by three later architects, William Lindley, William Hurst and William Butterfield. Their alterations will be described as our tour through the building progresses.

The Mansion House and the High Street



The exterior of the Mansion House must have impressed its earliest visitors even more than it does today. High Street is now a succession of three-storey houses and shops, many of later eighteenth-century date, with Victorian banks and other commercial premises.

When the Mansion House was first built, the surrounding buildings would probably have been the modest, two-storey properties which can be seen in early engravings, making the Mansion House loom even larger than it seems to do to-day. This engraving, reproduced from Edward Miller's *History of Doncaster* (published in 1804) shows the Mansion House in its setting in the High Street. The low buildings on the right would be typical of the street at the time the Mansion House was built. There are still two very old shops on the opposite side of the road towards Baxtergate whose small size gives an idea of the scale of the historic town.

The exterior of the Mansion House does not now entirely have the appearance that Paine intended for it. The original design was topped by a giant triangular pediment, spanning the entire facade. This was replaced in 1801 by the present parapet to a design by William Lindley. The parapet has three windows, but all of them are blind; behind them is the original roof designed by Paine to fit with his pediment.

The new parapet was topped by a golden lion holding a standard. This was one of the heraldic badges used by King Edward IV, who granted the borough its charter of incorporation in 1467. The charter of 1467 is decorated with a number of these heraldic badges. One of them, a seated lion holding a standard, is shown here. The charter, along with nine other royal charters granted to the borough between 1194 and 1688, is to be found at Doncaster Archives.

Mansion House or Palace?



The Mansion House must not only have seemed palatial but, in origin, its design was, quite literally, palatial. In producing his plans for Doncaster corporation, Paine had not created an original design, but had taken his design from Inigo Jones. Jones was a distinguished seventeenth-century architect who had worked for both King James I and his son, King Charles I. Jones had produced many plans for the rebuilding of Whitehall Palace for King James I. He had been an enthusiast for 'Palladianism', the style of Andrea Palladio, who worked extensively in north-eastern Italy, around Venice, in the sixteenth century. The architectural style of Palladio was strongly favoured by the Earl of Burlington who, as we mentioned earlier, was probably the man who first detected Paine's talents as an architect.

Jones was an important architect but relatively few of his designs were actually constructed. The only surviving building completed to Inigo Jones' designs for his royal patrons was the Banqueting House in Whitehall, restored in the mid-1990s to its original splendour.

Amongst the plans for the Palace of Westminster which never progressed beyond the drawing board was one which Paine adopted for the Mansion House. So Doncaster has a civic building whose facade was originally designed for a palace in London rather than a high street in Doncaster. (Paine was not attempting to pass off the design by Jones as his own. The design had been published earlier in the eighteenth century and would have been known to all those interested in architecture. Paine's adoption of the design would have been seen as an elegant tribute to his famous predecessor).

This illustration shows part of Jones design. Its similarities to the front of the Mansion House are unmistakable. Notice, for instance, the three windows, (the central one in the 'Venetian' style, with a semicircular head), the four pairs of Corinthian columns, the balusters (small columns) under each window and the huge pediment over the whole elevation.

The Vestibule and Staircase



As we enter the Mansion House, we stand in the vestibule and face the staircase. It is in imperial style, with the first flight of stairs reaching a landing and then dividing into two flights before reaching the first floor. The staircase is flanked by Ionic columns. The columns on the

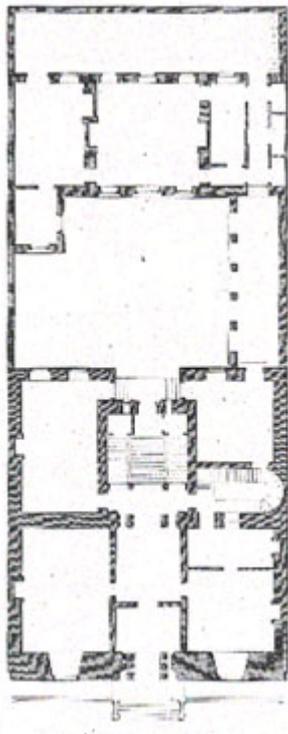
first, or principal floor, have the more elaborate Corinthian rather than the simpler Ionic capitals. To the left, out of view, is one of the three clocks in the Mansion House made by George Hallifax, a member of the corporation, and twice mayor.

On the landing, displayed in a case, is the grant of arms dated 1 September 1975 made by the Garter Principal King of Arms to the new Metropolitan Borough of Doncaster after its creation on 1 April 1974. The two Italian metal statues of pageboys holding lamps first appear in the inventory for 1865 but, unfortunately, their origin is unknown at present.

The wall on which the grant of arms hangs was originally the external wall of the Mansion House. It was not until 1864 that the window, where the Italian pages now stand, was removed and the gallery was built behind to improve access to the rooms on the first floor.

The Plan of the Ground Floor

The Ground Floor



There are four rooms on the ground floor, as the floor plan in Paine's Plans shows. Beyond them are the kitchens and domestic offices, originally joined to the main building by a colonnade.

Paine's published plans give no indication of the use of these rooms on the ground floor. However, in Doncaster Archives there are volumes of Mansion House inventories dating from 1756 to 1908. These allow us to discover the use to which the rooms were put and how they were furnished. They show that the Mansion House, besides being a place for civic entertainment, was used for local government purposes from the beginning.

In the mid-eighteenth century, the ground floor housed the grandly-titled 'court of judicature' (where the mayor and his three fellow alderman-magistrates held a magistrates court every Monday morning), a councillors' room, an aldermen's room and a gentlemen's dining room.

To the right of the main staircase is another, slighter, staircase. This is the backstairs, the separate staircase by which the servants moved from floor to floor. These were probably removed in 1806, when the new dining room was built and the backstairs were relocated to the rear of the dining room.

The Front Committee Room



The ground floor of the Mansion House contains several rooms whose purpose was severely practical. To the left of the front door lie the two committee rooms. Probably this room was originally used for the twice-weekly magistrates court for the borough. Round the large oval committee table are many of the set of mahogany dining chairs made by William Lilley (about 1735- 1816) of Doncaster. The entire set of twenty-seven was made in 1806 for the new dining room and cost £66. 60p.

On the wall is one of three clocks made by George Hallifax (about 1726 -1811), two of them especially for the Mansion House. Hallifax was a migrant from a clock-making family in Barnsley and admitted as a freeman of Doncaster in 1750. As a condition of his admission as a freeman, the corporation ordered him to make a watch to the value of seven guineas (£7.35p) for the Mansion House. In June 1770, the corporation ordered another from him for the great kitchen. He became a councillor in 1755, an alderman fifteen years later and mayor in 1775 and again in 1791.

On the wall hang photographs of the mayors of Doncaster Metropolitan Borough. The portraits of the mayors of the former County Borough of Doncaster from 1835 to 1974, which were formerly on display in the Mansion House, are now to be found at Doncaster Archives.

The Rear Committee Room



Paine's published plans give no indication of the use of the ground floor rooms. However, in Doncaster Archives there are volumes of inventories for the Mansion House from 1756 to 1908, which list all the furnishings and fittings and describe the use to which the rooms were put.

In the eighteenth century, one of the ground floor rooms was used as the magistrates court, where the mayor and his three fellow aldermen-magistrates held court every Monday morning. This was probably what is now the front committee room. Other rooms were used as a councillors' room, an aldermen's room and a gentlemen's dining room.

The rear committee room may have been, on account of its size, the room available to the twenty-four 'common council men', rather than the twelve aldermen, as the senior members of the council were called.

In the rear committee room there are, amongst the paintings, two relating to Doncaster's racing history: Royal Lancer, the winner of the 1922 St Leger, painted by Lynwood Palmer, and the finish of the St Leger in 1958, painted by J Appleyard. The wall clock is by Richard Holt of Newark.

The Civic Parlour



To the right of the front door is the parlour of the chairman of the council, which was formerly the mayor's parlour. According to Paine, 'in case any mayor was inclined to keep his mayoralty in it (that is, the Mansion House) care was taken to provide convenient apartments to receive his family'. But the rooms provided above the second floor, accessible only by the back stairs, were hardly adequate for the purpose. Very few mayors have ever made use of them. The inventories describe them as a best chamber and servants garrets. The mayor was not allocated this ground-floor parlour until 1835.

The office of mayor is very old-established in Doncaster. (Since May 2002, the mayor of Doncaster has been an elected office.) The earliest reference to a mayor in the borough records is in 1427, when Thomas Dowssyng, mayor, was witness to a property transaction. The borough formally had royal permission to appoint a mayor in 1467 and, from 1493, there is a complete list of mayors down to the present day.

The photographs of the mayors from 1974 (when the present Metropolitan Borough came into being) are hung on the walls of the Front Committee Room. Doncaster Archives has the portraits of most of the mayors of Doncaster from 1835 to 1974, which formerly hung in the mansion house.

The Great Kitchen



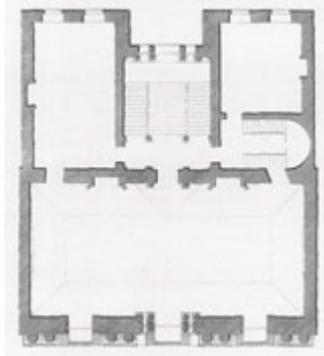
Like any historic house, the Mansion House has an extensive series of rooms where servants prepared and stored food. In the single-storey service wing at the rear of the premises was a back kitchen, a little back kitchen, larder and pastry larder and, most important of all, the great kitchen. In this room were prepared all the great feasts which the corporation held to entertain the local and the visiting gentry and nobility.

In the early nineteenth century, the mayor routinely hosted six great feasts each year. There was an October feast, held after his election to office, balls and suppers in honour of both the king and the queen, two dinners for the assize judges and a 'Green Goose feast'. There would also be 'occasional dinners to strangers to support the credit of the corporation'.

The great kitchen was converted into a dining room in the 1980s, although many of its historic features, including the impressive kitchen range, were retained.

The Mansion House also boasts a range of cellars. Up to the 1830s, the inventories (available at Doncaster Archives) show that they were used to store prodigious quantities of port for consumption by council members.

The Plan of the First Floor



Access to the first, the principal, floor is by the magnificent staircase which rises from the vestibule. In Paine's original design, the staircase was at the rear of the building, and directly above it was a Venetian window, complementary to the window at the front of the house. This was altered in 1864.

The simple plan of the first floor of Paine's building follows that adopted in public assembly rooms in other eighteenth-century towns.

In this standard plan there are three rooms: a card room, a tea room and a ballroom. Paine placed his grand 'banqueting room' so that it extended along the entire High Street frontage of the house, flanked to right and left by the two subsidiary rooms.

The card room, on the right, is entered by a vestibule which also contains the backstairs, the means by which the servants moved from floor to floor.

This placing of the backstairs was an inconvenient arrangement and in the alterations by William Lindley in 1806, the backstairs were removed and new access stairs for servants were built at the rear of the new dining room.

The Mayoress's Drawing Room



The original tea room is now known as the mayoress's drawing room. The copy of the portrait of Mrs Siddons by Sir Joshua Reynolds is a reminder of the theatrical life of the town. This centred on the corporation's theatre in the market place (where Mrs Siddons herself appeared on stage), which flourished as part of the racing festivities.

Other portraits in the room are of the 2nd Viscount Halifax, owner of Hickleton Hall and father of the lord Halifax who was Foreign Secretary on the eve of the Second World War, Archdeacon F G Sandford, vicar of Doncaster from 1905 to 1928, and T B Mason, town clerk from 1835 to 1867.

The Salon



On the right of the staircase is the former card room, now called the salon. It has been radically altered, and for the better, since it was designed by Paine. It was enlarged in 1806 and altered again in 1831. In Paine's original scheme, this room was smaller for (as can be seen on the webpage with the plan of the first floor), it was separated from the ballroom by the back stairs. In 1806, new back stairs were built at the west end of the new dining room (of which more later), to allow direct communications with the kitchens below.

The space occupied by the old back stairs was absorbed into the salon. The building of the new dining room on the west side would have deprived the salon of its windows, and so roof lighting must have become necessary. In 1831, the ceiling was raised to the same height as the dining room, which is now the council chamber. The fine rectangular roof lantern probably dates from this time. The alterations of 1831 were carried out by William Hurst (1787-1844), a native of the town, an alderman of the corporation and a one-time pupil and then partner of William Lindley, architect of the 1806 alterations.

This photograph of the salon shows the portrait of Queen Elizabeth II by Leonard Boden, presented by Lord Scarbrough in 1965 and another of Queen Mary, consort of King George V, painted by J St Helier Lander and purchased in 1938. Other portraits hung in this room include King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra, presented by Lord Halifax in 1934.

Amongst local portraits the most notable is that of Sir Edmund Beckett of Doncaster, M P for the West Riding from 1841 to 1859 and chairman of the Great Northern Railway Company. His influence was decisive in bringing the Company's locomotive engineering works to Doncaster in 1853 and, in doing so, changing Doncaster from a market town serving the surrounding agricultural district into an industrial town.

The Gallery and the Peace Window



From the ground floor there is an imperial-style staircase: that is, a staircase with one flight of stairs which then divides into two at an intermediate landing. Mounting the stairs brings visitors up to the first, or principal floor. In Paine's original design, there was no communication between the card and the tea room except by passing along the landing in front of the banqueting room, or ballroom. The construction of a new dining room to the rear of the building in 1806 would have made this inconvenient, and in 1864 the last significant alteration was made to the Mansion House.

This was the introduction of a gallery behind the staircase. This allows direct access between

these two rooms and, by providing an alternative means of circulating, prevents congestion on the landing.

The new feature was designed to fit sympathetically into its context and only details in the glass of the roof-light readily identify the work as Victorian. The design was the work of William Butterfield, the borough surveyor and was carried out in 1861.

The original Venetian window in the rear wall over the staircase was removed but the design was copied in the new external wall. The window was renewed and the glass replaced in 1986 by the new panes of stained glass, specially-commissioned from Harry Harvey of York, to commemorate the International Year of Peace.

On the walls are four of a set of six rococo mirrored sconces (candle-holders). These are some of the few original furnishings now remaining, and all six were purchased for a total of £60 18s (£60. 90p).

The Ballroom



The focus of the whole building is the room that has been known as the ballroom since 1826. Before that date it was known as the 'grand room'. It was called the 'banqueting room' by Paine when he published his Plans in 1751. It is a 'double cube' room, so called because it is sixty feet long, thirty feet high and thirty feet wide.

Again, Paine is perhaps recalling the designs of Inigo Jones. Amongst Jones's works is a double cube room for the earl of Pembroke at Wilton House, Wiltshire. In his published Plans of 1751, Paine showed the room as having paintings on the ceilings, an expense beyond the resources of the corporation. This was perhaps another of his attempts to aggrandise his commission in the eyes of possible future patrons.

The room does not have paintings in the ceilings but instead it has plaster work of a wonderfully high quality, the work of Joseph Rose or Thomas Perritt, who were amongst the finest craftsmen of the age. The room is lighted by three crystal chandeliers, which the corporation decided to buy in 1750.

There is a musician's gallery over the principal entrance doors, which lead from the landing at the top of the imperial-style staircase. The portraits include those of King George III, presented by Lord Eardley in 1804, and the first portrait to hang in the House, and Queen Victoria. There are portraits of three generations of the grandees who lived at Wentworth Woodhouse: the Marquis of Rockingham, Prime Minister in 1782, and his successors the fifth and sixth Earls Fitzwilliam. These noblemen were among the most influential figures in Yorkshire society and politics.

In addition, there are also portraits of the Doncaster-born Sir Frank Lockwood, the barrister who defended the locally-notorious Charles Peace, and M P for York, who became Solicitor General in 1894, and Lord Lonsdale, the sporting earl (painted by Sir John Lavery, 1930), another reminder of Doncaster's racing history.

The Council Chamber, formerly the Dining Room



Sixty years after the ballroom was completed, it was provided with a companion of equal, and perhaps less awesome, elegance. In 1806, a new dining room was designed for the corporation by William Lindley (about 1729 - 1818). A pupil of the celebrated architect, John Carr of York, Lindley had moved to Doncaster by 1783, where he carried on a thriving local architectural practice.

It seems likely that the new dining room was inspired by the wish of the corporation to present the best possible image of the town for the visit of the Prince Regent (the future George IV) and his brother, the Duke of Clarence (the future William IV) to the Doncaster races in 1806. They stayed with Lindley in his house on South Parade. Given the importance of racing to the town, it is natural that the royal visit should prompt a major improvement in the facilities available in the town's most important building. Similarly, the alterations of 1831 were specifically intended to cater for the needs of the gentry and nobility attending the races. These later alterations were the work of a pupil of Lindley, William Hurst, who was also an alderman (senior member) of the corporation.

The new dining room is, like the ballroom, sixty feet long, but is three feet lower and three feet narrower, dimensions which seem to make it a more welcoming space than the double cube room. The room as we see it now is an amalgamation of the talents of Lindley and Hurst. The inventory of 1834 refers to a new orchestra, the musician's gallery in the photograph, and in 1831, £130 was spent on the large mirror at the far end of the room and fifty guineas (£52.50p) on the two chandeliers.

Since 1914, when the council ceased to meet in the Guild Hall in Frenchgate, the dining room has been adopted as the council chamber. As we have seen, the ground floor has provided a home to council business from the beginning, and in the Mansion House of to-day, civic practicalities rather than civic pleasures dominate its daily life.