

Nostalgia

Looking back at Pembrokeshire of yesteryear

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Researching Rooms like hunting for gold

In a two-part feature, historian Mark Muller goes digging to try to find out more about the history of Haverfordwest Assembly Rooms

I HAVE delayed writing anything about the Assembly Rooms in Haverfordwest because there is an absence of any meaningful documentation relating to the early years of the life of this building.

The blue plaque on the wall outside, placed there many years ago by the civic society, suggests that it was built in the early part of the 18th century, which I shouldn't really cast any doubt on as an executive member, but there are just ever so slight - dare I say it - doubts as to how old this building might be.

It's a pity, and an irony, that so little should be known about number 5 High Street, just above Dark Street - because of all of the buildings in the town, this one was for many years, the absolute centre of the upper-strata social life of the county.

Every town of any size had their own Assembly Rooms, and every year the landed gentry moved, from their country estates where they spent glorious, stress free summers, to their town houses for the winter; made bearable for the poor souls by the succession of balls held in the Assembly Rooms during "the season".

(The season lasted traditionally from just after Christmas until June, which seems quite a long period... but then there was quite a lot of socialising to do.)

One of the few early descriptions of arrivals at a ball portrays carriages waiting to offload their cargoes, or else of ladies being conveyed there in sedan chairs. It is perhaps a wonder that the site was chosen, in that fairly steep hills have to be ascended from practically anywhere in the town to arrive there.

During the Victorian and Edwardian period, the Assembly Rooms and the season were important calendar events for debutante



Haverfordwest Assembly Rooms after conversion

balls, giving young ladies the opportunity of "coming out"... although I think that the phrase might mean something else now.

The problem is that there are potentially three conflicting dates relating to the properties that stood on this site.

The building that was knocked down to make room for the Assembly Rooms was the White Hart, a coaching inn from where, we are told, the first mail coach left Haverfordwest for London on July 7, 1787 (prior to this the system had been to use 'Standing Post' or Post Horses).

But a well documented event is recorded in 1785, two years earlier, when Prince William, later William IV, danced, we're told, in the Assembly Rooms while the ship he was serving on (*HMS Hebe*) was anchored off Milford Haven.

And in addition, isn't the argument between General Sir Thomas Picton and

land agent Charles Hassal (which ended in a subsequent duel with Hassal besting Picton) supposed to have taken place in the Assembly Rooms in about 1785?

So, might one of these events need correction... or perhaps the Assembly Rooms were located in a different building in the town when Prince William visited or when the Hassal/Picton argument took place?

This is indeed possible; a lease document of the property next down to the Assembly Rooms, on Tower Hill and dated 1804, describes the upper boundary as being next to "The New Assembly Rooms".

That description supports the possibility of an "Old Assembly Rooms", doesn't it? And I have a vague recollection of the Kings Arms in Dew Street as having possibly served this purpose, but of course, information that might take us in that direction is just as sparse; I'll just have to dig deeper...(or

wait for readers to educate me further).

In among all of this, I have recently discovered gold in the Pembrokeshire Archives. Anything bearing the name of "the Assembly Rooms" is extremely rare.

It sadly doesn't throw any light on the above, but is a minute book dealing with the later life of the Rooms and records the meetings of the "Committee for the Management of The Assembly Rooms" which was brought into life in 1863.

The list of names of those invited to serve on this committee reads like a Who's Who of mid-19th century Pembrokeshire; Lord Milford, Lord Cawdor, Baron de Rutzen, Lord Kensington, Capt Lort Stokes, Capt Lloyd Philipps, Rev Martin, Mr Scourfield MP and others, with the power to add to their numbers if they felt the need.

Next week I will reveal the minutes of some of those meetings.



Haverfordwest Assembly Rooms in sadder days