

Brian Moore -

Piece Hall Patron

I must admit that my first foray into live culture wasn't without ignoble motives. My visit to Leeds, to see a production of *The Nutcracker*, was solely on the basis that I was trying to impress Amanda Weaving, a fellow 6th former. Irrespective of intent, the production was captivating and I have seen at least one production every year since 1979.

The jump to opera wasn't too far, after seeing so many ballets, and the thing is, you never know who you will meet at the opera. It could be someone highbrow, like Baroness Bakewell. It could be someone a little less so, like Frank Skinner. I have been going to the Holland Park Open Air Opera for many years and I've seen some wonderful performances, not least the contemporary version of *Il Travatore*, which had the middle-class, middle-aged audience on their feet stamping and whooping their approval. What I never expected was that a chance meeting with Nicky Chance-Thompson at one of its sponsor's evenings, would lead to me becoming a patron of Halifax's finest architectural structure – the Piece Hall.

Like most people of my age (58 – my God, where did those years go?), my youthful memories of the Piece Hall were of an imposing but run-down building, which had a few craft shops and a dingy market at the weekends. There were occasional events in the cobbled square but, beyond that, few people seemed to know or care about the building. My distinct memory is of the Town Council arguing endlessly over what should be done with the fading edifice, particularly as nearby councils were getting on with demolishing old buildings and building progressive ones. In fact, I believe we came within one vote of losing the Piece Hall as we know it. The only thing that saved it was that they couldn't agree what to put in its place. The last mooted venture I recall was a Japanese business consortium was going to turn it into a hotel. Whatever the reason, thank God Halifax/Calderdale didn't follow suit.

What we would have lost is the finest example, anywhere in the world, of a cloth trading building, dating back to its opening in 1779. You can trace cloth-making back to Halifax in the 12th Century and the subscriptions provided to fund the Piece Hall delivered a magnificent multi-colonnaded building, purposely resplendent as homage to Roman architecture.

The fortunes of the Piece Hall rose and then died when the industrial revolution

progressed. For about 50 years the Hall thrived, as nearly 300 clothiers traded from its rooms, but cottage industry manufacturing was never going to compete with mass production and mills and with that the need for a central market hall evaporated.

The following century saw the Piece Hall used as a general trading market, with varying degrees of success, until it became clear that it could no longer run as a private enterprise. In 1868 it was handed over to the Halifax Corporation as a gift and it became a wholesale market for fish, game, fruit and vegetables. Under civic management it thrived for many decades. The changing nature of trade and manufacture saw a gradual decline in the fortunes of the Piece Hall and by the 1960s it was struggling. Not only did the trade decrease but the building itself required updating and restoring to match other purpose-built retail buildings.

It was at this point that the natural conundrum of the Piece Hall came into stark focus. As a historically important, Grade 1 listed building there was a limited amount of alteration that you could do to its inside or outside. However, the demands and needs of businesses had changed and what was ideal for a body of independent clothing retailers was not what was needed in modern times. Just one example of the impracticalities of the building is shown by the fact that there were only four toilets. How could it be made practical for modern trade and yet not significantly alter its magnificent and legally protected structure? It is a problem that exists to this day and the fact is there is no ideal, cheap and quick solution. The Piece Hall's strengths as an edifice were also its gravest weaknesses as an ongoing concern.

The seminal decision was taken in 1972 to put more public money into cleaning and restoring the woodwork and metalwork and other services were improved. It is no exaggeration to say that, had this not taken place, the building would probably have not survived as we know it today.

The official re-opening in 1976 saw a number of small shops occupy some of the rooms but an art gallery and museum were added and the Tourist Information Centre was housed in the building. From that time until its recent and magnificent £19m refurbishment, the Piece Hall never made enough money to exist without support from Calderdale MBC.

My chance meeting with Ms Chance-Thompson came after the 2017 re-opening and the transformation achieved with money from Calderdale, the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Garfield Weston and Wolfson foundations. When I saw the new Piece Hall it is no exaggeration to say that I was completely awed. If this building was situated elsewhere, it would be feted, as it should be, as a superb creation that allows businesses, shops, civic amenities and outside events to co-exist against the stunning backdrop of the town's manufacturing past.

I accepted the invitation to become a patron without hesitation, as I passionately believe that too many of our historic buildings have been demolished or altered beyond recognition. I understand the practical problems the building presents but what should be remembered is that we do not know in what direction future trading trends will take us and whether the current difficulties will always be there. We do know that once you let a building like this go, it will never return and you have lost some part of your past.

As I discussed various aspects of the operation of the Piece Hall with Nicky, an old attitude became apparent. The people of Halifax are proud to show off the building; they understand its place in history but they are reluctant to pay for it. I don't imagine this is a problem peculiar to this town but it is the sort of debate that doesn't happen in, say, France, where civic buildings, art and public works are seen as for the general good, irrespective of whether they make a profit or not. It is easy for me, as a non-council taxpayer in Halifax to say that public money must be made available to give Nicky and team the chance to make the Piece Hall self-financing and they are making huge strides towards this. However, I don't object to my money being used in this way where I live in London, as I believe you cannot always put a price on the value gained from this sort of structure.

I hope, and I will try to help, the people of Halifax to value this building and to take justifiable pride in its uniqueness and splendour. Let's face it, there aren't many places where you can still buy the original Kop Kop sweets, have a gourmet lunch or dinner and see the Manic Street Preachers in the same place, a place that, if you closed your eyes and the sun shone, could be in Tuscany.

BRIAN MOORE
(1973 - 1980)



Brian shows his daughters the display of his rugby shirts on a visit to Standeven House.