

They also acquired the rights to access the hall from the High Street via an arch leading to a passage through the building of the house. That passage currently goes right through the bar and kitchens of the Duchess Public House.

What you see now is the bare bones of the building. Imagine if you will that it was plastered and painted nicely, with cast details of flowers and foliage. On the wall above the entrance "Science Art and Literature" was spelled out in dahlias. The walls were covered in paintings of local worthies, Aldermen and The Mayor. It was opened with great fanfare in 1881, the year of the great exhibition and partly inspired by the feeling of expansion of general knowledge and education that pervaded Britain at the time.

Despite efforts by radicals among the Liberal party to call it the People's Hall, they settled on the title the Public Hall. Later the name was changed to St George's Hall, the name it still carries. Here many a political rally was held – often of the good old riotous example. One trick by their political rivals was to turn off the gas, creating darkness.

It is a large brick built lofty hall, with an apse at the far end, which you can still see from the W and G car park. It has a musicians gallery at the High Street end, not the gallery you see now which was erected by Messrs.' Cullingfords to use as a paper store, but a much smaller one. Those tall arched windows, now boarded up and looking so sad were magnificent and flooded the hall with light. It is a grade 2 listed building – but that was a mistake. The assessors from the listing authorities got confused when they visited the Albert Hall next door, (now the Co-op bank and for years the home of Colchester Repertory company), but they listed that building under then name of St Georges Hall. By the time they had discovered the mistake, they refused to lift the listing and listed them both.

It was a spectacular success and much in demand by amateur and professional musicians and other performers. In 1867 the Colchester Harmonic Society performed Mendelssohn's "Elijah". A successful "Messiah" led to the formation of the Colchester Musical Society, and in 1876 "The principle parts of Bach's sublime oratorio, The Passion were given.

I would like to introduce you to a Mr. Charles Clark – a local arts entrepreneur, visionary and consummate showman, and a man who should be better known. He used to put on events and performances all over Colchester. He became the manager of the Public Hall in 1885 and under his management the place boomed.

Never one to do things by halves, he imported and installed an entire Japanese Village in here for a few weeks, which filled not only the Hall but the entrance passage and the Corn Exchange next door as well. Each day there were demonstrations of Japanese arts and crafts and musical specialties. There were also entertainments in the form of living marionettes, waxworks direct from Madam Tussauds and a performer who went by the unlikely name of Le Clair the Japanese Juggler.

In a nod to the science and mechanics institute still resident here, Charles Clark gave one of the first demonstrations in Britain of The Talking Machine, the "Graphophone." This was the first practical and commercially usable wax cylinder recorder/ players.

As well as music there were displays of clairvoyance, military concerts, spelling bees, panoramas and so on, including Herr Adalbert, who gave his extraordinary entertainment consisting of mid air extravaganzas, spiritual clairvoyance and deceptions, and the "original and only American Slave Troupe and Brass Band" and with it a negro dwarf named Japanese Tommy. There was also an appearance by General Tom Thumb, the famous American dwarf. And a company called The Spectral Opera Company presented Gounod's Faust which included a Pepper's Ghost, a ghostly spectre hovering in mid air by means of carefully placed reflections.

The local newspaper editor and columnist Mark Downe wrote " My own earliest recollection of public entertainment are associated with the gas-vitiated atmosphere of the old public hall where we children were taken to see the one-man performance of Thurton the Suffolk entertainer with his impersonations of "odd folks" and Woodin, the marvelous quick change artist. Whether Woodin's performance would today retain the charm and glamour that it had in the sixties would be questioned, but as it lingers in memory still, it seems almost unparalleled in the wonder of it all"

He went on to say: "The curtain over the front of the public hall apse revealed the coming glories of that coming entertainment. When it was at last withdrawn – and how long the interval of waiting appeared! – there was a screen in the middle of the platform from which emerged the immaculately attired Woodin in evening dress. After a few words of an introductory character he dived behind the screen and to the amazement of the crowded hall reappeared a few seconds later from the other side of the screen dressed as a lady- low necked, adorned with ringlets and attired in a gown of flounced silk. He had transformed himself in an instant into a contralto or soprano, and in a bewitching voice sang such songs as "Beloved Eye, beloved star"

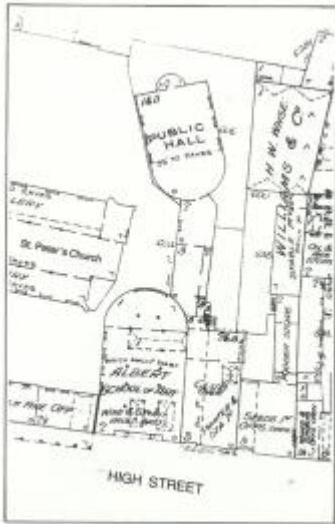
in a manner that captivated the audience. For two hours he kept this up in this astonishing programme of quick change with impersonations of every worthy from Lord Dundreary with his whiskers down to a boor-boy in cap and apron. It was a truly exhausting variety show for one man to carry through nightly and probably has no counterpoint in our time..."

After the Institution's closure in 1860 it was used as a library and reading room, lecture room, and theatre until the owners, the Colchester New Public Hall Co. Ltd., went into liquidation in 1897. The hall then changed hands several times and had a number of uses: as a magistrates' court and cells, a clothing factory, a print-block making factory for Benhams Press and a club for the troops in the First World War, run by the YMCA with 4 million visits by soldiers, 1,750 000 meals served, 100,000 baths taken 2,250 000 sheets of paper and a million postcards issued.

In the 1890s the Club St George was held here (I think, above the shop rather than in the main hall) for young men, which became the 1st Colchester Scouts when the leader read 'Scouting for Boys' and realized that this sort of organization was exactly what the Club St George was already doing. One could therefore claim that the Scout movement began here in Colchester before Baden Powell (who knew Colchester well and put on band concerts in the town possibly at the Hall) invented it.

The neighbouring Repertory Theatre used the hall as a workshop from 1937 (or 1946, sources vary) to 1967. Cullingford and Co. bought the premises in 1948 and rented the basement out separately to Clubb and Rabett, metal workers. From c. 1960 Cullingfords used half the hall as a stockroom and took over the whole of the ground floor in 1967.

The Hall was lined with portraits of local worthies. During the opening ceremony at which the Astronomer Royal Sir George Biddell Airy was present, a portrait of the Chairman was hoisted into place and dedicated with the reading of an ode which was very very long. Here is a short part of it.



Essex Libraries Local Studies Department
A ground plan showing the top of the High Street with the Albert Hall and St. George's Hall. It is taken from a map produced by a firm of civil engineers, Chas. E. Gould Ltd., in 1939.





THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE CITY OF BOSTON, MASS., AS SEEN FROM THE BOSTON COMMONS, 1878. The building is the City Hall, designed by George Lincoln Smith.

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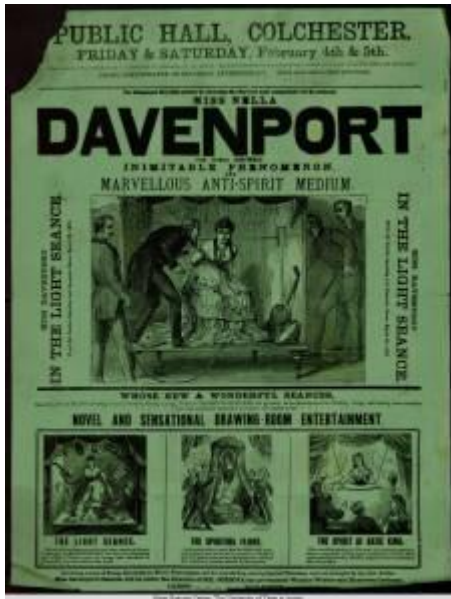
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EASTERN HOLIDAYS.





A dinner in the Public Hall for the wounded, January 1919.



Members of the St. Georges Institute 1906 - 1909. J.H.Heap & Son were the wholesale and manufacturing clothiers using the Public Hall and or the ancillary rooms.

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ODE,

DELIVERED ON THE OCCASION OF THE SESSION

(By Mr. Brougham's Vestition.)

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PUBLIC HALL,

COLUMBIA,

ON THURSDAY, OCTOBER 16, 1831.

BY J. A. TABOR.

PRINTED BY C. A. ALLEN, 105 N. 3RD ST., PHILADELPHIA.