

The Athenaeum

Friday lunchtime 25 July

The Athenaeum was founded in 1797 to provide a meeting place where ideas and information could be exchanged in pleasant surroundings. Today these facilities continue in the present building, erected in 1928 in French renaissance style from Portland stone.

The simple, segment-headed entrance, its keystone carved with the head of Athena, leads to an elegant elliptical staircase. There is a splendid dining room and a spacious news and reading room on the first floor, but the most impressive interior is the second floor library with its vaulted ceiling and Greek revival decoration. It was here we had lunch, followed by two talks, the first by David Brazendale about the history of the club.

David explained how Liverpool became a boom city from about 1760 as a result of shipping and the slave trade. People came from all over Britain and Europe to try and make their fortune. It was a city of trade, not culture. The second generation of merchants in the late 18th century, lead by William Roscoe, became increasingly interested in culture. They needed an institute for learning, a place to study, a forum to discuss matters other than disputes about politics, wars and the slave trade. They wanted to exchange views and opinions, have peaceful discussion and access information about literature, architecture and the arts.

In our second talk, Vincent Roper, senior librarian, explained how between 1797 and 1850 the Athenaeum was the biggest buyer of books in Liverpool, and that these were lent, and still are, to its 500 proprietors purely on trust. The collection of books and pamphlets deals mainly with local matters of importance and includes bequests by notable antiquarians, including the Roscoe collection. There is a fine collection of local maps and charts, and drawings of Liverpool buildings and important dignitaries.

The committee room housed two glazed mahogany bookcases, possibly by Gillow, but as they were full of books it was impossible to look for a maker's stamp. A few expensive items have been sold in the past to raise funds and it has been suggested that these bookcases be sold. Two of our members suggested that if the more important and rare books were copied and stored in digital format, then online access to them by agencies and researchers could be charged for and revenue be raised this way rather than by selling valuable items.

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