

The Piece Hall

Halifax

The Great Concealed Courtyard

Opened in 1779, The Piece Hall was originally built as a cloth hall consisting of 300 rooms for the secure storage of woven textiles arranged around four sides of a central courtyard in Halifax, a town of 80,000 people in West Yorkshire. Its design was eminently practical but also celebrated the international scale of the proto-industrial Yorkshire textile industry of the time and the great wealth, pride and ambition of the 18th century cloth manufacturers. It is now the last survivor of a building type that was specific to the West Riding of Yorkshire and its textile industry.

Its great central courtyard, measuring 90m x 70m, was where the cloth was traded at weekly markets and used as a pleasure ground at other times by the people of Halifax. The Piece Hall was initially a success but the nature of the textile industry changed with the Industrial Revolution and its original use declined over many years. It came to be used for civic gatherings and events and was eventually converted to an open air market in 1871. Buildings and structures were constructed in the courtyard over time, impacting on its purity and elegance as an outdoor room and obscuring the deep neo-classical facades that formed its walls. The buildings and other accretions were however removed during a subsequent conversion of The Piece Hall to a shopping destination and tourist attraction in the 1970s.

By the early 2000s, although The Piece Hall was still a retail and tourist destination that had long been the subject of great admiration, it was in danger of falling into decline. Calderdale Council wanted to make the most of the building to kick-start its transformation of Halifax and the development of a new cultural and learning quarter. In 2009 the Council started the Piece Hall Transformation Project.

The courtyard of The Piece Hall has been ranked with Piazza San Marco in Venice and the Piazza del Campo in Siena as one of the forty greatest Public Squares in the world but the beauty of The Piece Hall courtyard as an urban space is not widely known, most probably because of its location in what many think of as an industrial town in the north of England rather than one of the great European cities. The courtyard has an extraordinary sense of place however. Entering it has been likened to "finding one of the great mosques of Delhi or Cairo; a vast sea of calm hidden in the midst of bustling, narrow streets" and the four courtyard elevations, identical except for variations to accommodate entrances and the sloping site, create a remarkable sense of harmony and calm. The slope of the courtyard creates a three-dimensional form that is unique and creates a wonderful variety of levels and changing viewpoints in and around the building and courtyard.

