

## The Remodelling of Penzance Market House, 1922-1925

by Linda Camidge

The Greek Revival style Market House was built between 1836 and 1838, its architect was the District Surveyor for Bristol, William Harris. Yet, by the early 20th century much needed repairs and increased traffic load around the narrow Penzance streets forced the local authority to consider drastic changes to the building – even demolition. Today this iconic Grade I listed building is on our buildings at risk register – its future very much uncertain.



Market House and Town Hall by William Harris of Bristol.



## ***The plan to lease and alter the building approved by the Town Council 8<sup>th</sup> March 1922***

Repairs are required to the dome and roof, at prohibitive cost: the surveyor has estimated £500 for the roof and £1500 for the dome. The building, less than 100 years old, is not yet even fully paid for. The Town Council [\[1\]](#) is presented with two choices, both of which would entail the loss of £600 revenue from the stall-holders.

1. The Market House can be leased out, producing revenue of £700 a year for the rest of the century from a lease which also absolves the Corporation of responsibility for maintenance.
2. The Market House can be demolished – in itself a costly process.

The first option also includes a remodelling which, at no cost to the borough, reduces the danger and congestion on the south-west corner where the road turns a sharp bend downhill: a spot that is being made increasingly hazardous, year on year, by the increase in motor traffic. The Mayor, Howell Mabbott, supports the remodelling option:

*'We have an opportunity now of widening the road by twenty feet, free of expense. We have an opportunity of having the present market removed into the Market Hall free of cost, and the market prepared on up-to-date lines... We have an opportunity of having the dome... put in repair free of all cost to us. Not only that, but it will be maintained in repair during the whole time of the lease, free of cost to the town.'*

### ***12<sup>th</sup> April 1922***

Architects' impressions are published [\[2\]](#) showing how Cowell, Drewitt and Wheatly envisage the remodelled frontage. With them is a rationale for – and summary of – the intentions: [\[3\]](#)

*'By taking down the end of the market house and setting back the building line and rebuilding with a circular end, a very considerable street widening is obtained... In place of the existing western end there will be a rounded end carrying out the same architectural lines as the present building.'*

Replacing a square with a rounded aspect is promised to improve the look of the building (which it probably did), and stone similar to the original will be used (which it certainly was – a century later it is difficult to distinguish the old from the new). Frederick Drewitt has been described [\[4\]](#) as 'a master of neo-classic architecture' with the great neo-classical architects such as Palladio 'part of life in the firm'. As part of the work, the dome will be re-modelled with columns added to the pilasters between the windows, although this had not appeared in the original architect's illustration. Otherwise, the work is carried out as promised, and the architects' image shows the frontage of the building almost exactly as it looks today if photographed at a quiet time of day with a wide angle lens.

### ***Building phase – begun by March 1923***

The roadway on the north side appears in the architects' image as a wide and useful thoroughfare, rather than a narrow space crowded with stalls as shown in Stanhope Forbes' painting of 1921, *Market Place*. [\[5\]](#) In the way of such architect representations, the published illustration maximises the new open space north and west of the new front entrance in a way that reminds us of earlier engravings. Forbes' painting is already acknowledged [\[6\]](#) as a memorial:

*'Who can forget the suggestion of strength and endurance with which Mr Forbes invested this venerable building. Now it is in the hands of the builder, and its appearance will be changed for ever.'*



**Watercolour by Bouverie Hoyton, whereabouts unknown. Hoyton was a friend of Frederick Drewitt who made a illustrations for the firm.**



**New facade, 1925**

### ***Changes to the access and gradient – Spring 1924***

More crucial is a re-think about the access to the front steps, which had originally been planned to rise straight from the roadway.<sup>[7]</sup> The pavement is now to be continued, while the gradient of the roadway is being reduced by lowering the ground at the northern side of the building by 10 inches. Lloyds' agree to pay the substantial sum of £50 towards this work, which will greatly improve the safety of their customers. It may not be co-incidental that within months of the building re-opening as Lloyds' Bank, through traffic will be barred from the thoroughfare on the north side of the building,<sup>[8]</sup> although the idea of re-opening it to create a one-way circuit will continue to be suggested from time to time.<sup>[9]</sup>

### ***The toilet controversy – April 1924***

The Town Council seeks to install public toilets in the space once occupied by the town post office, at the base of the eastern façade.<sup>[10]</sup> The new conveniences are evidently intended to replace an older facility behind the cabmen's shelter and Humphry Davy statue, which will later be described <sup>[11]</sup> as '...truly inadequate and very unsanitary', and giving rise to an 'abominable' stench during the summer months. In fact this original convenience will remain in use until the 1950s. Its plumbing will later be used for a short-lived 'water feature' on the site, repurposed in the 21st century as a planter.

### ***Finishing off – June to September 1924***

In June 1924, Alfred Smith is given the contract to fit out the new premises in 'battleship linoleum.'<sup>[12]</sup> On July 2nd, the Town Council learns that Lloyds will not meet their deadline to finish the work and have requested an extension until September 29<sup>th</sup> – but the bank are summarily told to take their hoardings down and give the people their pavements back.<sup>[13]</sup>

On 30<sup>th</sup> September the work, presumably completed, is according to the *Cornishman* 'admitted on all hands to be the finest improvement effected in the centre of the town for many years'. <sup>[14]</sup>

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<sup>[1]</sup> Town Council report – 'The Market House' *Cornishman* 8 3 1922 p 5 cols 4-5 – the report states that the meeting had happened 'this morning'

<sup>[2]</sup> Fig I <http://freepages.rootsweb.com/~treevecwll/family/pzmkthse.htm> (accessed 17 4 2021) said to be a photograph of a lost watercolour by Bouverie Hoyton, also published *Cornishman* 12 4 1922 p 5 cols 3-6

<sup>[3]</sup> *Cornishman* 12 4 1922 : 'Penzance Market House and New Lloyds' Bank' p 5 cols 3-6, 'Correspondence' – 'Market House and Penzance Traffic Danger' editorial reply to letter signed 'Ratepayer' p 3 col 4, 'Penzance Market House Banking Scheme Adopted' p 4 col 4

<sup>[4]</sup> <http://freepages.rootsweb.com/~treevecwll/family/pzmkthse.htm> (accessed 17 4 2021) – the words of Raymond Forward, who joined the firm in 1962 and later saved many old images of the Market Place and elsewhere for posterity, publishing them on the site

<sup>[5]</sup> Penlee House Art Gallery and Museum

<sup>[6]</sup> 'Newlyn Academy Pictures' – halfway through long paragraph beginning 'One fact alone' *Cornishman* 28 3 1923 p 7 col 1

<sup>[7]</sup> Town Council meeting report – 'Market House and Bank, the Difficulty of the Gradient' *Cornishman* 20 2 1924 p 3 cols 3-4

<sup>[8]</sup> 'Penzance' paragraph beginning 'The Watch Committee' *Cornishman* 19 8 1925. The speculation that the Bank might have used their donation as leverage to create a quieter environment is my own

<sup>[9]</sup> For example 'Correspondence' – 'Some Neglected Cornish Assets' letter signed 'Ratepayer and Pedestrian' paragraph beginning 'What are the objections' *Cornishman* 20 3 1930 p 2 col7, Town Council meeting report 'Market Jew-Street Lavatory' paragraph beginning 'The chairman' *Cornishman* 11 1 1934 p 5

col 5, 'By-passing Penzance' – 'Chamber of Commerce Discussion' second paragraph beginning 'Mr Michell' *Cornishman* 26 5 1938 p 9 col 3

[10] The proposals and the basis of opposition to them are evident from 'Correspondence' – 'Lavatory Accommodation in Penzance' letter signed 'Tradesman' *Cornishman* 23 4 1924 p 3 col 5; for the Town Council's own debate on the matter see Town Council meeting report 'Lavatory Accommodation' *Cornishman* 9 4 1924 p 4 col 5

[11] Town Council meeting report 'Market Jew-Street Lavatory' *Cornishman* 14 12 1933 p 5 col 3

[12] 'Penzance' – paragraph beginning 'We are pleased to hear' *Cornishman* 4 6 1924 p 3 col 3

[13] Town Council meeting report 'Lloyds Bank' *Cornishman* 9 7 1924 p 5 col 2

[14] 'A Memorable Mayoralty' paragraph beginning 'The opposite was the case' *Cornishman* 1 10 1924 p 7 col 5