

A temple to textiles

A magnificent Georgian venue designed to showcase the finest Yorkshire cloth, the Halifax Piece Hall has been repurposed numerous times over the centuries. **CONNIE ROUT** explores this spectacular al-fresco venue

With its graceful columns and sweeping courtyard, the Piece Hall in Halifax could, if you squint, be mistaken for a grand Venetian piazza. The surrounding green hills (and not-so-Italian weather) provide a hint, though, that this one-of-a-kind historic site is firmly rooted in West Yorkshire.

A Grade I listed building standing just a short walk from Halifax train station, the world's last surviving Georgian cloth hall is a dazzling reminder of the region's rich textile history. Yet, in the 1970s, this cultural gem was almost lost – and was saved from demolition by just one council vote.

The Piece Hall's story begins in 1779 when it was opened as a centre for the sale of 'pieces' of hand-woven woollen fabric (a 'piece' was a 30-yard length). For two hours every Saturday it buzzed with activity as around 300 clothiers, based in the rooms surrounding the vast square, traded with merchants from Halifax and beyond.

Not long afterwards, though, the industrial revolution swept across the region, and those smaller traders were cut out of the equation when large-scale mill production replaced traditional cottage industry. By 1830, fewer than 200 of the Piece Hall's rooms were in use, and its sandy facades were becoming blackened by factory smog.

Wandering under its classical archways, today scrubbed clean to reveal their original honey hue, it's hard to imagine those hard times. The Piece Hall has been transformed into an incredible open-air venue where, in recent summers, the likes of Blondie, George Ezra and UB40 have drawn thousands of

music-lovers to this otherwise unassuming market town.

Public gatherings aren't a new occurrence at the Piece Hall. With balconies running the lengths of its 6,100-square-metre courtyard, it's the perfect location in which to assemble an audience. In 1806, renowned abolitionist and Yorkshire MP William Wilberforce delivered a political speech from the Piece Hall's steps. And in 1830, radical MP Henry Brougham campaigned for electoral reform to crowds gathered here.

On a lighter note, in 1861 the Piece Hall welcomed Charles Blondin, the French performer renowned for his death-defying tightrope walk across the Niagara Falls. Above admiring onlookers, he made a dizzying journey from one corner of the courtyard to the other along a high-wire – reportedly blindfolded.

Also in the 19th century, the Piece Hall played host to popular Whitsuntide 'big sings'. A staggering 34,000 people reportedly joined voices in the square in 1856, piling onto the balconies and cramming into temporary stands for the occasion; today, the capacity is set at a more comfortable 5,500.

For much of its existence, though, the Piece Hall has been a commercial hub. In the Victorian era it hosted a market selling fruit, vegetables, fish and game, and the space has evolved with a shifting world. Since then, it's championed local businesses, swerved demolition, and re-established itself as a cultural treasure.

When not dancing the night away at a gig, visitors to the Piece Hall should set aside time to explore its independent shops, join a heritage tour or workshop, or simply people-watch while relaxing at one of the bars, cafes and restaurants flanking the magnificent square. There's also an excellent free visitor centre exploring this vibrant chapter in the tale of England's textiles. **IT**

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For more information, head to thepiecehall.co.uk

// Charles Blondin walked across the courtyard along a high-wire – reportedly blindfolded //

Saved from demolition in the 1970s, today the Halifax Piece Hall is a popular destination for shopping, eating, drinking and concerts in the central piazza



Some 315 rooms, originally occupied by cloth salesmen, open onto colonnaded walkways surrounding the 6,100-square-metre courtyard

Yorkshire-born abolitionist and politician William Wilberforce, elected MP for Hull aged just 21, spoke at Halifax Piece Hall in 1806



A painting of the Piece Hall from the early 19th century shows that it essentially served as a town square as well as a business venue

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