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THE ULSTER HALL.

Belfast has been for many years increasing with a rapidity beyond that of any other town or city in this country; and, as its population multiplied and its wealth accumulated, the necessity for public buildings and popular institutions became more and more felt. Places of resort for the dense population of the town; halls in which to hold meetings and favourite amusements, were found to be required.

Private individuals, companies and organised societies, endeavoured to supply this lack, but all their calculations were outstripped by the ever-advancing progress of the town, and accommodation was found to be still wanted on occasions of concerts and other popular entertainments. To meet this necessity, the Ulster Hall Company (Limited) was formed, for the purpose of erecting a great public hall, which would be adapted to the wants of the community, and be, at the same time, a credit to Belfast, and another proof of the enterprising spirit of its inhabitants,

The project thus started has been ably carried out, and the embodiment of an idea which long prevailed amongst all classes of the people – to have a large and commodious hall for all popular purposes – is now to be seen stretching from Bedford Street to Linen-hall Street, a distance of 240 feet, and occupying in width 90 feet, while its realisation is still further carried upwards to the height of some 80 feet or more; and this is now known as the Ulster Hall, and as such it will stand without a compeer, at least till the generations now living will all have passed away.

This building has been well named “The Ulster Hall.” To it pre-eminence must be given throughout the whole province, and the province will be glad, no doubt, to recognise it as their own, and feel proud that Ulster can boast of possessing the largest public building for popular purposes which has hitherto been erected in Ireland.

The plan of the Hall was by Mr. W. J. Barre, architect, who received the first prize offered by the directors of the company for the best design of a suitable building, and whose plan was, of course, adopted; and, with some alterations to increase the size of the edifice, has been carried out by the contractors – the Messrs. Fulton – who completed their work in a very creditable manner.

The Ulster Hall stands, as already intimated, in the grounds which had for so many years lain unoccupied at a short distance behind Donegall Square South, running from Bedford Street to Linenhall Street along a new street now known as Franklin Street. The front stands in Bedford Street, and presents a very beautiful appearance. In the immediate vicinity are situated some of the very largest and most elegant of the establishments occupied by gentlemen engaged extensively in the staple trade of Ulster.

The beautiful and the practical are thus brought into close proximity, and give evidence that, while Belfast is a busy mart of industry, the monotonous hum of the spinning-jenny and the continuous clack of the power-loom can be hushed to silence, in order that the rich and the

poor, the manufacturer and the sons and daughters of toil, may meet together beneath the arched roof of the new Hall, to listen to sweeter sounds and more melodious strains than machinery can produce, and to spend there a few short hours of relaxation, pleasure, and enjoyment.

The large hall contained within the space previously named is 138 feet long, 63 feet wide, and 63 feet high. The remainder of the space is occupied – next Bedford Street – by a large and beautiful entrance, 30 feet square, handsomely floored with tessellated pavement. At either side of this are two cloak-rooms. From it, doors lead into wide passages which surround the large hall, and from which the stairs ascend to the gallery, and a minor hall above.

Next Linenhall Street is the kitchen, with every requisite that modern skill and invention have produced. Adjoining this are rooms for the caretaker. Above these are anterooms, from which doors open to the orchestra and platform of the hall.

When the large hall is entered, the first thing almost that strikes the eye is the height to the ceiling—a distance of sixty-three feet from the floor. This, of course, tends to make the whole present an appearance of grandeur somewhat majestic, which can never be attached to a low-roofed building. This large hall is lighted by seven windows on each side, placed at a considerable distance from the floor – indeed, much above even the highest portion of the gallery. The light afforded through these is excellent. In a word, the lighting and ventilation may be said to be perfect.

The gallery spreads itself over the entrance doors of the Hall, and runs along both sides to within a short distance of the orchestra. There is space for four rows of seats round the gallery, and at present it has been seated with chairs for first-class ticket-holders at any public concerts or other assemblies in the building. This gallery will accommodate within a few of 500 ladies and gentlemen – allowing, of course, for the compressible nature of even the most expansive dresses in which either could appear.

The body of the Hall has been seated for, and divided into, three classes. The front space next the orchestra is arranged for second-class ticket-holders. Next to the forms, with backs, set apart for these, is a space seated with chairs, similar to those on the gallery, for first-class ticket-holders, and the back part of the Hall is seated as the front portion for third-class ticket-holders. About 1,500 can be comfortably accommodated in this part of the building.

The orchestra, in which the organ of the Classical Harmonists' Society has been erected, after being removed thither from the Victoria Hall, is well arranged to the best advantage, so as to produce, when fully occupied, the greatest effect. It is capable of containing from 200 to 250 performers.

Such is the interior of the Large Hall, so far as space is concerned. But while the chief aim seems to have been – and properly so – to provide accommodation, yet the ornamental has not been neglected.

The space between the windows, and at the same height around the walls over the orchestra and the end gallery, has been beautified by numerous figures, representing the shamrock, the

harp, &c, as emblems of Erin and its old bardic poetry. Over this again are masks which add to the appearance of the whole.

In order to provide for the lighting of the Hall at night twelve sun-lights have [been] placed in the ceiling, forming entirely 750 jets. Beneath the gallery is also well lighted with gas, so that no portion of the house can be left wanting good light.

To the right of the stairs which lead to the gallery is a minor hall 63 feet long, 31½ feet wide, and 31½ feet high. This is also admirably lighted and ventilated – sun-lights similar to those in the large hall being introduced to light it up at night. This hall will be well adapted for all meetings not requiring the immense space in that adjoining.

Everything requisite to complete such an edifice and make it permanently useful and commodious has been provided in this building, which does infinite credit to all connected with the carrying out of the project – either in its conception or its realisation. It is an honour to the town, and will be long looked upon as such. Strangers can now be admitted to see an edifice adapted to all the present wants of the population. Complaints will not be heard that “there is not a hall large enough for a good public assembly to be had in Belfast.” This disgrace to our town has been everlastingly wiped away, and the Ulster Hall will proclaim to all that there is taste, and energy, and enterprise enough amongst the mercantile community of this town to originate and complete any plan necessary to make provision for the requirements of the community.

A better or more enduring testimony of Mr. Barre’s skill as an architect he need hardly aspire to leave to record his name to future generations. The perseverance of Mr. Lyons, J.P., chairman of the company, is only developed in the splendid structure which we have but briefly noticed; and which proclaims silently, but with power, what patience, combined with an undaunted will and never-tiring zeal, can accomplish.

[This article continues with the review of the first concert – see separate PDF]