

Long read: what saving Piece Hall did for Halifax

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In part one of two features, find out how National Lottery funding helped save Halifax's Georgian Piece Hall, but also benefited the town, too.

- [Read: Part two: the future of the Piece Hall](#)

“Halifax is full of character and hidden beauty. The Piece Hall is symbolic of its hidden and great worth.”

John Betjeman, 1979

On Whit Tuesday 1890, an estimated 34,000 singers – mostly poor Sunday School pupils – gathered inside the vast courtyard of The Piece Hall, Halifax.

While “The Sings” had been taking place there since 1831, the spectacular 1890 celebrations marked the centenary of the Georgian building itself.



Piece Hall Big Sing painting by H R Oddy. Credit: Calderdale MBC

They were also the last to be held there until 25 May 2018, when a [singing spectacular](#) was held to celebrate the resurrection of Halifax's heritage treasure – and the rejuvenation of the town.

The story of The Piece Hall

The Piece Hall first opened on 1 January 1779.

The vast 315-room building, constructed around a quadrangle, was to be used as a spectacular “hall of accommodation for manufacturers of worsted and other woollen goods”, where local weavers and merchants would sell their “pieces” of cloth.

Large crowds gathered for “much fanfare and public ceremony” including an evening firework display which saw a rather unfortunate pigeon used to set fire to an illuminated Egyptian pyramid.

It was the centre of an industry which can be traced back to the 12th century.

But by the 1860s, the Industrial Revolution had changed trade forever, and in 1871 The Piece Hall was turned into a wholesale market for fish, game, fruit and vegetables.

In the 20th century it was recognised as a heritage asset - Grade I listed in 1954 - but in the 1970s there was a close shave with demolition. Despite extensive renovation, by the 2000s it had fallen into disrepair.

Nicky Chance-Thompson

Nicky Chance-Thompson, CEO of The Piece Hall Trust

“It was in a real state of decline,” says Nicky Chance-Thompson, CEO of The Piece Hall Trust. “It was being underutilised, there were very few shops, people didn’t really come here.”

In 2012, Calderdale Council applied for funding from what was then the Heritage Lottery Fund. It went on to receive £7million as part of an overall cost of £19m, funded by the council and other bodies. The Lottery money was to be used to help conserve the building, turn the courtyard into an accessible public space, celebrate the building’s heritage and offer learning and volunteer opportunities. It opened on Yorkshire Day, 1 August 2017.

A private trust was set up with a 125-year lease on The Piece Hall, with Nicky taking over as CEO in 2014.

“I was absolutely delighted when I heard the council was going to invest in its assets,” she says. “To be involved in something that was going to breathe new life into this building, to keep it maintained for future generations, and really to serve as a catalyst for regeneration in Halifax... [It was] a real joy to be involved in it.”

Investing in Halifax

Towards the end of the 20th century, Halifax’s famous textile industry had declined sharply. More recently, the town has suffered from austerity measures – in 2013, teachers led the [Northern Towns Against Cuts march](#) from the town hall to The Piece Hall.

However, there was history in the town of using heritage as the basis for regeneration, such as the famous Dean Clough factory buildings. Calderdale Council was set on investment in the town, with the revitalisation of The Piece Hall at the centre. It would be positioned in a “cultural quarter”. The Square Chapel reopened in June 2017 after a £6.6m capital redevelopment, the new Central Library and Archives and revamped Calderdale Industrial Museum opened in September 2017. The nearby Orange Box young people’s centre is also undergoing renovation.

Nicky says: “It was a brave decision, because they were doing this in a period of austerity at its height... but I think even government recognised... if you don’t invest in infrastructure, the economy will be absolutely knackered. Not just in a temporary situation, but in longer-term perspective.”

Cllr Tim Swift, Calderdale Council's leader, said: "Calderdale Council embarked on the visionary, courageous transformation in financially-challenging times, as we could see the potential of The Piece Hall – a major part of our heritage and one of the things that makes Calderdale and Halifax so distinctive – in shaping the future story of our place."



A 2018 recreation of Blondin's 1861 tightrope walk across The Piece Hall. Credit: Stu Johnston

And National Lottery Heritage Fund support was key to that investment taking place. “I think it brings confidence from an outside perspective. If the HLF thought this is worth investing in, it probably is,” says Nicky.

“It’s much more than the capital investment... it’s a confidence thing for me. It’s saying that the story of the Piece Hall is really important [and] not just in a local context...”

“Without [National Lottery Heritage Fund], it could have just been a community asset, rather than an asset of national and international importance.”

How the project has helped Calderdale and its people

“This stunning example of urban renewal should spur on councils of every major city and town in Britain to do something similar.”

Andrew Lloyd Webber, who presented the Hall with a Historic England Angel Award

The revitalised Piece Hall has benefited Calderdale and the town in three ways:

Economic boost

Increased economic confidence can be seen in both inward investment and international attention.

Nicky says: "I live here, and I've seen the change in the town and the new businesses that are coming in. The confidence that it's creating in the local people. And the visitor numbers: over 4m now that we've had here."

She cites Lloyds Bank deciding to stay in the town and also the opening of the Leeds Beckett Business School in the regenerated Piece Mill buildings.

Piece Hall itself has so far created 120 jobs (including part-time and casual roles). It has also nearly filled all of its business units.

One successful tenant is Loafers, a cafe, record shop and life venue which [recently announced](#) that it is expanding.

Another is vintage store and family business Al's Emporium, which moved in after finding it difficult to sustain a physical shop in nearby Todmorden. Co-owner Simone Sargent says: "We were there for two and half years. But unfortunately, the footfall started to get worse, it's the usual thing with the high street... you need a place, a destination. Which is why we decided to take a risk and try The Piece Hall."



Simone Sargent of Al's Emporium with her family

She has been delighted with the result, twice extending the size of their space in the first year, and is grateful for the sense of “security”. The publicity has also helped, the chance to appear on TV’s *Antiques Roadtrip*.

“Halifax was run down when I was a child,” she remembers. “The town seems to have moved, if that makes sense... All the old mills used to be down this section [and they] have all been knocked down or reinvented... I think a lot of that is, specifically recently, to do with The Piece Hall and Halifax Minster, the Industrial Museum, [children’s museum] Eureka.

“Town seems to be shifting this way, and a lot of that is a direct result, of what’s happened to The Piece Hall. Marks & Spencer is down here now!”

She adds: “A lot of the businesses that were around here have had to up their game.”

[Keep reading: The future of Piece Hall](#)

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