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Athenaeum Buildings, 27 Fawcett Street, Sunderland: Investigation and research

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Discovery, Innovation and Science in the Historic Environment



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**ATHENAEUM BUILDINGS
27 FAWCETT STREET
SUNDERLAND**

Investigation and research

Dr Lucy A Jessop

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SUMMARY

Athenaeum Buildings (centred on NZ 39790 56893) is a commercial development in Sunderland which was completed in 1900; it was built on the site of the Athenaeum, a public building which was constructed in 1839-1841 to house the Sunderland Literary and Philosophical Society. Its position on Fawcett Street puts it at the heart of the Sunderland Heritage Action Zone, a project running from April 2017 and led by Historic England (HE) and Sunderland City Council (SCC). At the request of Barbara Hooper of HE's Planning team in the north east and Mark Taylor, conservation officer at SCC, members of HE's Historic Places Investigation team briefly visited the site, researched its history and wrote this report to inform future planning decisions.

CONTRIBUTORS

The building was investigated by Lucy Jessop and Tristan Wilson, and the report was researched and written by Lucy Jessop and edited by Dave Went. Photographs were taken by Lucy Jessop and Tristan Wilson.

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ARCHIVE LOCATION

Historic England Archive, The Engine House, Fire Fly Avenue, Swindon SN2 2EH

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Fig 1: 1:528 Ordnance Survey plan of Sunderland, surveyed 1857 and published 1858. The Athenaeum is shown on the corner of Fawcett Street and Athenaeum Street, the latter clearly taking its name from the building. © and database right Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Ltd. Licence numbers 000394 and TP0024.

THE ATHENAEUM, 1839-1841

The Athenaeum [*Figure 1*] was built in 1839-41 to house the Sunderland Literary and Philosophical Society, in addition to a museum, library and meeting rooms [*Figure 2*]. A prominent corner site was selected which had its principal elevation to Fawcett Street to the west and its secondary elevation facing Athenaeum Street to the north; both streets were recently constructed at this date. Fawcett Street, linking Building Hill with the bridge over the River Wear to Monkwearmouth, swiftly became a popular location for the upper classes of Sunderland society, with three-storey houses and numerous public buildings constructed along both sides. The street soon took on a more commercial function, eventually becoming another high street for the expanding city.

Tenders were invited for the construction of the Athenaeum in August 1839 by the builder Thomas Pratt, who was also the builder of the Penshaw, or Earl of Durham's, Monument to the west of Sunderland.¹ The Duke of Sussex (1773-1843), Grand Master of the United Grand Lodge of England, laid the Athenaeum's foundation stone on 9 November in a ceremony full of masonic ritual including



Fig 2: Late 19th-century photograph of the Athenaeum, showing its elevations to Fawcett Street and to Athenaeum Street. © Sunderland Antiquarian Society.

a procession of masons from Phoenix Hall, the masonic hall on Queen Street.² Building continued during 1840 and though still incomplete in September 1841 the Athenaeum was finished soon after.³

The architect was William Billinton or Billington of Wakefield (c 1809-1860), who was also a civil engineer, and the cost of the building was over £4,500.⁴ Designing in the Greek Revival style, he gave the Athenaeum a giant Ionic portico to Fawcett Street, giant simplified pilasters and a massive entablature with heavy stone parapet. The corners of the two-storeyed building broke forward slightly to form abbreviated corner pavilions on all three elevations. To the south it shared a party wall with 28, Fawcett Street. The building was clad in ashlar, relieved only by horizontal rustication to the ground floor. Windows had unmoulded surrounds, except on the corner pavilions. The general effect was one of heaviness and classical Greek severity.

In 1857 Fordyce described the interior as it was at that date, which is in essence that shown on the Goad Insurance map of 1894 [*Figure 3*]. On the ground floor, one entered through the Fawcett Street portico into a small entrance hall, and then into the central hall (36½ ft by 34 ft) with a gallery around it at first-floor level. It was lit by ‘sash windows in a coved roof’ instead of being top-lit by a lantern.⁵ The building also contained a lecture room (56½ ft by 28 ft) and the Long Room for the Borough Museum (66 ft by 20 ft), and the rooms of the Library and Newsroom also combined to measure 66 ft by 20 ft. There were several anterooms. The lecture room’s dimensions are close to those of the space marked ‘Billiard Room’ on the east of the building, as estimated from the Goad map of 1894, and is shown as top-lit.

The usage of the Athenaeum varied through the 19th century. Initially constructed for the Literary and Philosophical Society (founded 1834) with its subscription library, it also contained a public museum which was funded by the Sunderland Corporation from 1846. A Free Library was opened there in 1858. However, the Society collapsed in 1860 and its books and museum were donated to the town.⁶ The Athenaeum, with its large central hall, remained a popular venue for exhibitions, lectures, political and public meetings, bazaars, conferences, concerts, balls and performances into the 1860s and early 1870s.⁷ It also served as a temporary place of worship for the Wesleyan Reformers and the Mormons, and housed the Sunderland Institute in the 1850s.⁸

From December 1873, however, the building found a new use as the home of the Sunderland Liberal Club, membership of which cost a mere £1 1s (one guinea) per annum.⁹ Alterations were made in preparation for the club’s arrival, with Sunderland architect Frank Caws advertising for tenders for the work in June 1873; he was presumably in charge of the renovations.¹⁰ What these alterations

entailed is not specified, but they may have included the installation of kitchens in the basement in order to provide for the club's dining rooms. Billiards was to be part of the offering, something which the *Shields Daily Gazette* described as 'one of the sheet-anchors of the concern'; the paper feared, however, that 'men who make a practice of playing billiards in a well-refreshed club-room until the small hours of the morning are not exactly on the safe side of the hedge.'¹¹ Billiards became a lucrative source of funds for the club, and the billiard room probably took over the space of the lecture room on the east side of the building.¹² Despite the alterations, by the end of the 19th century the Liberal Club had decided that the Athenaeum in its original form no longer served its purposes appropriately and it was consequently rebuilt.

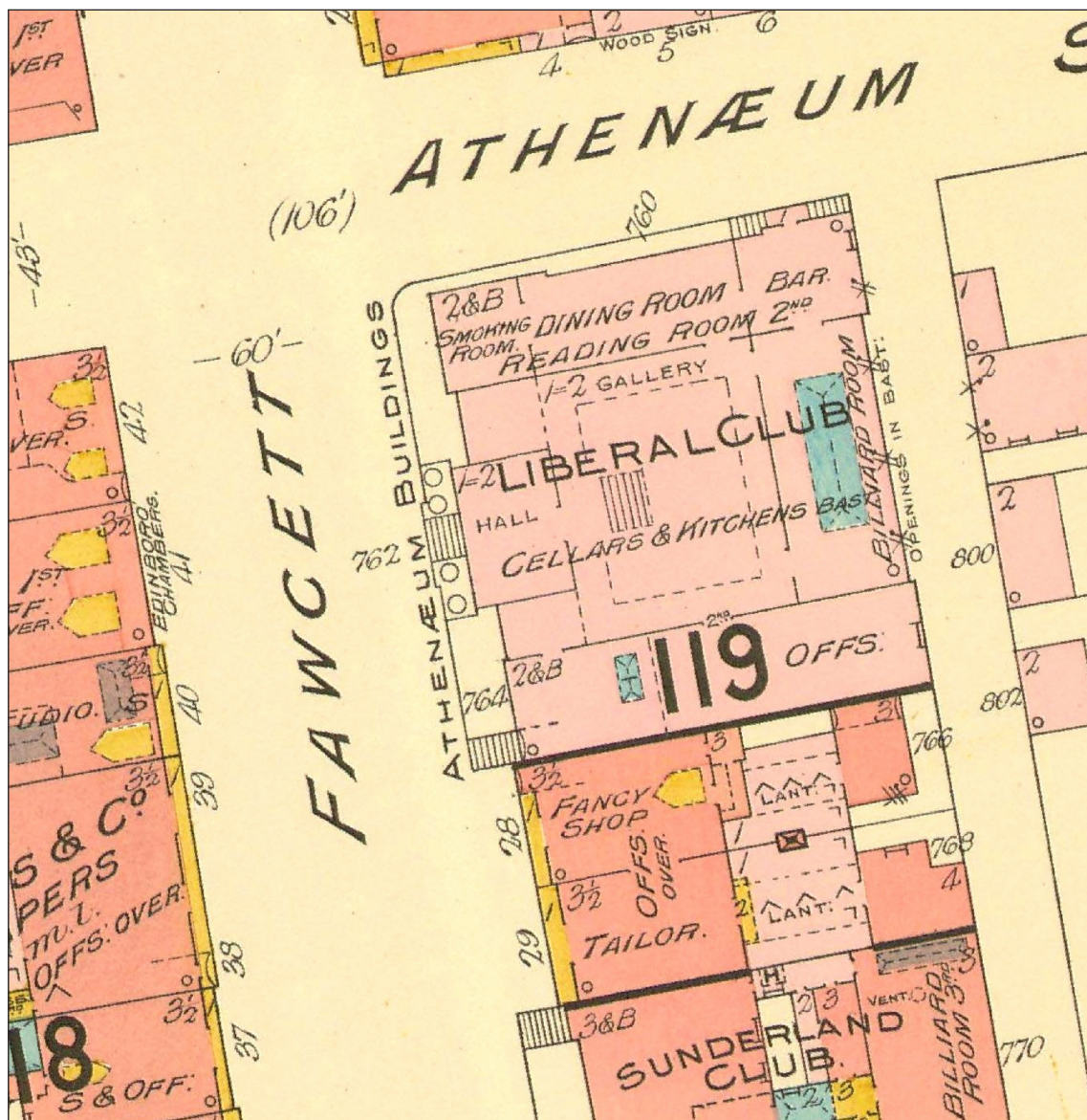


Fig 3: The 1894 Goad map of Sunderland, showing the layout of the Athenaeum while in use as the Liberal Club. © and database right Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Ltd. Licence numbers 000394 and TP0024.



Fig 4: The Fawcett Street elevation of Athenaeum Buildings. © Historic England / Lucy Jessop.



Fig 5: The Athenaeum Street elevation of Athenaeum Buildings. © Historic England / Lucy Jessop.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE ATHENAEUM, 1900

The Liberal Club rebuilt its premises at the end of the 19th century, this time including five commercial shop premises on the ground floor for additional income and two storeys of club accommodation above.¹³ It was opened in December 1900 after nearly two years of rebuilding and the cost of membership remained at a guinea per year.¹⁴ The ground-floor entrance hall was laid with encaustic tiles, from which a broad and 'easy' stair rose to the first-floor rooms, all of which were 'sumptuously carpeted and ornamented'. A corridor ran around three sides of a square, off which there was the 40 by 20 ft members' dining room to the south (lit by the most southerly of the Fawcett Street bay windows and the light well to the east), the 30 by 23 ft private dining room (lit by the next bay window to the north), and the 'reading hall or 'Great Hall' with its musicians' gallery. This room measured 40 ft by 30 ft and was lit by two more bay windows facing Fawcett Street and 'above by 4 smaller windows'.¹⁵ The corner room, lit by two bay windows, was a 'magnificent smoking room'; the other two rooms on the north side were games rooms. Even the roof was intended to be an amenity, the reporter saying that it 'will probably form one of the greatest attractions of the new club when the weather is favourable'.¹⁶

On first appearances, the replacement Athenaeum could not have been more different from its forerunner. The portico was removed and an attic storey was added with Italianate round-headed windows for the pavilions and sweeping Palladian mouldings around the rest of its openings, pilasters articulating each bay; the whole was surmounted by a parapet, the centre of which had a blind balustrade. An entrance doorcase, plate glass shop fronts and playful bay windows at first floor level provided all the visual interest that the previous building may have lacked [*Figures 4, 5 and 6*].



Fig 6: Illustration showing the rebuilt Athenaeum Buildings from the *Sunderland Daily Echo*, 25 August 1900, p3. © www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.



Fig 7: Detail of the eastern elevation facing the rear alleyway, Athenaeum Buildings. The open-textured limestone and sandstone ashlar of the 1840s building, with its projecting corners, can be clearly seen, with later blocked and refenestrated openings. © Historic England / Lucy Jessop.



Fig 8: The eastern elevation, facing the rear alleyway. The red brick 'towers' are an addition of 1900, and the brickwork added to the wall of the billiard room may suggest that it was also refenestrated at this time (replacement windows have been recently inserted). © Historic England / Lucy Jessop.

However, a considerable amount of fabric survives from the two-storey 1840s Athenaeum. The most obvious evidence lies in the rear, eastern wall of the building facing the alley. Here the principal building material is stone, an open, fossil-bearing limestone similar to that from the quarries on Building Hill, now part of Mowbray Park. This walling rises to the height of two storeys plus parapet, the same as the 1840s Athenaeum, and has the slight pavilion projections with inset panels clearly shown on the 1894 Goad plan. The slightly lower central portion allows for the lantern lighting the billiard or lecture room. It was a well-fenestrated elevation [*Figures 7 and 8*], with tall, slim ground-floor windows lighting the central rooms; windows were given sandstone ashlar jambs and lintels, of better quality than the main walling stone; courses of this sandstone are also used in structurally sensitive locations. Some windows have been blocked up, but their lintels and sills are still visible. A large number of square openings at the foot of the wall must have once lit the basement.



Fig 9: The corner of the alley and Athenaeum Street, showing the basic 1840s walling with the 1900 façade grafted onto it. © Historic England / Lucy Jessop.

The Athenaeum Street façade was originally ashlar, as the pilaster strip on the corner with the alley suggests, but the 1900 ashlar façade and shop front has been grafted to it, leaving a distinct pattern of straight and ragged joints [Figure 9]. This also suggests that the first floor of the Athenaeum Street façade is just a re-veneering of the 1840s building, something which the map evidence supports. Goad and Ordnance Survey maps dating from after the rebuilding of 1899-1900 show the survival of the outline of the 1840s Athenaeum [Figure 10], complete with the shallow corner pavilions. In addition, both the Fawcett and Athenaeum Street elevations have the same number and rhythm of bays. The ground floor shop fronts of 1899-1900 pushed the elevation out to the boundary of the area around the 1840s building, but above, at first floor level, the structure remains within the same envelope. There is also a considerable similarity between the entablature of the 1840s building and that of the present structure, between the first and second

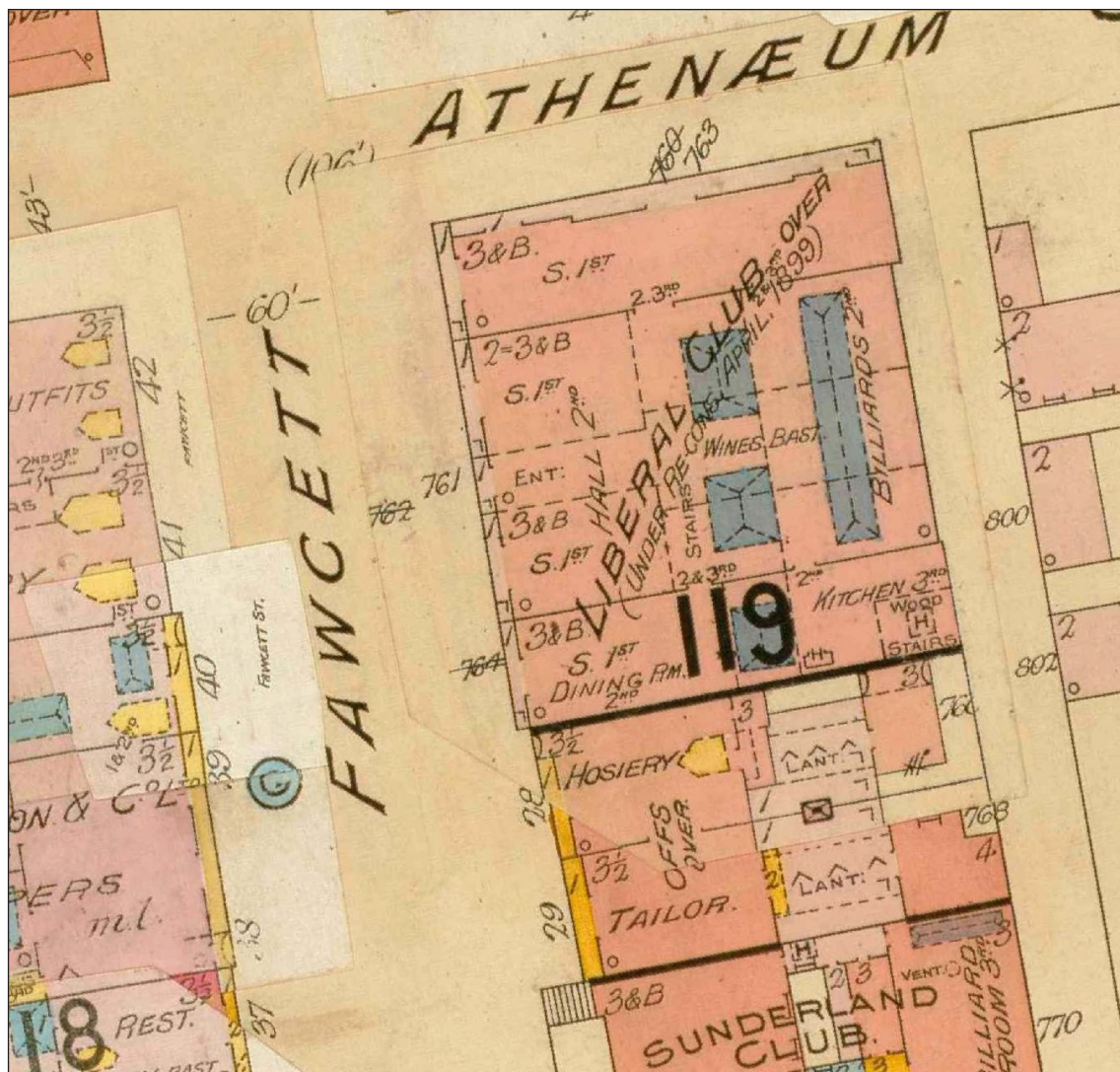


Fig 10: The 1912 Goad map showing the rebuilt Athenaeum Buildings on the same Athenaeum Street, Fawcett Street and alleyway footprint as before. © and database right Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Ltd. Licence numbers 000394 and TP0024.

floors [Figures 11 & 12]. This could either be due to the repetition of fairly standard classical forms or it could represent the considerable reuse of the 1840s stonework. The arrangement of pilasters and the breaking forward of the entablature over them is handled differently in the two phases, so the new elements of the façade do not appear to be an entirely straightforward addition.

Internally, there is further evidence of the 1840s building. The ground-floor party wall between the Athenaeum and the building to the south on Fawcett Street is of stone rubble, constructed in a pattern of recesses and buttresses [Figure 13]. This is similar to the basement of Hutchinson's Buildings, at 103-109 High Street West. Although the Buildings were rebuilt from ground floor upwards after the 1898 'Great Fire' of Sunderland to a design by Henry Potts of Joseph Potts and Sons, there is a fair survival of buttressed and recessed rubble walling of the 1850s along the boundary with High Street West. Hutchinson's Buildings also has a rubble party wall to the east and several internal rubble walls, which reflect the alignment of the 1850s buildings on the site rather than the 1899 rebuilding; all of the latter's walls are in red brick.¹⁷ On the first floor of the Athenaeum, though most of the walls are of red brick and form part of the 1900 phase, there is a further stretch of exposed rubble wall running the full height of the corridor leading to the billiard room [Figure 14]. This is part of the wall between the offices and the gallery of the hall as marked on the 1894 Goad plan (see Figure 3).



Fig 11: The corner of the entablature of the 1840s Athenaeum, with fasciaed architrave. © Sunderland Antiquarian Society.



Fig 12: The same corner today, with the additional storey and bay window of 1900. © Historic England / Lucy Jessop.



Fig 13: The rubble and ashlar party wall on the ground floor of the Athenaeum, part of the remaining 1840s fabric.. © Historic England / Lucy Jessop.



Fig 14: The end of the 1900 corridor on the first floor, looking up above the doorway to the billiard room. To the right is the surviving 1840s rubble internal wall; to the left is a tall blocked window which would have looked onto the middle light well. © Historic England / Lucy Jessop.



Fig 15: The 1900 billiard room, with its timber trusses with metal strapping, slender reinforcement bars, Ionic queen posts, fluted consoles and the boarded, double coved ceiling. © Historic England / Tristan Wilson.

Should the internal faces of the walls facing Fawcett and Athenaeum Streets ever be revealed, it might answer whether the 1840s walls formed a basis, at ground and first floor level, for the present building or whether they were taken down entirely and rebuilt in brick, possibly reusing much of the masonry as the facing stone. We know that brick was used internally and externally in the rebuilding of 1900, with the rear, alley walls of the pavilions raised to support and include the new attic storey.

The continuance of the billiard room played an important part of the Liberal Club's reconstruction of the Athenaeum and is the most complete survival of this phase of work today [*Figure 15*]. It formed 'the fourth side of the square' of the building; in other words, it was on the site of the former billiard room and lecture hall of the 1840s Athenaeum. It was 'pronounced to be the finest three-table billiard room out of London', 'lighted by handsome roof lights'; its dimensions were stated as being 49 (or 56) ft long by 28 ft wide by 25 ft high.¹⁸ It was heated by a fireplace to one end and an inglenook containing a stove at the other; the inglenook was supposed to be substantial, at 10 by 18 ft. The roof was specifically described before the club was officially opened:

The roof has been made one of the features of the club, having double cones [coves] at the sides and carved and narrowed couples with a lantern light running its full length. This arrangement provides ample light and perfect ventilation. Upon each side of the room is a raised dais, where members may sit and witness the games.¹⁹

Whether the daises were included in the finished building is not known, but the curved, double-coved boarded roof and the inglenook (probably smaller than the dimensions stated above) are certainly in evidence today. Unfortunately neither of the fireplaces survives and the plaster has been stripped from the walls.

The ground floor of the building is much changed; no original shop fronts or interiors survive, and the elevation of Gentoo facing Fawcett Street looks particularly recent. A small area of mosaic flooring survives at the rear of the raised part of the empty ground floor unit, which suggests that this was the original floor level of this part of the building, perhaps some part of a hallway that was accessed from the alley. The mosaic flooring of the entrance hall and the stair up to the Liberal Club on the first floor have also gone.

The 1900 first-floor plan is still easily readable, despite some changes in layout, including the recent modernisation of the smoking and games rooms facing Athenaeum Street into offices for Gentoo. Red bricks were used for the internal



Fig 16: The former central light well, now ceiled and accessed from the billiard room. It provided light for windows on all four sides, and is executed, like the other light wells, in gault brick.. © Historic England / Lucy Jessop.



walls, and gault bricks faced the two light wells which lit the first-floor corridor [Figure 16]. However, all three light wells have now been converted to internal spaces. The original plate glass two-light sash windows (with handles beneath the upper sash) mostly survive both on the show elevations and the rear, eastern one. The first-floor bay windows still have their floor-to-ceiling panelling to each side, whose three-storey form echoes the proportions of the two-light sash windows and the smaller light above. There is also a good survival of cornicing and skirting throughout the Fawcett Street rooms, particularly in the former dining rooms (an opening has been made between them) and the corridor [Figure 17]. Picture rails and many door and window frames of 1900 can also be found. Only the billiard room is entirely lacking its plasterwork and carpentry, and its glass lantern may have been replaced. The second floor, recently converted into flats, was not inspected.

Fig 17 (left): The former private dining room, with bay window facing Fawcett Street. Much of its cornicing, panelling around the window, glazing, windows and picture rail survive from 1900. © Historic England / Lucy Jessop.

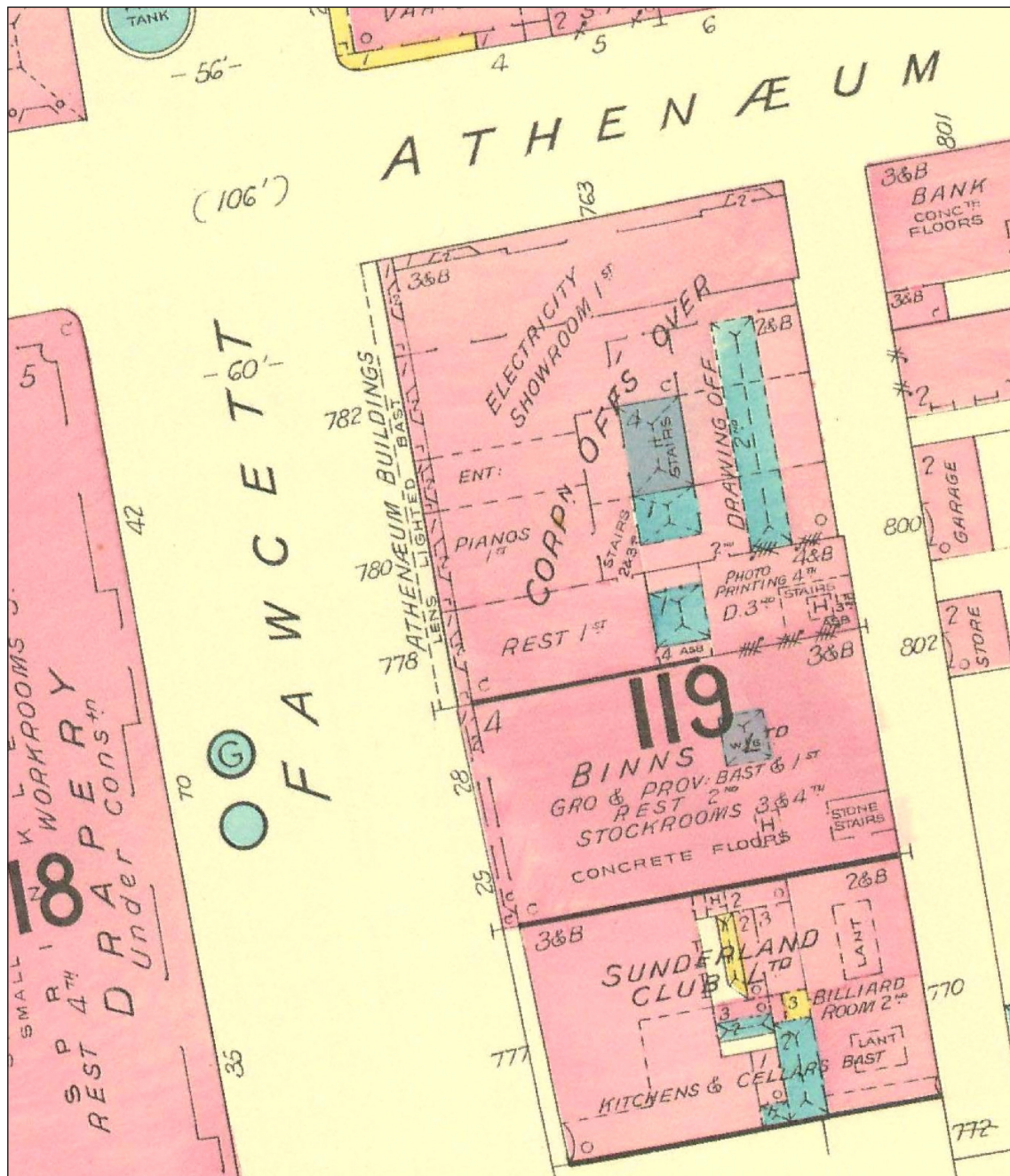


Fig 18: The Goad Insurance map of Sunderland, 1952, showing the occupation of Athenaeum Buildings by the Electricity Board, a piano shop, restaurant, and the Corporation of Sunderland. The Corporation's drawing office was positioned as to take advantage of the lantern of the old billiard room. © and database right Crown Copyright and Landmark Information Group Ltd. Licence numbers 000394 and TP0024

THE LATER HISTORY OF ATHENAEUM BUILDINGS

The Sunderland and North Durham Liberal Club moved out by March 1915, when they held their annual meeting at their new premises in St. Thomas's Street; they hoped their expenses there 'would be considerably less' than at the Athenaeum.²⁰ They had suffered several years of financial losses and this led them to terminate their tenancy of the Athenaeum.²¹ Their old premises, so the advertisement for its lease said, 'would suit a large restaurant, having all appliances; or could be subdivided into suites of offices. A lift would be put in.'²²

The billiard room was operated as a separate concern in 1938, under the name of 'The Billiard House, Athenaeum Buildings', boasting four full-sized tables by Burroughes & Watts, 'Burwat' Steel Vacuum Cushions and 'Shadowless' Shade Lighting; light refreshments and cigarettes were also available.²³ By 1945, it appears that the Corporation of Sunderland were in residence; in August it was stated that the Health Department was at the Athenaeum, which included a clinic for mothers and children.²⁴ There was already talk at this date that the Borough Engineer and his staff should be moved to the Athenaeum; that this happened is confirmed by the 1952 Goad plan [*Figure 18*], which shows the billiard room being used as a drawing office. The four shop units continued to be let, including the northern two, which together housed the Electricity Board showrooms and offices. The Borough Engineers remained at the Athenaeum until they moved to the Civic Centre in 1971, but it appears that the first and second floors then fell out of use.²⁵

Athenaeum Buildings now belongs to Sunderland City Council. Gentoo occupy the northern two ground-floor units, and part of the first floor, facing Athenaeum Street; their Fawcett Street shop front appears to have been recently rebuilt. Havisham's Restaurant is housed in the southernmost unit and has a later 20th-century shop front. The second floor of the entire building, not inspected on this visit, has been converted into flats and some of the windows at the rear have been replaced.

ENDNOTES

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- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 <http://sunderland-antiquarians.org/members-area/the-athenaeum/>.
- 7 Numerous references to events held at the Athenaeum found in www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.
- 8 Milburn, Geoffrey and Miller, Stuart, Eds 1988 *Sunderland: River, Town and People. A history from the 1780s*, 110, 116. Sunderland: Sunderland Borough Council. Also Cookson, Gillian, Ed 2015, *A History of the County of Durham*, V: Sunderland, 213, 290. Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, Victoria County History and University of London.
- 9 *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, Saturday 7 March 1874, p4, accessed via www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.
- 10 *Shields Daily Gazette*, Wednesday 4 June 1873, 4, accessed via www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.
- 11 *Shields Daily Gazette*, Saturday 22 March 1873, 2, accessed via www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.
- 12 *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, Wednesday 5 January 1876, 2, accessed via www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.
- 13 *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, Saturday 25 August 1900, 3, accessed via www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.
- 14 *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, Thursday 6 December 1900, 3, accessed via www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.
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- 16 *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, Thursday 6 December 1900, 3, accessed via www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.
- 17 Jessop, L and Wilson, T 2018, *Hutchinson's Buildings, 1 and 1a Bridge Street and 101-109 High Street West, Sunderland*, Historic England Research Report 28-2018.
- 18 *Ibid.*

- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, Thursday 25 March 1915, 6, accessed via www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.
- 21 *Newcastle Journal*, Wednesday 20 May 1914, 10, accessed via www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.
- 22 *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, Wednesday 3 March 1915, 1, accessed via www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.
- 23 *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, Tuesday 19 April 1938, 9, accessed via www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.
- 24 *Sunderland Daily Echo and Shipping Gazette*, Thursday 9 August 1945, 7, accessed via www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk.
- 25 <http://sunderland-antiquarians.org/members-area/the-athenaeum/>.



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