

THE ATKINSON

The Building

HRH Princess Mary of Cambridge, after whom the building was named, laid the foundation stone of the Cambridge Hall on 9th October 1872. The building was designed by Maxwell and Tuke of Bury and built by Messrs. Heywood of Southport at a cost of around £30,000; it was opened to the public on 6th October 1874 by the Rt. Hon. RA Cross, the then Home Secretary.



The municipal gardens in front of the Cambridge Hall boasted an ornate fountain, a bandstand and a statue of Queen Victoria. The original bandstand was built in 1900, but demolished in 1911 to make way for a permanent structure but this was later demolished in 1969. The statue now stands at the end of Neville Street facing out to sea. The ornate fountain was also demolished in later years.

To the right of the building (facing) is a stone archway inscribed 'Victoria Schools of Science and Art'. This was the entrance to a large complex of rooms behind the Cambridge Hall and these opened in 1887. Remarkably these comprised of an Art School for 300 students, science classes with a chemical laboratory accommodating forty students, a school of cookery and domestic economy, classes in modern language, as well as a variety of technical subjects. These buildings were demolished in 1987/88 to make way for major redevelopment of the site.



The clock tower is 132ft high. The clock itself was manufactured by Messrs. Joyce of Whitchurch and was the gift of Mr. W. Atkinson Esq. of Southport (after whom The Atkinson is named).



At each corner of the tower stand four carved figures representing the British, Roman, Saxon and Norman periods of the English history in the persons of Caractacus, Julius Caesar, Edward the Confessor and King Alfred.



Between the window heads are four medallions, each one representing one of the four seasons. Left to right these are spring, summer, autumn and winter.



The Foyer

Passing under the carriage porch through the main doors we enter the foyer, originally the entrance hall, measuring some 35 x 42 feet. When the Cambridge Hall was first opened Southport's post office was situated here. To the right of the main doors were compartments for telegraph forms, while directly opposite were the money order desk and the counter for the sale of stamps.

The large ornamental fireplace bears the date of the opening of the Hall and across the foyer opposite were the Mayor's reception and retiring rooms, along with various ladies' and gentlemen's staterooms.

The Stained Glass Windows

These were the work of Edmonson's of Manchester and were originally five in number. At the head of each is an armorial roundel, these represent:

1. The Arms of Lord Skelmersdale
2. The Arms of the Duke of Teck. He was the husband of Princess Mary of Cambridge, who laid the building's foundation stone. He was one of the Dukes of Wurttemberg and Stuttgart and his motto 'Furchtlos and Trew' means 'Fearless and True'
3. The Royal Arms. With the Royal motto 'Dieu et Mon Droit' and the motto of the Order of the Garter, 'Honi Soit qui mal y pense'.
4. The Southport Arms. The five men in a boat used to refer to Southport's lifeboat; it no longer forms part of the town's arms, however. The motto 'Salus Populi' means 'Health of the People' and refers to the town's reputation as a health resort.

There was originally a fifth window, bearing the arms of Princess Mary of Cambridge but this was removed as early as 1887 when the Victoria Schools of Science and Art were opened and a passageway was created linking the two buildings. The missing fifth window, however, still exists as it was transferred to the Mayor's Parlour in the Town Hall and this can be seen at the very end of the Cambridge Arcade.

The windows are now displayed on the 3rd floor of **The Atkinson**.

By the late 1960s the Victorian splendour of the Cambridge Hall had deteriorated almost beyond recognition; the building had fallen into virtual disuse and many schemes were suggested to make good use of the structure which, because of being a listed building, could not be demolished. The most practical idea seemed to be to turn it into an Arts Centre and, with the support of the (then) borough council, feasibility studies were carried out. It was estimated that the cost of turning the ghostly Victorian building into a thriving modern Arts Centre would be around £230,000.

Work commenced in the early seventies and in 1972 Alan Daiches was appointed as the Centre's first director. Despite many setbacks during the conversion work (not least being the discovery of dry rot in the auditorium), Southport Arts Centre opened its doors to the public on 28th September 1974 with the Annual Southport Music Festival. The first professional artist to appear was the concert pianist John Ogdon on 1st October. Mrs. J Jessop J.P., Chairman of the Libraries and Arts Committee officially opened the Centre to the public on 3rd March.

The Southport Arts Centre closed for refurbishment in 2010.

The Atkinson opened its doors in May 2013, with comedian Josh Widdicombe as the first act. The Atkinson is now home to a theatre, studio, library, cafe, shop, exhibition spaces and Egyptology Gallery. The final phase will see the new museum, **Between Land and Sea** open in February 2015.

The Redevelopment

In 1986 as a result of a redevelopment package arising from a partnership between Sefton MBC and the private sector, the first plans for the redevelopment of Southport Arts Centre were drawn up.

Initially, in Phase II of the original Arts Centre plans of the 70's, a small second theatre was to be built within the existing Victoria Hall. However, by the mid-eighties plans had become much more ambitious involving not only the construction of a fully equipped Studio Theatre but the complete renovation and refurbishment of the existing Arts Centre premises.

In addition to a new office complex, the complete refurbishment of the main auditorium, a new look foyer and theatre bar as well as many other improvements, the old Victoria Schools of Science and Art were finally demolished in December 1987 and work on the Studio complex began.

The entire redevelopment process took two and a half years, which meant that the Arts Centre had to continue to function under sometimes trying circumstances. However, eventually the Studio Theatre was ready and this opened in March 1990.

A new Photographic Gallery was also built (to the right before you enter the Studio Theatre) in which the work of some of the country's most innovative photographers is exhibited, as well as the more traditional exhibitions of historical interest.



The Studio



The Studio is one of the Arts Centre's two performance venues. The Studio features a semi-sprung maple wood floor, a bleacher seating arrangement which, when fully extended, combines with the upper gallery seating to provide a total capacity of 261.

When the bleacher seating is retracted a number of portable seating arrangements are possible, the most popular as far as the public is concerned being the club-style configuration. Here, portable seating is arranged around the tables in the manner of a nightclub and patrons can enjoy a drink while they are entertained. The Studio can also be adapted for productions 'in the round'. It is probably one of the most versatile performance spaces in the area.



