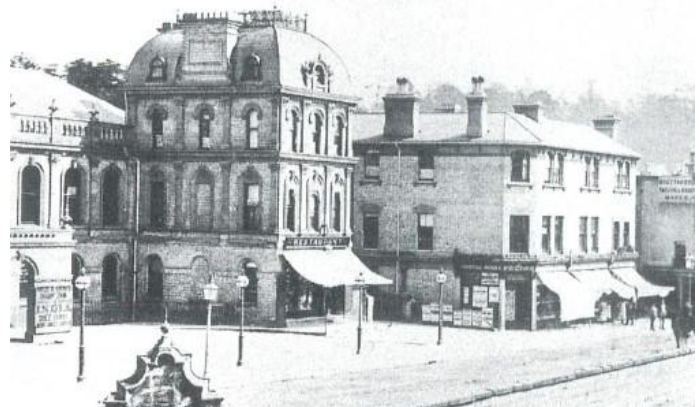
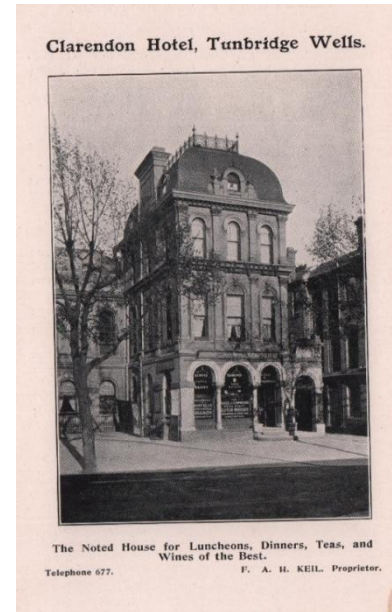


Clarendon Hotel/The Great Hall



The Great Hall - no date or photographer, but probably 1870's.



Above: After the fire in Carriages night club

Above: Advert and photo, dates unknown

August 1980.

When the “New Public Rooms” opened in 1872, The Builder magazine, at the time, described the architectural style as “Byzantine”. Today the influence seen in the Great Hall is usually referred to as the French Empire style. The design is usually said to be by H.H. Cronk, but both The Builder and the Tunbridge Wells Journal attribute it to Messrs Wilson and Wilcox of Bath. Certainly, it was Messrs Willicombe and Oakley who built it, at the cost of £11,000. The two wings had Mansard roofs crowned with ornamental railings. The central façade was originally set further back than today and had a grand porte-cochere (a large porch to shelter people alighting from carriages). The Hall was built of white brick with Bath stone settings.

The North wing was originally taken by the photographers Robinson and Cherrill, who erected additional glass houses round the side of the building in order to carry on business on a larger scale. The other wing was taken by the proprietor of the Clarence Hotel, Mr Terry, as a restaurant and coffee room. The Hall itself was 100 feet long, 42 feet wide and 35 feet high and had a large central gilt chandelier with 63 gas jets. The panelled ceiling and walls were lavishly

decorated. It must have looked grand indeed, though perhaps a little heavy for modern taste. Upstairs were a clubroom, a reading room, a billiard room and a library, all reached by a handsome staircase.

In its early years the Great Hall was put to various uses – the Wesleyan Methodists held services there while their chapel was being built and Messrs. Poole and Young provided entertainment in the form of painted panoramas of Paris and other European cities. Subsequently various cultural events took place – plays, concerts, popular readings (by Mrs Scott Siddon for example) and lectures (including Stanley the explorer). The exclusive Tunbridge Wells Club (gentlemen of the aristocracy only) occupied the upper rooms.

The Great Hall Restaurant almost came to an untimely end in 1887 when a passing policeman spotted smoke issuing from the fanlight of the bar door. Fighting his way through thick smoke he found the coconut matting and the floor boards on fire. A couple of buckets of water did the trick, though the floor had burned through.

The 1948 Kelly Directory lists the occupants of the Great Hall as being the Clarendon Hotel, the Great Hall Cinema, the Kent and Sussex Club Ltd and the auctioneers Richardson & Pierce Ltd. The Cinema, which was called The Roxy from 1955, closed around 1959 and the Court School of Dancing took over the main Hall.

By 1972 the Great Hall was beginning to get dilapidated, but it was still occupied by the Court School of Dancing, the Clarendon Bar, the Kent and Sussex Club and various financial offices. As the owner of the site Tunbridge Wells Borough Council intended to lease the ground to a developer. Kent County Council gave permission in August for the Hall to be demolished to make way for a complex of modern shops and offices four storeys tall but the work was delayed by the need to secure an office development permit from the Government. The scheme was keenly opposed by some councillors and a section of the public who wanted the building preserved.

Various plans were discussed during 1973 and 1974, particularly a redevelopment by the Commercial Union, and public objection grew. Pupils of the Court School of Dancing sent in a petition to the Council. Amongst the councillors who opposed the scheme was Cllr. Arthur Cottam who in February 1974 complained that the public were being kept in the dark about what was going on. In the end Whitehall turned down the application for an office Development Permit and the Great Hall re-opened as Carriages Night Club in 1979.

Carriages, developed by Larry and Mike Goodmaker at the cost of £100,000, was plush and exclusive to begin with, but it transpired that local demand was more for disco-type entertainment than for London-style opulence and the brothers adapted accordingly. Dogged by fires right from the beginning Carriages was finally destroyed by what appeared to be an arson attack in September 1980. Demolition and redevelopment were back on the agenda. The Civic Society put up a defence against the former and the Council delayed making a decision until the nature of the Torrington development next to the Central Station became clear. Finally, in November 1983, planning permission was granted to Speyhawk Land and Estates Ltd to redevelop the site, retaining the original façade. The scheme incorporated a Victorian style shopping arcade of twelve units and a multi-storey car park at the rear. The architects were Essex Goodman and Suggitt, and the shopping arcade opened in time for Christmas 1985. A third floor was added to the centre of the façade, increasing office space and arguably improving the proportions of the building, as the flanking wings had always had three storeys.

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