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The Market Place, South Shields

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Research into other matters has brought to light some information on the Market Place at South Shields, together with the building which forms its centrepiece. In 1766 the Dean and Chapter of Durham agreed to release eight acres of Glebe land at “Scheeles” so that a market place could be formed, agreeing at the same time to apply for a Bill in Parliament, where proceedings began in January 1767.

In the House of Commons it was stated that, although South Shields was allowed to hold two Annual Fairs, the town “consists of One Street only, extending in Length One Mile and a Half along the South Side of the River Tyne” and as a result of its narrowness was unable satisfactorily to accommodate the fairs; a new location was essential. With minor modifications the Bill was passed by the House of

Lords and received the Royal Assent on 23 March 1767.

In September 1768 John Wooler – a civil engineer at times associated with John Smeaton and later associated with new bridges at Newcastle and Hexham – was paid five guineas for drawing “his Plan of Shields Market” although it is uncertain if the design of the building was included. The matter is somewhat complicated by the fact that, at about the same time, ‘Harding for his plan’ was paid four guineas.

Construction would seem to have begun immediately as in October 1768 Thomas Duncan was paid £100 towards the cost of building the “Town House”, a two-storey building open at ground level on three sides, each side with three moulded arches on Tuscan columns. Work included the formation by John Walker



Fig. 1 South Shields Market Place and Town Hall, about 1800. (Reproduced by kind permission of Tyne and Wear Museums.)

of drains two feet wide and three feet high, "to be done in the Manner Proposed by George Nicholson", mason/architect to the Dean and Chapter; Walker's performance was to be guaranteed by Duncan who was paid further sums of £334.1.10d in 1769 and £50 in 1770.

The Market Place was paved as part of the undertaking and this work was also carried out by Duncan at a cost of £509.13.0d. Iron hand-railings were provided by Robert Flemming for £51.12.4d and a sum of £77.2.5d was paid to Walker for the drains, together with £63.15.0d for a well. For visiting the site to measure and value the work Nicholson received £3.8.6d, together with some travelling expenses. The Market opened in July 1770, and was later described as having "streets branching from the centres of each side of the square, and a handsome town-hall in the midst, with a colonnade under it for the market people...; the square is handsomely paved, with a broad foot-walk, by the houses in the London form" (Fig. 1).

It is unfortunate that no details are given as to the designer of the Town Hall ("Town

House") and it could have been the responsibility of Wooler, Harding, Nicholson or Duncan. Records would seem to indicate that Nicholson was paid only for measuring and valuing the work, and this would perhaps eliminate him as the building's designer. As a result, credit for the design should probably be given to Harding or Wooler, with Duncan responsible only for building work. It is not inconceivable, however, that only an outline drawing of the building was given to Duncan and that he provided its detailing.

SOURCES

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