

Information Sheet

Fine and Decorative Arts Series No. 1

THE FOUNDING OF THE USHER GALLERY, LINCOLN

James Ward Usher was born on the 1st January, 1845, at Lincoln in a private house along the High Street (site now occupied by Barclays Bank Limited) opposite to his father's shop on the corner of Swanpool Court facing the Cornhill (No. 192). He was the eldest son of James Usher, a jeweller and watchmaker, and the grandson of James Usher, a cabinet maker of St. Swithin's Parish, Lincoln. In 1860, after completing his education at the Lincoln Grammar School and Totteridge Park School, Hertfordshire, James Ward Usher joined his father and the name of the business was changed to 'Usher and Son'. His father had opened the business there in 1837 and in his trim Georgian shop window had hung his own watch, as he was too poor to acquire any stock. Previous to this, he had a tiny shop near Gowts Bridge, in the High Street.



Lincoln High Street 1857 showing James Usher's shop on the left.

(Local History Collection, Lincoln Library by courtesy of Lincolnshire Library Service).

In June 1874, James Ward Usher took over control of the business. His father moved to live at 366 High Street, Lincoln, and died there on the 11th February 1882. His wife died a few years later on the 2nd October 1891. He had two brothers, the Reverend Henry Usher, who was for some time Vicar of Snitterby, and George Usher, a clock-case maker who lived near Gowts Bridge.

James Ward Usher's brother was born in 1849 and was named Alfred Henry Usher. Alfred married Mary Esther Harrison on 5th July 1871, and for a considerable period was a farmer near Lincoln. Retiring in 1903, he went to live in Jersey, where he died many years after his wife, on the 30th June 1924. His body was brought to Lincoln and interred in the family grave in Canwick Road Cemetery.

In 1873 James Ward Usher undertook improvements to his shop front and in 1886 he carried out further refinements when he became the first business man in Lincoln to introduce electricity into his shop from his own generating plant. He continued to draw power from this until the establishment of the City Electricity Works in December 1898.

James Ward Usher appears to have been successful in most aspects of his business. It was during the 1880's that he was much involved in purchasing stocks and shares. Weekly sales were held either in the Assembly Rooms in Bailgate, or at a local bank and he invested shrewdly in industry, banking, British and Foreign Government Securities, railways and rubber, including interests in the Dunham Bridge Company, the Market Rasen Water Company and the Horncastle Railway Company.

Usher was to reap just as much success from his own business as a jeweller, and he became one of the main suppliers of trophies, ceremonial plate and presentation pieces in the area. It was probably sometime in the 1880's or early 1890's that Usher began looking for a suitable novelty that would be attractive to the visitors to Lincoln. He eventually chose the 'Lincoln Imp', a sculptured figure in Lincoln Cathedral, having for a time the sole right to sell 'Lincoln Imp' jewellery. This alone brought him in considerable business and fame to the extent that such insufficiently addressed letters as 'To the Silversmith who makes and

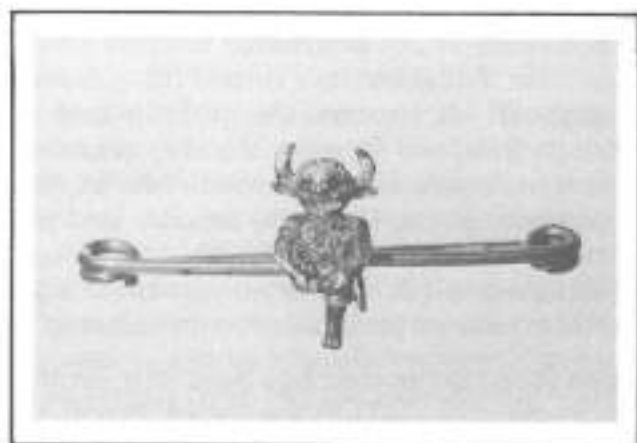


James Ward Usher's shop in 1873.

(Local History Collection, Lincoln Library by courtesy of Lincolnshire Library Service).

sells the Lincoln Imp' and one with only a sketch of the Imp and the word 'Lincoln' on the envelope, found their way to his business in the High Street.

Usher produced the 'Lincoln Imp' in the form of tie pins, cuff links, brooches, spoons, the jewellery often being set with precious stones.



A 'Lincoln Imp' brooch.

(Usher Gallery Collection 72/18)

USHER THE COLLECTOR

As a youth James Ward Usher was a fervent collector and on more than one occasion he was scolded by his mother for spending money on some particular object which took his fancy. The only quarrels he had with his father were also about this subject. His father entertained old fashioned ideals respecting the pursuit of art in any form, believing that it was fatal to success in business. It was in March 1883 that he first entered Christie's salerooms in London. His most active year was in 1895 when he purchased some thirty six items. From 1883 and for the next thirty years he was constantly adding to his collection upon definite lines of selection which he laid down for himself. His collection can be divided into the following groups:

CERAMICS

1. English porcelain especially from the Chelsea, Derby and Worcester factories.
2. Continental porcelain with special concentration on the Meissen and Sèvres factories.
3. Chinese export porcelain of the K'ang Hsi period 1662-1722.

CLOCKS AND WATCHES

4. A fine collection of English and French

decorative clocks and watches of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth century.

COINS

5. A small group of Roman, English and Scottish gold and silver coins.

ENAMELS

6. A large collection of eighteenth century Battersea and Staffordshire enamels.

MINIATURES

7. English and Continental portrait miniatures from the late sixteenth to the late 19th century.

SILVER

8. A collection of English silver dating from the late sixteenth to early 19th century.

James Usher's love of collecting is reflected in contemporary newspaper reports by their references to the interesting items of antique jewellery, silver and coins which he had acquired and which were displayed in his shop window. In 1900 James Usher published his book *The Usher Collection Objects of Art* and printed fifty copies for private circulation. It was at this time that he produced in watercolours a *Supplement* (Usher Gallery Collection 77/2742) to this volume depicting a few of the decorative watches in his collection. During the next few years he was prompted into producing eighty watercolours of his more choice items. The watercolours which he painstakingly executed, were occasionally exhibited at the Lincoln Art and Industrial Exhibitions.

By 1911 his collection was nearing its completion and in 1916 his life's work culminated in the publication of his second book *An Art Collector's Treasures*. Before Usher undertook this book he decided that it was imperative to his business that he obtained an experienced assistant and he eventually appointed Mr. E.A. Taylor from London. The book was printed for private circulation (300 copies) and described in detail some of the items in his collection which included reproductions of his watercolours. In the preface to the volume Usher wrote,

"I have travelled many thousands of miles, and no trouble or pains have been thought too great in accomplishing the desired object and now, having formed my collect-

ion (which I believe to be in its way unique), I have long entertained a strong wish to produce, and possess, prior to its dispersal, an illustrated record of it, historical and descriptive in character. Just fourteen years ago I commenced this work, and I can safely say that all my leisure time during that period has been devoted to it. I have, indeed, been wedded to it".

Mr. Usher who was of a retiring disposition, cared little for public honours and it was only with reluctance that he became Sheriff of Lincoln during the third year of the Mayoralty of Alderman C.T. Parker in 1916. It was the third time on which he had been approached and it was Councillor T.C. Halkes who proposed the appointment. In returning thanks, Mr. Usher observed that like his father, he had never sought public honours. This was an honour thrust upon him, and only accepted from a certain sense of duty and obligation which he felt he owed to the city. Mr Usher went on to say:

"It has long been my desire and ambition to bequeath a considerable portion of my life's work in art to Lincoln, and I hope that it might form the nucleus of an art gallery and museum worthy of the city. I might then, perhaps, indulge the hope that my life has not been in vain, and that I have left Lincoln a little better than I found it".

In a diary dated 1915, belonging to Mr. Usher (Usher Gallery Collection 1946) he lists the legatees of his will. However, if it had not been for the timely action of Mr. Taylor, it seems unlikely that his wishes would have been fulfilled. In Mr. Taylor's account (Local Collection, Lincoln Library Service) of the events leading up to Mr. Usher's death he states:

"His last holiday in 1921 was spent touring down the Wye Valley and South Wales, but was cut short by illness He arrived home on a Thursday and seemed a little better, but during the night had to call his housekeeper for assistance, when I arrived on Friday morning he was too ill to leave his bed and I thought it time to call a doctor (Dr. Levis) The Doctor had drugged him and said he might be unconscious for at least twenty four hours, was the house in order, and had he made a Will? We knew nothing of his private affairs I knew he was friendly with Lawyer Brogden and so I went to see him. He said that Mr. Usher had spoken to him regarding his wishes for the future, but

nothing more had come of it Saturday morning he had a relapse did not regain consciousness".

"I thought it was time something was done concerning his Will and so went in search of Mr. Brogden, whom I found in a barber's chair having his hair cut, he hurried down to the shop, saw the condition of Mr. Usher and sending for his chief clerk (Mr. F. Chester) proceeded to draft a Will on the lines he had heard Mr. Usher suggest. It appears the drafting took a long time and it was Monday morning before it was ready — and then in the presence of the Doc, the solicitor and his clerk, we were able to lift Mr. Usher up, and guiding his hand enabled him to sign and so saved the collection for Lincoln".

James Ward Usher died two days later on the 20th September, 1921 at the age of 76 and his collection passed to Lincoln Corporation.

PLANNING THE GALLERY

James Ward Usher's Will was accepted by the Corporation on the 4th October 1921, and it was proved on the 10th January 1922, at £58,735.9.7d exclusive of the value of the art collections which could not be estimated for probate, and it was afterwards re-sworn at £59,125.1.4d.

In May 1922, the City Council was experiencing some difficulty over the selection of a suitable building for the display of the Usher Collection. At a meeting of the Council in Committee on the 10th April 1922, it was decided to authorise the purchase of Hatfield House, Lindum Road, as a temporary place in which to accommodate the Usher Collection. It was resolved at that meeting that the recommendation be withdrawn and that the architect Sir Reginald Blomfield, R.A., be consulted as to a suitable building for housing the Collection. The same year it was decided that the Usher Collection should be temporarily displayed in a room in the Public Library in Free School Lane. The room was opened on the 18th October by Dr. George C. Williamson, the art historian, with the Mayor, Councillor Walker H. Kilmister, City Sheriff Mrs. J.S. Baker (Trustee of the Usher Collection) and the Town Clerk Mr. M.L.O. Need in attendance.

The contemporary newspaper reports show that there was a certain amount of wrangling over the Bequest within the City Council, but

one must assume that there was some doubt about the possible recurring expenses of administering an art gallery. At one time a project was put forward that the Art Gallery should form part of a Town Hall Building, but it was felt that the time was not ripe for the adoption of such an ambitious scheme. The Corporation eventually decided to negotiate for the purchase of the Temple Gardens and these, together with the surrounding property were bought for the sum of £8,000. This was the property formerly belonging to Mr. Joseph Collingham. It was not until the 6th December 1924, that Sir Reginald Blomfield's original proposal was adopted by the full Council. It resolved that the Ecclesiastical 'Commissioners' be approached to release the Corporation from a restrictive covenant, that the building proceed as planned by Sir Reginald Blomfield as architect. The Temple Gardens which had been purchased in March 1924, were thrown open to public use prior to the acceptance of the plans and the demolition of the house and excavation of the foundations commenced.



No. 7 Lindum Road, the property of Joseph Collingham. Demolished in order to build the Usher Gallery.

(By courtesy of the Lincolnshire Archives)

The original plans presented to the Council in October 1924, provided for the exterior of the Gallery to be built in Ancaster stone (from Sleaford) at a cost of £34,000, but these were later modified in order to reduce the cost by some £5,000 by substituting Nottingham red bricks between the pilasters. The Gallery floors were to be of teak, and the entrance paved with Yorkshire stone and black marble with the stairs made of Portland stone. The imposing south front measures 110 feet in length and rises to 42 feet at the parapet.

The building contract was secured in July 1925 by the Lincoln firm of Messrs. W. Wright and

Son, Limited. Before building commenced it was necessary, owing to the nature of the site, to drive in some 120 ferro-concrete piles, 14-25 feet into the ground, upon which a concrete raft was bedded. This work started at the end of September, 1925, with Captain J.H. Porteous as the Clerk of Works.

LAYING OF THE FOUNDATION STONES

The foundation stones (either side of the main entrance, but not inscribed) were laid by the Mayor of Lincoln, Councillor Miss M.E. Neville, on the 10th March 1926. At the ceremony the Architect, Sir Reginald Blomfield, formally asked the Mayor to accept for the purpose of laying the stones, a silver trowel (Usher Gallery Collection 1805) which he had designed and which had been presented by the contractors Messrs. W. Wright and Son. The trowel was supplied by Messrs. James Usher and Son. The firm had been bought in in July 1922 by Mr. John Hodgson of 14 Newland, Lincoln, who carried on his business under the same name. On the trowel blade (silver), beneath the arms of the Diocese is the family crest and the motto "Nevile Velis". In the November of the same year her successor, Councillor G. Robson, placed in position the sculptured vases which crown the centre facade, thus marking the completion of the exterior.



Laying the Foundation stones, 10th March 1926.

(By courtesy of the Lincolnshire Archives)

THE OPENING

In the *Lincolnshire Echo* of the 8th December 1926, an account appeared of a lively Council meeting held the previous evening when it was announced that H.R.H. the Prince of Wales would visit Lincoln in May 1927, to open the Usher Gallery. This engendered strong opposition from sections of the Council and doubts were expressed at the propriety of inviting him in view of the internal differences which had arisen within the Committee set up to run the proposed Gallery. The general consensus of opinion of the people according to the Press editorials, was one of support for the proposed visit of the Prince. The concern with expenditure for the Prince's visit can be readily appreciated if one recalls that the Country was entering on a period of economic recession. Just over a year before the Prince opened the Gallery, the General Strike had taken place, and it is reported to have temporarily held up the construction work. Debates continued for a time with bitterness on both sides but plans went ahead to make the necessary arrangements and to draw up a programme.

In March 1927, it was announced that Mr. A.R. Corns, the City Librarian, would be appointed as Director of the Library, Museum and Usher Art Gallery. By the latter part of the

same month the papers were full of the provisional programme for the Prince's visit, including a public luncheon. However, by the beginning of May 1927, it was decided to abandon the idea of giving a public luncheon to the Prince and it was decided that he would dine privately at the White Hart Hotel.

It was on the 25th May 1927, that the Usher Gallery was formally opened by His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales and the Prince's final words at the ceremony were:—

"It seems to me a fine thing that an act of such munificence should be inspired in a man by pride in his native city and affection for his fellow citizens. The result, as we see it today, is in all respects a fitting embodiment of Mr. Usher's aims, on which the Corporation, the Architect, and the builders are to be congratulated. I appreciate deeply your having asked me to associate myself with the opening ceremony, which I now have much pleasure in performing".

After opening the Gallery door with a solid gold key, a reproduction of the City Mace (made by Messrs. James Usher & Son, Newland), the Prince unveiled the tablet in the entrance hall commemorating Mr. James Ward Usher and his gift to the City.



The opening of the Usher Gallery by H.R.H. the Prince of Wales, 25th May 1927 (Sir Reginald Blomfield, R.A. (left) H.R.H. the Prince of Wales, the Mayor (Councillor G. Robson), Mr. A.B. Wright (Managing Director, Messrs. W. Wright & Sons).

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