

The Stirling Arcade – Our City’s Hidden Gem

The Stirling Arcade – one of only five shopping arcades in Scotland – has been described as a ‘rare gem from Scotland’s architectural past’. Strategically situated in the heart of the old town centre and rich in both interior design and social history, the Arcade has held a special place in the hearts of ‘sons and daughters of the Rock’ for generations.

The Arcade was the brainchild of William Crawford, an astute businessman and local councillor who owned properties in Murray Place and King Street. A property developer well ahead of his time, Crawford saw the potential in connecting the streets and commissioned the architect John McLean to come up with a design. The project, which cost £20,000 (approx £1m in 2010), was personally financed by Crawford and the Arcade (at times called the Crawford Arcade) was opened in 1861. It consisted of two hotels (one at either entrance), a theatre, 39 shops and six dwelling houses.

The Alhambra Theatre (originally called the Arcade theatre) was, in its heyday, a veritable hub of entertainment, particularly variety. It played host to some famous acts, including Sir Harry Lauder. Isabella Kidd says the “magic” of her only visit to the Alhambra has remained with her for more than 70 years:

In 1938 when I was eight years old, I was invited to the theatre to see a pantomime. I was fascinated by the beauty of the interior, feeling as if I had walked into a fairy tale. I was entranced by the colours, the lights and the beautiful ceiling.

Jane Duthie, who worked as an usherette in the Alhambra in 1937, has vivid memories of her “great wee job”:

It was variety! Jimmy Running & His Orchestra would start the show off and then out would come a group of wee chorus girls, the May Moxan Girls - 5 of them. I can see them yet! The principal people were always the comedians – Tommy Morgan, people like that and they had speciality acts... a ventriloquist... or magician. I remember performers like Dave Willis. He was a wee man and he wrote a nice wee song about the war, ‘Ma Wee Gas Mask’. It was a right wee ditty! The kids at the matinee loved it.

In 1931, the theatre was converted so it could also be used as a cinema. Sadly, the Alhambra closed in 1939 due to the outbreak of war.

For photos and more detail about the Alhambra Theatre go to www.scottishcinemas.org.uk

The Arcade in the news

Trawl through old newspapers and you'll find a myriad of news stories, adverts and anecdotes relating to the Arcade over the decades. A few examples:

- blind cow being taken to market breaks shop window at Murray Place entrance Dec 2, 1919
- 'The Stirling Arcade Sold' – February 26, 1920
- the tragic death of Arcade caretaker, John Campbell – October 1923

The Arcade's shops and businesses

Willie Hendry (b. 1915) has detailed memories of the Arcade during his childhood... Bannigan's newsagents; Stevens ladies outfitter; Paul's drapers; the Milk Bar; Craig's ironmonger ("where the laddies used to steal the fireworks!"); Howat's toy store; Shillinglaw the dry-salter; Willie Low the grocer; McLaren confectioner. Mr Hendry recalled being scolded by his mother for playing with the 'whangs' [bundles of shoelaces] in the shoe shop which she managed - and getting them tangled up. He also recounted stories of the heightened activity in the Arcade at 'Fee-in Fair' time.

Jimmy Mylchreest remembers spending "guid nights" in The Douglas Hotel with Canadian soldiers billeted in Dunblane in 1940/41 – and one night when things got a bit out of hand. A "big battle" ensued... Enter the Military Police! The Canadians were barred from Stirling after that.

Maureen Ferguson managed the popular Crown Inn (for many years owned by the Harris family) from 1976–79 and remembers it as being "a family". She has a scrapbook and many interesting and happy memories of parties and excursions, competitions and Stirling Folk Club - acts like 'Chapter 4' and 'Two and Bit'... and once giving Billy Connolly a row for swearing in 'her pub'!

The Rise and Fall of Thomas Menzies...

... a fascinating story in itself! John Sharp worked as an apprentice upholsterer with Menzies in the late 1950's. His detailed accounts provide a valuable insight into the business. He recalls the workshop behind the Central Library building on Corn Exchange; helping to build the connecting bridge across the south section of the Arcade; Menzies' use (and abuse... eg the construction of the split level / false ceiling, etc?) of the Alhambra Theatre; various staff members and staff outings... and a comical incident involving Evostick! Mr Sharp talked about the changes he witnessed as Menzies expanded more and more into the Arcade – and ultimately the demise of the business.

The Future?

The Arcade recently underwent an internal refurbishment and the current owners' goal is to make the Arcade a key city centre asset. For more info visit www.stirlingarcade.com