

Grantham Then

By John Manterfield

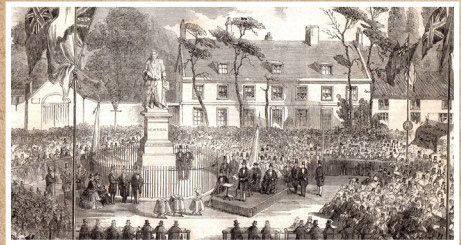


St Peter's Hill, with its bronze statues of Sir Isaac Newton, erected in 1858, and Frederick James Tollemache, four times MP for Grantham, erected in 1892, is dominated by the Guildhall, built in 1868-70. Adjacent is the Museum - originally the

Public Library and Museum - built with help from the Carnegie Foundation in 1928.

Two hundred years ago, the scene was very different. Travellers coming down the steep Spittlegate Hill (the gradients lowered by unemployment relief work in the 1920s) would have observed small fields of enclosed land. Having passed through Spittlegate, a small hamlet on the east side of London Road extending as far as where the Esso garage and Halfords now stand, there were then small fields or closes on either side. Some fields belonged to Corpus Christi College in Oxford and that connection is retained through the names of College Street, Oxford Street, Cambridge Street and Eton Street when the area was developed in the late nineteenth century. On the west side of London Road were more fields as far as Spittlegate House, close to the junction with Wharf Road. This listed Georgian house was built c1790. More recently it became Strutt and Parker's and is now divided into supported residential units. Named after the wharf at the terminus of the canal from Nottingham, which opened in 1797, Wharf Road formed an important boundary. To the south of the road lay the liberty of Spittlegate, Houghton and Walton which was distinct and separate from the borough of Grantham controlled by its Alderman and twelve Comburgesses.

St Peter's Hill then opened out from where the Tollemache statue now stands. On the left was a large plot of land where the recently closed Post Office and adjacent shops now stand. For centuries this was the estate of the More family, but it was not developed until later in Victorian times. The east side of St Peter's Hill was not then punctuated by either St Catherine's Road or Avenue Road - these were late Victorian additions. Various dwellings with substantial plots of land fronted the open space of St Peter's Hill. Their gardens extended to the line of the mill stream that powered Wellam or Well Lane mill which stood at the bottom of present-day East Street.



The Unveiling of the Isaac Newton Statue in 1858

The stream ran roughly parallel with the main course of the River Witham that divided the borough of Grantham from Harrowby which extended as far as the High Dyke. The appearance of this east side of St Peter's Hill is seen in the engraving done for the unveiling of the Newton statue.

Almost certainly, our Victorian councillors had a bigger scheme in mind of which the siting of the Newton statue was a first stage. The Guildhall, already too small for the proper discharge of the town's growing functions and responsibilities, was located at the corner of High Street and Guildhall Street. It contained a ballroom as well as the court room with the borough jail to the rear. The jail was deemed inadequate after several prisoners had escaped. Grantham's town hall did not match the grander civic and municipal halls elsewhere. St Peter's Hill was the ideal location for a new building, but it took several years to acquire the land, initiate architectural designs and invite tenders for construction. The spacious symmetrical brick and stone building was completed at a cost of £7,260. It presents striking silhouettes with its steep French-style roofs. The first-floor ballroom has a triple-curved oriel window above which is the clock tower. It was designed by William Watkins of Lincoln. The associated remodelling of the east of Castlegate including Avenue Road will be featured in the next issue.



The Guildhall detail from a postcard, 1904