

History of The Building

INTRODUCTION

- We have discovered little surviving information about the fine granite and ‘rubble’ building at 10 Parade Street. While many buildings in Penzance have been reasonably well documented and photographed, searches at Kresen Kernow and in the extensive Penlee House collections have uncovered no early drawings or photos of the building.
- A search of documents at Morrab Library has uncovered some interesting but often conflicting information, partly confused due to changes in building and street names – Parade Street was once South Parade Street and no. 10 has been known under several different names; Parade Chamber, Commercial Buildings.

HISTORICAL FACTS

- In the early 19th century 10 Parade Street held a significant place at the centre of Penzance’s physical, cultural and economic life.
- The building at 10 Parade Street was built around 1825-28. Known as Commercial Buildings it was erected through the initiative of active members of the Commercial News Room and accommodated a Library, the Savings Bank and the News Room itself.
- Penzance was in its boom years, with tin mining providing a major injection of funds that enabled a rapid expansion of the town.
- Miners’ hard work made wealth for many, and the growing industrial infrastructure necessitated financial services – the Savings Bank was situated at 10 Parade Street. With a growing worldliness came the need for public access to learning and books, housed in the library upstairs.
- The Savings Bank, established in 1818, occupied the building from its construction until at least 1878 and possibly beyond and the 1841 Borough of Penzance map actually names the building at 10 Parade Street as the Savings Bank. However, the name ‘Commercial Buildings’ was still in use in 1890, when local authority meetings were being held there.
- Its large first floor room was designed as the first permanent home of the library (now known as Morrab Library) – one of at least three libraries in Penzance at that time. It housed an important collection of books, including the libraries of the Royal Cornwall Geological Society and the Cornwall Agricultural Society.
- The library remained at 10 Parade Street until moving to the newly built Public Buildings (St John’s Hall) in 1869, and then to its current home at Morrab House in 1889.
- The Library was fitted with a gallery, which together with cornices, shelves and removal charges, cost nearly £100, a substantial part of the £850 build fee. At the time of its completion Commercial Buildings was probably the largest secular building in Penzance and was an impressive testament to the town’s growing prosperity. This was ten years before the roofline of the Market Building and St. Mary’s Church came to dominate the Penzance skyline and 40 years before St. John’s Hall was built.

TOWNS WATER FOUNTAIN

- The building stands at the intersection of 5 small lanes and footpaths where the town’s main water supply was situated and everyone in the area would have visited the water fountain and 10 Parade Street would have formed an important backdrop to their daily lives.
- The Penzance Shipping Company, formed in 1808, had offices upstairs, on the same floor as the Penzance Library. In 1839 the company owned 9 of the 83 vessels of above 15 tons registered in the port of Penzance. It had secured nearly all the carrying trade between Penzance and London and Bristol with just one vessel engaged in foreign trade.
- In 1884 G C Boase remembered the Commercial News Room, a “tradesmen’s news-room... a fine large room with a good supply of papers” existing at Commercial Buildings. This newsroom, which was dissolved under acrimonious circumstances in the 1840s, is likely to have been a fore-runner of the Penzance Institute, which appears in directories for 1856 and 1878. The Institute (not to be confused with its rival the Penzance Institution) seems to have had some informal links with the Penzance/Morrab Library.



GRADE II LISTING

Listing detail – Early 19th Century Rubble, 2 Storey, 3 sashes each side. Side elevation has windows in round headed recesses. Front has a Gothic (chinois) doorway with clustered columns, supporting a pagoda roof in round headed recess. Gothic panelled door. Overhanging eaves. Slate hipped roof.



RECENT HISTORY

- The building has had many other tenants over the years. There are some references to Magistrates Offices in the building and from the 1940s to 60s The Plymouth Brethren held services on Sunday mornings with Sunday School in the afternoon.
- Older Penzance residents may remember other occupants; Boase and Bennett Solicitors, a holiday letting business and an unmanned studio for ITV West Country linked to Plymouth for occasional news stories and interviews.
- People may remember visiting Social Services in the building in their youth, and the fine Library room has been a gym and a telephone call centre. In the first 2 decades of this century the building has housed a recording studio and accountants’ offices.
- Over the years there has been some unsympathetic ‘modernisation’ of the building including the removal of all original fireplaces and the replacement of the original floorboards with chipboard.
- The building is now in a slightly sorry state, but not too far decayed to be rescued. Thankfully some original features have survived including the Library’s original ceiling and rose, the balcony, doors and door surrounds and various other period architectural details.

MORRAB COTTAGE

- Since well before 10 Parade Street was built a small house existed to the side of the building. It was called Morrab Cottage, had a small garden to the side and shared the outside WC facilities with No 10.
- In the 1950s it was lived in by the caretaker of 10 Parade Street.
- In 1962 10 Parade Street became the new Headquarters of the St Ives National Liberal Conservative Association. Work on and around the building at this time included the demolition of Morrab Cottage, the creation of new toilets at the rear of the building and a car park on the site of the cottage and its garden.
- The large adjoining Jordans Chapel/Central Hall/Regal Cinema was also demolished a couple of years later to create space for Penlowarth House – the Penzance tax office, now newly refurbished as PZ 360 with new apartments of the top floors.

In 1875 J.S. Courtney wrote about the building:

- ‘The Commercial Buildings which now stand at the left-hand corner of Parade Street were built very soon after 1825; in them were the Penzance Library (founded in 1818 through the instrumentality of Sir Rose Price and Dr. Forbes, a physician, who practised for some time in the town), Savings Bank, and Commercial News Room.
- The Library was here for nearly forty years, until its removal to the Public Buildings; the Savings Bank is still in this place. The Commercial News Room was established in 1826, and existed for many years, but has now quite disappeared, and its place is supplied by the Penzance Institute.’

- The Official Guide to Penzance 1876 states “The Odd Fellows occupy a room over the Savings’ Bank at the Commercial Buildings. The Foresters meet at the same place.” Local people referred to the building as the Odd Fellows Hall well into the 1960s. The Odd Fellows were originally trade guilds but as the nineteenth century progressed they became a network of mutual support clubs. The Ancient Order of Foresters were originally social societies but realised they had a duty to assist their fellow men “as they walked through the forests of life” and began weekly contributions to a common fund to provide sick pay and funeral grants to their members.

- The compilation of the following information has been made possible thanks to research carried out by Lisa Di Tommaso (Librarian, Morrab Library), Linda Camidge and Sue Nebesnick (Penwith Local History Group), and local resident David Allison.

- Also The History of The Town & Borough of Penzance by PAS Pool with contributions from Peter Laws and David Pooley