

## **The Palace Hotel, Manchester History**

When Refuge began in 1858 it was known as 'Refuge Friend in Deed Life Assurance and Sick Fund Friendly Society' at this time the company was very small with a handful of employees. The company expanded over time and had moved offices several times before they bought the land on the corner of Oxford Street on 29<sup>th</sup> September 1890 for £210,000 which is where the Palace Hotel stands today.

In 1890 the Directors of the 'Refuge Friend in Deed Life Assurance and Sick Fund Friendly Society' approached a well known architect by the name of Alfred Waterhouse to design the first part of their new home. Waterhouse was known at the time for his work throughout England which included Oxford University, Cambridge University, Town Hall, Manchester and Natural History Museum, London. In January 1891, designs were completed and building soon began. The building took four and a half years to complete and was ready for occupation in 1895.

The Number One Building, known as the North Wing still today shows all its glory from the Gothic Victorian Architecture, which Alfred Waterhouse became so renowned. Over the years of occupying this building, Refuge began to realise that they were still expanding so instead of moving office again, they would just build an extension on to the building. Unfortunately Alfred Waterhouse died in 1905, which was the year that Refuge decided they wanted a new building. With the dilemma of not having the original architect to expand on the work he has already started, the company commissioned the project to Alfred Waterhouse's son, Paul Waterhouse, under the condition that the style which was begun by his father would be carried on throughout.

The extension to building number one was ready for occupation in 1912. Paul Waterhouse had adapted his father's style and also added a little extra to make his mark on one of the most famous buildings in Manchester. Paul Waterhouse designed the number two building with a splendid clock tower, which interconnects the two buildings.

The clock tower stands a staggering 217 feet high and has a four face clock at the top, and the hands on the clock are 7'10" long and weigh 60lbs. The clock tower became one of Manchester's famous skylines. The cast iron gates at the foot of the tower became the main entrance to the building, the gates opened on to a large courtyard which was lit by a glass dome.

In 1905, the new technology which was around was introduced to the building, by Paul Waterhouse, in such a way that the number two building became the principal heating source for the whole complex. Due to the use of electricity, the number two building was designed to

use this new source of power and eventually the number one building was adapted so it too could use the new form of power, which with the changing times had become necessary.

Twenty years went by before the company again decided they wanted to expand the building and building number three was commissioned. Between this time the company as a whole went through a lot of changes. The biggest change of all happened around the time of the First World War, many people went away to war and sadly many of them did not return to their Manchester home. Soon after the World War, Refuge as a company saw the need to recognise the people who gave their lives to save others, so as a tribute to their members of staff a 26 foot high grey war memorial was built, this bore all the names of the fallen who had worked for the company and was unveiled in November 1922.

When it came to find the architect to design the third building, the company had to find a suitable person to carry on the good work, so they looked towards a Manchester architect called Stanley Birkett. Due to the changing times and ever increasing technology, the third building was built in a modern way by the use of modern concrete systems, which meant the need for pillars throughout the spacious areas was no longer required. Building three was ready for occupation by the company in 1932.

Stanley Birkett designed the third building to be as spacious as the others and he also designed a magnificent staff dining hall, which had a fully equipped stage with fully operational orchestra pit and sprung dance floor. This dining hall was designed to accommodate all 1300 members of staff and also equipped to hold social events such as dinner dances and shows which were put on by the staff.

In 1958 the company changed their name to a much shorter version and was simply known as the 'Refuge Assurance Company Limited – Refugium Rebus Adversis'. When this happened, any shareholders which were involved in the company at the time, made a very impressive sum of money, £2.00 per share made them £3,000,000.

The Second World War, like the first, was a very troubling time for the building and the company. Again more members of staff went off to fight and did not return. At this time, the women who were working in the more menial areas of the company were suddenly promoted to accommodate the loss of men throughout the company.

Fortunately the head office escaped the war with very little damage, the original spire on the top of building number one was damaged by a bomb and although the rest of Manchester was almost destroyed by bombs, the Head Office only really experienced blast damage.

Due to the constant concern of bombs damaging the building, the company decided to reinforce areas of the building. The bomb shelter was not only for the staff of Refuge Assurance but the general public of Manchester. Even today you can see where the air raid shelters were and how much steel framework was invested into making the building a safer place.

Again like the First World War, there were many deaths of people who worked for the company so the Directors of Refuge expanded the war memorial and made a tribute to people who fought for their country. Three of the four sides bear cast bronze panels on which appear the names of the fallen. The front panel bears the dedication inscription, which reads:

**In honour of those of the staff of the Refuge Assurance Company Ltd, who served in the war 1914-1918 and in loving memory of those who fell.  
'Let those who come after see to it that their name be not forgotten'**

After the Second World War, Refuge Assurance got themselves back on track. Over the years, the business grew and unfortunately once again the premises which they were occupying was not sufficient to accommodate it all. In 1988, the technology has changed once again and the Manchester Office just can not be adjusted to the demands of the new world, so the Directors of the company decided to move once again. The Refuge Assurance Company moved to Wilmslow, which is where they operate their Head Office today. People often questioned where the infamous War Memorial has gone and they are often surprised to find that it went with the Refuge Assurance Company to their new home.

Once the building was completely empty, there was a lot of talk about what was going to come of the most famous buildings in Manchester. Many suggestions were given, one was to split the three buildings up, to use building one as a hotel, building two as residential flats and building three as offices. A large shopping complex was also discussed and even a permanent home for Manchester's Halle Orchestra.

In March 1988, the building was sold to Brook House Properties, a Manchester developer for the sum of £3,000,000. Brook House was given a strict schedule to work against and unfortunately for one reason or another, this could not happen. The building stood empty for almost a year until eventually Brook House decided to review their situation and place the building on the market for the increased price of £4,500,000.

Skillion Holding Ltd bought the building in 1989. Skillion announced their plans for the building in January 1989 and they held a public meeting in

the Directors Boardroom, their plans at that time were to restore the building to its natural state and then open the building for the first time since it was constructed for public viewing. Skillion also proposed to bring the building back to its full economic life, their plan was to let the space of all three buildings to local businesses on a monthly basis and the basement areas below as a storage area for the building tenants.

The Hotel was renamed The Palace Hotel and they stayed in number one building, although not for long. Principal Hotels had realised the potential of the building next door and after only a year of opening they decided to buy the number two building. The plans which they had for this building was not only to introduce extra bedrooms to the hotel, but to introduce a modern business centre to attract the business clientele to the Hotel.

With the introduction of number two building, this increased the bedroom capacity of the hotel to 141, which also mean that The Palace Hotel could move the main entrance to underneath the clock tower. During the restoration of the courtyard, a magnificent marble floor piece was placed in the centre of the courtyard, underneath the glass dome; this would become the centrepiece for the reception area. As this area of the Hotel was actually an outside area of the building, an under floor heating system was installed to allow some heat during the winter months. An extravagant chandelier was also hung at the centre of the glass dome.

The marble and bronze staircase in the number two building was not in very good condition when the Palace Hotel bought the second building. It took quite a while and a lot of constructive work for the infamous staircase to be restored which today looks as splendid as when it was first built.

It was around the same time of the purchase of the second building that the company renovating building number two came across the staff canteen, which fortunately was restored to its former glory and is now used as the Grand Room.

As time went by the Hotel attracted a series of regular business clientele, they realised that they were an established company and would thrive on the Oxford Street site. In May 1997 the hotel completed the conversion of building number three which added 30 new ensuite bedrooms, which increased the total number of rooms to 171. With the ongoing refurbishment programme still continuing today the hotel bedrooms have increased to 275.