

A brief history of Victoria Building situated at 36-44 King Street



Picture above, the date is unknown, shows a large funeral cortege arriving at the Free Methodist Church. Giving a clear view of the four Georgian properties and Victoria Building (with signs for Bodega, Eureka store established around 1900) and the junction of College Avenue.

Victoria Building is situated between 36-44 King Street and the corner of College Avenue in Wigan town centre, although it is not a listed building it lies within the Wigan Town Centre Conservation Area.

The building was commissioned by James Whitfield, an Ironmonger who owned Clarington Brook Forge and Iron Foundry which later became Bulldog tools. The grand opening celebrated in a newspaper article of 1877 reports that it was designed by Mr. George Heaton, Architect born in Pemberton (1831 – 1899) and was built by James Fairclough's company. The article also recognised Mr John Johnson a bricklayer and Mr Mooreby, a plasterer in attendance along with other dignitaries.

The Planning application was approved by Wigan Council on 17 May 1876 for a commercial property with a basement and three floors above. The original building had two shops either side of the central main entrance. A central door gave access to the basement and smaller offices above and it was three storeys in height. As it stands today, you can just make out the four bays on first floor with a central window which would have stood above the original entrance.

The building formally opened on 15 September 1877, initially James Whitfield transferred his ironmongering business into the new build. Later the same year adverts can be found in local newspapers for Butter and Bacon Markets, although it's not clear from the records where these were positioned.

Photographs below shows the Register of plans approved by Local Council 1876 (WLA) and the Council Minutes reflecting the decision.

Register of Plans Approved by the Local			Board of Health, for the Year 1876		
Plan No.	By Whom Deposited	When Approved	No. of Houses	Remarks	Locality
1022	Mr John Nevill	May 17 th 1876	7 Houses		Morris St
1023	Mr Whitfield	May 17 th 1876	Shops & Offices	Victoria Buildings	King St
1024	Mr Wm Richards	June 21 st 1876	4 Houses		on Wightington St
1025	The Trustees of the Presbyterian Church	June 21 st 1876		additions to Presbyterian Church	in Chapel Lane
1026	Mr Edward Wigan	June 21 st 1876	8 Houses		in My Lane
1027	Mr John Edward Kenyon	June 21 st 1876	5 New Heath Vm		Springfield Road
					Pagefield Road
					Montague St
					Off Woodhouse Lane

Moved by Mr France seconded by Mr Proe and Resolved that the arrangement with Mr. Whitfield be approved subject to the projection of the Bay windows being arranged to the satisfaction of the sub Committee and that the plans produced be approved accordingly

Moved by Mr Alderman Lamb seconded by Mr Proe and Resolved that the Common Seal

This picture shows Victoria Building around 1882-1892 (Courtesy of Wigan and Leigh Archives) showing the entrance on King Street and to the side College Avenue. The timber frame on the roof is thought could have held telegraph wires. The building to the right of the gap was the Methodist Free Church which was replaced in the 1970's by a Tesco supermarket.



The photograph below, is believed to be from 1980's and shows some of the original layout of the building (on the right of the picture) with a central doorway and two shops either side.



Throughout its life of approximately 145 years most of the building has been used for shops and restaurants. Census data between 1881 and 1939 show very little residential use of the building.

Organisations and Individuals

Over the years many professions came and went from the building, including Professional Surveyors, Architects, Civil Engineers, Accountants, Insurance Companies, stock and sharebrokers and shop owners. One consistent was food and entertainment trades. There have been several bars, restaurants and more recently night clubs in the building up until 2021. It is currently up for refurbishment into residential accommodation.

Restaurants

In the same year of the building opening the Victoria Restaurant opened in the basement, it was recorded by the Wigan Observer and District Advertiser (WODA) in November 1878 as the first public restaurant in Wigan. This soon changed its name to Horder's restaurant, the restaurant advertised dining in Grand Saloon from one shilling. Facilities included private dining room for ladies, a large smoke room with access to all with chess and draughts and all the leading papers available.

Later in 1880 it was advertised as being under new management by Mrs A Leyland the then Victoria Restaurant was to be known as the Wigan Restaurant Company. Four years later in 1884 an advert appeared giving details of the winding up of the Wigan Restaurant Company.

In 1888 the Victoria Restaurant reopened. (Wigan Almanac, Mar 15, 1888) Before changing the name again, this time to The Garrick in 1891. The census of that year recorded Rachel E Burrows and Elizabeth Thomas as waitresses.

During 1895 the Manager and Beer seller Mr William Harrison was found to have people in his licensed premises who did not live there, he was charged with the unlawful sale of intoxicating liquor to non-residents, after hours.

During September 1899 the landlord of the Garrick Restaurant in the basement, Mr. Hall, applied for to make some internal alterations. (WODA 30 Sept 1899). He proposed turning a large part of the building into high class luncheon bar. The planned alterations went ahead in November 1899 making an entry from College Avenue.

Renamed again around 1900 the now Bodega Bar and Café hosted a diner in 1905 for the Wigan water polo team relating to new 'baths' to be opened in Wigan. With an after-dinner concert being held at the Orange Hall, King Street.

Several changes were requested to make alterations to the building from November 1909, some were refused. The licence was transferred to Mr Alfred Silvester who is shown on the 1901 and 1911 censuses as living next door at 28 King Street with his wife Rosa Ann and children. He died in 1917 age 50 and his wife continued to manage the bar for several years. It changed its name again in 1924 to the Bodega Co. Ltd. Wine Merchants.

The name is believed to have continued until around 1983 when it became the Bier Kellar, then merged with the Transport club and became the King of Clubs, exact dates not known. Continuing the theme with name changes in 1992 the former Bodega bar/Bier Kellar, changed to Leo's, then, The Movies, then JR's. Two years later the space was made bigger, and the entrance moved when the freehold of the whole building was sold to Luminar leisure. The name changed again to Liquid Nightclub, then to Elements and finally Evolution. There have been many name changes of the nightclub namely, Leo's Barn in 1979, Liquid Nightclub in 2005-2011, Elements in 2012 and finally Evolution 2016 to 2020.

Shops, meeting rooms and Offices

The original entrance was central with two shops on either side. Numerous occupants came and went over the years. Some of the longer and more notable occupants are noted below.

A shop selling Bicycles, Tricycles, Bassinets and Mail Carts between 1891 and 1920's and managed by Mr HH Timberlakes. In 1924, adverts now included the sale of automobile engines.

In the mid 1880's, Smith's Bicycles moved from number 16 to number 30. Mr J. Smith and Sons – selling bicycles and then pianos They advertised themselves in 1893 as, the best and cheapest shop in Wigan for hiring pianos and organs. On the same newspaper page, they advertised sales of old and new violins, harps, guitars, banjos, flutes, clarinets, and concertinas along with all kinds of strings and fittings. A later advert in 1904, June stated, "Smiths are without doubt Agents for the World's best Bicycles".

In May 1923 two adverts can be found on the same page for Timberlake's and Smith's Bicycles in King Street.

Picture Frame maker Mr Emmanuelle Vitali born near Lake Como Italy (1862- 1934,) was recorded as a fine art dealer in the 1891 census with a shop in Pemberton. This was scheduled for demolition in 1894 when he moved to King Street. A few years later in 1895 Kelly's Directory¹ shows him based at 30 King Street. Further advertisements recorded "Mr Vitali, Picture Frame Makers, wholesale, retail catholic repository. Best and cheapest place in town. Door on the right inside the building from King Street main entrance." (Advert WODA December 1906 and May 1907).

1 – Kelly's Trade Directory, was a national listing of businesses and trades people in any city or town as well as a general directory of postal addresses of local gentry, landowners, charities and other facilities.

A Hatter and Hosier, Mr William Ollerenshaw, (1843-1929) was another familiar name for many years in King Street selling from number 32. An advertisement in the 1881 Wigan Trade Directory recorded him as a "Practical Hatter and Gents outfitter, oldest established in Wigan". During 1890 he was advertising new shapes in silk and felt hats. In 1909 he was recorded as a hat manufacturer (advert in WODA).

Many adverts in the local newspaper show the variation of trades based in Victoria buildings, for examples see listed below.

- Bankruptcy Boot Company, selling boots and shoes, advert in (WODA on 26 December 1891)
- Eureka shop sales – cook ware.
- Kimoc Medicine specialist and experts located at 34 King Street (Advert in WODA 20 December 1913, page 8 and WODA 3 January 1914 page 4)
- 1916 new Gas showroom opens – (WODA March 4, 1916).
- Hiltons Boot Shop, on corner of Victoria Building.
- Hilton and Leyland Estate Agents from 1902.
- Wigan Conservatoire of Music opened new teaching rooms at no 18, by Mr W Grimes in 1906.
- Mr Ernest Wyatt Ralph architect had offices between 1910-1914.
- Messrs Platt and Fishwick Solicitors.

Wigan School Board – this was accessed by the side door entrance on College Avenue. An outline of the door is still visible although fully blocked in.

The first Wigan School Board meeting was held in Victoria Building in 1878, presided by Mr. France, Present were Messrs. JM McClure, W Berry, J Hill and Mr Lever Robert Rowbottom, Esq. who was clerk to the Wigan School Board at the time. (WODA 11 Oct 1878).

School boards were public bodies in England and Wales between 1870 and 1902, which established and administered elementary schools.

Created in boroughs and parishes under the Elementary Education Act 1870 following campaigning by George Dixon, Joseph Chamberlain and the National Education League for elementary education free from Anglican doctrine. Education was still not free of fees. Members were directly elected, not appointed by borough councils or parishes. Each board could:

- raise funds from a rate.
- build and run non-denominational schools where existing voluntary provision was inadequate.
- subsidise church schools where appropriate.
- pay the fees of the poorest children.
- if they deemed it necessary, create a by-law making attendance compulsory between ages 5–13 - until the Elementary Education Act 1880 when it became compulsory for all.
- not to impose any religious education, other than simple Bible reading.

Unusually for the time, women were eligible to win election to school boards. When the first elections were held, in 1870, seven women were elected across the country: Anne Ashworth and Caroline Shum in Bath, Catherine Ricketts in Brighton, Lydia Becker in Manchester, Marian Huth in Huddersfield, Eleanor Smith in Oxford, and Jennetta Temple in Exeter.

Following a letter from Education Department Privy Council in March 1872, eleven members were elected without contest to the Wigan School Board.

They met monthly at Wigan Borough Courts on Rodney Street until July 1878 when they moved to meet in the new Victoria Building offices. The last meeting at the Victoria Building was held in September 1903.

Wigan Rural District Council

The Wigan Rural Sanitary Authority was set up in 1872 under the Public Health Act (1872) following application by the Wigan Board of Guardians. It took in the townships of Dalton, Haigh, Parbold, Shevington, Worthington and Wrightington. It was later superseded by a Rural District Council covering the same area, the first meeting of the Council was held in December 1894. Actual dates are unknown.

Offices of the Clerks to the Board of Guardians

The Wigan Poor Law Union officially came into existence on 2 February 1837. Its operation was overseen by an elected Board of Guardians, 28 in number, representing its 20 constituent parishes and townships. The population falling within the Union at the 1831 census had been 58,402 with parishes ranging from 124 to 20,774 in Wigan itself.

The new Wigan Union Workhouse in Frog Lane was built by a local firm James Fairclough and son. The foundation stone was laid in April 1856 and was opened in December 1857.

The Board of Guardians held their first meeting in their new board room at Frog Lane on Friday 5 March 1858. Later offices could be found in both Victoria Building and Leader's Building on King Street. Two of the towns prominent people, Mr Henry Ackerley then Mr H Gordon Ackerley, spent a several years as Clerks to the Board of Guardians.

The last Chairman, appointed at the meeting on Friday 19 April 1929 was Gordon McGregor Esq. Following the Local Government Act of 1929, the Wigan Board of Guardians was abolished on 1 April 1930, and responsibility was passed to Wigan Corporation. After many years Wigan Workhouse had finally been consigned to history. Boston House Health centre now stands on the site.

Wigan Coroner's Office

Several Wigan coroners had offices in both Victoria Building and Leader's before moving across the road to the Leader's Building. Prominent gentlemen, whose names appear in various roles over the decades held the post of Coroner for the Town.

One of the longest serving Coroners in the country was Mr John Hopwood Sayer (1888-1975) After attending Wigan Grammar school then Rossall School. He was apprenticed (articled) to solicitor and former town clerk, Howard Devon. He was admitted as a Solicitor in 1912 and became a Deputy Coroner in December 1913.

In August 1918 following the passing of the Jury's Act allowing Coroners to dispense altogether with juries he held the first inquest without a jury. He continued to serve until 1968.

The Wigan Mission of Apostolic church

Also known as Catholic Apostolic Church, was listed in Kelly's Directory as being at Victoria Buildings, King Street in Wigan between 1891 and 1918. Although registration as a place of public worship and for the solemnization of marriages was considered in 1903, this was probably never affected, however no records indicate that this was realised.

No records have been found to gain additional information. According to Wigan and Leigh Archives -A Baptismal Register was kept at the time but does not survive. (WLA Wigan minutes and register of services D/NCa Ap, 2 files, Acc. 1859.)

Telephone Exchange

The Wigan Telephonic Exchange was situated on the 2nd and 3rd floors. Opening on 1 April 1882 the Wigan Observer (1 April 1882, page 2a) stated that "*shortly it is expected to be connected with those in Manchester, Liverpool, Blackburn and most of the leading towns in Lancashire, and local members will be able to converse with their fellow subscribers in those places at their own offices*".

The picture below is copied from <https://modernmooch.com/2022/02/07/telephone-exchanges-wigan/>

Dated 1882 it possibly the first picture of the Wigan Telephone Exchange in Victoria Buildings.



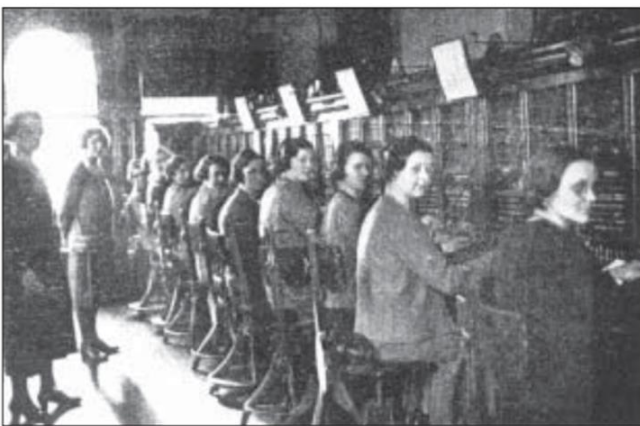
A letter dated 17 July 1883, held in the archives shows the Town Clerks office, advises the Lancashire and Cheshire Telephonic Exchange Company Limited that Wigan Corporation had sold the triangular plot in King Street on which they had erected a telephone pole and were respectfully asking for the pole to be removed within one month. Wigan Corporation minutes note permission given initially for a pole to be erected on a piece of land opposite the fish market on condition that it be removed when they receive a letter giving them 3 months' notice.

A newspaper article in May 1892 describes the visit of students from Wigan Mining and Mechanical School; *"where the whole system of working, as well as the detailed construction of the apparatus was kindly explained by Mr. Mewburn, the Manager, and Messrs. Williamson and Dagger, Electricians.*

The students were first taken to the top of the building where the standards are fixed to which the wires from the different subscribers converge, and from which they are cabled down in boxes to a terminal board in the central offices. From this they were taken to the switch board which has one hundred down strips of brass and thirty-six cross strips, also of brass. The down strips relate to the end of a subscriber's number, the cross strips being for the purpose of conveying the current from one down strip to another."

The 1901 census records Mr. John W Harre an Electrical Engineer at number 18 Victoria Building, and numbers 19 & 20 residents as Mr. William H Wetton age 38 a Telephone Operator from Liverpool and his wife and children in residence. It is unclear what the facilities were for a family to reside.

In April 1910 the Wigan Observer and District Advertiser (WODA) published an advert for "a smart youth wanted for office – apply by letter to National Telephone Co. Ltd."



Last day of service of the old Wigan Telephone Exchange before the new Wigan 'Common Control' Automatic Exchange system began service on 11 March 1933.



In March 1933 Wigan's Mayor, Councillor James Horne, opened Wigan's Automatic Telephone Exchange in Dorning Street, Wigan.

This was regarded as being "more than a telephone exchange" It was Wigan Group Switching Centre: which included an automatic (Strowger) telephone exchange, manual switchboards, test desks and a repeater station, amongst other things. The object of the automatic telephone exchange was to dispense with the assistance of a third party in making connection between two subscribers. (Ref: S., M. *The Automatic Telephone Exchange. Nature* **67**, 40–41 (1902). <https://doi.org/10.1038/067040a0>)

Shortly after opening, all services moved leaving the 3rd floor of Victoria Building empty until BT opened planning and drawing offices in the previous telephone exchange office during 1960's.

From 1961/2 Dorning street was the main switch exchange before the introduction of subscriber trunk dialling. The telephone exchange and its associated technology then on Dorning Street (Corner with King Street West).

In the early 1960's the Assistant Executive Engineer in charge of Post Office Telephones' Group Switching Centre (Wigan) was Harry Ridgway and the Higher Technical Officer in charge of the test desk was Joe Unsworth.

From 1991 the initial state of the art building in Dorning street has stood empty.

In conclusion, if walls could talk, I am sure Victoria Building could tell some tales. Whilst the external brickwork of Victoria Building still exists, sadly it is unclear if any of the internal structures remain.

The building has had many planning requests made for change of use, structural changes including and the movement of doorways. In 1976 number 3 Victoria Buildings requested permission to erect a radio mast on the roof, offices changed use from betting shop to wholesale tailoring businesses, record exchanges and sales of books, stamps and antiques. Clubs were transformed into retail shops, then back to cellars and beer lounges. In 2021 an application was made for a further change of use of the building residential. This due to start in 2023/4.

Picture below shows the building as it appears today.



Jan Bannister Thomas,

WLHHS for HAZ Project February 2024.