THE HISTORY OF

MILBURN HOUSE

BY **JOHN GRUNDY**

MILBURN HOUSE

1. The Site

In prehistoric times there were probably people living on or near the site of Milburn House. Where the Castle now stands, plough marks were found in the subsoil when the Roman fort that lies beneath the castle was being investigated and a stone axe head was also recovered. An excavation on High Bridge off Grey Street uncovered the site of a Bronze Age house dating from between 1500 and 800 BC, the oldest man-made thing so far found within the boundaries of the city. In the bed of a small stream beside the Black Gate a hollowed out wooden canoe from the Iron Age was found in Victorian times.

Later, when the Emperor Hadrian decided "to separate the Romans from the Barbarians" in AD 121, the wall that he planned was originally intended to end near where the Swing Bridge now stands, the lowest bridging point on the river and the site of the Roman Bridge. In the event the wall was extended to Wallsend but the line it followed was just to the south of Milburn House, over the castle hill and on, following the route now used by Westgate Road leaving Milburn House outside the Roman Empire and firmly in the territory of the barbarians. It's a worry.

It isn't clear what happened on the site in Saxon times, though a Saxon cemetery has been excavated under the arches of the railway viaduct that passes so close to the Castle Keep, but what we know for certain about Newcastle began at Easter 1080 AD when Robert Curthose, William the Conqueror's eldest son, built the first castle on top of the Roman Fort (and the Saxon cemetery – a clear symbol of who ruled the roost now).

From that start Newcastle expanded rapidly and by 1400 it was the 4th most important town in the kingdom. It was one of the shock troops of the Middle Ages – growing ever more powerful because of the independent and entrepreneurial spirit of its residents, because of its position on a tidal and easily navigable river and because of the increasing use and availability of coal.

The wealth was created on the river bank but increasingly the town spread up the hills to the north. St Nicholas was the centre of the town with an extensive market place in front of it (The Bigg and the Groat Market, Market Street). Newcastle's other mediaeval parish churches of St John, St Andrew and All Saints were all in existence within 100 years of the creation of the town and are sufficiently far apart to give an indication of how big the town rapidly became.

The site of Milburn House was part of this town.

The Side, the street on the south side of the building, was the main route up from the river bank to the castle and into the town. It was a steep and difficult route. Dean Street did not exist at all. It was literally a dean, the steep-sided valley of the Lort Burn, one of several tributaries that ran into the Tyne and divided the growing town into sections. Between these two features lay St Nicholas and its churchyard. The churchyard was much larger than it is now, hogging the whole of the hill top in much the same way as All Saints' Churchyard still does 3 or 400 metres to the east.

Before the building of Milburn House, The Side was lined with ancient buildings. Surviving photographs from Victorian times show an extraordinary mix of buildings. There are four-storey mediaeval houses with long strips of wooden windows just like Bessie Surtees House on Sandhill and there are lots of tall, brick, early-Georgian houses as well.

Behind the main street there were probably a number of alleys struggling up the steep banks below the churchyard in much the same way as the chares on the Quayside struggle up towards All Saints, but apart from this there were unlikely to have been any other buildings on the Milburn house site – St Nicholas' Churchyard was still filled with graves and Dean Street was a steep-sided valley filled with water and rubbish washed down from the upper parts of the town.

But change was in the air.

In the later 18th century two developments took place which had a profound effect on the future shape and scale of Milburn House.

1760: the churchyard was cleared of graves and reduced in size allowing a series of houses to be built along the south and east sides of the churchyard. One of these was Thomas Bewick's workshop and drawings of it done before it was replaced by Milburn House show a charming and informal Georgian house. The others were probably similar.

1780s: the Lort Burn was made into a culvert; its valley was filled in and Dean Street was created. It was immediately lined with houses designed by the local architect David Stephenson. They were standard brick-built Georgian houses. Four or five of them still survive relatively unaltered on the east side of the road.

These two events were part of a major surge in the development of Newcastle – they were part of its determination to achieve modernization and sophistication. The Mediaeval Town Wall that ran along the Quay and was perceived as a block to commercial advancement was demolished in 1764. About the same time Mosley Street was created and lined with the same modest but polite Georgian houses as can be seen on Dean Street (one survives). On Westgate Road, The New Assembly Rooms were built in the 1770s and close to them Charlotte Square, the town's first essay in formal town planning.

So, by the end of the 18th century, the site now occupied by Milburn House was fully occupied and very crowded. It probably didn't change a great deal for most of the following century The Ist Edition OS map (1858) reveals that there were at least 35 different buildings on the site. They included two public houses – The Grapes Inn on The Side and (ironically as it was to turn out) The Burnt House public house which was on a lane/yard right in the middle of the site. There were at least 7 of these little lanes, 5 of them accessible only by going through passageways under buildings. 8 or 9 flights of stairs are shown on the map and there are another 7 or 8 little yards marked which appear to be entirely enclosed by buildings. The map suggests that by the second half of the 19th century the site of Milburn house was covered by an extraordinary, jumbled mass of building. It is an impression reinforced by a glance at the extracts of the deeds deposited by the Milburn Estate in the Northumberland Record Office which reveal that the properties acquired by the estate housed a bewildering mixture of shops, dwelling places and workshops.

But no offices blocks.

2. 19th Century changes

The 19th century was a time of profound change in Newcastle. Coal and industrial wealth, entrepreneurial ambition and a certain degree of Tyneside arrogance saw the city push to improve its status. The changes were relatively modest at first but increased in speed and scale as the century proceeded. Collingwood Street was created in **1810;** a new theatre and indoor market were opened on Mosley Street. Further north, in the 1820s, Eldon Square and Leazes Terrace introduced a new metropolitan scale to the architecture of the town. Finally, and most importantly, the extraordinarily sophisticated new town was created by Richard Grainger in the 1830s; its principal glory was the northward extension of Dean Street, initially called Upper Dean Street and later renamed Grey Street.

Grey Street was intended to be a new main street for the town and what that meant mainly was a mixture of shops on the ground floor and houses above but it also included a number of buildings specifically intended for the administration of commerce...

Office Buildings

Until the first half of the 19th century there were very few buildings anywhere dedicated to the administration of commerce and all of them were concerned solely with a single activity. Newcastle probably only had one – the Custom House which controlled the commerce on the river. Other businesses occupied no more than a room or a few rooms in ordinary private houses. However, the Joint Stock Acts of 1826 and 1833 encouraged the growth of large, publicly-owned banks and they rapidly began to become an architectural presence in our towns. Grey street acquired several in the 1830s including the Bank of England which had a splendidly columned office half way up the west side of the street - and the present beautiful and impressive Lloyds Bank beside The Monument was opened as the Northumberland and Durham District Bank in about 1840. Closer to Milburn House, the splendid Italian “palazzo” style building on St Nicholas Square was opened as The Newcastle Joint Stock Bank in c. 1845.

A few years later, and certainly by the 1860s, an entirely new type of building was invented. It became increasingly common for speculators to buy up a number of old houses and construct a single large building which would become “Office Chambers”, premises that would allow a variety of businesses to rent space in a purpose-built office. The process started in the City of London but rapidly spread to places like Newcastle. St Nicholas Buildings opposite the Cathedral and The Black Gate was built in 1863 and was one of the first.

Another surviving example is adjacent to Milburn House. St Nicholas Chambers on Amen Corner was opened in 1880 and is a solid and weighty Victorian design – plainer and simpler than Milburn House as we shall see, but an excellent example of the sort of office buildings that existed before the late Victorian and Edwardian boom years.

The Boom Years

By the end of the 19th century and the first years of the 20th, Newcastle was doing extraordinarily well. The coal industry was vibrant and all aspects of the shipping industry were on a high. Vast fortunes were being made and the economic power can be clearly seen in the commercial buildings which were put up in those years. Collingwood Street, Mosley Street, lower Westgate Road, Neville Street and the lower end of Grainger Street were all almost entirely rebuilt on a stupendous scale and with tremendous panache, creating a business district of a type which is rare in English towns. Middlebrook (in Newcastle upon Tyne: its growth and achievement) quotes the writer of a local guide in 1903, "At no time in its history has the spirit of change been so active in Newcastle as it is at present".

There were innumerable banks and insurance companies and**, increasingly,** many speculative office buildings; a few of these buildings were by architects with a national practice. In 1891 Alfred Waterhouse built the attractive red sandstone Prudential Assurance branch (**currently** Portofino) on the NE corner of Dean Street, while a few years earlier John Gibson built the former National Provincial Bank of England (The Lodge) on the NW corner. Most however were by local architects. Newcastle was exceptionally rich in fine architects like F.W.Rich, W.H. Knowles and Benjamin Simpson but among all of them few had more impact than the designers of Milburn House, Oliver, Leeson and Wood.

3. Oliver, Leeson and Wood

"Oliver" was Thomas Oliver Junior (1824-1902). His father had been one of the band of notable architects who worked on Newcastle in the first half of the century (he designed Eldon Square and may well have been responsible for the Bank of England on Grey Street). Thomas Junior started his practice in Sunderland but moved to Newcastle in the 1860s to form a partnership with...

...Richard John Leeson (died 1914) who is a bit of a mystery. His personal history has proved difficult to trace. He did, however receive mention in the newspapers of the time. In 1900, for example he produced a much publicised plan to build a new Town Hall for Newcastle at the head of a grand boulevard to be cut through, due north of Grey's Monument towards the Haymarket. This scheme came to nothing but a few of the early works of Oliver and Leeson's partnership are recorded. They built Prospect House (formerly the HQ of Tynedale Council in the centre of Hexham) in 1888. It is a pleasant but unremarkable building. In 1885 they built St Luke's Church in Wallsend which is quite a distinguished building in the centre of the town. It is large, strong and quite dignified and the commission implies that they had a reasonably successful profile at this time.

By the 1890s the firm seem to have become more successful with an ever increasing presence in the prestigious heart of Newcastle. In 1893 they built Eldon Buildings, a very prominent rounded corner building adjacent to Grey's Monument and they were responsible for a beautiful Arts and Crafts interior at Pumphrey's Coffee shop on the Bigg Market in 1897. From then on they started to soar. In one year, 1899, they built two remarkable buildings – The Collingwood Building (now a vodka bar) opposite the Literary and Philosophical Society at the end of Collingwood Street, and Blandford House (now the Discovery Museum), the HQ of the North Eastern Cooperative Association which is a splendid building with a hugely original and very beautiful hall on the top floor. It's difficult to

explain how this leap in scale, quality and ambition could have occurred over a very few years without suspecting that it had to do with the arrival in the company of...

...William H Wood who was born about 1849 and lived until 1939. He was from Durham. For a number of years he worked with the Durham ecclesiastical architect, J. Hodgson Fowler, but by 1889 he seems to have moved to Newcastle to join Oliver and Leeson's firm. In 1898 he became a partner and the firm acquired the full title by which it is best known.

The most remarkable work that Oliver, Leeson and Wood did started in 1901 and ended in 1905. Between those years they transformed the west side of Dean Street from Mosley Street to The Side. In the middle of the street there is one building that they didn't do. Nos 17-21, which now incorporates a furniture shop, was built a few years earlier in 1897 by a different firm (Marshall and Dick) for an insurance company. It's an attractive building with the ground floor fascia in terracotta and a nice shaped gable on the roof – but it is a simpler building than everything else around it. This is not surprising because Oliver, Leeson and Wood's buildings on the west side of Dean Street are as good as any office building erected anywhere in those years.

They are quite remarkable in a number of ways and the first point to make is about their style.

The style of Edwardian Office Buildings

It is often true that entirely new types of building stir the imaginations and creativity of designers and that was certainly the case with the design of office buildings when they first began to emerge in significant numbers. No other class of Victorian or Edwardian buildings attracted more variety of approach, style and technical innovation than commercial buildings. From the 1880s there were iron and steel frames, extensive use of concrete, rich variety in the use of distinctive styles and elaborate decoration.

With few exceptions the chosen styles were all versions of the Classical style. Some drew their inspiration from Jacobean and Elizabethan building. Occasionally there were French Renaissance style buildings. Very often they were versions of the Baroque style which tends to be a rather exaggerated and richly **decorated version** of the Classical Style.

Whichever of these styles was chosen, eventually more adventurous architects began to tire of using the old architectural language and started to break the rules – to come up with new, less pompous and more innovative designs. They might mingle the Baroque style with ideas from other periods and include more playful, less grand details.

Oliver, Leeson's and Wood's buildings on Dean Street are rule breakers, they are not at all pompous and they are very beautiful.

The first they built was Cathedral Buildings at the top of the hill. It was done in 1901 commissioned by the Cathedral as a speculative venture, principally to house coal and shipping companies but despite this serious intention it is a light-hearted, colourful and jolly building, full of unexpected details (including the murderous rabbit over its back door). You would have to describe it as a Free Jacobean design because the facade is rich in shaped gables and oriel windows. . The architects said that it was inspired by a beautiful and festive early 17th century house in Ipswich called Sparrowe's House.

Cathedral Buildings was admired by Newcastle people, including the press, from the start. In 1902 The Newcastle Weekly Chronicle wrote, "Recently indeed Dean Street seems to have taken a new lease of life and several handsome piles of business premises have been erected on either side of it, notably the picturesque group of new buildings on the west side adjoining St Nicholas churchyard."

It is hardly surprising, given such a response, that the same architects should be chosen to complete the transformation of the street by building the vast new office building next door.

4. Milburn house (finally...)

We have already seen that by the 2nd half of the 19th century the enormous site of Milburn house was covered by a vast complex of buildings. The next question is how did it become available for redevelopment?

FIRE!

On March 8th 1900 there was a catastrophic fire *"which entirely destroyed the printing works and paper warehouse of Messrs Robinson and Co, then occupying the site"* (Newcastle Chronicle 8/3/00). In the early months of 1900 there had been a series of disastrous fires in Newcastle including a prodigious fire in a warehouse on Cowgate by the river early in January, but this fire beat them all.

Robinson's was a major firm, a wholesale stationers and paper manufacturer with a workforce of 320 and a national reputation. The company had very extensive premises on The Side:

"The firm had four blocks of property on the east side of The Side – about 40 or 50 yards in The Side and extending back, almost as much, practically to St Nicholas' Churchyard." (Chronicle again)

One at least of their buildings was mediaeval with over-hanging storeys and all of the others seem to have been old. They had been occupying the site since 1818 and only one section, the lowest, nearest the railway arch, had been recently rebuilt in glazed brick. One of their buildings on The Side had been formerly the town house of The Duke of Portland (the dukes were descended from the lords of the manor of Jesmond).

The fire appeared to have started in the 2nd building from the top of The Side – a part of the works known as the Light Paper Flat. Nobody, so far as I can discover, has ever found out what caused it since the works were closed at the time and there was only one stove in the whole place – and not in the areas where the fire started. According to the local paper, at least one cynical local was heard to make comments about "insurance" but no suggestion along these lines was ever made public and the cause remains a mystery.

It was a catastrophe however. Quoting from the Newcastle Chronicle again:

"The fire had spread with amazing rapidity. There was, of course, communication between all parts of the building. The building was packed with an enormous stock of books and paper and fancy goods; the paper acted almost like a trail of gunpowder and the lavish use of oak in the construction of the buildings helped the progress of the flames with wonderful celerity; everything was as dry as tinder with the seasoning of centuries and everything burned with appalling fierceness"

The fire soon spread beyond the printing works. The Grapes Inn and The Burnt House (sic) were destroyed. The problem was not just the tinder-dry combustibility of the buildings but the jumbled complexity of the site which (as the paper put it) *"in the older parts of Newcastle the firemen have occasionally to encounter in the pursuance of their duties".* Bystanders reported the absolute futility and inadequacy of the water supply to combat the flames.

And there certainly were bystanders – tens of thousands of them. They crammed all of the surrounding streets and hung out of the windows of neighbouring buildings. Among the best views (said the paper) was to be had by those who lined the great railway bridge over Dean Street and looked down on the scene from above. They clearly loved it – just as the paper loved it...

"When the firemen got there the roof was all ablaze and the sparks were flying in the air – myriads of tiny specks, shining and scintillating, making a spectacle more brilliant than the most gorgeous display of fireworks that ever was devised."

It is not quite clear how much of the site was destroyed in the blaze; some buildings undoubtedly survived and were demolished later as part of the redevelopment of the area but everybody who wrote about the fire agreed that Robinson's was totally gone. The damage was estimated at £35,000 which is about the cost of a trip to the supermarket nowadays but was presumably a lot of money then.

After the Fire

Very shortly after the fire it was clear that a vast office block was going to be built on the site. Within a couple of years we hear (in the Chronicle) about *"an extensive scheme for an imposing set of new commercial premises"* being undertaken by Mr J.D. Milburn, the purchaser of this and the adjoining site."

Other journalists varied this point and suggested that the scheme wasn't solely J.D.'s baby. One newspaper article talked of the purchasers being *Messrs Milburn and Co.* while another wrote of the work being done *"on behalf of Mr J.D. Milburn and other members of his family."*

The Milburn Estate papers are held by the Northumberland County Record office and it would take research beyond the scope of the present writer to explore the deeds for the buildings on the Milburn House site to find out who acquired which property and when – whether the idea was already planted before the fire or whether it was a rapid response to the opportunity that the fire presented. However, the extracts from the deeds which can be seen on the National Record Office website seem to make it very clear that a number of different members of the family were involved in the acquisition of property. Apart from J.D.Milburn, other names that appear are William Milburn the Younger, Charles Thomas Milburn (Colliery and ship owner of London) and Frederick Milburn (Colliery and ship owner of Cardiff).

So I am not clear as to whether the concern was a family one or an initiative on behalf of Milburn and Co or whether it was an undertaking entered into by J.D Milburn alone but with the support of his family. What is clear, however, is that it's called Milburn House because the Milburns built it.

The Milburn Family

The Milburns were an old Northumbrian family. Records reveal that before 1603 they had connections with the village of Birtley, high in the valley of the North Tyne. They were never a wealthy or a powerful family however and in 1804 Thomas Milburn moved to Ashington Farmhouse where he worked for Stephen Watson who was a tenant of the Duke of Portland.

Thomas's eldest son, William was born in 1826. He married Mary Davidson, the daughter of a Blyth shipowner and by 1849 (aged 23) he was already part-owner of a schooner; just three years later he owned three collier boats trading out of Newbiggin and Blyth. He continued to expand the business and by 1856 he was trading with the West Indies where he met another NE shipowner called Edmund Watts with whom he formed a partnership. Together they were among the earliest companies to adapt to steam and started running steam ships on the China tea run (with their superior speed condemning the old tea clippers to history). They had a huge trade importing wool from Australia and William co-founded another company, the Hamburg-Brazil line which went on to become one of the world's largest shipping lines.

Eventually, in 1877, the partnership with Edmund Watts split and William set up his own company, Messrs William Milburn and co. There were two offices; the London office was run by two of his sons, William Junior and Charles. His other son, John Davidson Milburn ran the Newcastle office.

By the end of the century Milburn and Co. owned one of the most important merchant fleets in the world. It's often said that the company had the 5th largest fleet in the world. That may be true. This researcher came across the names of 38 ships which they owned. All but five of them were built on the Tyne (the five that weren't were built in Sunderland).

As if this wasn't enough, the company was also heavily involved in the Ashington Coal Company, one of the world's most important coal mining concerns which had, by the end of the 19th century, an annual output of 2,500,000 tons. Four members of the family were directors of this company as well.

No wonder they could afford to build Milburn House.

Building Milburn house

Given the success of their work at Cathedral Buildings which they had completed just after the fire (that must have been a worrying time), it must have seemed natural to appoint Oliver, Leeson and Wood as architects of the new building. The people they worked with in the enterprise are as follows:

The builder was Stephen Easten of 277 Westgate Road who was described in the paper as *"the well-known contractor, Mr. Stephen Easten".*

The Metal frame to the building (about which, more in a moment) was provided by Messrs Swinney Bros of Morpeth.

The heating and ventilation engineers were Henry Watson and Sons of the High Bridge Works.

The interior decoration, including the painting and glazing, was entrusted to Geo Gavin Laidler who had premises on Northumberland Street but whose offices were on Lisle Street. (G.G.Laidler's son was a notable cartoonist. Until he died in 1939 he was a regular contributor to Punch).

There is an element of confusion about the tiles. Pevsner says that they are an early work by H and R Johnson of Stoke (the firm was founded in 1900) and that they were restored by the same firm when the building was restored in 1991. The Newcastle Chronicle writing in 1903, while the building was still being erected and probably before the tile work was started, state that the contract had been given to the Marsden Tile Company of Burslem, a company which had been founded in 1890 and which, like H and R Johnson, produced beautiful Art Nouveau tiles. Perhaps the MTC were the intended supplier but in the event the work went to the newer firm.

The contract for all of this building work was £130,000! I don't know whether that was the final price but that was the contract.

Clearing the site

Before the building could begin, the site had to be cleared and prepared for rebuilding. I don't know how many of the original buildings had survived the fire. Robinson's extensive works had been entirely destroyed and some buildings are known to have collapsed but others were still standing and they needed to be demolished. There seems, in Edwardian Newcastle, to have been a rather complacent approach to the demolition of old buildings. Over the lower part of the city a vast number were destroyed at this time and it is possible to hear voices that explained why it didn't matter.

One elderly correspondent called John Werge, writing about "Old Newcastle" in the Weekly Chronicle in 1894 describes *"an ordinary brick building like most of those ugly brick buildings of the Georgian era which formed the chief features of Pilgrim, Mosley and Dean Streets in those days"*

But there were other buildings and other writers who show that the demolition could also be contentious. An article in the Weekly Chronicle about Thomas Bewick written in 1903 when Milburn house was under construction adopts a melancholy tone about the demolition and the new building that was taking place. He writes:

"Bewick's workshop in St Nicholas' Churchyard, made famous by the artistic treasures that were produced there, remained a centre of curiosity and interest until a few months ago when it was removed to make way for a great pile of new buildings. All Bewick's great works are associated for all time with the now demolished house that stood so lately under the shadow of the lantern tower of St Nicholas Cathedral."

The preparation for the build was considerable. A major metal barrier had to be inserted into the ground between the site and the ancient church to make sure that no vibration could damage the cathedral. And of course the new building, being on so much vaster scale than those it was replacing, needed massive foundations. On The Side at least, piles 30 foot deep were sunk before the building could begin.

The Building Itself

With the exception of the article on Bewick quoted above I haven't found any negative opinions expressed about Milburn House at the time it was built and in the years since then it has received an

entirely good press. It has been loved (rightly as we shall see) for its interior and consistently admired for its exterior. What qualities does it possess to have merited such a positive response?

1. It is a huge building but wears its size relatively lightly.

The Newcastle Chronicle in 1903 recorded its size as *300 ft on The Side, 160 ft on Dean Street and 200 ft in St Nicholas churchyard.* And it is tall – 6 storeys plus a basement – or at least a ground floor on the corner of Dean St and The Side which turns into a basement higher up the hill. Its footprint is vast as well – roughly triangular with major facades on three widely separated streets.

The difficulty in designing big buildings which need to contain repetitive elements – in the case of office building lots of rooms with lots of windows to let in light – is to avoid making them seem boring and repetitive. Milburn house does this brilliantly. The facade is broken up into many smaller facets, each one containing its own rhythm of windows, each one becoming a facade in its own right.

The windows are also remarkably varied. There is a basic pattern of sash windows with segmental-arched heads, but this pattern is broken by tall oriel windows that run over several storeys, by large arched windows with heavily moulded arches, and even by pretty domestic windows under gables on the roof. The variation is so subtly done that the trick seems almost invisible.

2. It has moments of high drama.

The building looks exciting from almost any angle but the view from below, framed by the railway arch is one of the architectural highlights of Newcastle (and indeed of any other town you could think of). It is thrilling. It is often compared to an ocean liner because of the Milburns' nautical background (though they did not own passenger ships) but in actual fact its rounded form follows the line of the buildings that existed before the fire. It is, **nevertheless,** a stupendous and exciting view. This researcher once watched a window cleaner walk along the ledge just below the attic storey and had to run away.

3. The choice of materials soften the effect of grandeur

The style chosen for the building is a version of the Baroque. Among the Baroque elements are bold, rather exaggerated door surrounds and heavy keystones to close-set windows

The original Baroque architecture in Britain dates from the late 17th century and is typified by grand public buildings like St Paul's Cathedral, Hampton Court and the great country houses (Blenheim Palace for example) of Sir John Vanbrugh. In the late 19th century there was a revival of this style because of its grandeur. Britain had become used to seeing itself as the greatest power on Earth, the centre of a great Empire and architects and clients frequently chose the Baroque to represent that power. It is a style which would normally be associated with grandeur and executed in stone. Milburn house has lots of Baroque elements but it is a free-er version of Baroque with the rules broken in a playful way and softened by the use of warm red brick, varied by stone detailing and even (in The Churchyard) by pebbledash and simple wooden windows to make the building less intimidating.

4. It uses the slope brilliantly

It just does. It uses the slope brilliantly. The slope is dramatised by the use of marble in places and by the way that floor levels die into the contours. It is a source of endless fascination and admiration

5. It is a clever building technically

First of all it has a metal frame. On the basis of this research it is not clear to me how much of the building is framed. One quote from the time seems to suggest that the frame is to be found just around the light wells with their large, American-style windows; but a newspaper article from May 1903 when the building was well under way says that the building is *"to a large extent made up of steel columns and girders which form an internal framework to bind together the other constituents of wood, brick and stone."*

This is a particularly interesting quote for two reasons:

Firstly, it has been generally accepted by architectural historians that the first steel frame to be used on any building in Newcastle was the former Scottish Provident House (now Heroes) on the corner of Mosley Street and the Bigg Market. This building was put up in 1906, well after Milburn House.

Secondly, the archivist for Swinney Bros (who has a photograph of the building under construction) says that his firm never used steel on any of their projects and that the frame was constructed of cast iron – rather an old-fashioned choice for 1902. Pevsner claims that another 1901 Oliver, Leeson and Wood building on the opposite side of Dean Street (Brew Dog) has a steel frame. So, is it a complete frame or a partial one and is the frame steel or cast iron? These questions still need to be resolved, but any way they turn out it is interesting and an innovative design feature that the building has a metal internal frame.

There are also other ways the building is technically interesting.

It was heated by steam – a situation that was still in place when the building was restored in the early 1990s. I don't know how it is heated now.

It was lit by electricity and had four electric lifts from the start. To be fair both of these would be expected in a large new building in 1902. Lifts were generally available after the 1880s and so was electric lighting though it continued to be expensive. It is quite interesting that the existence of lifts has not really affected the height of the building. When office buildings first emerged in the second half of the 19th century it was generally accepted that six storeys was the highest that was acceptable for a building using stairs and it is interesting that Milburn House (along with all of the other office buildings in Newcastle incidentally) was willing to continue to accept that limitation. It wasn't until the 1960s that taller buildings began to appear.

The treatment of light is interesting too. With electric light being relatively expensive and relatively unreliable it was important to get as much natural light into the building as possible. Milburn House has been designed in such a way that it is rich in natural light. Five (I think) white-painted light wells surrounded by rooms with large plate-glass windows carry light into the deepest sections of the building. The corridors are lined with glass as well which is a beautiful effect but also a highly practical solution to the problem of natural light.

And then there are fire protection measures – understandable given the circumstances under which the building came into being. Each section of the building has access to a stone, fireproof staircase and the floors throughout the building are made of concrete – still a relatively new material in 1902.

6. It is brilliantly planned.

Given the extreme complexity of the site in terms of the different ground levels and the complicated profiles of the streets that form the boundaries of the building, not to mention the surviving **buildings** with which it had to interact, the architects have produced an extraordinarily coherent building. It must have seemed like a nightmare to design – but it works.

My favourite element of the planning is the provision of different entrances at different levels. Contemporaries were particularly struck by the way the higher level entrance in St Nicholas Churchyard benefitted those making their way to and from Central Station.

And finally...

7. The interior decoration

The public spaces inside Milburn house are beautiful. "Beautiful" seems like a bold word to choose for a commercial and speculative concern like an office block, but it is true, the internal decoration is beautiful. The delicate tracery of the internal windows that line the corridors, the exquisite Art Nouveau tiles that form a dado throughout the building (and also the more extrovert brightly coloured ones forming friezes at the entrances), the delicious copper door furniture throughout the building, even the lamp fittings, everything is gorgeous.

There aren't a lot of different elements to the decorative scheme, the same lovely things are repeated throughout **but it is** all remarkably delicate and extraordinarily pretty and gives the building a consistent and remarkably consistent personality. It is difficult to think of a more successful interior.

The assumption is that it will all have been bought off the peg and installed by the decorators, but the choices must have been made by the architects who had a proven record in the creation of beautiful interiors (cf. **Pumphrey's** Coffee shop and the Great Hall in Blandford house).

There are three special decorative moments which deserve to be mentioned separately. The stately armorial glass in the central halls adds an element of civic dignity to the display. The coats of arms (I am no expert on this) are said to be those of the Newcastle Trade Guilds and if that is the case, their use here must be a conscious choice to relate the new buildings to the city's illustrious commercial past. They were inserted by G.G.Laidler but I have not been able to find out who made them.

The same is true of the mosaic of Electra on the floor of the central hall. It is a splendid and a striking picture – utterly late 19th century in style and beautifully executed – but a little odd to find here since Electra was the daughter of Agamemnon who plotted the murder of her mother and stepfather. She seems an unusual choice for an elegant decorative scheme though it was fashionable to admire tragic classical heroines. Electra herself was the subject of a tragically dramatic painting by Lord Leighton done a few years before Milburn House. My assumption is that she is there to

represent “electricity” and all the wonders of the modern world – but I might be wrong. Once again, I have been unable to discover who designed and made her.

And then, in the main porch there are the two painted gesso panels representing *The Battle of Otterburn* and *The Entry of King Charles into Newcastle*. These were favourite images for patriotic **North-Easterners** and they call to mind the stirring historical lunettes that were painted to decorate the galleries of The Laing Art gallery which was being built at exactly the same time as Milburn House.

The panels are of wonderful quality. Similar ones are (or were) to be seen at Ford Castle (the home of the industrialist Lord Joicey. Others can be seen at Naworth Castle in Cumbria and in Tullie house Art Gallery in Carlisle. The presence in Milburn house, like the armorial glass, is a clear advertising message to users of the building, telling them that they are among wealthy and successful **people;** but they are also clearly intended as a statement, positioning the building into the city’s social hierarchy and historical structure.

I don’t know who created them or where they came from. I fully expected that to be available information but it has eluded me so far. I intend to keep searching.

So...that’s the building – beautiful, innovative, sophisticated and posh – who was tempted to become a tenant in such a palace?

5. THE TENANTS

The information about the companies using the new building is all extracted from various annual registers of Newcastle published by Ward and first of all it is quite interesting to look at who was on the site before the fire. On Dean Street in 1897-8 there were two solicitors and an accountant, a general merchant and the Scottish Employers Association. On The Side and in the jumbled vennels behind it, apart from the ill-fated Robinsons there was a complete mix of concerns - there were clothes dealers and a newsagent; there was a “tonsorial saloon.” Several premises are described as the homes of labourers and skilled workers but among these relatively lowly concerns there were some that were different. There was a “Fine Art Dealer”, a public analyst (which later moved across Dean Street into new premises) and there was a shipbroker.

In 1903, Three years after the fire and two years before the building opened, the Newcastle Chronicle wrote, *“The ground floor shall be mainly let as shops while the upper floors will be made into suites of offices and we believe that tenants have already been secured for a very large proportion of the shops and offices.”*

By and large the ground floor shops never materialised except for the basement unit on the bottom corner of the building and the hairdressers now occupied by G. Scott at the top of The Side (a tonsorial saloon) but the paper’s prediction about office suites turned out to be the case.

There are indications that the building was inhabited in stages as it became available. So, Ward’s 1905-6 Directory of Newcastle which must have gone to print even before the building was officially opened, only includes a few tenants. One of them at least, the solicitors Ingledew and Fenwick, had

lost their previous premises in the fire while another, The Ashington Coal Company could hardly fail to become a tenant since four of its directors were Milburns who had paid for the building. The Ashington Coal Company was destined to stay in Milburn House until it went out of business after the nationalisation of the coal industry in 1946.

Among that first select tranche of tenants, at least half were concerned with the coal industry while among the others three were metal companies. One of those was a major concern which still exists today. Isaac Cookson had set up his glass manufactory in 1817 but by the end of the century the company had expanded into many other industrial concerns and it was Cookson and Co, Lead **Manufacturers,** which moved into Milburn House in 1905.

This group of tenants set the tone for the future of the building because it is obvious that there are people missing – there was no place in the new building for the artisan concerns which had been displaced by the fire. Milburn House, from the start was a home for professional people.

The next edition of Ward's Directory for 1907-8 makes this very clear and paints a much more complete picture of the sort of companies that were attracted to the new building.

There were 185 of them!

That number may be slightly misleading because some listed concerns might have shared offices. Francis Priestman is listed as The Chairman of The Ashington Coal Company, for example, but he is also listed as the owner of two other coal companies in Sunderland.

Coal is one of the key themes to be found among the tenants in 1907 and for many years after. Of the 185 companies mentioned, 43 were to do with coal and they represented all aspects of the business. There were coal owners and coal shippers; there were also coal fitters (not workers in the mines of course, but colliery engineers). There was a coal and coke company and there were a number of gas companies whose product in those days derived from coal.

All of the coal has gone now but some of it seems more gone than others. The Plashetts Coal and Coke Company has long been drowned beneath the waters at **Kielder**.

But if coal was important, it was shipping that lead the way. At least forty six of the offices were let to shipping concerns and once again all aspects of the industry were represented. You really get the sense that the whole business could be organised from one single building and that there was no expertise which wasn't available on the premises. There were shipbuilders and shipowners, ship brokers, steamship companies, professional and indemnity clubs (for marine insurance); there were coal exporters and (sticking to the power theme) a "Petroleum Tanker Steamship Co. There was The Northern Steam Haskinizing Co which I think, though I don't know for certain, dealt with the preservation of wood and in particular with the protection of ships' timbers.

And in the end, if everything went wrong, there was even The Society for the Relief of Widows and Orphans of Shipwrecked Mariners (not the only charity incidentally – the RSPCA had offices in Milburn House in 1907).

But if industrial concerns provided the bulk of those taking space in the building there were lots of other activities as well.

The Cuban Embassy was there and so was J. Potts and Son, Tourist Agents. Two different electrical supply companies (The Northern Counties Electrical Supply co. and Cleveland and Durham Electrical Power) perhaps attracted by the thought of Electra, resplendent in the central hall.

Inevitably financial and legal services were present too – one bank, one insurance company, several accountants and a number of solicitors (though not as many as were attracted to the building in later years)

And just like today there were architects. In 1907 Oliver Leeson and Wood (minus poor Mr Oliver who had died before the building was even started) moved in to the building they had designed.

A note about sources

The information in this report came first of all from published sources. The starting point was Niklaus Pevsner's "Northumberland (2nd **edition** 1991 revised by Grundy, McCombie et al).

Newcastle and Gateshead (Grace McCombie)

Several books published by Tyne Bridge Publishing (Victorian Panorama, Digging Deeper and Down our Streets)

Victorian Architecture by Dixon and Muthesius (Thames and Hudson) and English Towns by Mark Girouard (Yale UP)

As ever, Ward's Registers proved an invaluable source of information

1st Edition OS was supplemented by the hand-drawn **BOAD** Maps held by Newcastle Central Library

All of the quotes from the contemporary local newspapers **were** drawn from collections of cutting held by the Central Library

The National Record Office website provided information about the Milburn family

Red duster.co.uk provided more information about the Milburn family and the development of Milburn and Co.

The National Mining Museum website provided information on The Ashington Coal Company.

It is almost certain that there **is a lot** more information to be found at the Northumberland Record **Office** where the Milburn Estate papers are stored but that was research beyond the scope of the present enquiry.