

# Reading Town Hall

No. 36



The Town Hall, about 1900  
(Museum object no 1996.236.25)

The oldest part of the Town Hall complex is the Small Town Hall, now known as the Victoria Hall. This was built in 1786. It was rebuilt in 1864 in Italianate style to accommodate the Father Willis Organ that had just been presented to the town by the Reading Philharmonic Society.

In 1875 a new building designed by Alfred Waterhouse was added with the council chamber, Mayor's rooms and offices. It is built of locally made red and grey bricks with terracotta panels. Waterhouse wrapped his new building around the existing 18<sup>th</sup> century Town Hall. He was a skilled planner, and enjoyed the challenge of a constricted site. His principle of design was to *'first get your plan right - then the skyline - then fill in'*. He carefully placed the clock tower for views from Friar Street and Market Place. Waterhouse lived at Foxhill, Whiteknights in Reading.

A few years later it was decided to add a Concert Hall, Museum and Library. Waterhouse was asked to submit a design, but it was too expensive. A design competition was held and won by local architect Thomas Lainson. The Father Willis organ was relocated and enlarged and the Concert Hall opened in 1882. The last addition to the Town Hall was in 1897 when the Art Gallery building by W.R. Howell was opened.

In 1943 an air raid destroyed the southern end of Waterhouse's building. Temporary repairs remained in place until the Town Hall was restored between 1989 and 2000. This restoration brought the Concert Hall and organ back into use and created new galleries for the Museum of Reading.

## Reference:

Reason, M. 'The history and architecture of Reading Town Hall', in Peter Marr (ed.), *The organ in Reading Town Hall: a symposium*. 1982

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