

# 6 The Mercer Gallery

Walk 1: The Golden Age  
of the Victorian Spa Walk



Since its opening in 1991, today's Mercer Art Gallery in Swan Road has become one of Harrogate's greatest attractions, and although any successful art gallery is so much more than the building which contains it, the history and varying fortunes of the building are worth noting.

The building itself had opened in 1805 as the Promenade Room and then the Assembly Room, with the handsome Italian Renaissance stone frontage added in 1874-6. This was financed by a group of Harrogate doctors, who realised that if their patients extended their visits to Harrogate to enjoy entertainment, the medical profession would surely benefit!

The 1874 refurbishment was designed by architect Arthur Hiscoe, who gave the building an impressive hall with an elaborate coffered ceiling lit by stained glass ceiling windows. Such artistes as Lilly Langtree and Oscar Wilde appeared here.

During the 1890s, the Promenade Room served as a theatre for W. H. Breare's Minstrels and various touring companies, until the new Grand Opera House opened in 1900, when the Promenade Room was used by the Council for a variety of uses including the Mechano-Therapeutic Department of the Spa, and later as the Borough Treasurer's Office.

Meanwhile, Harrogate's collection of art was growing. It had begun in the nineteenth century when visitors began to present the authorities with paintings,

which were displayed in the New Victoria Baths and the Spa Rooms.

When in December 1922, the Herald published a long article in favour of a municipal art gallery, it became clear that it was only a matter of time before one was provided.

Harrogate's custom-built Art Gallery was opened in a first floor extension to the public library on 9th January 1930.

Today, much of the successful fund raising is brought about by the energetic work of the Friends of the Mercer Galley, who were able to build on the generosity of the Mercer family, whose generosity enabled the Art Gallery to move from the Library into the former Promenade Room. Since its opening in 1991, the Mercer Gallery has a highly impressive record of presenting magnificent exhibitions of masterpieces, showing more contentious contemporary art, as well as displays by amateurs and children.

Today, a visit to the Mercer Gallery is an unmissable part of every visitor's experience of Harrogate.

