

Biographical Background:

Thomas Robinson Ferens, born on 4 May 1847, was the son of a Miller. He moved to Hull in 1868 at the age of 19 when he began working as a clerk to Mr James Reckitt. He progressed through the company of Reckitt and Sons, taking on the roles of Secretary, then General Manager and eventually Chairman. He became a wealthy industrialist, with an old Hull saying that 'Reckitt's Blue made Ferens' gold'.

Although Ferens became very wealthy, his Methodist up-bringing meant he had no desire for luxurious living and sought to use his wealth for the benefit of others. Accordingly, he made gifts to the city totalling more than one million pounds. It is for these generous gifts that he is best remembered. Ferens helped to fund a variety of causes and contributed to the formation of Hull University, the hospital and the city's art gallery.

Ferens had a great love of art and he also believed that works could have both a moral and spiritual effect on the viewer. In view of this he gave £5000 in 1905 for the purchase of new works for the city. He also started to campaign for a dedicated art gallery as he was dissatisfied with the display space for art in the Albion Street Museum. In 1917 he offered 35,000 pounds and the site of St John's Church, Queen Victoria Square for the construction of a new art gallery. The Ferens Art Gallery was opened in November 1927 and the following year Ferens provided a £20,000 covenant for the purchase of new works of art.

During his life, Ferens acquired almost forty paintings which he presented to the gallery. These tended to be works by established artists that were purchased from the annual Royal Academy exhibitions and included Herbert Draper's 'Ulysses and the Sirens' and Edgar Bundy's, 'The Night School'. Ferens generously gave £250,000 towards the founding of Hull's new University College. He also supplied the original 18 acre site on Cottingham Road. The foundation stone for the new University College was laid in 1928, by the Prince of Wales. Once the College was built, Ferens endowed a further £240,000.

He also gave some land for the East Park in East Hull and paid for the building of the Ferens Boating Lake in 1913 within the Park, which was further extended in 1923. Ferens thought of both young and old and gave 14 acres of land for a recreation ground for the Young People's Institute, as well as providing funding for twelve almshouses, known as the 'Ferens Rest Homes' for elderly people.

Ferens was Liberal Member of Parliament for East Hull from 1906 to 1918. He first stood for election in 1900 but was defeated by Firbank by 836 votes. However, six years later, he won with a majority of 2,362 votes. He celebrated this landslide victory and also his thirty six years with the Reckitt company by giving a sovereign to each employee. He sent an accompanying letter expressing his appreciation of their work. The only request in the letter was that they didn't spend it on 'intoxicating liquor' as Ferens believed in abstinence from alcohol.

Ferens and his wife Esther lived at 'Holderness House', on Holderness Road. They were members of the nearby Brunswick Methodist Church and also taught at the Sunday School every weekend. This was very important to Ferens and he continued to teach to the end of his life, taking his last classes at his own home. In 1924, to mark the anniversary of the Church and Sunday School, he was presented with a bound album as a gesture of gratitude for his involvement. It contained photographs of past ministers, an account of its history, along with the signatures of members of the congregation.

Hull History Centre: Papers of Thomas Ferens

In October, 1911, Ferens was given the Freedom of the City of Hull. At the ceremony, several speeches were made that expressed appreciation of both his charitable gifts and his religious and community work. In the following year he was made a member of the Privy Council by King George V and later in the year, he was also made High Steward of Hull. Although Ferens was honoured in these ways, throughout his life he never sought recognition for his efforts. He was also offered a title on more than one occasion, but refused it, preferring to be known just as 'Mr Ferens'.

Following a few weeks of illness, Ferens died on Friday 9th May, 1930. Two funeral services were held at the same time in the city -one at Brunswick Church and the other at Holy Trinity Church. As his wife Esther had died eight years previously and they had no children, 'Holderness House' was left to be used as a 'home for poor gentlewomen'.

It is clear from sentiments expressed in Hull's newspaper obituaries that Ferens had been held in great respect and affection. The Hull Times had the headline 'Hull Loses a Lovable and Sterling Character'. The pages contained many tributes, one of them by the Principal of the Hull University College, who remarked that 'Hull will seem empty without him'.

Although Ferens was not born in Hull, it was his home for over sixty years and it became his 'adopted city'. It is said that when he first moved to Hull, he had only two shillings that his mother had given him. He amassed great wealth, not as a result of privilege, but through ability and hard work. He then used this fortune to help others and as a result, thousands of people in the city and the surrounding region have benefited over the years.

Custodial history: Donated by Prof. HK Bevan, Nov 1985

Description:

Four diaries of Thomas Ferens, written in shorthand and two photographs at the laying of the foundation stone for Hull University College.

Extent: 4 volumes & 2 items

Related material: Other papers at U DX96

Access conditions: Access will be granted to any accredited reader

U DX171/1	Diary of T.R. Ferens 1 volume	1866
U DX171/2	Diary of T.R. Ferens. In shorthand 1 volume	1868
U DX171/3	Diary of T.R. Ferens. In shorthand 1 volume	1870
U DX171/4	Diary of T.R. Ferens. In shorthand 1 volume	1872
U DX171/5	Photographs taken at the laying of the University College, Hull foundation stone by the Duke and Duchess of York. Including the platform party and T.R. Ferens speaking. 2 items	Apr 1928