

SHORT

ARTICLES

ART NOUVEAU



# Arthur Wakerley - Businessman, Politician, Architect and Turkey Lover.

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United  
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Uncommon  
Culture



The Turkey Cafe opened in September 1901 and was renumbered 24 Granby Street. As a tea room, the cafe was popular with women. Not only was it a respectable venue for gathering, but it also provided a convenient meeting place to discuss the progress of women's rights

Arthur Wakerley was a politician, businessman, architect and an active contributor to the newly forming and wealthy city of Leicester, UK. Born in 1862 in Melton Mowbray, an area of the UK most notable for its culinary delights, rather than its Art Nouveau, he moved to Leicester when he was about 23 and was elected as mayor of the city on 9 November 1897. In the 1920s he was the Chair of Leicester's first Housing and Town Planning Committee, as well as being a Wesleyan local preacher, and President of the Temperance Union, whilst also making several attempts to enter Parliament as a Liberal candidate for the Melton Mowbray Division.

I first encountered Wakerley in his capacity as an architect as part of some research for the Partage Plus project, where I discovered his flamboyantly designed buildings in the city which range from a synagogue to a number of factories, a home for the blind to hotels and streets of affordable housing.

Perhaps one of his most interesting tasks was to design an Art Nouveau turkey themed cafe in the centre of Leicester. Keen to adopt current trends when designing his building, the *Turkey Cafe* opened in 1901, embracing the new art of the period, Art Nouveau. The background to the history of this beautiful building starts in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, on the land around where the *Turkey Cafe* now stands at 24 Granby Street, Leicester, UK, home to inns, blacksmiths, stables, pigsties, and homes. While families did work and live in the area, morality and honesty were not hugely visible there. This is evident when the *Falcon Inn*, built on the land next to the cafe, lost its license in 1873 for being a house for prostitutes. However, situations improved as ownership of the land changed and new stores were established. In 1877, James Wesley, a grocer and confectioner, bought the land next to what used to be the *Falcon Inn*. He owned the land





until 1899, when he sold 22 Granby Street to Arthur Wakerley. Wakerley already had his first tenant in line, John Winn. John Winn was a restaurateur and already owned the *Oriental Cafe* in Leicester. The offices of Wakerley's architectural practice were above Winn's *Oriental Cafe*, making it easy to negotiate a deal regarding the construction and occupancy of a new cafe on Granby Street. Wakerley understood that to realise his vision of his *Turkey Cafe*, he would need specially designed tiles to adorn the front and so approached the Royal Doulton Company for help constructing his design for the new *Turkey Cafe* (Farquhar, Skinner 1987).

The style of the *Turkey Cafe* reflected the new trend of Art Nouveau and the building was designed to create a sense of stability by visually implying a pyramid structure. This was done by having seven arches on the ground floor and then decreasing the number of arches on each level. The pyramid is completed with a single turkey located at the top of the building. The building was coloured blue, green, and buff, which allowed any onlooker to fully appreciate the shapes and curves of the building's designs (Farquhar, Skinner 1987). The facade was constructed using tiles, hollow blocks, and a type of terracotta called carraware, a matt glazed stoneware developed by the company in 1888. The carraware tiles of this frontage were handmade by William Neatby, a ceramic artist who worked for Royal Doulton (Taylor 1997). In addition to these features, Art Nouveau can be found in the decorations etched into the front window, as well as the red and green Art Nouveau designs of the rear tea room windows and the turkey statues, who sit in pride of place at the cafe entrance (Farquhar, Skinner 1987).

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a tea room, the cafe was popular with women. Not only was it a respectable venue for gathering, but it also provided a convenient meeting place to discuss the progress of women's rights (Taylor 1997). However, the cafe was not designed with only women in mind. Located in the back of the cafe was the Smoke Room. This room with its dark interior provided a place for men to gather and converse. The cafe became so popular that in 1911 the owner, John Winn, expanded into the building next door, taking over the premises of Wheeler Kendall's *Umbrella Manufacturer and Can Stick Merchant*. This change allowed Winn to expand the restaurant and storage space, and add a billiard room (Farquhar, Skinner 1987).

Further renovations were made in 1927 when Winn decided to modernise the entrance, making the front appear more Art Deco than Art Nouveau. Wakerley allowed for the changes, as long as Winn restored the shop to its

original appearance once the lease was done. Unfortunately, when Winn's family sold the *Turkey Cafe* to another local Leicester business, Brucciani Bakers Ltd. in 1963, no restoration was undertaken. Under its new ownership, the Brucciani family turned the *Turkey Cafe* into a coffee and ice-cream shop. The reputation of the cafe as a location for woman to gather continued, and in 1966 the cafe had a "Ladies Only" room. However, once the *Sex Discrimination Act* was passed in 1974, the cafe was no longer able to prohibit men from entering and in 1968, the cafe was once again renovated. The result was a mixture of old and new. The original interior tiled walls were panelled over, a tiled mural of a turkey was added, and smaller windows were inserted (Farquhar, Skinner 1987).

The *Turkey Cafe* underwent yet another renovation process when Rayner Opticians Ltd. purchased the property in 1982. The interior was altered greatly to accommodate



the new business, and curved windows were added to the above stories. However, the etched glass windows on the ground floor and the front arch were kept and restored to their original condition (Farquhar, Skinner 1987). Rayner Opticians tracked down Hathernware Ceramics Ltd. of Loughborough, UK, the only firm experienced in using the terracotta material needed for restoration at the period (*The Turkey Cafe*, 2011). The opticians had the original architectural drawings and a 1910 photograph, which architects Sawday and Moffat had in their archives. As a result, Rayners commissioned Deardon Briggs Designs Ltd. to follow these plans for the restoration process and creation of reproduc-

tions. In the end, the restoration of the exterior cost over £30,000, with the Leicester City Council contributing £5,000 (Farquhar, Skinner 1987).

For two decades the building served as an optician's office, but in 2004 the building was returned to its original purpose and resumed business as a cafe (*The Turkey Cafe*, 2011). The building has been listed as a grade two building for its Art Nouveau style architecture, making it clear that the building is of architectural and historic special interest. To the people of Leicester, the building is a landmark and an interesting part of the city's heritage. The building has served as a cafe, restaurant, meeting place, ice-cream parlour, and unex-





pectedly, an optician's studio. While numerous buildings were destroyed during and after the World Wars, including all of Winn's other cafes, the *Turkey Cafe* has remained (Taylor 1997). The building has come full circle, standing restored in its original appearance and serving as a cafe, acting as a perfect location to sit back, enjoy a cup of coffee, and be transported back to an earlier time.



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