

# THE CORONER'S COURT

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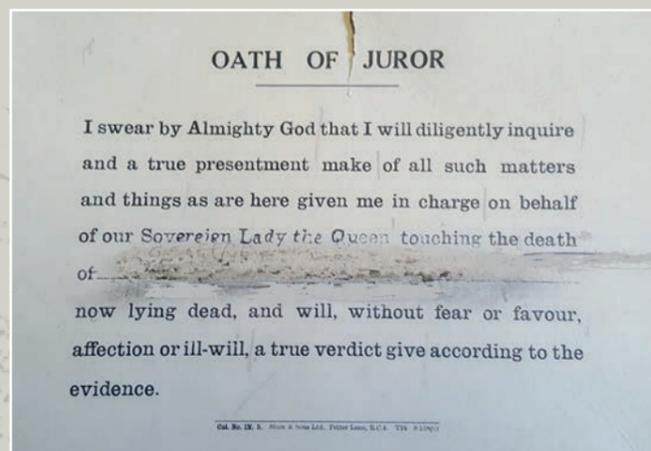
HERITAGE OPEN DAY



# WHAT IS A CORONER

The office of coroner is an ancient office which appears in records dating back to 1184. A coroner is an independent judicial office-holder, appointed and paid by the relevant local authority, but answerable only to the High Court for judicial and administrative decisions. A coroner must be an experienced lawyer or a doctor, and in some cases may be both.

The coroner is limited by law in what he or she may do. It is a coroner's duty at an inquest to establish who the deceased was, how, when and where the deceased came by his or her death. An inquest is a fact-finding inquiry: it is not a trial. An inquest is not permitted to determine or appear to determine criminal liability by a named person or civil liability. It is about what happened, not who was responsible for what happened, for which the civil and criminal courts have jurisdiction.



## HISTORIC COURT ROOMS

Although the legal system of England and Wales may be referred to as a single entity, it is in fact a series of interconnected jurisdictions with specialised practices, staff and buildings.

Specific buildings have evolved during the past two hundred years to serve each of the branches, though the buildings share some common design elements, themes and symbols.

Each type of courthouse contains courtrooms, offices and chambers and rooms for judges, magistrates, coroners and other legal professionals arranged to guarantee an appropriate level of separation from other court users. However, courtrooms in each branch of law differ in the status of their fittings and the layout of their furniture, a reflection of the procedures in the courtroom and the character and extent of the jurisdiction of the court.

Purpose-built, dedicated coroner's courts began to be constructed during the late 19th century, particularly in London, providing somewhere for a coroner and a jury to inspect the dead body as part of the process of reaching a verdict about

a death. Due to the sensitive nature of the work, coroner's courts were often, although not in this instance, located close to a mortuary, often in a graveyard, and in a discreet location.

The form and provision of coroner's courts have been closely related to the changing legislation governing the coroner's duties. The law regarding coroners was codified and standardised by the Coroner's Act 1887, which confirmed that their duties were primarily to look into the causes and circumstances of deaths. The principal requirement of the Coroner's Court was that the room should be of adequate size, be available at short notice and increasingly that it should provide a suitably dignified location for the solemn task, rather than being held in a room in a prison or a pub. Court buildings, town halls and larger police

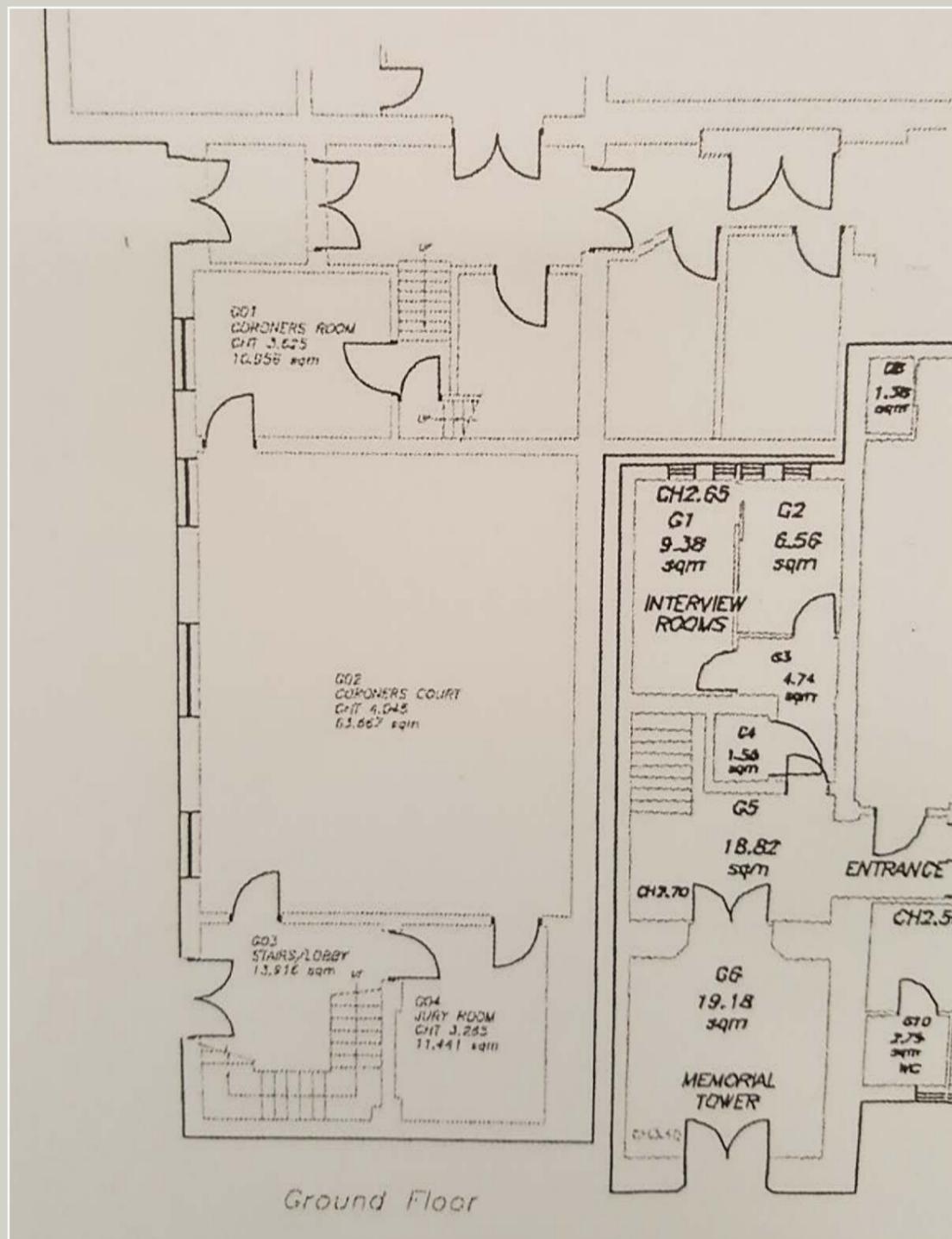
stations were also employed for inquests and some coroners found other types of buildings satisfactory. Here, in Dudley, the courtroom is part of the Town Hall complex, built with separate entrance and attached retiring rooms for the coroner and jury.

The typical layout of a purpose-built coroner's court building included a public entrance, a coroner's entrance and, where the mortuary was on the same site, access to its viewing window. The courtrooms were the focal point of the buildings and were handsomely fitted out. Courtrooms in coroner's courts were smaller (than magistrates' and county courts) partly because comparatively little provision was required for counsel, solicitors and their clerks, the purpose of an inquest being solely to establish the cause of death.

Ground Floor

MEMORIAL TOWER

## HISTORIC COURT ROOMS (CONT)



(Plan of the Coroner's Court, showing entrance lobby, jury room, court and coroner's room)

The courtrooms generally had a door for the coroner's use, giving access directly onto the railed-off dais on which the coroner's desk stood. A peculiar feature of the courtrooms was the size of the jury benches: prior to the Coroner's (Amendment) Act 1926, which reduced the number of jurors to between seven and 11, a coroner's jury consisted of between 12 and 23 jurors. Public seating was placed at the rear of the room, facing the bench. The other rooms associated with the court were generally limited to a waiting room and coroner's room which was commonly placed close to that end of the courtroom in which his desk was situated, as here. This room sometimes also served as the jury's room, although a separate jury room is provided in Dudley's Coroner's Court.

The lack of space for the coroner's offices became an increasing problem from the 1930s. The availability of suitable space for conversion or additions has been one of the factors that has influenced the choice of those courts that are retained in use. The number in use fell during the 20th century following legislative changes permitting the coroner to sit without a jury in most cases, the easing of restrictions on the jurisdiction within which a case was heard and because fewer notifications of death required public inquests.

# DUDLEY'S CORONER'S COURT

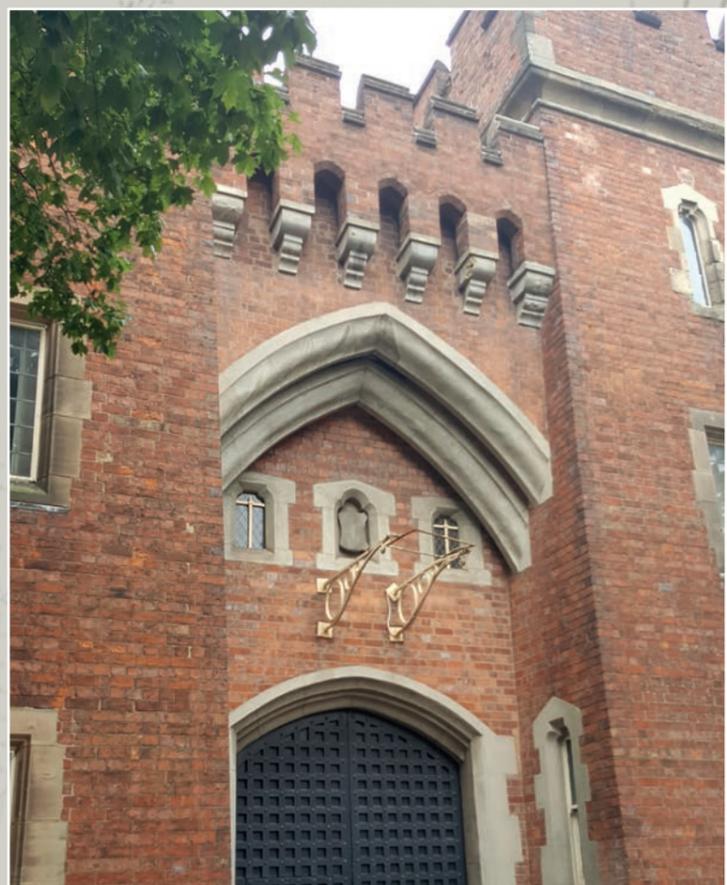
The Court is part of a group of civic buildings, which also includes the Town Hall, Museum Room and the former Magistrates' Court and Memorial Tower.

They were designed by Harvey and Wicks, following an open competition for the new public buildings which attracted 55 entrants. The buildings were constructed between 1924 and 1928 and built adjacent to earlier municipal buildings occupying the rectangular site bounded by Priory Road, Priory Street and St James's Road which include the Police buildings (designed in 1847 by Harvey Eginton of Worcester) and the library buildings facing onto St James's Road (designed by G H Wenyon and opened in 1908).

Alexander Harvey came to prominence as the architect involved in the design of the Bournville village for George Cadbury in the earliest years of the 20th century. In 1903, he left the company and set up in practice on his own, but was retained to design the public buildings on the estate. He later took on his nephew, H Graham Wicks, as a partner. The work on the Dudley civic buildings led to the award of an RIBA medal and diploma in 1934 and to a further commission to build a new Council House in Dudley on the other side of the police buildings, started in 1935.

Harvey and Wicks' winning scheme, as presented in *The Builder* of January 1924 varied from what was actually built. The competition brief had stipulated a design that should blend with the neighbouring police buildings. The initial design was consistently Tudor Gothic in style, with a battlemented parapet which blended with the appearance of the neighbouring police building. The decision to erect a new police headquarters elsewhere and to adapt or demolish the former buildings may account for the change in style in the Harvey and Wicks building.

The new Town Hall Museum and Coroner's Court, were built in memory of Brooke Robinson and his wife, Eugenia. Robinson was a prominent local solicitor, who had served as the borough coroner for a number of years and also as the town's MP for four parliaments. He presented a selection of his collection of furniture and family portraits to the borough, which were housed in a museum room at first floor level above the Coroner's Court. The central plaque on the Town Hall records the gift of the hall and the museum to the town by Brooke and Eugenia Robinson.



(Left) Exterior of Dudley Coroner's Court present day and (Right) neighbouring Tudor Gothic style police building.

Ground Floor

MEMORIAL TOWER

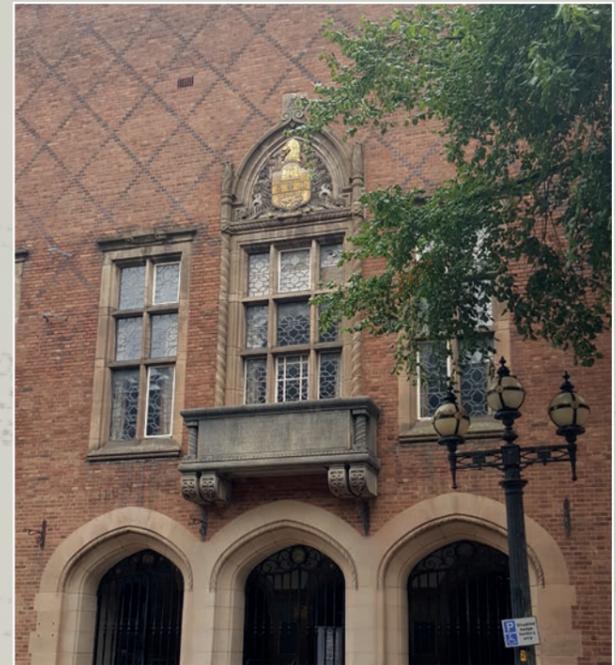
# THE EXTERIOR AND ITS ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES

The Town Hall building faces onto St James's Road with three central arches, approached by a flight of steps, which have cable mouldings to the outer edge of their ashlar surrounds.

The arches (*right*) lead to a covered lobby and have wrought iron gates and grilles with the date '1928' to each surmount. At first floor, the mullioned and transomed central window is fronted by a stone balcony supported on carved brackets and with barley-twist columns to the corners. The central plaque records the gift of the hall and the museum to the town by Brooke and Eugenia Robinson. To either side of the window are attached barley-twist columns which rise to stylised flame finials set at either side of an arched overthrow displaying the coat of arms of Dudley. The second floor walling is blank, but decorated with a lattice pattern of blue brick diapering and in combination with the first floor window balcony is reminiscent of the Doge's Palace in Venice.

To the right of the Town Hall is a gabled block which houses the Coroner's Court at ground floor level and the former Brooke Robinson Museum room at first floor level. The court is approached by a double flight of steps with a wrought iron hand rail (*right*) and the door has an overthrow with the inscription **'CORONERS COURT / BROOKE ROBINSON MUSEUM'** and with carved shields and foliage to the spandrels. The gabled front of this block faces onto Priors Street and has mullioned windows to both floors. Between the first floor windows is set an inscribed tablet which records the opening of the building by Stanley Baldwin in October 1928. Below is the bronze RIBA plaque, awarded to the building in 1934.

To the right of this is the Memorial Tower, which includes the foundation stone laid on 14 April 1926 by the Viscount Cobham. The entrance has a stone surround to the ground floor doorway and first floor window forming a frontispiece which bears a commemorative inscription composed for the building by Thomas Hardy: **'IF YOU THINK HAVE A KINDLY THOUGHT / IF YOU SPEAK SPEAK GENEROUSLY / OF THOSE WHO AS HEROES FOUGHT / AND DIED TO KEEP YOU FREE'**. The names of the Dudley fallen are inscribed on the walls of a vaulted chamber at the base of the tower.



(Top) Frontage of Dudley Town Hall with its distinctive three arches.

(Middle) Entrance to Dudley Coroner's Court

(Bottom) Mayor's proclamation from Memorial Tower on 14th December 1936 of George VI's Accession to the Throne

## THE EXTERIOR AND ITS ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES (CONT)



The tympanum, over the window, bears a sculpture of St George and the Dragon. This, and much of the sculptural decoration, is the work of the Birmingham sculptor William James Bloye whose work can be found across the Midlands and includes the bronze statue of Queen Victoria in Victoria Square, Birmingham, as well as the Apollo Fountain in Coronation Gardens, nearby in Priory Road, Dudley.

Flanking this centrepiece are bronze lions' heads (*below*) supporting the flag staffs to each side of the main entrance are also by Bloye, although these were not added to the building until 1936. To the top of the tower and facing in three directions are clock faces set in diamond shaped surrounds with a triangular hood to the top.

(Left) Window with tympanum illustrating St George and the Dragon.

The external architecture of this group of buildings is deliberately varied and this appears to have been in response to the site and its demands. The design manages to effect a carefully gauged modulation which allows the group to sit comfortably beside the Edwardian Baroque library on St James's Road and also to blend with the old police buildings on Priory Street. In the built scheme, two stylistic trends run alongside each other: Tudor Gothic and Italianate.

The fenestration across much of the building is mullioned and transomed with stone surrounds and the doorways have four-centred arches and this treatment of the openings can be seen as Tudor Gothic. In parallel is the loosely Italianate treatment of elements such as the Memorial Tower and the front of the Town Hall block, in particular the central windows with their balconies and sculpted surrounds.



(Above left) Bronze lion head and (above right) detail of ornate stone floral carving.

On the Town Hall, the blank second floor caused by the balcony seating was used to advantage to create the impression of a Venetian facade and on the Memorial Tower a similar motif was used together with the flat roof and prominent clock faces to suggest a brick tower from northern Italy.

Ground Floor

MEMORIAL TOWER

# THE INTERIOR

The courtroom interiors to the Coroner's Court, as well as the adjacent Sessions Court, are both impressive in their architectural treatment and their high degree of survival.

The Coroner's Court remains largely intact and is a particular rarity. It retains its oak benches to all sides of the room with their detailed carving and the wood block flooring is still in situ beneath the carpet tiles.

The Coroner's Court has its original fitted furniture of light oak with panelling to dado level and fixed benches and desks with inset inkwells to all four sides. Several of the bench ends are ramped and carved with guilloche patterning. The apron in front of the Coroner's desk has miniature spiral-fluted columns with carved cushion capitals.

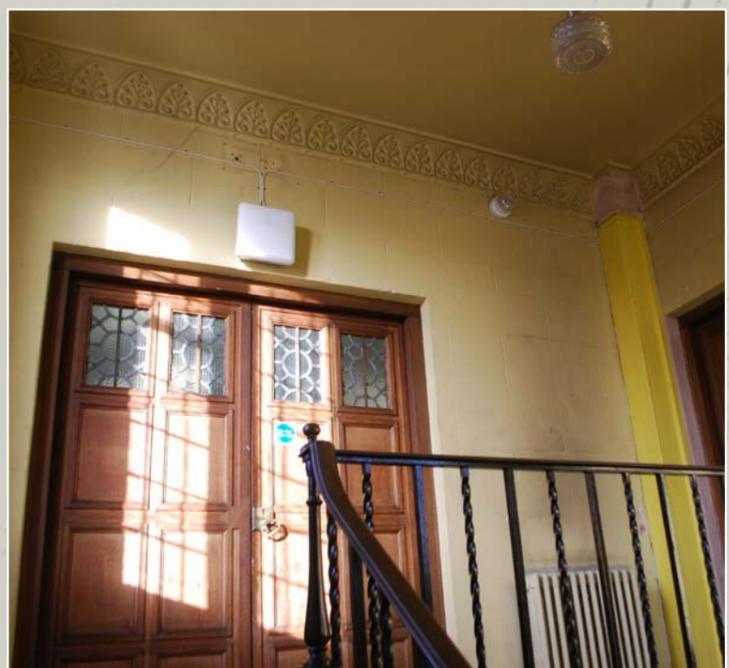
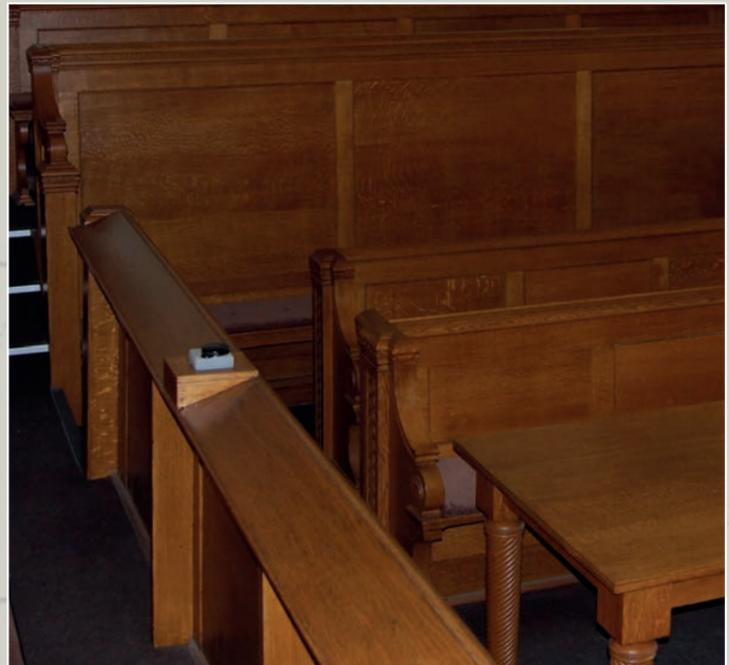
The projecting cornice which runs around the room is fluted and supported on brackets. A stone staircase with ramped bronze handrail leads to the former Brooke Robinson museum room. The architect also paid detailed attention to the less obvious public spaces and lobbies, hallways and staircases are treated with care.

English Heritage has undertaken research in recent years into courtrooms. Although there are several examples within London, a specific space set aside for coroner's hearings, as opposed to another courtroom used for the purpose, is rare and only one other purpose-built example has come to light in Newton Street, Birmingham.

*(Top) Oak benches to all sides of the room*

*(Middle) Cornice which runs around the room*

*(Bottom) Architectural detail of the stairway*



Source: English Heritage recommendation and List Description (National Heritage List for England)

Ground Floor

MEMORIAL TOWER

G6  
19.18  
sqm

INTERVIEW ROOMS

G5  
5.95  
sqm

G5  
18.82  
sqm

CH2.6  
G7  
9.38  
sqm

G03  
STAIRS/LOBBY  
13.516  
sqm

G04  
JURY ROOM  
CHT 3.285  
11.441  
sqm

# THE LISTING OF THE BUILDINGS

The group of buildings were listed in 2010 at Grade II\*, being considered particularly important buildings of more than special interest. Only 5.8% of listed buildings are of Grade II\* status. The vast majority (almost 92%) are of Grade II status.

## English Heritage concluded that:

“In summary, the Town Hall building, incorporating the former Sessions Court, Coroner’s Court and Brooke Robinson Museum is a well-designed building which has distinct architectural presence at the heart of Dudley. It was carefully designed to co-exist with neighbouring buildings of sharply different styles and also to have a distinct character of its own and this care is carried through to a series of impressive interiors and to the treatment of structural detailing such as sculpture. The degree of intact survival is remarkable and although there has been some adaptation to changing functions, the retention of so much of the original fabric of the building is a testament to its fitness for purpose and the regard in which the buildings are held. The architectural and artistic quality of the group, combined with its high level of intact survival, mean that it has clear claims to more than special interest and should be designated at Grade II\*”

*The principal reasons for listing were as follows:*

**Architectural:** The design of this group of buildings with varied functions by the noted architectural practice of Harvey and Wicks is inspired and bridges the stylistic gap between the Edwardian Baroque library building and the medieval style of the old police buildings with flair.

**Planning:** The handling of the internal spaces and the planning throughout the complex is carefully judged to reflect municipal ambition and allow smooth functioning.

**Decoration:** The buildings contain sculptural decoration of high quality to both the exterior and interior and a large mural by the noted artist Hans Feibusch.

**Intactness:** Despite some adaptation to changing functions, the buildings contain a high proportion of their original fittings and much of their original plan.

**Rarity:** The existence and retention of the complete furnishings of the Coroner’s Court is a distinct rarity.

*(Top) Memorial Tower balcony with inscription*

*(Bottom) Detail of stone carving*



Ground Floor

MEMORIAL TOWER

G04  
JURY ROOM  
CHT 3,285  
11,441 sqm

STAIRS/LOBBY  
13,617

CH2.6  
G7  
9,38  
sqm

INTERVIEW ROOMS

G5  
5,96

18,82  
sqm

19,18  
sqm