

COUNCIL HOUSE DUDLEY

HERITAGE OPEN DAY

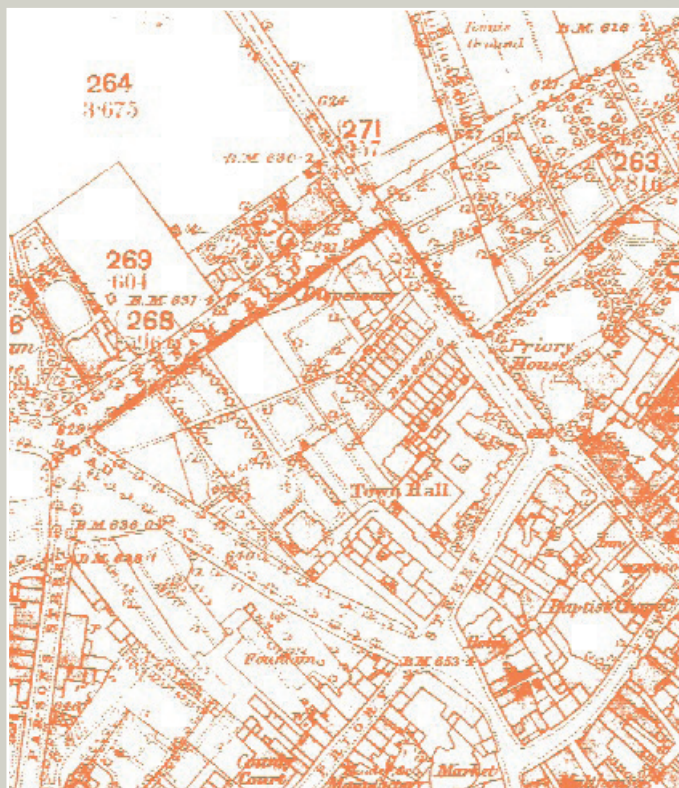


THE COUNCIL HOUSE

Dudley has accumulated a fine collection of public buildings in the St James's Road and Priory Street area, creating a 'Civic Quarter' - the administrative heart of the borough.

The 1920s and 1930s were a period in which many town and city councils commissioned new and prestigious administrative and headquarter buildings. Here at Dudley, the budget could not match the sums available in major cities and county towns. The population of the borough numbered some 59,000 in 1931, as opposed to almost 260,000 in Nottingham. Nonetheless, the council wanted a suite of civic rooms and offices which would express the heritage of Dudley, whose medieval castle and abbey ruins had recently been included within the perimeter of the borough.

The site occupied by the council house building had formerly been the location of the earlier town hall. Part of the site for the new building was formerly a close of houses, opening onto Priory Road. These are shown on the first edition OS map of 1884 and on the second edition map of 1904 they are marked as 'Police Buildings' and again on the third edition map of 1919.



Civic Quadrant 1884



Civic Quadrant 1904

They turned to W. Alexander Harvey and H. Graham Wicks. Alexander Harvey came to prominence as the architect involved in the design of the Bournville Village for George Cadbury, but set up practice on his own in 1903, later taking on his nephew, H. Graham Wicks as a partner. The practice had also previously designed the town hall complex to the south-east corner of the island site, fronting onto St James's Road and Priory Street and including the town hall, Brooke Robinson museum, coroner's court and sessions court and the memorial tower which incorporated a monument to the dead of the First World War.

The earlier design had managed the difficult brief of co-existing alongside an Edwardian Baroque library on one side and a Gothic-revival police building on the other side, while also having a distinct character of its own. The complex was awarded an RIBA medal in 1934. The council house is also rich with works of art integrated into the design of the building by the Birmingham sculptor, Walter Gilbert. Other cast and sculpted work throughout the building is by William Bloye, who had established a studio in Birmingham as well as being head of sculpture at the Birmingham School of Art from 1919 to 1956.

THE EXTERIOR AND ITS ARCHITECTURAL FEATURES



The site for this second phase of development faced north-east onto Priory Street, where the building was joined to the northern flank of the old police buildings and also north-west onto Priory Road, which was the longer frontage and principal emphasis of the design. The two sides of the design represented the different character of these two streets. The closely spaced bays fronting Priory Street follow the rhythm of the commercial properties fronting that street. By contrast the Priory Road frontage faced onto allotment gardens and had distant views of Castle Hill topped by the

ruins of the medieval castle. From the start a public park had been planned as part of the composition and this was eventually finished in 1939, on the site of the allotments and called Coronation Gardens. The park allowed spacious views of the council house and this was used by the architects in creating the long façade with an emphatic centre.

The architectural synthesis of different styles which was seen on the earlier Harvey and Wicks town hall building is also present in the council house. However, the architects had more freedom here as the Priory Road façade would have no neighbours. Although the mullioned and transomed windows were continued round from the Priory Street front, where they had to link with the old police buildings, the form on Priory Road elevation is very different from the Tudor Gothic of the old police buildings. The front elevation of the council house reflects more closely 18th century country house architecture, with its symmetrical form and gradual development of the front from bays at the outer edges to the projecting central nine bays with its further emphasis on the central three, which project upwards and out from the plane of the wall. At the centre, however, is a three-bay loggia which is a clear quotation from Ragnar Ostberg's Stockholm City Hall, whose inner courtyard featured similar heavy columns with cushion capitals supporting round arches. This was a style which gained currency and favour in the 1930s where the use of forceful massing of its exterior and richly decorated interiors, together with the use of integrated works of art and simple geometric shapes were seen as a progressive aesthetic. There is clear architectural skill apparent in amalgamating these styles and also some sleight of hand in creating the illusion of the symmetrical front for the site slopes considerably from left to right.

Top: old police buildings, Priory Street

Right: the borough's coat of arms symbolised the things that Dudley was famous for: At the top is a representation of Dudley Castle, in the middle, the anchor on the left represented the chain and anchor industry, in the middle a trilobite, for the geology that helped to make the place prosper and on the right a Davy lamp, representing mining. Underneath is a salamander, the traditional emblem of the smith.



At ground floor level is a loggia of three round arches supported on columns which is approached by a flight of steps. The circular drums are supported on octagonal bases and have cushion capitals which have figurehead carving to their corners. The carved heads at the corners of the capitals on the Priory Road lobby are by William Bloye (perhaps showing members of the Public Works Committee in caricature).



To the rear and side of the loggia are windows with bronze frames and a pair of doors which are decorated with panels showing emblems indicative of the trades and manufacturing carried out in Dudley and designed by Walter Gilbert. Above the loggia, at first floor level are three tall windows. The central one has a projecting balcony supported on carved brackets and columns to either side with a shaped overthrow which bears the arms of Dudley.

Above: carved capitals to the columns of the main entrance

Left: doors to main entrance

Below: decorative tympanum above the corner entrance



The building continues north-east to Priory Street and there is a three-bay quadrant which is recessed and joins the two facades. The centre of the quadrant is a doorway with a decorative ashlar surround including a shaped overthrow. The tympanum above the doorway is an arched panel showing Dudley Priory and Castle and figures of a monk and warrior, carved by William Bloye.



THE INTERIOR

Both entrances, at the quadrant end and at the centre of the Priory Road front, lead into staircase halls and the internal plan of the building is built around these and the wide corridors which lead through the building on each floor. The Priory Road entrance leads into a semi-circular hall with the borough coat of arms carved in the centre of the floor.



Top right: carved coat of arms on floor of the main lobby

Above: one of the curved staircases leading from the main lobby

Right: decorative panel above entrance to a committee room



From here pairs of quadrant staircases, placed against the wall, lead down into the basement level and up to the council chamber landing. At either side, a wall screens the staircases leading downwards. This is pierced by a circular opening into which plant troughs have been set which take the form of Neo-Classical sarcophagi of carved stone.

The ascending staircases have wrought iron handrails and are placed behind screens of columns which have shafts of black marble and limestone capitals, carved with simplified acanthus leaves and a ring of egg-and-dart ornament (a type which is seen throughout the building).

At first floor level, similar taller columns are set away from the wall and above them is a clerestory with decorative leaded glazing. Double doors to the south of this landing lead to the council chamber and to the north they lead to the principal committee room. Above each of these doors is a plaster semi-circular panel which shows views from the Wren's Nest district of the borough in the 19th century (over the council chamber door) and in 1935 (over the committee room door) designed by Bloye.

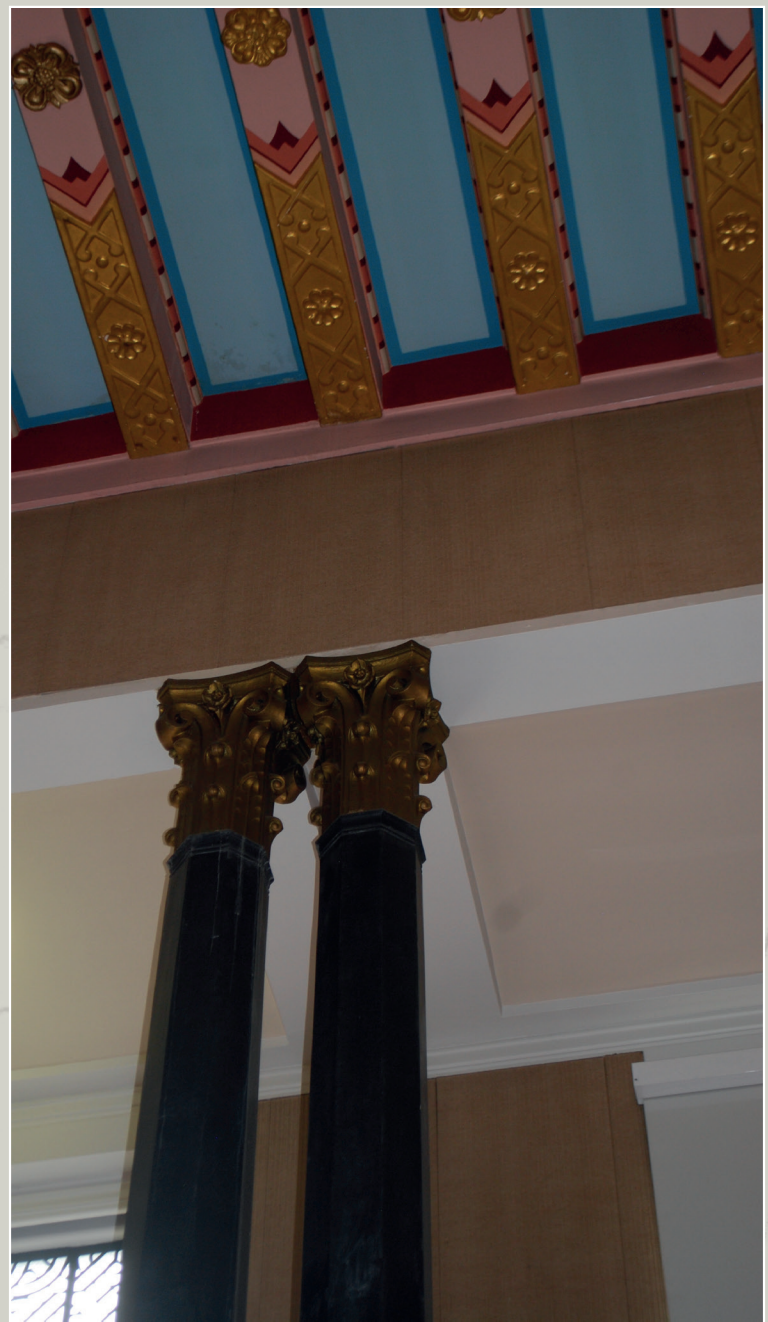


Ground Floor

MEMORIAL
TOWER

The council chamber is entered through the low division lobby which is placed below the gallery and has panelled walls. The chamber has paired octagonal columns to each side with stylized Corinthian capitals. The heavy beams of the ceiling are closely set and painted with richly-coloured patterns. A set of benches of light oak with leather seats form a horseshoe shape, facing the dais which has a central chair for the mayor with a high back, above which is a suspended awning. Few of the office spaces at other levels have been greatly altered.

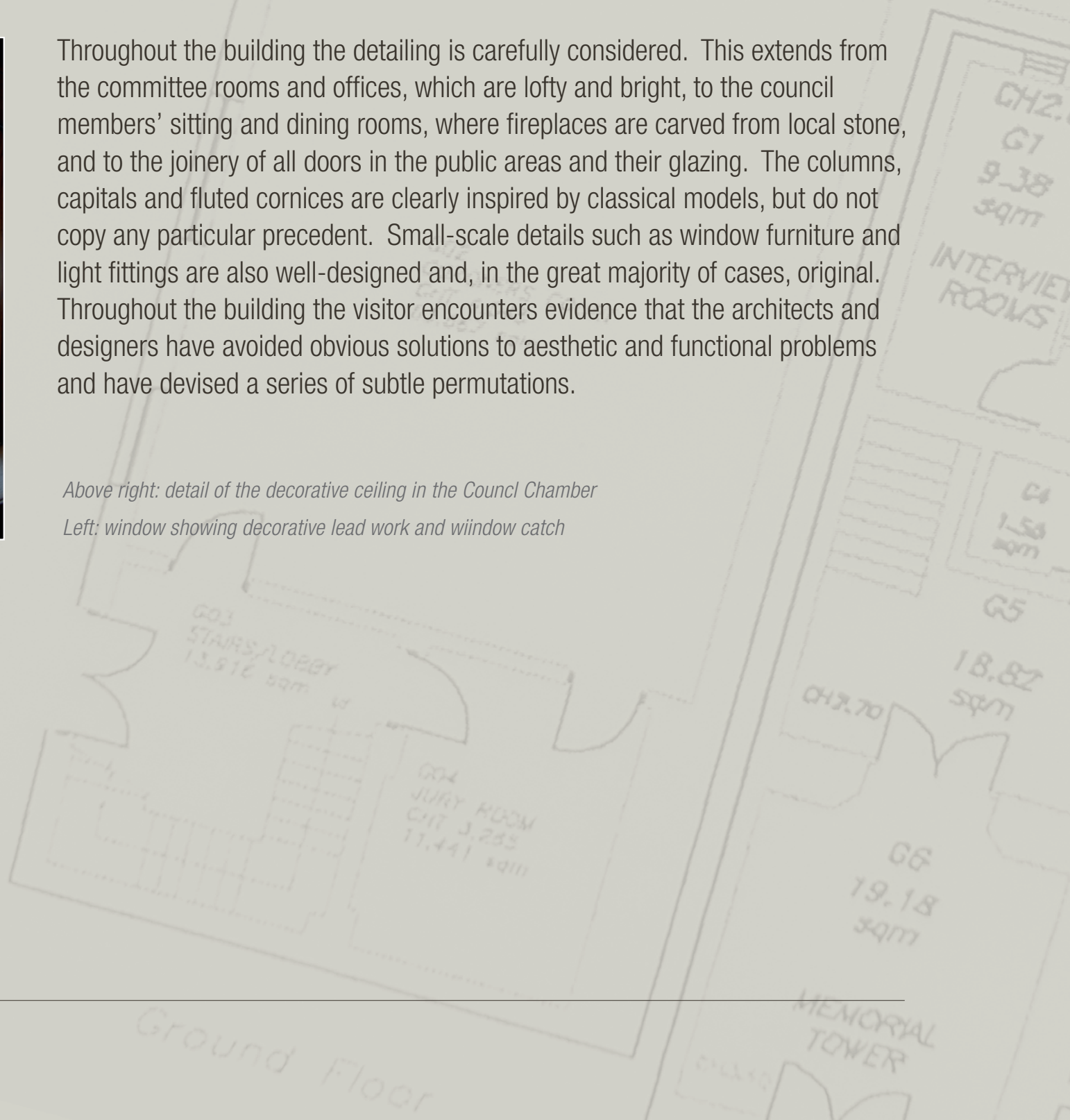
Internally, the building combines impressive public areas and carefully-detailed office space with a clearly legible plan. It is arranged around the hub of the semi-circular, columned halls at ground and first floor levels which give access to the principal interior spaces. The use of classical columns gives grandeur to the interiors and their positioning in the semi-circular halls, free-standing and away from the walls, is unexpected, as is the use of an unorthodox order. The council chamber varies this with paired octagonal columns grouped along the sides of the chamber. Here too the play of space is well handled and one walks from the spacious, semi-circular lobby to the lower, richly-panelled space of the division lobby and then through to the council chamber where plain walls act as a foil to the brightly-painted ceiling beams and the dais with its hanging and canopy placed over the mayor's high-backed chair.



Throughout the building the detailing is carefully considered. This extends from the committee rooms and offices, which are lofty and bright, to the council members' sitting and dining rooms, where fireplaces are carved from local stone, and to the joinery of all doors in the public areas and their glazing. The columns, capitals and fluted cornices are clearly inspired by classical models, but do not copy any particular precedent. Small-scale details such as window furniture and light fittings are also well-designed and, in the great majority of cases, original. Throughout the building the visitor encounters evidence that the architects and designers have avoided obvious solutions to aesthetic and functional problems and have devised a series of subtle permutations.

Above right: detail of the decorative ceiling in the Council Chamber

Left: window showing decorative lead work and window catch



THE LISTING OF THE BUILDINGS

The building was included on the statutory list in 2010 at Grade II. Although the majority of listed buildings are grade II, buildings which are dated after 1840 require greater selection. Listing guidelines published by English Heritage (now Historic England) indicate that buildings of law and governance tend to project a social message and for that reason their architectural quality is a key consideration. The guidance document points out that “such buildings are hierarchical, with some areas being accorded much more attention than others: principal public areas will be of particular importance when assessing buildings. Decorative or symbolic elements can sometimes be significant”. It also goes on to say that because of radical changes in the provision of public services, original or early features are vulnerable and in some cases rarely survive”.

English Heritage concluded that:

“The building, for a moderately-sized county borough, has definite architectural quality and impressive and carefully-detailed interiors which largely remain in their original state. The building incorporates a series of notable art works by Walter Gilbert and William Bloye”.

The principal reasons for listing were as follows:

Architectural: This building, by the noted practice of Harvey and Wicks, has distinct quality and presence. It is well suited to its site and is carefully detailed and combines several different styles including Tudor Gothic, Neo-Classical and contemporary Swedish architecture into a well-considered and inspired whole.

Planning: The principal public areas are planned to give a legible and dramatic flow of space connecting a series of impressive interiors.

Decoration: Decorative and symbolic elements which are integral to the building and its design include sculpture and carvings by Walter Gilbert and William Bloye.

Intactness: The building contains a notable quantity of its original fittings and the plan has been little altered.

