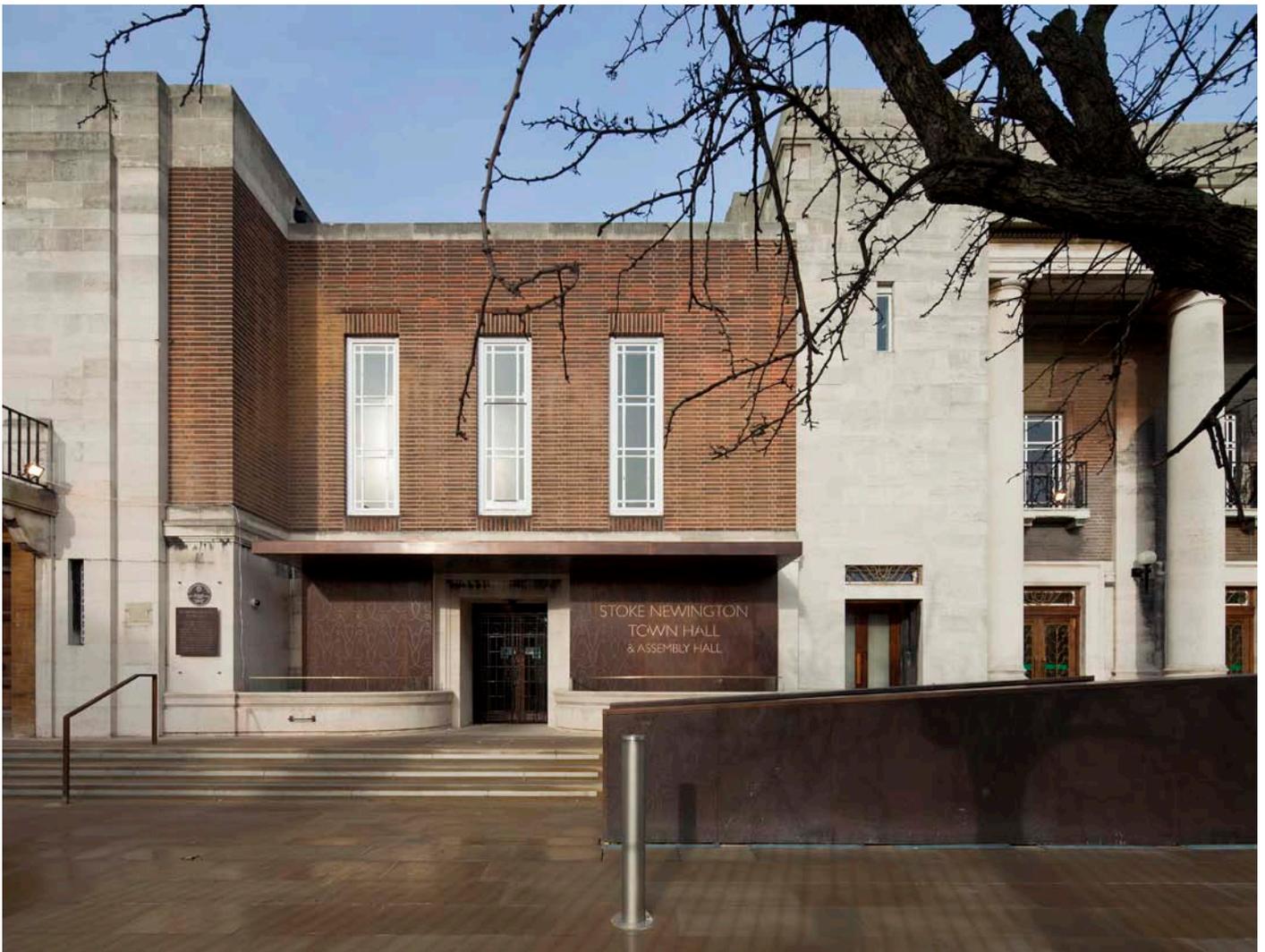




# The Civic Plunge Revisited

March 24th 2012

Led by John East and Nicola Rutt



# Civic Plunge: Introduction

The 1920s and 1930s were a great age of municipal architecture – greater in some ways than the extravagant years of Edwardian Baroque that gave us so many exuberant town halls. A huge number of Town Halls were constructed during inter-war years in response to the vastly increased responsibilities of local government. New county offices, civic halls and municipal buildings were erected all over the country and such public buildings were, arguably, the most characteristic building type of the period. In such buildings, the contemporary preoccupations with clear and efficient planning, with monumentality and appropriate expression, all achieved fulfilment. Furthermore, not only were such buildings popular, but they were almost always the products of the competition system which was at its most productive and objective in the inter-war years. Many architects began and made their careers by winning competitions for municipal buildings – notably Vincent Harris, Berry Webber, Cowles Voysey and Percy Thomas. It is significant that a book should have been published on Town Halls by the Architectural Press in 1937 (by A. Calveley Cotton) which consisted largely of plans and sections of competition winning designs with not a single illustration of an executed external elevation. Good planning was the principle priority in modern British architecture, in whatever style. Indeed, the interior planning of the civic areas rarely deviated from the plan of a grand entrance hall and staircase leading up to the Council Chamber on the first floor, normally located towards the rear of the building with the Committee rooms, Mayor's Parlour, etc. arranged along the front. Marble facings, extensive use of wood veneers, spectacular light fittings and specially designed furniture were all usual if the budget permitted.

At first, civic architecture continued the revived monumental Classical tradition pioneered by Belcher and Mountford in the 1890s and celebrated by Lutyens in his design for New Delhi – a major influence on the 1920s. But already before the Great War the sculptural Baroque of, say, Lanchester and Rickards was being toned down to become, via Edwardian mannerisms, something more streamlined and stripped down to essentials. A classic example is Marylebone Town Hall, won in competition in 1911 by S. B. Russell and Edwin Cooper with a design which, as Alan Powers has noted, was 'advanced for its time for its Franco-American simplicity of outline and scholarliness of ornament'. Comparative simplicity and clean lines became the order of the day. 'The St Marylebone town hall,' wrote Goodheart Rendall in 1934 '...piles on the Corinthian agony very competitively; but in a way that the present generation feels, probably rightly, to be incongruous. English mairies contain no magnificent salles de marriage, English mayors have but few ceremonial duties. The Chief Civic building of a town or suburb should, no doubt, be something better than workmanlike, grandeur ridiculous in the department of a Borough Surveyor'.

At first however, in the 1920s, the monumental Classic manner continued to be obligatory for any large public building, although tempered by this increasing taste for the austere and for muted decoration. In this respect, English Palladianism was preferable to Continental Baroque, as can be seen in the well-planned town halls of Vincent Harris, Cowles Voysey and, above all, in the many magnificent municipal buildings erected by the Bolton firm of Bradshaw Gass & Hope. By the 1930s, however, municipal design, like every aspect of English architecture, was increasingly influenced by Continental modernism towards less rigidly classical solutions. Dagenham Town Hall is a Characteristic example, in which the civic grandeur given by monumentality and symmetry is tempered by much freer and more 'modernistic' massing in the wings and by a stripped down, somewhat 'Deco' detailing. This would have been impossible without Continental influence and two buildings in particular account for the dominant elements of the most experimental and 'modernistic' character of the best town halls of the 1930s – the town halls in Stockholm and Hilversum.

The Stockholm town hall – one of the greatest of 20th century buildings – captured the imagination of British architects through its exploitation of a magnificent site, its grand public spaces and tastefully decorative iconography. Homage to the delicate profile of its campanile was paid by many English cities and especially by Norwich. But the body of the new town hall which rose there in the late 1930s was influenced not by Ragner Ostberg's rustic masonry and Ruskinian asymmetries but by the 'Swedish grace' of the contemporary classicism of Tengbom and Asplund. The portico of Norwich City Hall was clearly derived from that on the Stockholm concert Hall and a similarly attenuated and inventive order appears in the porticoes of many other town halls of the 1930s: at Walthamstow for instance.

W.M. Dudok's Hilversum Town Hall was another potent influence on architects anxious to develop more flexible planning on sites unsuited to Classical symmetry while maintaining a civic character. Here was a modernism which retained roots in sensible building traditions while being formally inventive. Dudok's interpretation of the manner of Frank Lloyd Wright in a brilliant asymmetrical three-dimensional composition building up to a rectilinear tower was imitated, albeit tamely, in several town halls of the 1930s and most conspicuously at Greenwich and Hornsey. Hornsey is, in many ways, the quintessential English modern public building of the decade, combining details from Stockholm Town Hall and a campanile from Hilversum with more ordered English symmetries on a difficult site altogether with a controlled use of architectural sculpture and decorative touches. Here are subtly detailed, cool and unpretentious municipal spaces ideal for English civic activities.

A building like Reginald Uren's North London masterpiece, along with contemporary municipal buildings by such successful competition winners as Philip Hepworth and Barry Webber, could give an architecturally undistinguished borough a strong sense of local identity through a conspicuously modern civic monument.

The history of London government needs a book itself. Local government began as a function of the parish vestry. The grouping of parishes into larger areas began in the nineteenth century; some boroughs, like Poplar, reflect the boundaries of Poor Law Unions (groups of Parishes grouped in 1834 to administer outdoor relief and the local workhouses), others such as Walthamstow have their origins in sanitary boards. There is no single set pattern for their development.

The creation of the Metropolitan Board of Works in 1855 was the first wider organisation: its area was roughly that of the London County Council, created in 1889. Of the boroughs visited today, St. Pancras, Islington, Stoke Newington, Hackney, Poplar and Bethnal Green were part of the LCC, Wembley, Hornsey, Wood Green and Tottenham



*Hilversum Town Hall by W M Dudok 1928*

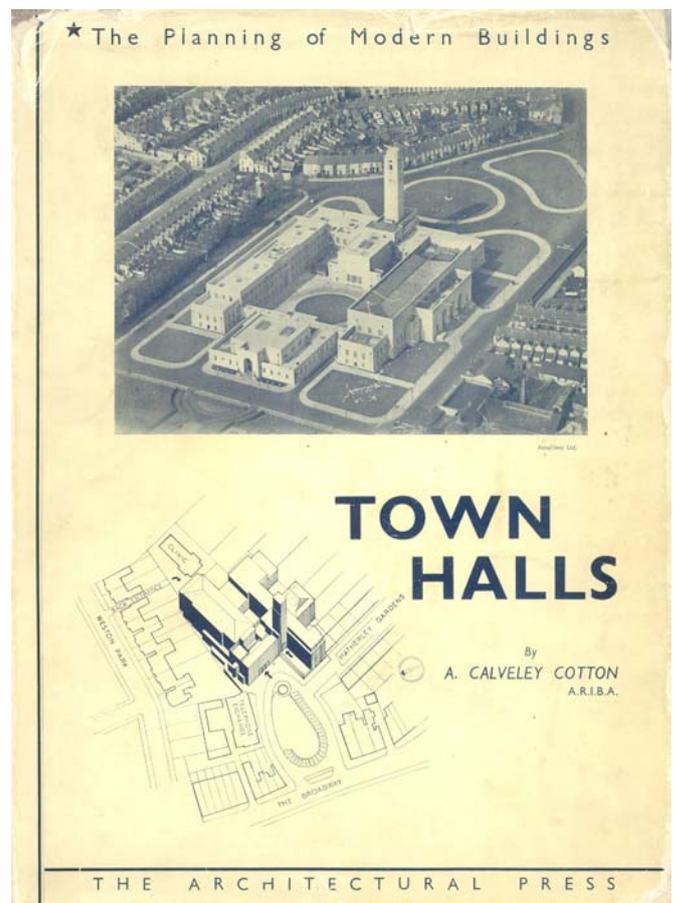
were in Middlesex and Walthamstow, East Ham, Barking and Dagenham in Essex. London's various vestries and boards of works were concentrated into metropolitan boroughs in 1900; urban areas around London were formed into a variety of urban districts and metropolitan boroughs at various dates. The formation of the Greater London Council and the present London boroughs dates only from 1965.

Whilst the LCC area had centralised fire and education services (the Metropolitan Board of Works and the School Board for London respectively) the outer boroughs had to provide these for themselves. Until 1948 many local authorities in and around London also ran their electricity undertakings. It was perhaps the newer and poorer areas that required the most social utility of all, the public concert or assembly hall: indeed in newer areas where there were few recreational facilities the assembly hall was an important element of civic pride. Different civic centres are built up of varying combinations of the same elements: a council chamber and municipal offices, with perhaps an assembly hall, electricity showroom, library and/or fire station. How these elements are combined is as important as the architectural style of the building.

Town Halls and Civic Centres have been a highlight of many a Twentieth Century Society event. However, it is now over twenty years since the Society (then the Thirties Society) spent a day looking so comprehensively at London Town Halls (Civic Plunge I and II, although a Civic Plunge III took place in the early 2000s examining just town halls in South-East London).

At that time, most of the town halls we visited were in their original use albeit some had been 'municipalised' or were showing visible signs of decline after years of under-investment in their fabric. Twenty years on, and the picture is very different. Many of the town halls we visited then have either been refurbished, or are now in an entirely different use.

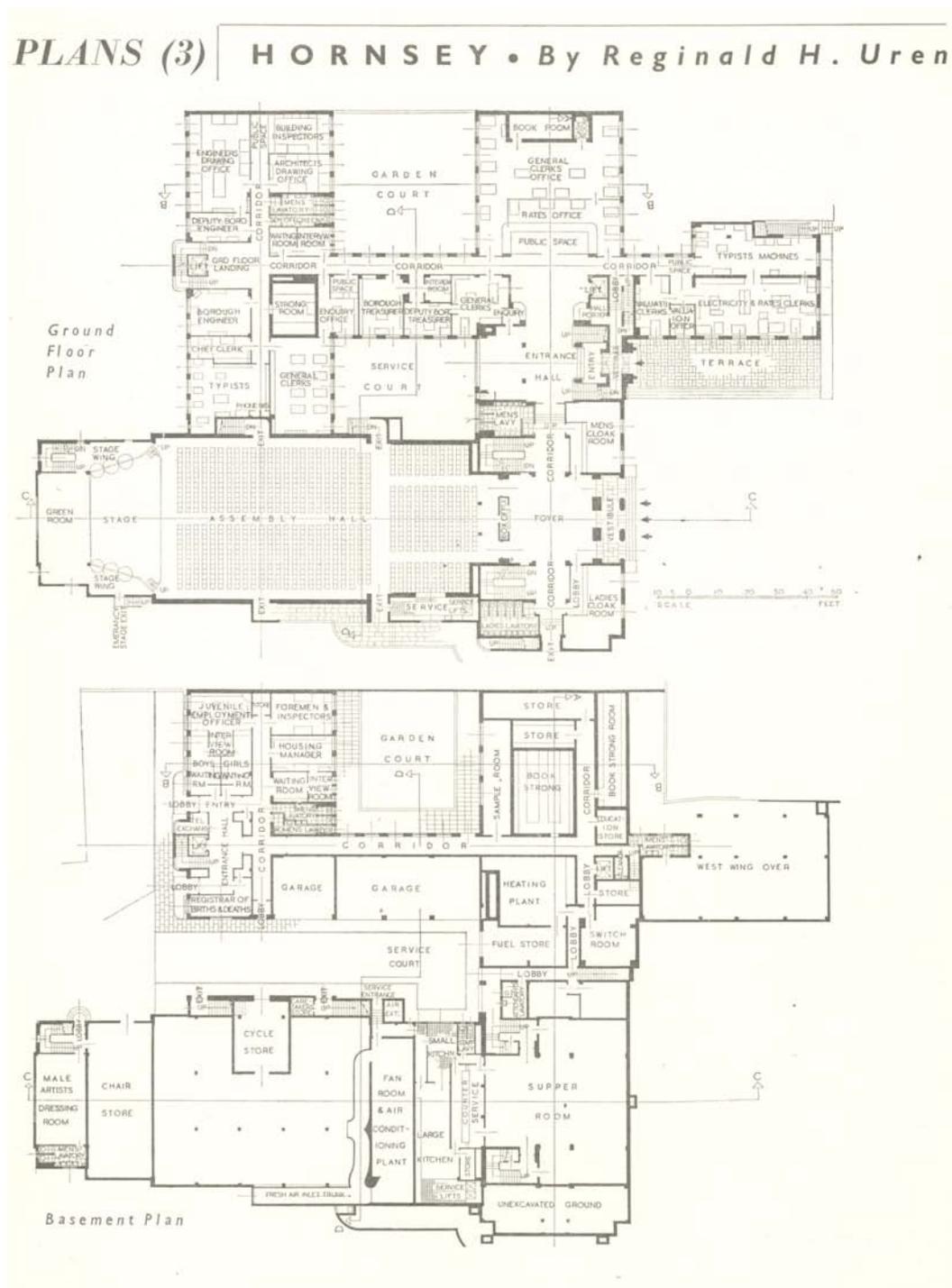
Starting at Camden (formerly St. Pancras) Town Hall we will see a range of town halls and civic centres in North and East London, from the Edwardian period through to the 70s, but mainly focusing on the civic pride and art deco splendour of the inter-war years. The key theme will be about adaptation, re-use and restoration. To that end among those that we shall see will include Hornsey (star of the recent TV series 'The Hour' and 'Whitechapel'), Tottenham (with its transformation to the Bernie Grant Centre by David Adjaye), Islington (whose hall recently re-opened after thirty years of dereliction)



and the refurbishments of Stoke Newington and Hackney, both carried out by Hawkins\Brown Architects as well as the 'boutique' Town Hall Hotel (formerly the civic offices of the Metropolitan Borough of Bethnal Green), radically converted by Rare Architects in 2010. But whilst we celebrate the survival and in some instances renaissance of this iconic building type, we should also reflect that for some, e.g. Wembley, their future looks uncertain as councils seek to rationalise their assets and the need for vigilance from the Twentieth Century Society has never been greater.

John East – March 2012

(with extensive use of Gavin Stamp's introduction to Civic Plunge I – 1989)



# St. Pancras Town Hall

Town Hall, Judd Street and Euston Road - A.J. Thomas – 1934-37

Thomas was Lutyen's office manager until 1935, and although there are no town halls in London designed by Lutyens, we shall be seeing two by his assistants on our tour today. In fact, that a relative unknown such as Thomas should have been commissioned to design such a prestigious building demonstrates the strength of the competition system in the inter-war years.

Although the Metropolitan Borough of St. Pancras, dealing with the huge challenges of a poor and badly housed population in the 1930s, were generally considered one of the more progressive boroughs, the town hall is conservative in its appearance, being of a cautious Neo-Palladian design, with some Lutyens mannerisms (such as vanishing rustication around the windows). Indeed, it is quite probably the most traditional-looking town hall to have been erected in London in the 1930s. It is constructed in Portland Stone externally, with a columned centrepiece above a channelled ground floor but there are some decent finishes inside, including marble for the entrance hall and grand stair, and good panelling to the committee rooms. It has a symmetrical plan, with the first-floor council chamber approached by long corridors with domed and groined vaulting. At the end, there is a public hall, entered from Bidborough Street.

Attached to the town hall is a large extension by Camden Architect's Department, dating from 1973-77, the Town Hall Annexe. At eight storeys of precast panels with curved window corners, and curved bays projecting to Euston Road it somewhat overwhelms the original building. It was conceived in order to centralise Camden's principle administrative functions on to one site, and at one time contained a bar on the top floor (known as the White Elephant bar), negotiated by the unions in return for agreeing to the relocation of the offices from Holborn Town Hall. A library is located on the ground floor.

In 2008, Camden Council announced that they wanted to update and consolidate the facilities of the Annexe, and following a feasibility study considered that the most cost-effective way would be through demolishing the existing building and starting afresh. This subsequently morphed into proposals to sell off part of the Town Hall and build offices for Camden Council on the King's Cross railway lands. A developer competition was held in 2009 with an unnamed developer being selected for proposals which included a substantial c20-storey mixed use tower.

Although Labour members in opposition campaigned against the proposal, the new Labour-led council on coming into power in 2010 stated that it intends to press ahead with the move to new offices close to St Pancras International rail station, to be built on top of a new leisure centre. Labour finance chief Councillor Theo Blackwell said the council was "bleeding money" in trying to maintain old buildings. At the root of the turn-around was the claim it would cost £77million to put right the Annexe building. Less than 35 years old, it was reported that there are daily faults with lifts and plumbing.

There have been no more recent announcements on the building's future, but although the main town hall is listed, its long term use as municipal offices must be doubtful.

# Stoke Newington Town Hall and Assembly Hall

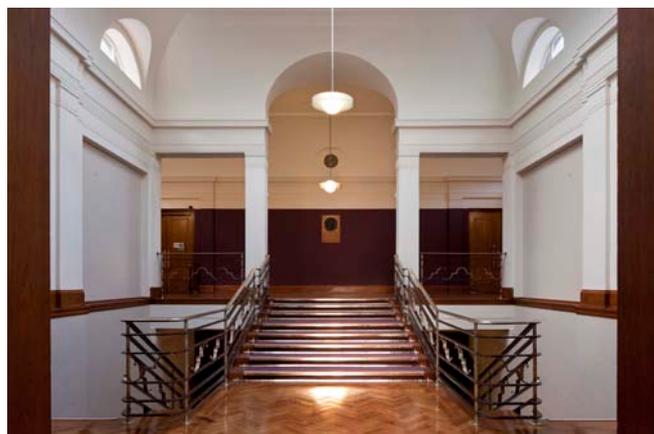
Grade II, Stoke Newington High Street- J. Reginald Truelove- 1934- 1937.  
Refurbished by Hawkins\Brown architects 2009.

Built as the Town Hall and Assembly Hall on the site of a former Tudor Manor house and subsequent eighteenth century terrace housing. The council had previously occupied a vestry hall in Milton Grove.

A competition to extend the adjacent Victorian library was won by architect J Reginald Truelove, who had previously been an assistant to Sir Edwin Lutyens. Following on from his work for the War Graves Commission, the new building, completed in 1937, was designed in the English Renaissance style with facades of long handmade bricks between grand stone floor plinths and cornices with lavish Portland stone dressings and columns. The interiors reflected the Art Deco styling of the period although the exterior was unaffected by the modern movement.

Orientated to face the Tudor and Victorian churches to its west and Clissold Park to its north, the then new building with its many functions was very much at the heart of the area and community. At the advent of WWII, part of the building was commandeered by the MOD as a district civil defence centre, where camouflage paint was applied to the facades of the building, which remain in part today.

In 1965 Stoke Newington was amalgamated with Shoreditch and Hackney districts to form the London Borough of Hackney where the corporate and civic operations of the new authority became centred at the Town Hall building in Mare Street, Hackney. Initially Stoke Newington Town Hall and Assembly Hall continued as municipal offices and to hold events, concerts and weddings etc. However, the Council Chamber was decommissioned and adapted to form a storeroom with the outcome of severe damage to its fine fabric and interior. Eventually the As-



sembly Hall fell into disrepair and became unsafe for use and was finally closed in the early 1990s.

In 2004 the London Borough of Hackney updated a feasibility report for their Town Hall and Offices Redevelopment Programme in line with PPG 15 (“The Government urges local authorities to maintain and strengthen their commitment to the stewardship of the historic environment and to reflect it in their policies and the allocation of resources”). In summary, it illustrated the need to refurbish and restore the dignity of the Grade II listed building by, improving public access, redefining the relationships between public and private external and internal spaces, improving the office accommodation, refurbishing significant spaces within the building and bringing the Assembly Hall and Chamber back to public use

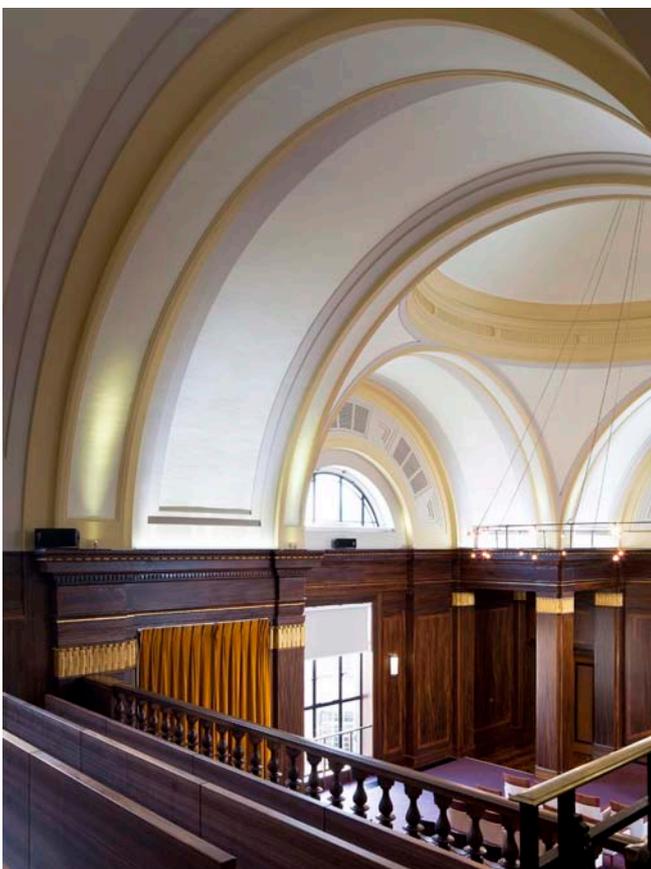
Working closely with the Authority’s Conservation team, English Heritage and the conservation management plan, Hawkins\



Brown carried out extensive research and investigations to record and fully understand the building, its fabric and history prior to being able to realise the requirements of the clients.

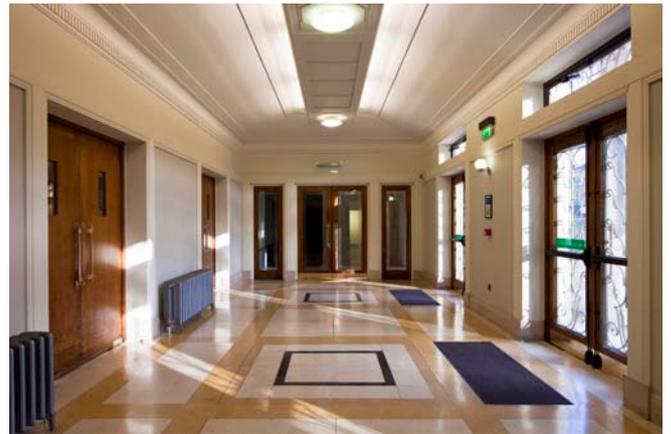
Externally, the English Renaissance stone and brickwork facades were carefully cleaned and repaired. Car parking was removed from the front of the building and York stone paving was laid to extend the existing stepped plinth to the building, incorporating new ramps with integrally illuminated bronze balustrades enabling unconstrained and safe pedestrian access while reinforcing its connection to the street.

A new entrance and foyer was created by Hawkins\Brown to unite the two main buildings in what was once an alleyway. Modern materials of bespoke decorative precast concrete rainscreen panels, lightweight glass and steel roof light and mirrored glass wall



panels were used to echo the quality and materiality of the original building, while still retaining a buffer between the municipal offices and the Assembly Hall. Layers of the site's colourful history have now been exposed for all to see, with the integration of the reclaimed Tudor brickwork panels and the WWII external camouflage paintwork.

Internally areas were refurbished and restored to their former glory. In particular the Council Chamber which was severely damaged by previous interventions when utilized as a storeroom for the last 35 years, and the Assembly Hall with its supporting spaces have undergone extensive refurbishment and modernisation.



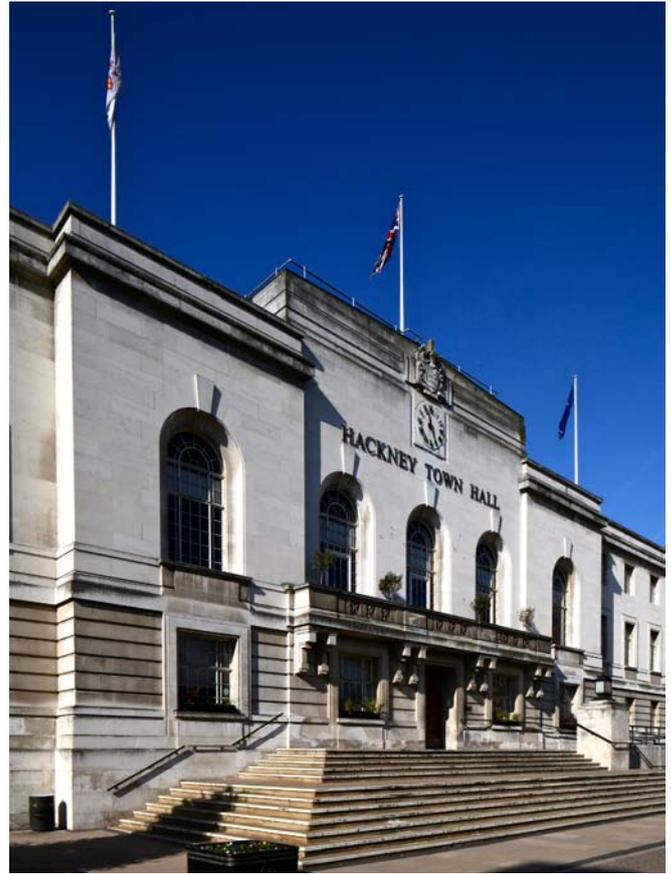
Twentieth Century Society, Civic Plunge Revisited, 24th March 2012

# Hackney Town Hall

Mare Street - Lanchester and Lodge - 1934

Hackney was designed by the town hall specialists Lanchester and Lodge and is remarkably well preserved. As was customary the architects were selected by staging a competition; the other competitors being C. Cowles-Voysey (2nd), C.S Joseph (3rd) and Robert Atkinson, C.H. James & S. Rowland Pierce and Louis de Soissons all unplaced. Professor S.D. Adshead acted as adjudicator. Given the tried and tested formula for Town Hall design it is not too surprising to note that most of the competition entries were remarkable for their similarity with only Robert Atkinson's Scandinavian-influenced design set apart.

Lanchester and Lodge's design was selected on the basis that it made full use of four storeys, a simple system of closed circulation, economic and strategic location of staircases and intelligent groupings of the various departments around the several entrances to the building.



The generous site allowed a four-square building to be constructed, faced on all sides in Portland stone ashlar with each side having its own entrance(s) and vehicular access. The building is set back from Mare Street by a formal civic garden with a war memorial garden and car park situated to the north behind a screen wall. The most obvious difference between the finished building and the competition design is the more modern treatment of the central bay of the principal façade.

The ground floor was given over to offices for the departments of the Borough Engineer, Medical Officer and Treasurer, Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages. The first floor accommodates the Assembly Rooms in the western range which, in addition to its own entrance and foyer, is connected via the Council Chamber to the civic area the principal rooms of which are double height. The top floor houses staff quarters and the caretaker's flat whilst the basement is given over to storage and plant rooms.

The building is redeemed of its ordinariness by the undeniable grandeur of the Council Chamber, Upper Hall and Committee Rooms which are enhanced by superbly opulent light fittings. The streamlined art deco lamps mounted on truncated pillars on the main staircase are particularly distinctive.

At the time of the visit the building is undergoing an internal restoration and refurbishment to a scheme by Hawkins\Brown Architects.

**Hackney Service Centre  
Hillman Street – Hopkins Architects – 2008-  
09**

To the rear of the town hall this significant project brings together, literally under one roof, the services of London Borough of Hackney. The architectural proposition is disarmingly straightforward. A U-shaped stacked plan of administrative space, five-storeys high, opens on to a huge, barrel-vaulted, glazed atrium. Each of the office floor plates is predominantly open plan with side wings that contain support spaces, informal meeting and break-out areas, and tea points.

The ground floor of the atrium houses the one-stop shop, the interface between the public and its civil servants. The staff can see the public and importantly the public can see the staff; this is a building that is based on the idea of visibility and accessibility. The entire building is drenched in daylight, the antithesis of a closed defensive civic headquarters. Immediately adjacent is a further administrative building for the Council designed by Hawkins\Brown and completed in 2007.



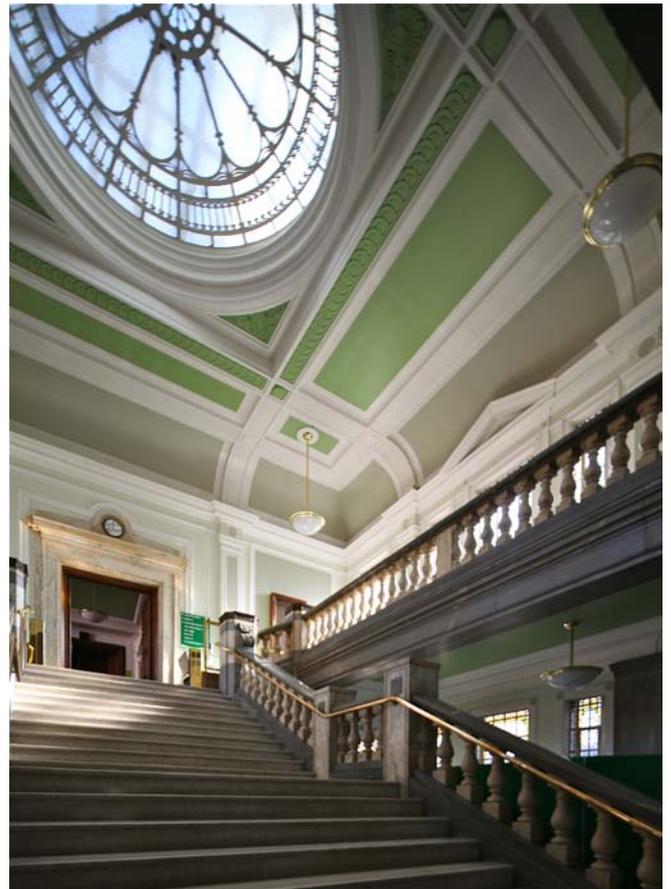
## **Islington Town Hall and Assembly Rooms**

**Town Hall, Upper Street. Designed by E.C.P.Monson - 1922-25 and 1929-30**

Islington Town Hall was built in two phases from 1922 to 1925. Even before the First World War, the Mayor, 10 alderman and 60 councillors of the Metropolitan Borough of Islington and the three MPs, were only too painfully aware that unlike their neighbours in Finsbury or Shoreditch, the borough lacked a town hall which befitted the importance of their office. After all, they jointly represented a population in 1901 of 334,991. The old 1880s Vestry Hall on the corner of Upper Street and Florence Street, next to the police and fire stations was hopelessly inadequate. After the war, funds became available to put this right on a much larger site north of Florence Street. A young architect, E.C.P. Monson, was chosen for the design, on the back of his successful new housing nearby at Halton Mansions (1921), and he duly produced the required municipal dignity, with a slightly severe classical frontage clad in Portland stone. Rather oddly the first phase in 1922 was the wing of the committee rooms facing Richmond Grove with its side entrance, now redundant. The second phase, including today's main entrance, more logically faced Upper Street, set back on the same line as the demolished Georgian terrace, to give a service road and a parking place for the mayoral limousine was completed in 1925.

The interior of the town hall is extravagantly opulent, with marble corridors, an imposing main staircase, elaborate coffered ceilings, and carved oak panelling and red upholstery in the Council Chamber and committee rooms. A third phase had been intended to the north to complete the symmetry of the composition, but money ran out. Instead Tynedale Mansions was built in 1927, also designed by Monson, but in a very different style. The town hall was condemned to remain lopsided and too small to accommodate the Council's expanding office requirements. All ideas of expanding the town hall were eventually replaced by the new Municipal Offices at no. 222 Upper Street, built in 1983 to a dismally cheap specification by T.P. Bennett to house council departments which had previously been scattered elsewhere.

The Assembly Hall was built in 1929 and neighbours Islington Town Hall. It was officially opened on 15 March 1930 by the Major of Islington, Ald Manchester. This building, also by E.C.P. Monson, has a stage, sprung dance floor and plush gallery in the typical 'deco' styling of that period.



It became well known in the post-war era for hosting fabulous dances and variety shows – with the likes of Diana Dors and George Formby performing on its stage. Before he rose to fame in the 1960's legendary Islington born soul/blues singer Chris Farlowe made some of his first performances at the hall in the late 1950's. Right up until the 80s, it was regularly used by a whole host of people from the council, arts organisations and local community groups for weddings, awards presentations and of course regular tea dances. Part of it was then used as the Islington Museum. It was then mothballed and became a storage space. For almost three decades it lay dormant, but when the funding was raised in 2009 it received a new lease-of-life with a full restoration and refurbishment. All of the original features were kept, even down to the ashtrays in the upstairs gallery. The Assembly Hall re-opened in 2010 and now hosts a wide range of events, taking advantage of its location in fashionable Upper Street.



# Wembley Municipal Offices

Forty Lane - Clifford Strange - 1935-39

Wembley Park was a popular resort for Londoners in the early nineteenth century following the opening of the London-Birmingham railway in 1838. The district then formed part of the large parish of Harrow, but was subsequently amalgamated as an urban district, first with Kingsbury and later also with Preston, Sudbury and Tokyngton. In 1937 it received Charter of Incorporation to become the Municipal Borough of Wembley. It grew dramatically after the First World War, especially when Wembley Park was selected as the site of the British Empire Exhibition and the North Circular was built. In 1935 the population was 115,000, in 1949 it was 132,000. In 1965 Wembley was amalgamated with Willesden to form the London Borough of Brent.

In 1935 a site was chosen for the Town Hall on open land away from the town centre and a competition was held with Stanley Hemp as the assessor. There were exactly one hundred entries and in May, Clifford Strange who worked for Burnet Tait and Lorne was declared the winner.

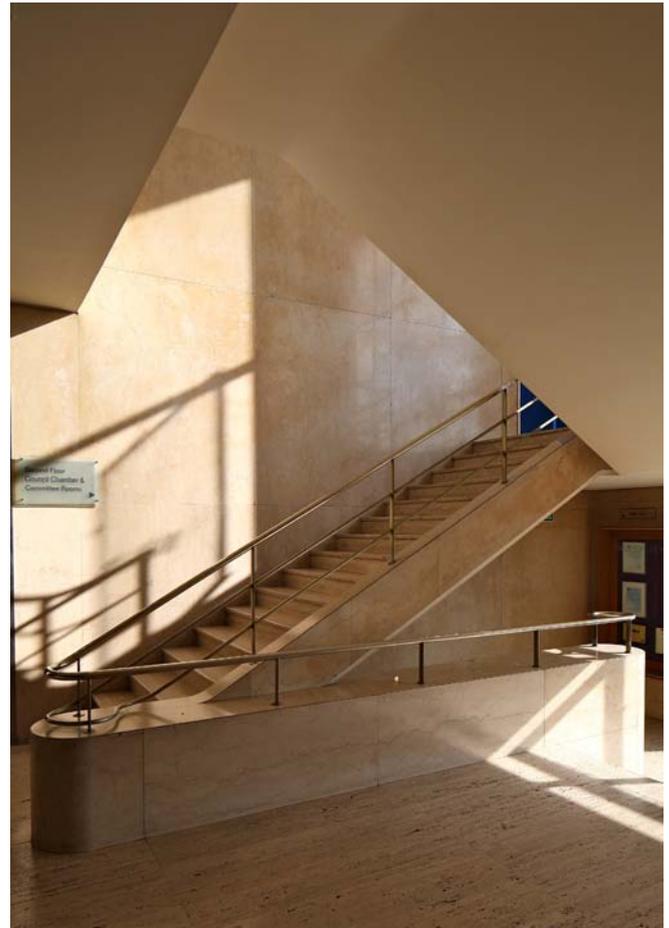
There were two main determining factors: the best use had to be made of a generous but steeply sloping site, and a variety of functions had to be housed in separate but related blocks. In the *Architect and Building News* for 24 May 1935, Hemp considered the winning design 'a very efficient and practical solution'. It is simple and direct in plan, and the elevational treatment shows refinement and simple proportions, while at the same time producing a dignified and impressive building.

There are three main units: the Municipal Offices, a public library and an Assembly Hall placed at right angles to the rear. Strange's success is that he united all of these functions in one imposing building instead of building three lesser ones; each element is however, separately expressed in



the elevations with a tall staircase window denoting the main entrance. Successful too is Strange's deployment of the sloping site to create an imposing processional way from the front entrance to the Assembly Hall. This is up a grand staircase to what is the first floor in relation to the entrance, although side doors in the Assembly Hall are at ground level.

The centre of the building is the Council Chamber, placed over the approach to the Assembly Hall and on the same axis with the main entrance. A separate staircase leads to the public gallery at its southern end. The *Architectural Review* for January 1940 considered 'an original but effective feature' to be 'the spacious foyer outside the Council Chamber, separated from it only by a glass screen with flower boxes as a base. When the Council Chamber is in use curtains can be drawn, but otherwise the interior, with its brightly coloured upholstery and coat of arms behind the Mayor's chair can be seen as this level is approached up the main staircase.' Three committee rooms were provided, separated by partitions that slid flush with the walls to enable them to be used as one large space for special functions. These rooms were panelled in walnut.



The library is a self-contained unit at ground floor level to the left of the main foyer and reached by a separate side entrance. It was originally subdivided by low bookshelves in English cherry with a central control desk. Over it are some of the municipal offices, the bulk of them forming the long block to the right of the main entrance. On the top floor of this block was placed the staff canteen with large sliding windows giving views over the site of the 1924 Empire Exhibition.

The Assembly Hall was provided with seating for 1,020 people and had a sprung floor for dancing, with stage and projection facilities. It was panelled in English veneer. Alongside was the refreshment room, with a 'folding window' leading to the gardens.

Pevsner called Wembley 'the best of the modern Town Halls around London, neither fanciful nor drab. The long stretching front has no conspicuous climax but not one detail either that could jar. The main staircase is also far from spectacular, but airy and sensible and the Great Hall at the back shares this character.' *Buildings of England, Middlesex, 1951.*

In 2008 the Council decided to take advantage of the regeneration of the area surrounding Wembley Stadium to build a new civic centre. Following a design competition, won by Hopkins Architects, the building is currently under construction and anticipated to be completed in 2013, at which time the existing civic centre will be vacated. Whilst listed its future is therefore uncertain, although conversion to a hotel, conference centre and residential have been mooted.

# Hornsey Town Hall

Crouch End Broadway - Reginald H. Uren – 1933-35

The Borough of Hornsey was created out of several villages, including Hornsey itself, Crouch End and Muswell Hill; but by the early twentieth century it was really undistinguishable from London. This was a largely middle class area whose focus had moved away from Hornsey village to the new shopping centre in Crouch End. However, the only council offices were in Southwood Lane, Highgate, built in 1868 by the local Board of Works, and by the 1930s these were both inadequate and inappropriately sited. One can therefore appreciate how essential it was for this prosperous borough to have a focus for its civic pride.

The competition for municipal offices and an Assembly Hall costing about £100,000 was announced in May 1933. The Municipal Journal stated that ‘the Council are desirous that the character of the buildings shall be dignified and they rely on good proportions and a fitting architectural setting rather than elaborate decoration and detail, which is not required. Stress is laid on straight forward planning, with rooms and corridors well lighted and ventilated.’ The assessor was C. Cowles Voysey, whose much-praised classical town hall at Worthington had just been completed.

The problem was the long, narrow site acquired by the Borough in 1920 and 1923 and laid out as a public park. Today we see the Town Hall as the focus of a pleasing group of related buildings, framed by the gas and electricity show rooms to either side. In 1933 Hornsey failed to secure these sites and had to set the Town Hall within a straggle of rather tatty shops and back gardens. These served to deprive any new building of light and a pleasant aspect. **The Architect and Building News** for 20th October 1933 was highly critical:



‘In all, 218 highly trained brains have exerted themselves to the full to find the solution to the problem which should never have been set....It would seem that the placing of what is really a monument would be of the utmost importance to the self-respect of all concerned. Never would environment appear to be more important.

Yet the results of the competition held show that undoubtedly the best solutions, within the limits laid down, were those which made the building turn its back on its surroundings and create its own ‘atmosphere.’ Hence on the last two faces the building would present a disordered array of party walls, fronting on to equally unsightly gardens.

All who were acquainted with what has been achieved by Dudok at Hilversum will grieve that British architects could not have been given, to a lesser degree, the scope for the creation of an influence which, instead of turning inward, might have expanded, so lifting from the depths into which it has sunk the entire surrounding of the new Town Hall.’

The winner of this daunting competition was a New Zealander, Reginald H. Uren. Whilst many competitors set their buildings round the edge of the site, facing an internal courtyard, Uren produced a very compact design, placed in the widest part of the site, at its rear. This gave some opportunity for a narrow show front behind the car park facing the Broadway, and the influence of Dudok's Hilversum Town Hall can keenly be felt. Hilversum: its style was modern, with clean streamlined lines, but used traditional brick facings and was appropriate for such civic embellishments as carved reliefs, bronze fittings and marbled interiors.

Hornsey Town Hall is a small building, and a relatively cheap one. It is entered under the tower. The Assembly Hall and its related foyers etc. are to the left; to the right is a staircase similar to that of the RIBA headquarters in Portland Place but on a smaller scale: it leads to the Council Chamber and committee rooms on the first floor. What is really impressive about Hornsey is the richness of its detail and the quality of its fittings. The restrained carved reliefs are by Arthur Ayres. The result is dignified and mildly progressive – appropriate for the Conservative Borough of Hornsey. In 1935 it was awarded the bronze medal of the RIBA for the best building in London of that year.

Maybe it was the success of the Town Hall, completed by its winning of the RIBA award that prompted a new interest in the adjacent sites on Crouch End Broadway. In 1935 the private Hornsey Gas Company acquired the southern site for its showrooms. Hornsey Gas Company was struggling: there were few new houses being built in the area so there was little scope for expansion. In an attempted burst of showmanship the company determined on an exceptionally lavish showroom and office, with a luxurious demonstration theatre on the first floor. The architects were Dawe and Carter of Watford. The two most notable features are the curved Heals-style glazing to the showroom windows, and a splendid series of reliefs by Arthur Ayres depicting the glories of gas. Nevertheless the Hornsey Gas Company was subsumed by a larger company in or before 1939.

The showrooms were converted into a bank for Barclays in 1998. Gas had a great and more fashionable rival: electricity. Electricity was a municipal enterprise in London. So Hornsey MB acquired the site to the north of the town hall, formerly the telephone exchange. Reginald Uren, by 1937, a partner in a firm of Slater, Moberley and Uren, was called in again to provide a rival showroom and more council offices. As befitted a cautious municipality, the electricity showrooms are less lavish than those of the Hornsey Gas Company, although Arthur Ayres was recalled to provide brick relief, 'The Spirit of Electricity.' This building was completed in 1939.

Hornsey Town Hall is probably Uren's best building. He added modern touches to Cecil Masey's Granada cinema, Woolwich, and



with Slater built John Lewis' department store in Oxford Street. The former Sandersons showroom, now a boutique hotel, is also by Uren.

Today the town hall survives as a delicate gem that has been mothballed since 1965, when Hornsey's amalgamation with Tottenham and Wood Green to form the London Borough of Haringey made its civic suite redundant. Although part used as municipal offices until the late 1990s, the impressive assembly hall has ceased active use, and there have been a string of proposals over the last fifteen years for re-use of the complex, the most recent, a scheme by John McAslan and Partners for Mountview Theatre School, granted planning and listed building consent (with enabling development) in the last two years. The buildings are currently predominantly used for filming, and in this year you could have admired its interior in 'The Hour' (a British version of Mad Men) and 'Whitechapel'.

Just around the corner from the town hall complex, and worth a visit, is **Hornsey Library** (Haringey Park) designed in 1965 by **Ley and Jarvis**. With more than a nod to Le Corbusier, in front of the blank convex west exterior wall is a pool with a bronze sculpture by T.E. Huxley-Jones, whilst internally it is light and airy, with a galleried interior and a spacious foyer with an open stair at the top of which is a large glazed staircase window with an engraved map of Hornsey by F.J. Mitchell. In recent years it has been listed.



*Hornsey Library by Ley and Jarvis 1965*

# Wood Green Civic Centre

Wood Green High Road - Sir John Brown, A.E. Henson and Partners - 1955-58

Built on the site of the Fishmongers and Poulterers' Almshouses. Intended as a focus for Wood Green, but now rather isolated on the northern fringe of the later commercial centre. Only three municipal complexes began construction in the London area in the 1950s, Wood Green being one of them. The architects, Sir John Brown, A.E. Henson and Partners, had been the winners of a competition held by Wood Green Borough Council in 1938 for a different site. New proposals for the present site, drawn up in 1946 and revised in 1950, were for an ambitious scheme that included offices and a council chamber, a public hall and a library arranged in an informal courtyard grouping. Only the offices and council chamber were built, housed in a long four storey range with a raised single storey rear wing put up in 1955-58, of reinforced-concrete and steel-framed construction, clad in sand-faced golden brick and stone.

The treatment of the elevations is subtle and low key, with a full height aluminium-framed glazing and a projecting canopy marking the off-centre main entrance. The building is in distinct parts, the civic end containing the council chamber being separated from the office section by the full-height entrance hall that leads to the mayoral suite and committee rooms at the rear. However, these elements are allowed to flow into each other, for example where the gallery of the council chamber bows graciously into the hall, reflecting post-war ideals of approachability and openness; lightness and transparency are emphasised in the interior. Indeed, the new ideal for post-war local government buildings was 'a more democratic civic centre which should attract rather than intimidate'. In practice this meant the rejection of grand facades in favour of simple, unaffected elevations. At Wood Green free movement is further encouraged by the bold helical stair, a sinuously curving first-floor bridge, and large areas of internal glazing. In all of this there are strong echoes of Arne Jacobsen and Eric Moller's Aarhus City Hall (1938-41) in Denmark. The Council Chamber has an unusual, curved dog-leg ceiling and a public gallery carried on two enormous hollow columns that act as a boiler flue and plenum duct. The original furniture was removed in 1965, when the buildings were taken over by the London Borough of Haringey and the number of councillors dramatically increased. A civil defence suite was included in the basement, with walls of two-foot-thick reinforced concrete, theoretically able to withstand a nuclear attack, and escape tunnels to the external gardens.

Sir John Brown, A.E. Henson had made their reputation in the 1930s (in London they were responsible for designing Friern Barnet Town Hall – 1939-41) and went on to specialise in municipal buildings in the post war period, including Crawley Civic Centre which the Society saw in 2011.



# Tottenham Town Hall Complex

Town Hall Approach Road - A.S. Tayler and A.R. Jemmett – 1903-05

Flanked by public baths and a fire station, Tottenham Town Hall forms the centrepiece of an agreeable Baroque municipal ensemble built in 1903-05 for the recently formed Tottenham Urban District Council, on the sites of older houses. Designed by A.S. Tayler and A.R. Jemmett, the winning entrants in a competition assessed by John Macvicar Anderson, this two-storey building of red brick and Portland stone makes liberal use of the Baroque vocabulary, combining pilasters and cupola in a restless exterior. Internally the building aims for grandeur with a marble imperial staircase, and the former Council Chamber on the first floor, which flaunts a particularly striking, Moorish-style domed plaster ceiling.

In terms of planning, the building was less remarkable, though its simple grouping with the other municipal buildings on the west side of the Tottenham Green by the same firm, is notably effective. North of the baths the group is continued by the former County School of 1913 by H.G. Crothall.



Following local government reorganisation in 1965, the town hall complex became increasingly redundant, and remained vacant for more than a decade. However, in the last two years BPTW Architects, on behalf of Newlon Housing Trust and United House, have restored the former town hall, and in particular the Moselle Room (former Council Chamber) which was re-opened in May 2011 and is now managed for community and other activities and events by Lee Valley Estates.

**Bernie Grant Centre**  
Town Hall Approach Road - David Adjaye Associates - 2006-07

The Bernie Grant Centre forms part of the Tottenham Town Hall complex, and is located behind the former baths building of which, for a number of years, only the frontage had existed.



The project was initiated by the late Bernie Grant, a previous leader of Haringey Council and Tottenham MP, and his wife Sharon, who wanted to bring a cultural facility to Tottenham. Bernie Grant 'believed that the creative industries and cultural activity have a major part to play in tackling social exclusion and in the regeneration of culturally diverse communities'. The project had a lengthy gestation, previous proposals for a major cultural complex to be located on a much larger site, prepared in the late 1990s, having been considered too ambitious by the Millennium Commission.

Adjaye Associates won the invited competition to design the Bernie Grant Centre. Funding was provided by the Millennium Commission and the London Development Agency for the £15m project to realise an arts/theatre centre for young people, which was constructed at the rear of the listed frontage buildings which had been vacant and derelict for more than a decade.

The 40,000 sq.ft. centre is envisioned as a series of pavilions, which are designed to complement the existing Edwardian buildings on the site. The Centre consists of a 300-person theatre, classrooms, dance and sound studios, performance space, foyer, café and bar, enterprise units for local businesses and a new plaza, which connects the centre with the College of North East London.

## Walthamstow Town Hall

Forest Road - P.D. Hepworth - 1937-42

Walthamstow's municipal origins lie in the parish vestry, whose eighteenth century building survives as the museum of local history. The parish was constituted as an urban sanitary district in 1873, and in 1876 a Public Hall in Orford Road was enlarged as a new Town Hall. This survives as part of the Connaught Hospital. Under the Local Government Act of 1894 the area became an urban district; in 1895 the urban district became the electric lighting authority and in 1903



Twentieth Century Society, Civic Plunge Revisited, 24th March 2012



also the education and tramways authority. In 1929 it became a Municipal Borough. Despite repeated extensions, the Town Hall could not cope with this expansion of services coupled with the rapid growth in the numbers of those who had to be served: 11,000 in 1871, 109,000 in 1961. Inevitably, a new civic centre was required.

The Town Hall, completed in 1942, was placed in the centre. Pevsner described it as being in 'the Swedish style of c.1925 which became so popular in England amongst those who were not satisfied to be imitatively Neo-Georgian nor wanted to go modern or earnest.' **Buildings of England, Essex, 1954.** The forecourt is laid out formally with a central pool and fountain. An Assembly Hall flanking the Town Hall to the east was completed by Hepworth in 1943, described by Pevsner as also 'typical of the dainty Swedish taste.' Sweden was certainly the source of this restrained classicism which was popular with English architects who visited the 1930 Stockholm exhibition in large numbers and were much influenced by buildings they saw there.

Phillip Hepworth won the competition in 1932 but building work did not start until 1937 which unfortunately, meant that it had not been finished when the war started. He was certainly not modernist but here he creates a superbly sited and arresting civic complex with the cupola's Town Hall straight ahead and the slightly later added Assembly Hall to the right, a 1925 exhibition style fountain in front with flagpoles either side. Hepworth built the so-called pseudish houses at the bottom of the Bishops Avenue in Hampstead, with white render, Cape Dutch gables and blue tiled roofs. He was also Architect to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission after the Second World War – his Dunkirk memorial on 1957 is very fine in a low-key way.

Here, the Town Hall, faced with white stone, has a central slim portico with unmolded square piers, rising through three storeys. The front is dominated by a tall square clock turret, sheathed in copper in a Swedish idiom and surmounted by an octagonal lantern. The plan had to be simplified, which possibly improves it, even before building started (although the Portland stone was kept rather than brick) and then by wartime restrictions. Outside decoration is limited to a little rustication, some plaques showing crafts and industries in the sides of the portico columns in flat relief and playful tapering balconies with scrolly ironwork.

Inside, there is no monumental staircase but rather, four lesser staircases. Wartime restrictions meant that the fitting out of the interior, particularly for the Council Chamber, was not as intended but the fact that it was completed was most unusual in itself (especially as it also functioned as an ARP shelter). Both this and the Committee Rooms were fitted with plain panelled woods (apparently it's plywood) but the Chamber seating had to be recycled from the earlier Town Hall in a heavy Renaissance Victorian style typical of the 1880s. To add to this, totally inappropriate, leather sofas have been added to the reception area of the Chamber. Nonetheless, the interior and lighting, particularly in the entrance, are quite fine. There is also a Cold war bomb shelter in the basement.

Its worth going around the back to see the E-shaped plan and the sculpture adorning the exterior of the bowed out Council Chamber – fellowship represents William Morris, the others education, motherhood, work and recreation by John F. Cavanagh. A nice pseudish but also a very whimsical Swedish touch are the (copper?) bells on the balconies.

The **Assembly Hall** emblazoned with 'Fellowship is life and the lack of it is death' quoting I think from Morris (and the words 'Comedy' and 'Tragedy') is very finely finished with its lead work drainpipes emblazoned with the WBC of Walthamstow Borough Council. Note the fine detail around the Borough Council and the subtle carved masks. The entrance is from the west, through full height opening between square pillars, with star motifs in windows very high up. The hall has nine bays of generously large windows. It was used for recordings in the early post-war period because of the lack of other suitable venues – Joan Sutherland recorded here and the London Philharmonic. To the south a sombre war memorial with mourning figures in granite beside.

The scheme was meant to be completed with law courts by Hepworth to the left but this was not done until 1971 as a **Magistrate Court** by the GLC under **Geoffrey Horsfall** (other sources give **K. Krumin** as the architect). Also in Portland stone but it sits much lower not obtruding above the massing of the Town Hall. It's a good building of its date, in its own idiom but respectful of its neighbours, the 2005 Pevsner describing it as a 'tough nephew by a maiden aunt'. Inside it was one of the first to have informal flexibly planned courts, so can continue in use today.

# Barking Town Hall

Clockhouse Avenue, Barking, Essex – Herbert Jackson and Reginald Edmonds – 1937-58

Following a competition for the designs of a new 'civic centre' for Barking the scheme submitted by architects Herbert Jackson & Reginald Edmonds F.F.R.I.B.A. was accepted and the final designs were agreed in October 1936. The building contract was entered into but abandoned in 1939, due to the outbreak of World War II. At that time some basic foundation work had been completed and the abandoned site was used for air raid shelters, decontamination centre and headquarters for ARP. Between 1945 and 1953 the Council constantly petitioned the Government to be allowed to go ahead with the scheme and permission was finally granted in March 1954. Work recommenced on the site in April 1954.

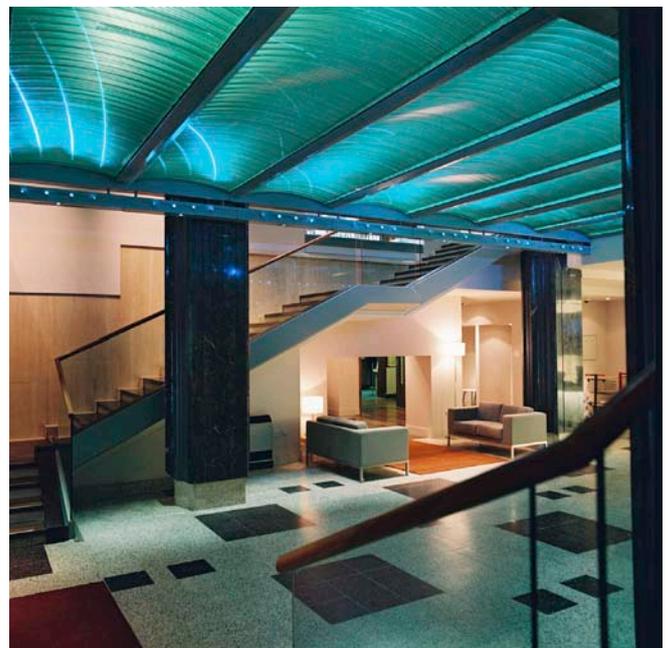
The Town Hall and Assembly Hall were built by the then Direct Works Organisation of the Council's. The first stage was opened on the 17th December 1958, which was the Civic Suite and Municipal Offices (now known as the Town Hall). In November 1958 the Council was finally granted permission to complete the Assembly Hall (now known as Broadway Theatre). The Assembly Hall which links up with the Town Hall was constructed during 1960 and was completed in 1961. At the time of construction it was believed that this was the largest civic scheme in the country to have been built by direct employees of a council. The Assembly Hall faces the Curfew Tower. The Curfew Tower, together with part of the garden walls, is the only part of the former Barking Abbey still standing.

The Town Hall building is constructed in small (65mm) red brick with red bold roll clay tiles and wooden Georgian style slash windows which are painted cream. To the front aspect the building has an imposing clock tower. Many of the original features and fittings still remain throughout the building. The gates to the main entrance were made from some ancient oak salvaged from the Leet House when it was demolished in 1926 (the Leet House was erected in the Broadway in 1567).

The main foyer area contains Ashburton marble-faced columns with the dado in Travertine, the floor in a pattern of terrazzo tiles. The Council Chamber is walnut panelled with the anteroom of figured teak and straight grained elm. The Mayor's parlour walls are faced in Wych Elm. The building originally had in-wall central heating.

The Town Hall itself cost £476,000 and the Assembly Hall (now known as the Broadway Theatre) cost in the order of £154,000.

Hawkins\Brown completed a refurbishment of Barking Town Hall in 2006. The building was taken back to its original structure and rooflights were added to bring natural daylight into the dark entrance space. A new glazed floor was added to improve circulation and add a focus to the reception space.



# Dagenham Civic Centre, Becontree Heath

Becontree Heath - E Berry Webber - 1936-37

The Borough of Dagenham is almost entirely a creation of the 1920s, although its village core survived until the early 1960s. In 1921 the LCC began its largest housing estate here, taking over the northern part of the parish. In the peak years 1922-23 and 1926-29 between 2000 and 4000 houses per annum were built. The planning owes much to the principles of Parker and Unwin, and was designed by G Topham Forest. These houses were not supplied with electricity until 1934, and then only for lighting; the high cost of the installation by the County of London Electricity Supply Company meant there were few takers. A full electricity supply only arrived in 1960. It is said that the Becontree estate was only saved from being a complete social disaster when Ford built its new car plant in 1931 – until then there was hardly any employment.

Dagenham became an urban district in 1926 and a municipal borough in 1938. The Builder (22 October 1931) reports that in 1926 there were no social services. Somehow, in the next ten years, health and sewage systems were developed; and five libraries, a salvage plant and an open air swimming pool were built. There is something rather desperate about Dagenham; it has all of the austerity and none of the charm of contemporary 'plotlands' developments. Such an area of rapid growth clearly needed a touch of civic pride.

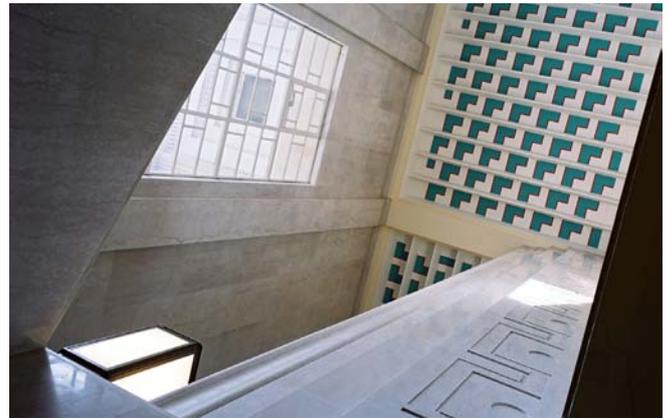
E. Berry Webber was the architect. He is best known as a Town Hall specialist and particularly for his Southampton Civic Centre of 1929-39. The Town Hall was to be the focus of a civic complex on a corner of Becontree Heath.

E Berry Weber's building is remarkably simple in design. It is dominated by a huge portico, which marks the Councilor's entrance. Their entrance hall is the full height of the building and is lined with Botticino marble. From it a ceremonial staircase ascends to the first floor – also marble lined and with 'solid' balustrades. Above, a gallery connects the office wings to either side at second floor level. The Council Chamber is to the rear, where it is denoted by a semi-circular projection. Its shape was dictated by 'acoustic considerations and the special requirements of convenient seating by which each speaker has a full view of the Chairman and his fellow members' **The Builder, 22 October 1937**. The walls and gallery front were faced with English walnut, with Betula and Sycamore wood bandings. Batula and Sycamore was also used in the Chairman's room, with deal in the Committee room; all of these civic rooms are on the first floor.



The rest of the building was for the various departments, the treasurers and medical offices being on the ground floor and the engineers' and surveyors' departments being on the top. The staff entrances were at each end where the staircases project in curved full-height windows.

The external treatment is simple, as **The Builder** reported; 'No attempt has been made to graft architectural stylism on the basic form.' Mulberry stocks with Portland stone dressings were used and the carving on the portico is by W. Aumonier and sons. A fire station was added to the complex in 1937 and a library and an Assembly Hall were also planned as part of the original scheme. It was a success of the Town Hall that it could stand alone as an imposing symbol of civic pride whilst these were still being considered.



In 2003, Hawkins\Brown worked as interior designers alongside Richard Griffiths Architects carrying out a complete refurbishment of the debating chamber to provide state of the art conferencing facilities.

# East Ham Town Hall Complex

Town Hall, Barking Road and High Street South. 1901 by Henry Cheers of Twickenham and Joseph Smith of Blackburn, with additional buildings by the Borough Engineer A.H. Campbell.

The supreme London example of the power and confidence of the Edwardian local authority, transforming an indifferent crossroads into an urban centre. The 150 ft tower at the large crossroads site announces not only the Town Hall, but a conglomeration of buildings serving the new borough: Assembly Hall, Public Offices, Police Courts, Library, Education and Public Health offices, Fire Station, Swimming pool, Technical College, Tram Depot, Electricity Office and sub station, all built between 1903 and 1914. The bold thinking behind this owed much to J.H. Bethall (1861 – 1945), first Mayor of East Ham in 1904-5. The flamboyant architectural character was established by Cheers and Smith's successful; competition design of 1898 for a civic group; initially this was to have consisted of Town Hall and Assembly Room, with separate Library and Technical school, but as built, the group differs from the original scheme, which had placed the library in the technical school block, and further buildings were added as the ambitions of the borough expanded.

The L-shaped group of public hall along Barking Road and lower offices with frontages along the High Street is recessed from the street and anchored by a commanding clock tower close to the corner, with receding tiers of pinnacles, topped by a tall dome and spike. The materials throughout are bright red Accrington brick and biscuit-coloured Doulton terracotta. They are employed to provide much lively detail – Tudor mullioned windows, playful blocked columns and shaped gables, and touches of Loire Chateaux in the decorative balustrading – a carefree mixture typical of the 1890s before it was overtaken by the fashion for more monumental baroque. Building News, writing in 1898, already considered the detail 'over wrought' and the 'rococo' ornament 'in questionable taste'. Cheers had some earlier experiences with lesser civic buildings and went on to build others: his slightly later Town Hall at Hereford was similar in detail. But East Ham was an exceptionally large commission (the total costs for the Town Hall group came to £80,000); for inspiration in handling such a large site he perhaps looked to E.W. Mountford's Sheffield Town Hall, completed 1897, comparable both in its eclecticism and in its corner clock tower.

There are also some so called 'free style' buildings complimenting it in the immediate vicinity. A triple gabled building containing shops on the ground floor opposite in Barking Road, with chequer brick and stone patterning in the gable tops. In the opposite corner the Earl of Denmark in a mixture of 1880's Gin Palace opulence on the corner with an 'improved', more sober brick and stone extension in High Street North, in brick with stone window dressings.

In recent years the Council has pretty much vacated the campus, including the 1937 Town Hall Annexe, whose future is uncertain. In 2011, planning and listed building consent was granted for the erection of an Integrated Front Office and Library, designed by Rick Mather Architects, in place of the Old Gym, alongside the refurbishment and restoration of the main campus buildings. Construction is due to be completed by the end of 2013.

# Poplar Town Hall and Civic Theatre

Mile End Road - Clifford Culpin 1938

Culpin and Bowers were appointed architects of the New Town Hall in October 1933 on the basis of their socialist sympathies. Bowers' original design, which was Edwardian in style, was abandoned when the practice split up and Ewart Culpin went into partnership with his 29 year old son Clifford. Despite having very little experience, Clifford Culpin was given the responsibility both of Poplar and the contemporaneous Greenwich Town Hall

The sweeping Mendelsohnian lines of the exterior were dictated by the 'V' shape plan of the building hinged on the main staircase. External dirt-collecting ornamentation was avoided and above the high terrazzo-faced plinth, the building is largely faced with Portland stone. The top storey, set back and originally flood-lit, is faced with special thin bricks as is the tower. Swedish green marble is used for inter-spacing the bronze ground-floor window frames. The two main entrances have impressively massive coffered bronze doors.

Through Ewart Culpin's socialist contacts, David Evans (1895-1959) was chosen to carve the five panels on the curved exterior of the Rates Hall and also to design the mosaics on the ceremonial balcony above the entrance to the Civic Suite.

Located in the eastern wing of the building, these offices accommodated the various Council departments. Intended to be a 'modern workshop', simplicity and flexibility were the keynotes. Vertical members were placed every 3' to enable an unlimited number of partitions to be put up as required. Widespread use was made of plain distempered walls, beech block flooring and built in flush cupboards. The wide corridors were faced with maintenance-free oatmeal-coloured cement glaze with doors painted in rich peacock green with frames, handles, stair handrails and lettering in brilliant orange. All this is a far cry from the present drab décor.

The Entrance Hall to the Civic Suite is combined with the Council Chamber ante room, the latter being raised on a few steps to give it emphasis. The walls are lined with marble and teak doors to give access to the male and female Members' Rooms and the Council Chamber. The 'Tutonic' lettering used on the Mayor's Board is a departure from the sans serif used as a standard throughout the building.

The Council Chamber, latterly used as a canteen, is perhaps the most convincingly modern feature of the building. The dais end wall is flush panelled, floor to ceiling, in Maple with concealed lighting. The original curtains were specially woven with a ship motif in vivid red to match the leather doors and the walnut upholstered chairs. Over the rich panelled dado of Indian Laurel the walls were covered with a plain sound-absorbing felt. The circle of down lighters, originally with a central single 1000 watt pendant diffuser, is a particularly pleasing feature. A 96-seat public gallery overlooks the Chamber.

On the first floor exists the range of three Committee Rooms, flush panelled in English Walnut with matching folding partitions. The original furniture was also in walnut upholstered in blue-green leather matching the carpets and, like all of the furniture, designed by the Architects.

Opposite the Committee Rooms is the Mayor's Parlour panelled in blistered mahogany and leading onto a roof garden. The hangings and leather were peacock blue offset by a carpet of dull purple. These colours are all picked out in the wonderful bird's eye view mural painting of the Borough of Poplar by W. D. Suddaby and Charles E. Fryer.

Approached from a jazzy entrance hall of vividly veined marble and nicely detailed decorative brick-work, the Assembly Hall took the form of a theatre being designed for meetings, musical and dramatic performances, dances and 'talkies'. The extensive dance floor was of a fully sprung maple laid to a 'dance-with-the-grain' pattern and when locked rigid could be used for seating, giving the hall the capacity of 1,200.

The proscenium had an orchestra pit with a removable apron stage and was flanked by Peroba-faced curved resonators accommodating the loudspeakers. The original curtain was copper-coloured and the asbestos-sprayed walls above the panelling of stained English Oak planks tinted with peach. Carpets were in grey-brown and the seats covered in a mohair cloth of two shades of brown.

The dance floor was overlooked by a small refreshment room with the glazing side illuminated, acid etched and sand-blasted to depict Father Thomas and symbols of the Poplar Borough parishes to the design of W. D. Suddaby and Charles E. Fryer. The interior was originally decorated with painted reproductions of the eighty or so shipping house flags of the district. A larger refreshment room with kitchen, servery and lounge existed at balcony level.

The Town Hall was sold off by Tower Hamlets in the late 1990s, and an inappropriate roof extension added. Notwithstanding this the building was nevertheless listed less than a decade ago, but is now in a poor state of repair, and currently used as a private college. It's not known how much of the interior is still intact (it was at the time of our last visit twenty years ago), but compared to the interesting refurbishments and re-use that we have seen elsewhere on the day, it is very much a missed opportunity.



*Poplar Town Hall mosaic above the entrance to the civic suite by David Evans*

# Bethnal Green Town Hall

Cambridge Heath Road - Percy Robinson and W. Alban Jones – 1909-10

Extension to Patriot Square by E.C.P. Monson - 1937-9 (for council chambers and electricity Board offices)

Bethnal Green became a municipal Borough in 1900. Its precursor, the vestry of St Matthew's Bethnal Green, had covered the same geographical area but had fewer powers. By 1906 the old vestry hall in Church Row was too small, and in particular had no council chamber where the elected members could meet. A competition for a new hall was held in 1907, assessed by Henry T Hare, and the foundation stone for the New Town Hall was laid on 23 September 1909. It opened on 1 November 1910. The architects were Percy Robinson and W Alban Jones, while the sculptor was Henry Poole.

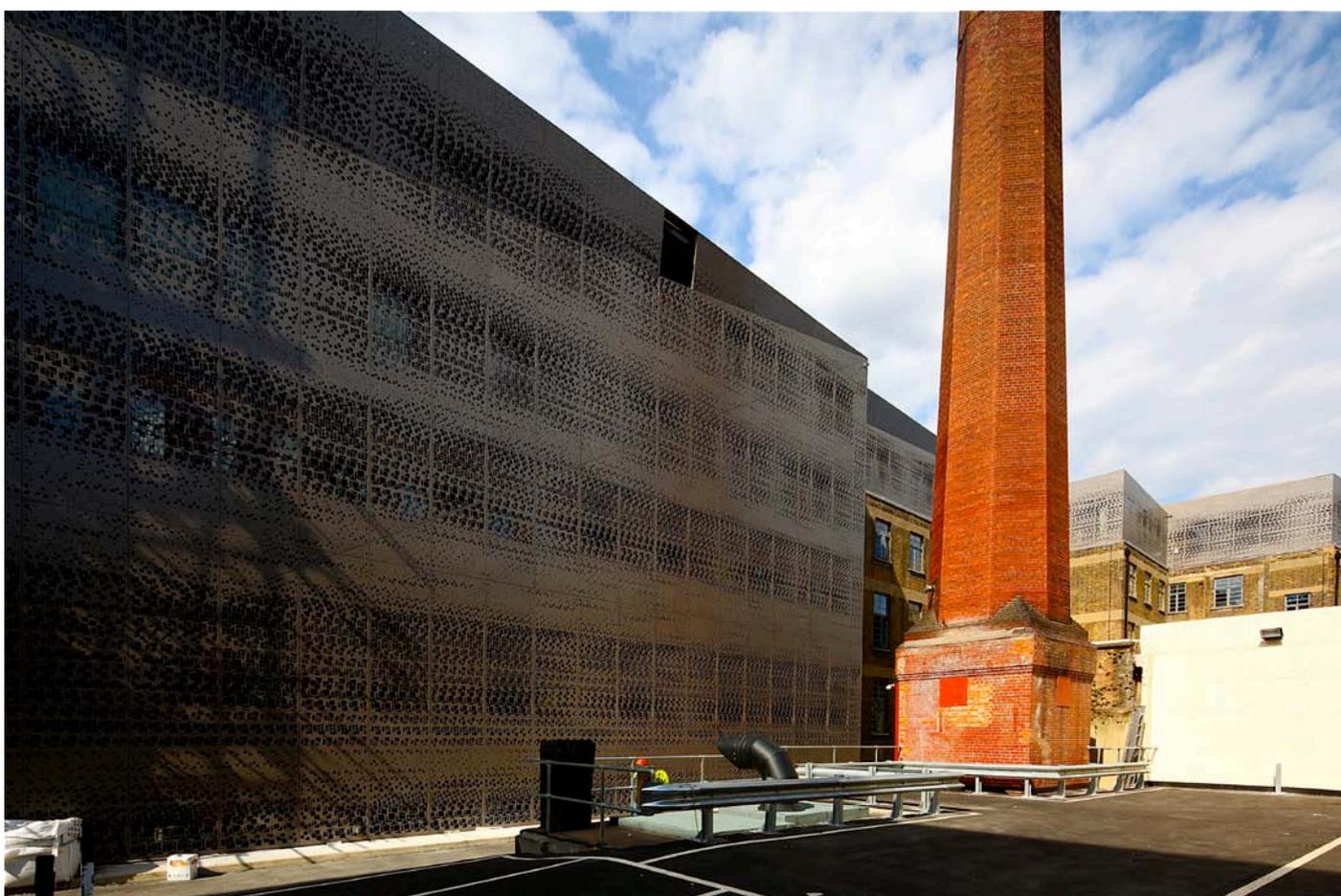
The main entrance leads to the stairs and upper hall, from which originally led to the Council Chamber, replete with figures of Industry and Temperance, Truth and Happiness. Today the staircase is the most important survival, with stained glass depicting the blind beggar of Bethnal Green, a figure derived from an Elizabethan Ballard, the De Bathonia estate from which the name may originate, and Samuel Pepys' association with what he called Bednall Green.

By the 1930s this building was itself inadequate. There had long been demands for a Public Hall. The York Baths to the rear could be put to serve as a dance hall in winter time, but there was nowhere for small meetings or receptions. The office accommodation was inadequate and the Council Chamber too small. More specifically, an electricity showroom was required. The idea of a New Town Hall and Assembly rooms was first mooted in July 1934. In December 1935, two Liberal members were accused of 'kicking against the bricks' when they opposed the extravagance of an extension, and in April 1936 plans by the ever-present E.C.P. Monson were approved. The similarity to his Islington Town Hall is striking. The Public Hall was postponed and the outbreak of war ensured it was never built; instead, the Council Chamber was conceived as a flexible space without the great tiers of seats common elsewhere. The first floor also houses four committee rooms, all like their corridor, panelled in oak and teak. The Registry office was on the floor above, whilst the ground floor housed the Medical Officer's and the Treasurer's Department.



The Approach Estate dates from the early 1960s. In the post war years the complex underwent numerous modifications until it eventually fell out of use and was vacated in 1993. For 14 years the former town hall was only used as a location for television and films – including *Atonement* and *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* – until it was bought by Singaporean hotel magnate Peng Loh. After 18 months of construction, during which it gradually opened in sections, the Bethnal Green Town Hall Hotel opened its doors officially in November 2010 with all of its 98 rooms finished exactly 100 years after the town hall itself was built.

The restoration of the town hall, and its bold extension have been carried out under the design team of Michel da Costa Gonçalves and Nathalie Rozencwajg, the founders of Rare Architecture. The young practice, based in London and Paris, has completed a project that combines careful restoration and computer-led parametric design.



*Aluminium patterned screen by Rare Architects 2010*

## References

**Pevsner: The Buildings of England - London 5: East** - Bridget Cherry, Charles O'Brien and Nikolaus Pevsner - Yale University Press - 2005

**The Planning of Modern Buildings: Town Halls** - A. Calveley Cotton - The Architectural Press - 1936

**Civic Plunge Notes** - Gavin Stamp and Elain Harwood - The Thirties Society - October 1989

**East Endings - A Walking Tour of Bethnal Green and Bow** - The Thirties Society - September 1989

**Municipal Modernity in Hackney** - A Thirties Society and Hackney Society Walk - April 1992

**Bethnal Green, A Museum of Housing** - Elain Harwood - Thirties Society - July 1993

**“Going to the Dogs” in Walthamstow** - Robert Drake and Mark Aldbrook - Twentieth Century Society - November 2007

**London's Town Halls: The Architecture of Local Government from 1840 to the Present** - English Heritage - 1999