

**Town Hall  
Bath Road  
Slough  
Buckinghamshire**

**Initial assessment of conservation interest: Supplementary  
Material**

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## 1. Introduction

1.1 DLG Architects have previously (February 2008) produced an "Initial Assessment of Conservation Interest" which used criteria set out by English Heritage for listing Law and Government Buildings, as well as policies within the Slough Borough Council adopted Local Plan, to assess the merits of the Town Hall building, Bath Road, Slough.

1.2 The purpose of this supplementary material is to provide further background information regarding the development of Town Halls within the UK during the 1930s, and to further assess Slough Town Hall against the key architectural trends and themes of town hall buildings of merit for the era. This Statement also considers the shortcomings of Slough Town Hall when compared to other relevant Town Halls in the UK.

## 2. Background: 1930s Town Halls in the UK

2.1 With the expansion of the population and the increasing number of services there was considerable pressure on existing town halls in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. As a result a number of new buildings were created and there was wide spread interest in the form such buildings should take (see Calveley Cotton).

2.2 In many ways this echoed the rapid changes during the nineteenth century moving from the simple buildings following the Municipal Government Acts from the 1830's, exemplified by buildings such as the first stage of Oldham Town Hall or that at Mansfield which Cunningham describes as the equivalent of a classically design mansion, through to the complex and impressive buildings of Manchester Town Hall of 1867 or Middlesborough of 1883 which replaced the earlier simple building of 1846. Cunningham recognises the eclectic range of styles with early interest in Gothic structures being to some extent replaced with Edwardian Baroque or what he calls Wrenaissance.

2.3 Whittick writing in *European Architecture of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* refers to a tendency following the First World War to reduce the scale of ceremonial and reception rooms which were often part of the mayor's suite in smaller town halls. At the same time there was a substantial growth in administrative offices which was identified by Cotton as one of the driving forces behind the master planning of the new town halls. C G Powell reporting on building trends notes that town halls were usually conspicuously expensive so much so

that George Orwell pointed out that Barnsely spent close on £150,000 (about five times the cost of Slough) which would have been enough for 350 council houses at a time of urgent need for housing.

2.4 The impressive entrances, and in particular the large towers which exemplified earlier buildings, tended to be reduced in scale and while they were still present in some examples such as Walthamstow, Barnsley and Swansea in others it is just a small turret over the centre of the building, see Peterborough, Worthing and Bridlington.

2.5 Many of the new developments were conceived as part of more extensive plans either integrated with the existing town centre or to form a new Civic Campus. In some cases this took some time to achieve but has resulted in impressive buildings and civic spaces.- Luton (the description mentions group value), Braintree and Bromley (both listed for group value), Walthamstow, Manchester and County Hall London.

2.6 Whittick's analysis refers to a wide spread arrangement with the Council Chamber generally at the rear on the first floor, for example Worthing, Walthamstow, Barnsley, High Wycombe, Beckenham and Southampton. A major consideration in determining this layout was the extent to which the main hall doubles up as both council chamber and general function room. This had a major impact on layout and planning of the building to provide security/privacy for the council. In many cases a separate function room was planned either integrated with the main town hall or as an adjunct - for example Walthamstow.

2.7 Cotton noted that design was moving towards an asymmetrical style to cope with modern requirements although of the block plans illustrated many were clearly symmetrical in plan and style (Beckenham, Swindon, Norwich, Bury and Worthing). The constraints of the site sometimes inevitably produced asymmetric layouts such as the back wings at Leeds, a corner site for Watford, a tight urban location for Hornsey or even at Hertford where there was no site constraint but where the expression of the council chamber is clearly expressed to one side. Some examples are listed partly on account of their interesting plans including Wandsworth, the segmental layout at Stoke Newington as well as those noted above.

### **3. Decorative Campaigns**

3.1 Extensive decorative campaigns were produced for most town halls reflecting the pride in civic grandeur which was present in

many of the Victorian and Edwardian buildings, this despite the financial constraints noted above. Norwich Town Hall and Hornsey show the importance usually given to the decoration of the building and its integration into the building as an expression of Civic Pride.

3.2 At Slough it is recorded that there was opposition to the move away from the town centre and possibly the budgetary constraints which existed reflected this divided opinion on the merits of the proposal and thus led to reduction in these aspects. Norwich by contrast is rich in sculpture with purpose formed brick niches on a grand scale, ornate doors, free standing lions and a wealth of other detail, acclaimed by the AR in November 1938 as one of the masterpieces of the era on a par with the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre at Stratford, the De La Warr Pavilion at Bexhill or the London University buildings.

3.3 Hornsey Town Hall equally achieved contemporary acclaim with a bronze medal from the RIBA for the best London building erected in the three years up to December 1935, the assessor C Cowles-Voysey noted that the design admirably fitted the site and cleverly makes use of a difficult site. Here Uren made use of sculpture by AJ Ayres and extensive ornamental metal work. Hertford Town Hall by the same architects as Slough contained, like their other major town hall at Norwich, a superb array of decorative features warranting four pages of description in the listing.

#### **4. Design**

4.1 Pevsner in an article written in 1939 (intended for a special edition of the AR but prevented by the Second World War) and published for the first time in the Journal of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Society 2007 refers to Slough Town Hall as a symmetrical design. As executed it clearly is not symmetrical nor was the original concept symmetrical even including the proposed future extensions at the back. Symmetrical designs for Town Halls are not uncommon as noted above.

4.3 It could of course be argued that this was a balanced design and indeed Pevsner says that his description of symmetry is a loose one which would include a balanced rather than truly symmetrical arrangement. This however only reinforces the view that as executed it is an incomplete and unsatisfactory composition. At Slough a separate hall was envisaged but never built. There appears never to have been a proposal to implement the original master plan for the area published at the time of the opening of the 1937 Town Hall.

## 5. Expansion of Accommodation

5.1 Not long after the Second World War there was pressure to increase the accommodation on the site and on two occasions Sir Basil Spence was commissioned to prepare plans for this. Later a building at the back was linked to the existing Town Hall totally changing the relationship with the existing building and leading to further alterations to its interior. This building has a poor relationship with the Town Hall and there is no visual synergy.

## 6. The Conservation and Heritage Merits of Slough Town Hall

6.1 Thus it can be argued that externally the Town Hall at Slough never lived up to its original design intentions and did not provide the inspiration for the development of a new nucleus as originally proposed nor did its presence inform the form of development in the area.

6.2 Pevsner in the article referred to also comments on Slough as providing an inverse example of the balance between horizontal elements and vertical ones in the same façade. This is only mentioned in passing and there are many other examples of this form of balance and indeed Pevsner cites other examples.

6.3 Writing twenty or so years later in his Buckinghamshire County Guide Pevsner makes no reference in the entry on Slough Town Hall to the symmetry or the contrast of vertical and horizontal features but instead refers to it as a substantially incomplete design, and one where the balance required had not been achieved. This is in contrast to his entry in the volume for South London regarding Greenwich of 1938, which he describes as the only town hall representing the style of our time. Describing Wembley (listed grade II) 1935-1940 in BOE M'sex Pevsner calls it 'the best of modern town halls around London. Both of these are contemporary with Slough.

6.4 Internally at Slough, while there are some interesting details, there is no major design campaign comparable to some of the listed town halls of this period. This may well have been due to stronger budgetary constraints here than in other places although one would have expected that some of those were in areas where equal financial constraints would have applied.

6.5 Even where some of the original features have been retained the alterations such as the change to the dais in the Council Chamber and the removal of the original furniture which are commented on in contemporary accounts has removed the little interest which existed.

6.6 Slough Town Hall sits comfortably within the norm of town hall layouts and features. It has a modest formal portico and short lantern tower externally while internally it follows a standard pattern with the Council Chamber located at the back on the first floor closely associated with the mayor's suite and committee rooms. The administration is located along one arm which in the initial stage may have been convenient but would have led to extended circulation if the final full plan had been implemented as originally planned. It was to have had a function room to one side for social use which would again have followed a common pattern and been well separated from the main administration areas thus maintaining privacy and security. All in all there was little remarkable in the layout, features or technical aspects of the building.

6.7 It may therefore be argued that this building is not of a standard comparable to listed town halls of grade II and II\* standard, that it did not fulfil its original master plan and composition objectives, and it did not have a positive influence on the development of the area. The interior has been altered and to a large extent what interest there is has been prejudiced.

6.8 There are other examples of work by the same architects of a higher standard and greater interest which are protected by listing such as Norwich and Hertford mentioned above as well as other public buildings which are not listed. In this they were similar to other practices such as Bradshaw, Gass and Hope, C Cowles-Voysey and Vincent Harris whose oeuvre contain both listed and unlisted examples.

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