

# BETHNAL GREEN TOWN HALL

*Patriot Square, LB Tower Hamlets*

*by*

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## **BETHNAL GREEN TOWN HALL, PATRIOT SQUARE, LB TOWER HAMLETS.**

### **Origins**

The 1899 London Government Act created new forms of local administration: the Metropolitan Borough Councils. One of these was Bethnal Green. The previous form of local government, the parish vestry, had occupied a small Tudor Revival hall in Church Row, designed by a Mr Simmonds and opened in 1851 (illustrated in The Builder, 17.vii.1852). As Bethnal Green's population grew, and local government came to assume more and more roles, the vestry's accommodation grew increasingly inadequate. A competition was held in 1887 to design new premises: that of Isaacs and Florence (illustrated in Building News 25.iii.1887) won, but was clearly never built. The Bethnal Green Council voted in 1907 to acquire 2-16 Patriot Square as the site of a new town hall. A competition was held in that year, with Henry T. Hare serving as assessor. The winners were Percy Robinson and W. Alban Jones of Leeds and London.

### **The 1910 Town Hall**

The earlier phase of the town hall was opened in November 1910. It is a characteristic municipal building of its date, a stately pile of Portland stone in the English Renaissance idiom enriched with sculptural figures carved from models by the sculptor Henry Poole. Its principal front was on Cambridge Heath Road, with the main entrance being emphasised with a domed tower over the large arched recess. The East London Observer for 5.xi.1910 described it as 'a striking and beautiful feature in an important thoroughfare'.

The tone of Baroque lavishness is continued within. The public circulation areas are all lined and floored with marble: the main staircase is particularly impressive, illuminated via a Venetian window with armorial glass. A variety of foreign marbles of various shades of green and grey create a sumptuous effect. The jardinières that formerly ornamented the stair case were stolen in September 1993, according to an internal Tower Hamlets memo. Opposite the stairs is the former mayor's parlour and along the Cambridge Heath Road front of the first floor are two former committee rooms and a members' room: all are lined in Austrian oak, and this material was also used for the furniture, most of which has been sold.

The principal chamber on the first floor was the council chamber, some 51 ft long by 38 ft, with a public gallery at the east end. The stage of this room was boxed in at some point in the 1980s, with the result that the gallery is now hidden from view and the stage area is occupied by temporary offices. The council chamber contains good plaster figures (again modelled by Henry Poole) depicting Truth and Happiness (on the west wall) and Industry and Temperance on the east wall (and now hidden from view).

The other rooms within the town hall were of far less interest, consisting simply of utilitarian offices. The significant interiors (with the exception of the council chamber) have survived very well.

## **The 1939 Extension**

Bethnal Green Borough Council's responsibilities continued to grow and an extension to the town hall had long been desirable and as early as 1934 earnest demands for the extension were made. Designs for it by E.C.P. Monson were approved in April 1936 and work commenced in earnest in September 1937. The extension was officially opened in October 1939, after the outbreak of war. As was customary with municipal buildings of this date, extensive air raid provision was located in the basement: wartime photographs show sandbagged entrances along the Patriot Square frontage.

Monson's extension was as characteristic of its day as Robinson's was of 1910. It continued the Portland stone, classical treatment of the elevations but employed a sparer, plainer idiom. The Patriot Square front was very plain and fairly old-fashioned for its day. Only the central pedimental section, with its relief of the Blind Beggar of Bethnal Green and carved relief panels of foliage, in any way stood out.

The interior was rather different. Like its earlier neighbour, it contained a staircase and entrance hall of considerable lavishness which led up to mayor's and committee rooms and a council chamber of great elegance but treated in an altogether more fashionable style. On entering the building, one is met by an inlaid marble floor and marble-faced square columns, of a brown-grey variety, flanking an imperial staircase. The steps are of terrazzo while the stairs are lined with Travertine, with brass rails. The stairwell retains its moderne light fittings; above it is a circular skylight. The first floor landing is punctuated with pedimental door surrounds of (?) Hopton Wood stone, and the decorative marble floor is continued at this level.

The new Council Chamber is situated to the south east of the stair, and survives astonishingly well. The original seats with fitted desks, both sporting green leather upholstery, remain in their initial U-shaped arrangement while the dais along the east end of the room retains its chairs and screen, as well as the rusticated surround to the mayor's entrance. The mayoral throne features a relief of the borough's badge of the Blind Beggar of Bethnal Green. Opposite it is the public gallery with its tiers of benches. The whole room is panelled in Australian walnut which was also used to face the fronts of the desks with. The windows are enriched with heraldic panels of glass depicting the arms of Middlesex, of the City and other bodies. Photographs taken in 1939 show how little has changed.

Rooms 121-126 running along the north-eastern part of the extension contain the former committee rooms and mayor's room. They are distinguished by their veneer-lined walls and coffered ceilings. Rooms 121-124 are separated by their original folding doors, enabling larger or smaller spaces to be formed according to requirements, a common installation in town halls of the period. Room 125 was the former mayor's room and is therefore the most elaborately treated of all. Its walls are lined with mahogany and has a floor of teak. The fireplace has a moderne surround, topped with a bronze coloured mirror (perhaps not original), and flanked with glazed bookcases. Opposite the mayor's room is another room of stature with a marble chimney-piece. The committee rooms are similar in feel. Overall, these first floor rooms are very good examples of late 1930s interior decoration. They have a French Moderne feel to them, and would have been even finer had they retained their original furniture: this has, however, been sold.

The rest of the interior is of rather less interest. The building was unfinished at the time of its opening, and rooms 116-120 on the first floor (the rooms that connect the committee rooms with the former council chamber) are far plainer in finish and may well

have been completed at a slightly later date. Like most of the rooms on the ground floor, the second floor also has little of particular note.

### **Critical reception**

Little attention seems to have been paid to the new extension in the press: not surprising, perhaps, given that the war had begun. An article appeared in the Hackney Gazette for 1.xii.1939 which explained which parts of the council were housed where in the building. Pevsner, writing in 1952, described the earlier part as being 'in a flamboyant Edwardian Baroque' but Monson's extension was dismissed as 'weakly classical'. He evidently never visited the interior. In any case, such views are only to be expected from this quarter when confronted by such a building, and now carry no weight.

### **Subsequent History**

The outbreak of war postponed the construction of the public hall that was intended for the eastern part of the extension and it was never subsequently built. York Hall, built in 1926-27 for the Baths Committee of Bethnal Green was subsequently adapted for use as a public hall, and acquired a reputation for the boxing matches held there.

The town hall, even with its extension, became overcrowded. As noted above, the stage of the first council chamber was boxed in and used for offices and extra accommodation was even placed on the roof. There was discussion in 1979 about building an extension but that came to nothing. In the event, the town hall was sold in the early 1990s and the council removed to new quarters in Mulberry Place, selling their former quarters to a property company. The furniture was disposed of in 1993, and the building has remained empty ever since.

### **The Architects of the Town Hall**

PERCY ROBINSON and his assistant W. Alban Jones was based in Leeds. Born in 1868 and articled to G.W. Atkinson of Leeds, he set up his own practice in 1890 and was elected FRIBA in 1905. Winning the Bethnal Green Town Hall competition was something of a high point in his career, and prompted him to open a second office in London. By far the greatest part of his work was done for Yorkshire. This included Leeds Central Fire Station, the Leeds Union Children's Home, the Masonic Hall, Leeds, the Armley Public Library, the Forum Cinema, Leeds, and Doncaster Isolation Hospital. He also designed Hove Library, and the Corporation Kursaal at Douglas, Isle of Man. Robinson's practice was also extensively commercial. He died in 1950.

Edward Charles Philip MONSON (1871-1941) was one of the busiest of private architects engaged on municipal work in the 1930s. Born in Acton, he trained with his father and set up on his own in 1904, in which year he was elected FRIBA. He was responsible for almost thirty individual housing projects for Bethnal Green, Finsbury, Islington and Stepney as well as a number of lesser municipal buildings such as an electricity sub-station and a nursery for Islington. By far his most important works were two town halls: those of Islington and Bethnal Green. The former, opened in 1925, is also listed grade II. Monson was assisted by the borough engineer A.E. Darby, who had been single-handedly responsible for the design of the adjacent York Hall baths of 1926-27.

### **Context: town halls of the inter-war period**

The English Renaissance style was far and away the most popular one for Edwardian municipal buildings. Between the wars, a shift in taste first towards the Neo-classical, and then towards the Scandinavian- and Dutch-inspired modern style can be discerned. Bethnal Green Town Hall mirrors perfectly this broad development.

Albert Thomas's St Pancras (now Camden) Town Hall, opened in 1937, was old-fashioned in its allegiance to classicism. Thomas, a long-time assistant of Lutyens, designed a stone-fronted building planned around a large central marble-lined staircase, with the corridors and chambers lined in Georgian-inspired panelling. Stoke Newington Town Hall, designed by T. Reginald Truelove and also opened in 1937, was decorated internally with a thinner, rather conventional classical treatment. Far more opulent was Sir Edwin Cooper's St Marylebone Town Hall extension (completed 1940). Camberwell Town Hall was extensively rebuilt by Culpin and Bowers (opened 1934): like Bethnal Green's, the town hall retained the Edwardian council chamber but wrapped a new building around it that was designed in an elemental Roman style, a freer form of classicism that could be compared with Lanchester and Lodge's Hackney Town Hall (opened 1937) or with the Dudley Town Hall of 1935 by Harvey and Wicks. The West Sussex County Offices at Chichester, designed by county architect C.G. Stillman (opened in 1936), consisted of a conventional neo-Georgian exterior with a transitional Georgian-Moderne style interior. Monson's extension at Bethnal Green relates to this transitional phase of design, in its mixture of classicism without and modernity within.

Reginald Uren's Hornsey Town Hall was one of the most interesting of all London municipal buildings of the 1930s. Opened in 1935, its starkly geometrical brick exterior and sleek, pared down interior were influence strongly the last phase of inter-war town hall design, which manifested itself most strikingly in Culpin and Son's Greenwich Town Hall (opened 1939), and to a lesser extent in their Poplar Town Hall (opened in 1938). In all of these moderne town halls, one finds similar materials as those employed at Bethnal Green: travertine-lined staircases, veneer-clad committee rooms, decorative stone floors and contemporary-style light fittings. These survive very well at Bethnal Green, and the forthcoming RCHME survey of municipal buildings in London will reveal how rare -or otherwise- such survival now is. It is my suspicion that this interior is surprisingly intact and of high quality.

### **Assessment**

Bethnal Green Town Hall is a building of two distinct phases that makes an entity of considerable interest and quality. Its state of preservation is excellent virtually throughout, and the opulence of the internal fittings in the principal areas is impressive. Neither the Edwardian part by Robinson nor the interwar part by Monson are of especial originality. These were the two greatest phases in the design of municipal buildings this century, and the Bethnal Green example can be compared with a large number of others of this type. That said, it would be difficult to think of an instance that surpassed it in interest. Individually, a number from both periods may be regarded as more architecturally distinguished (Deptford, Woolwich or Lambeth from the Edwardian period, and Hornsey, Greenwich or St Marylebone from the interwar one) than Bethnal Green, but the latter, with its unsurpassed alliance of Baroque and Moderne interiors, remains an exceptional town hall building.

Its empty state is to be regretted for two reasons in particular. First, it is one of the principal buildings in this fairly down-trodden area and its abandonment by the local authority can be seen as an abnegation of civic involvement in Bethnal Green. Secondly, town halls are, by their nature, specialised buildings which were designed with specific functions in mind. Their internal fittings -in particular those of the council chamber(s) and the enfilade of committee rooms- do not lend themselves to alteration, sub-division or removal. There are numerous rooms within the building that are of no distinction whatsoever, including the whole of the second floor, rooms 116-120 on the first floor and many rooms on the ground floor. Most of the others, however, are rather more special.

In conclusion, Bethnal Green Town Hall is an impressive and unusual example of a grand municipal building. It combines highly characteristic examples of the two great phases of town hall building -the Edwardian and the 1930s- within one complex, and it survives remarkably well. The 1939 extension, particularly its interior, is of greater interest than has been recognised in the past and is in the main thoroughly deserving of wholesale retention.

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## Appendix: town halls erected in Greater London 1900-1939

An initial list, probably not complete, but which serves to indicate the number of municipal buildings erected within this period.

### Barking

Dagenham Civic Centre, 1936-37, E. Barry Webber grade II

### Barnet

Hendon Town Hall, 1900-01, T.H. Watson grade II  
Barnet Town Hall, 1939, Sir John Brown & A.E. Henson

### Brent

Wembley Town Hall, 1935-40, Clifford Strange grade II

### Bromley

Bromley Town Hall, 1906 and 1939, Atkinson/CC Voysey grade II  
Beckenham Town Hall, 1931-32, Lanchester and Lodge

### Camden

St Pancras Town Hall, 1937, Albert Thomas grade II  
Holborn Town Hall, 1906-08, Warwick & Hall grade II

### Ealing

Acton Town Hall, 1939, Cross & Leicester

### Greenwich

Woolwich Town Hall, 1903-06, A. Thomas grade II  
Greenwich Town Hall, 1939, Culpin & Son grade II

### Hackney

Hackney Town Hall, 1934-37, Lanchester & Lodge grade II  
Stoke Newington Town Hall, 1937, JR Truelove

### Hammersmith

Hammersmith Town Hall, 1938-39, E. Barry Webber grade II

### Haringey

Hornsey Town Hall, 1935, R Uren grade II\*  
Tottenham Town Hall, 1904-05, Taylor & Jemmett grade II

### Havering

Romford Town Hall, 1937, Collins & Green

### Hillingdon

Yiewsley Town Hall, 1930

<u>Islington</u> Islington Town Hall, 1925, ECP Monson	grade II
<u>Kensington &amp; Chelsea</u> Chelsea Town Hall, 1904-08, L. Stokes	grade II
<u>Kingston</u> Kingston Guildhall, 1934-35, M. Webb	
<u>Lambeth</u> Lambeth Town Hall, 1906-08, Warwick & Hall	grade II
<u>Lewisham</u> Lewisham Town Hall, 1931-32, Bradshaw, Gass & Hope Deptford Town Hall, 1902-07, Lanchester & Rickards	grade II grade II
<u>Merton</u> Wimbledon Town Hall, 1928-31, AJ Hope	grade II
<u>Newham</u> East Ham Town Hall, 1901-03, Cheers & Smith	grade II
<u>Redbridge</u> Ilford Town Hall, 1901 and 1927, Woollard/Reynolds	
<u>Southwark</u> Bermondsey municipal offices, 1928, H. Tansley Camberwell Town Hall, 1934, Culpin & Bowers	
<u>Sutton</u> Wallington Town Hall, 1935, R Atkinson Carshalton municipal offices, 1908, Atkinson & Gale	
<u>Tower Hamlets</u> St Anne's Limehouse Vestry hall, 1905, B Fletcher <b>Bethnal Green Town Hall, 1910 and 1939, Robinson/Monson</b> Poplar Town Hall, 1937, Culpin & Son	<b>II</b>
<u>Waltham Forest</u> Walthamstow Town Hall, 1937-42, PD Hepworth	grade II
<u>Wandsworth</u> Wandsworth Town Hall, 1935, EA Hunt	grade II
<u>Westminster</u> Marylebone Town Hall, 1912-39, E Cooper	grade II.

Wandsworth Town Hall, 1935, EA Hunt

grade II

Westminster

Marylebone Town Hall, 1912-39, E Cooper

grade II.