

MINERS' OFFICES, SALTERGATE, CHESTERFIELD, DERBYSHIRE

*A Report on the Historical and Architectural Interest of a
Purpose-Built Union Office Building, and
Recommendation for Listing*

by

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MINERS OFFICES, CHESTERFIELD, DERBYSHIRE

The building was turned down for listing in 1996; Mr Tony Benn, M.P. for Chesterfield, has asked that it be reconsidered. This short paper places the building in an historical context, and offers an assessment of its architectural qualities.

BACKGROUND HISTORY

Coal has been worked in Britain since at least the Roman period and has been an industry of major national importance since the 17th century; with a boost from the canals and railways in the 18th and early 19th centuries coal mining reached a peak just before the First World War. Derbyshire, along with Nottinghamshire and Yorkshire, was a highly productive coal mining centre, producing around 8 million tons in 1889¹. By 1906 nearly 17 million tons were being extracted from 176 mines employing 52,000 men in the process. Although in existence from the 18th century, associations of miners were subject to severe repression and unable to maintain a continuous existence; even the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union of 1833 collapsed after a year, following a series of strikes and lock-outs. After 1834 the work of organisation began anew with attention concentrated on building up stable unions in particular trades. The National Miners' Association founded in 1841 came to grief and it was not until the formation of the Trades Union Congress in 1868 that trade unions at length secured more definite legal recognition under the Trade Union Act of 1871.

The first permanent district miners' association to be formed was the Yorkshire Miners' Association in 1858, followed by Northumberland (1864), Durham (1869), Cleveland and Cumberland (both in 1872), and, in 1880, the Derbyshire Miners Association and the Nottinghamshire Miners Association were founded.² It is not known how many of these had purpose-built offices, although the earliest purpose-built Nottinghamshire office, (1900) at New Basford, survives but has recently been sold.

Most of these county unions struggled to keep wages from continually being cut and to avoid large-scale disputes. There was no permanent recovery of miners' wages during most of the 1880s. No district could stand alone against a tide of wage reductions and falling prices as the owners attempted to maintain revenues by increasing output. The eventual result was the foundation of the Miners Federation of Great Britain in 1889, which brought together most of the county organisations under one umbrella.

THE DERBYSHIRE MINERS' ASSOCIATION

The Derbyshire Miners' Association was founded in 1880 and members met, in their early years, in pubs and cafes such as 'The Falcon Cafe' in Low Pavement, Chesterfield. Such an arrangement was always intended to be temporary, and by the late 1880s, the Association needed more space and were anxious to fulfil their aim set out in the 1880

¹ Victoria County History of Derbyshire, p.356

² Historical Directories of Trade Unions, Vol.2 by Marsh and Ryan 1984, p.195

rules that:

'The general business of the Association shall be carried out at Chesterfield in the County of Derby where there shall be offices for that purpose.'³ The General Secretary of the Association, Mr James Haslam appointed a full-time Assistant Secretary in 1883 and advised: 'that the Association would do well to take into consideration the question of having an office where the books etc. can be kept, and where the secretaries can do their business.'⁴ In May 1889, the same year that the national Miners' Federation (forerunner of the National Union of Mineworkers) was founded, a Building Fund was established and fund-raising for new purpose-built premises began.

In order to encourage donations and waylay the fears of sceptics Haslam announced: 'It would be an ornament and pride to the Association and once built, could not possibly be a burden, as the rents for the secretaries' houses would meet taxes and repairs.' Funds were slow coming in, as miners questioned the need for a large outlay for the accommodation, and Haslam had to encourage further:

'What is your fear? There is no intention of using the union funds, we only want fairly-sized working men's houses, and a room in which to meet on Council days, with offices beneath the room. Look at it generously, men, we are paying £10 rent now.'⁵

Eventually land was bought in November 1891 for £400, and the trustees instructed to 'secure an architect and get on with the building of the offices at the earliest opportunity'. The contract was awarded late in 1892 to William Maule of Nottingham, with Rollinson and Sons as architects. The building was formally opened on Saturday 24 June, 1893, with many Liberal politicians in attendance. The architect handed a silver key to the Member for Chesterfield inscribed:

'This key was presented to Mr Thomas Bayley M.P., wherewith to open the hall and offices of the Derbyshire Miners' Association, 24 June, 1893.'

Soon afterwards, the Council of the union held their first meeting in the Saltergate building and congratulated officials and members 'on the successful rearing and opening of these beautiful and commodious premises'. They expressed the hope that they would be

'a rallying point for very many years; for an earnest and honest effort to further improve the condition of the miners of this county, a centre of influence and power to uphold the right and stamp out the wrong, a lighthouse to shed its benign rays where unionism is scarce and dark.'⁶

³ J.E. Williams *The Derbyshire Miners* p.260

⁴ Williams p.260

⁵ Williams p.261

⁶ Williams p.261

THE BUILDING

The building comprises offices and residential accommodation for the general secretary and administrators. It occupies a corner block where Saltergate conjoins with Clarence Road. It consists of linked, two-storey blocks of red brick buildings with slate roofs, in a simplified Flemish Renaissance style. Inside, there is an entrance hall with coloured and etched glass in the doors, a cast-iron radiator cover, stone staircase with wrought-iron balusters (all original), and a council chamber which was modernised in the 1950s with new wooden panelling. It is not an ostentatious edifice- deliberately so, as subscribers to the building fund were anxious about the possibility of 'wasting' precious union funds. The buildings cost only £2,000, about the same as a contemporary police station or a modest church.

The Chesterfield-based architects Rollinson and Sons, who designed the building, were 'prolific local architects responsible for many restorations and churches of the economical kind' (Pevsner, Derbyshire p.44). Christchurch, Sheffield Road, in the suburbs of Chesterfield, is a red brick church in the Early English style designed by S. Rollinson, 1869, with later aisle by his son, E.R.Rollinson. Nearby, St. Bartholomew, Church Street, North Whittington survives by E.R.Rollinson, 1896, (Pevsner, p 148). The firm altered the church of Holy Trinity, Newbold Road, Chesterfield where George Stephenson is buried.

It is not known how many other regional miners' union offices were built at this time: no comprehensive survey has been done. I have looked at the list descriptions of listed union buildings and scoured the contemporary building press for accounts of union buildings to provide a context for the Chesterfield offices. There are about half-a-dozen listed union buildings of which only three are purpose-built. These are the National Union of S.Yorks and N.Derbyshire Miners building in Victoria Road, Barnsley, 1874 by Wade and Turner (listed grade II); Burt Hall, Northumberland Road, Newcastle, 1895 by John Dyson for the Northumberland Miners' Association (grade II, with a description that specifically states 'listed for historical interest'); and the Durham Miners Association offices, Redhills Lane Durham, 1913-15, by H.T.Gradon, (grade II). The Barnsley offices and Burt Hall are perhaps of marginally more architectural interest than the Chesterfield offices, but the latter compares well.

The Durham Miners Association offices are later and of a higher architectural calibre. They are only one of two trade union buildings that featured in the national building press in the early years of the 20th century, presumably when membership was strong and funds were available for grander buildings. The other was the Lancashire and Cheshire Miners Federation Hall by Bradshaw, Gass and Hope of 1917. The former consists of hall and offices in a large composition of red brick with stone dressing. The double-height, domed hall accommodated 300 delegates and offices for various departments of the union. The building was 160 ft long- huge in comparison with Chesterfield- and included two pairs of semi-detached villa homes for officials. The cost was over £20,000, over ten times the cost of the Chesterfield offices, and was the last work of Durham architect H. T. Gradon, A.R.I.B.A.(1855-1915). The latter, in brick and stone, was the winning design in a competition. It is not listed. Both are of higher architectural quality than Saltergate. Illustrations of these buildings are appended.

CONCLUSION

The Chesterfield Miners' Offices appear to be one of the earliest surviving purpose-built union offices and a symbol, in built form, of the importance of mining in Derbyshire. Its subdued Flemish Renaissance style aims to achieve a balance between pride and prudence; there was no desire to spend hard-earned members' wages on architectural embellishment. The style expresses a desire to be associated with a secular, publicly-funded, *progressive* image used, for example, by the early London Board Schools; it was a deliberate departure from the religious overtones of the Gothic style. Saltergate is a survival of a rare building type; buildings of a comparable civic presence such as club buildings, church meeting halls, schools and libraries have a much wider number of examples from which to select the best. The building has an equally strong historic interest as the listed statues of W.E. Harvey and Haslam, local MP and founder of the union, which were unveiled in 1915. It was for many years the focus of the Derbyshire mining community, and is of historic significance, not only for the people of Chesterfield but also for the history of industrial mining, trade union organisation and the history of the labour forces whose efforts created so much wealth for this country. Working class buildings such as recreation halls and billiard halls of similar architectural merit and comparable social-historical importance to the Chesterfield offices have been listed in the past, (Livesay Hall, Bell Green, Lewisham and the Disinfecting Station, Northfields Road, Hackney are recent examples). The Monuments Protection Programme recommend 41 new candidates for listing, including structures such as Pistern Hill Engine House and the Siddal Old Hall in Derbyshire, as a result of their survey of the coal industry. This survey does not appear to have included union buildings:

'such features lie beyond the scope of this report and scheduling will not be the appropriate form of protection; their importance for the social history of England should nevertheless be recognised and appropriate strategies developed.'⁷

RECOMMENDATION

For the reasons listed above I urge that this building be added to the national statutory list at grade II and suggest the following list description:

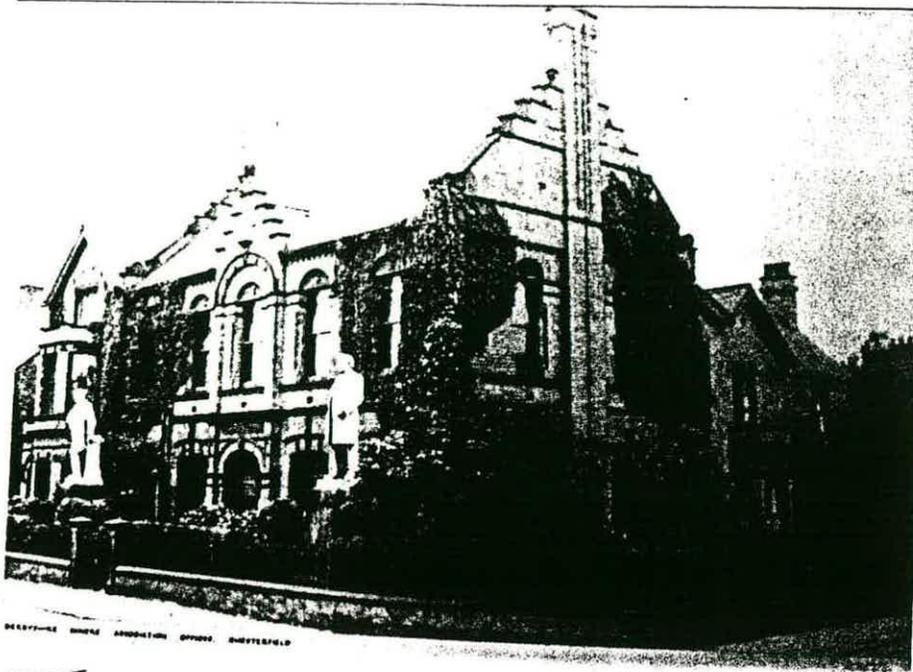
Trade Union Offices and house for the Derbyshire Miners Association. 1893, Rollinson and Sons of Chesterfield. Red brick with stone dressing, Welsh slate roofs, single pitch with gable ends. Main block fronting Saltergate: five bays wide with later extension, with double-height canted bay window. Central projecting entrance bay with stepped gable in the Flemish Renaissance style. Top storey: round-headed windows with stone spandrels; flatter arches to windows on ground floor. Elevation to Clarence Road : 2 windows on second floor, either side of the projecting chimney stack with corbelled base; single window on right of stack on ground floor. To right, two-storey lean-to link with house, with central entrance and canted bay to left, square bay to right.

⁷ Monuments Protection Programme, The Coal Industry by Gould and Cranstone, Feb. 1992 p.35

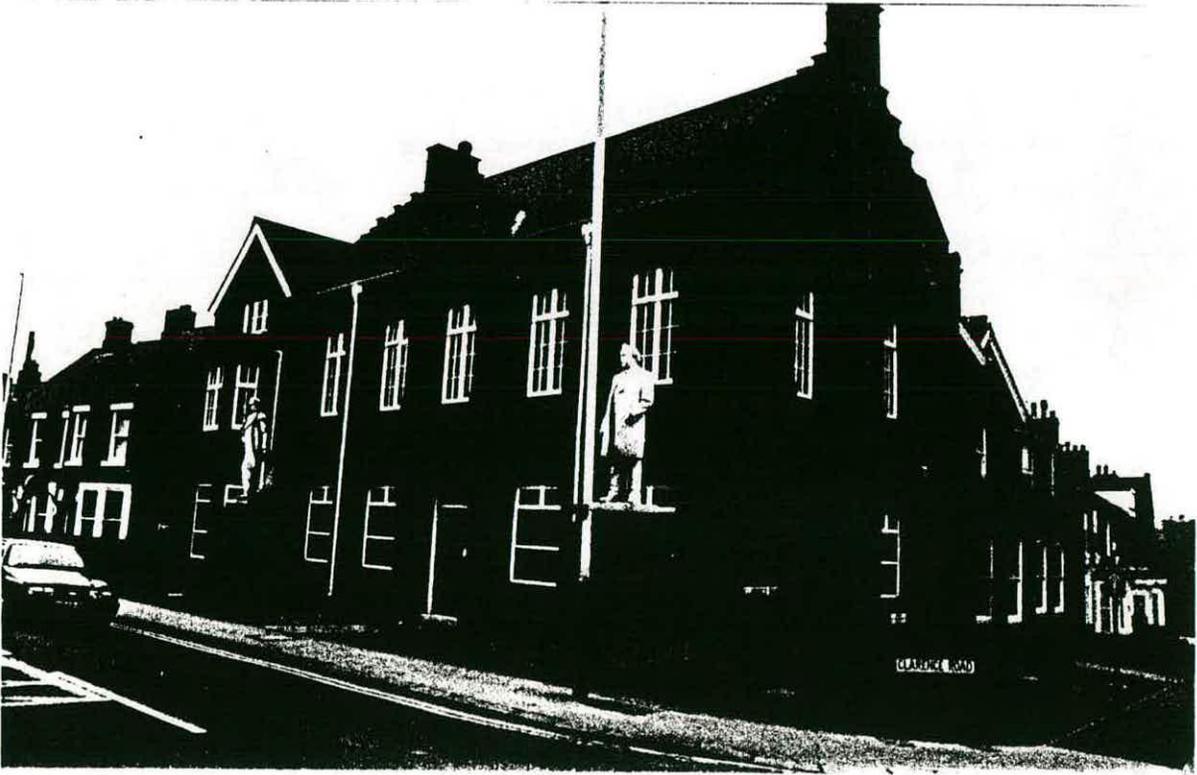
Interior: Entrance hall: doors with coloured glass and etched glass; stone staircase with wrought-iron balusters and cast-iron radiator housing. Council chamber with panelling and seating, and plaque encribed 'NUM Derbyshire area' and relief of miner at work, installed in 1955.

Listed for historical interest with the statues of Haslam and Harvey (q.v.) outside.

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