

The Face of Central Manchester:

Architecture in a Victorian City

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Victorian Manchester was a city of astonishing architectural vitality and variety, the product of great wealth placed in the hands of exuberant architects by ambitious clients and quite undisciplined by any attempt at overall urban planning. Two books have recently appeared that remind us of the richness and diversity of the city's architectural heritage: This article is intended, in a rather loose sense, as a review of their content and argument, treated as a perhaps rather unusual perspective on the evolution of the commercial and civic core of the city. Both books are magnificent in their production and presentation of their topics. *Art and Architecture in Victorian Manchester* is a collection of expert essays contributed by a distinguished group of authors under the able and sensitive editorship of John Archer. No-one who has not yet read it can claim to understand the Manchester of that golden age just dawning as Victoria was crowned and which was destined out-last her only rather briefly. *Thomas Worthington: Victorian Architecture and Social Purpose* by A J Pass is a development from a briefer study in Archer's book: beautifully produced to a large format that so suits its subject, it is clearly destined to become a collector's piece and indeed was first published in limited edition. Both volumes are superbly illustrated with a mass of contemporary as well as modern material.

We needed these two books to remind us of the splendour of our city's heritage of buildings of great distinction in almost infinite variety. Many of us had forgotten, or more accurately had become unaware through thoughtless familiarity, how rich the urban fabric of the city is. The streets of Manchester can be appreciated only by the uplifted eye, preferably one feeding its images to a mind at least part-educated in the subject. Read these books and re-tread the streets of the familiar city looking upwards to get a fuller perspective and a new Manchester is revealed. At least this was the present author's experience. Most of us see a familiar city only at ground level, where most of what is tawdry is uninvitingly concentrated. To lift up ones eyes to the full facade, and to jockey for position to see the fine detail is to turn dull streets into architectural displays. One would automatically do this in Paris or Florence: why not in Manchester? How many passing by in Oxford Street look skywards to observe the fine Roman lantern atop St James's House, doubtless masking mundane building services? Very few, for it is scarcely visible from street level. Here as elsewhere Central Manchester lacks vistas and broader perspectives. From the platforms of Oxford Road Station not only this splendid feature but a near twin crowning the southern angle of the nearby Refuge Assurance Building are much more clearly displayed. Why two such structures so close together? Was there deliberate imitation? Both buildings are part of a Fin-de-Siècle group of ornate

office blocks (the Tootall building is another) that invaded Oxford Road to mark the ultimate southwards extension of the Manchester central business district.

Crowding and congestion dull the impact of Manchester's finest architecture: many of the gems are half-hidden in dross. Buildings of distinction were obscured as adjacent plots became occupied by much plainer neighbours. Others, from the first, were put on to cramped and mean sites, in which their qualities were masked. The classic case is that of Ryland's Library on Deansgate, of which only the frontage was exposed until clearance opened a south-west prospect of this fine piece of academic Gothic in warm sandstone. But all this was the nature of 19th century Manchester. The urban economy roared along, dampened only briefly by recessions. Space was at a premium. Site values escalated. Plots were cleared for redevelopment to the very limits of their capacity. Rarely was open space ever left. Nor, in this city of free-trade, was there ever any serious attempt at urban planning or intervention in the free market in land, at least until very late. Victorian Manchester was a city almost without squares or open plazas: Albert Square was the one exception, the setting for the new Town Hall of c 1870. Piccadilly is the creation almost of accidents, the removal of the infirmary to the present site and the destruction by blitz of a range of warehouses on its west side in 1940. Elsewhere every square yard of urban land was put to hard revenue - earning uses, and so buildings of high distinction were put on sites that made them half invisible.

What both books make clear is how quickly central Manchester was built: the golden age in an architectural sense opened in the late 1840's and the city had assumed essentially its modern form and fabric (apart from post 1945 redevelopment) by c 1900. Much of it was the product of a single generation of talented young architects whose practices matured in the city. The Manchester to which they offered their services was ripe for an architectural revolution. Except for churches it was almost devoid of buildings of size or grace. The urban landscape of the 1820's is portrayed in detail in a series of prints by Ralston and James (brought together by A. Brothers in his *Old Manchester: A Series of Views*, of 1875). The evidence is clear that here was a bustling commercial city made up of the vernacular buildings of a small town. Even the main business streets, like Market Street, were composed of ramshackle houses and inns, brick or timber framed the former converted to shops at street level. Along Mosley Street and Portland Street were more impressive Georgian terraces of the well-to-do (soon to be converted to business uses) and St Ann's Square had some dignity; but buildings of any pretensions were few. A Town Hall was about to be built on King Street, but it was cramped and inadequate behind its classical facade, and had a short life before conversion to a Reference Library. The Exchange had been built and re-built facing Market Place, and Assembly Rooms and a Concert Hall now graced the Mosley Street area. These were exceptions: mostly the city consisted of buildings on a domestic scale, increasingly converted to business use as the needs of commerce grew with frantic speed. Business families still lived 'over the shop' or – in the case of the banker whose fine house survives on King Street – alongside his own banking Annex. Worthington got

good advice when he was urged, in 1849, to set up practice not in London but in Manchester; though by then the city had begun to be transformed. Buildings of distinction had begun to appear, and it seemed almost mandatory that in the pre-Victorian city they should be classical in style. This was true of the New Exchange, of the delicate Greek revival of the Portico Library of 1802-6, and most magnificently of Barry's Royal Manchester Institution (1824-35) now the Art Gallery. Thereafter classical styles went into almost complete eclipse in the city as Italianate and neo-Gothic competed for dominance. But one of the finest gems of Greek inspiration was still to come, C. R. Cockerell's Bank of England on King Street. The style suited the function, for banks and temples are broadly similar in their need for unobstructed interior space to accommodate the performance of complex rituals..

Sector and Style

By 1850 Manchester's commercial core had developed many essentially modern qualities, or not least in the emergence of distinct sectors dominated by particular functions. Retailing was already concentrated on Market Street, Deansgate and St Ann's Square. A financial and professional quarter was quickly spreading from King Street to colonise what had been Manchester's residential 'west end'. A broad sweep of the city from east of Market Street round the south side of the core and along the Portland Street axis was dominated by the offices and warehouses of the great cotton manufacturers and merchants. Though the textile companies at first converted houses in the older streets of the town, by the 1840's the scale of the trade was demanding new purpose-built structures on larger sites especially on or near Portland Street, close to the old canal and new railway terminals. It was in this warehousing district that the relationship between urban function and architectural form was (and remains) most clearly demonstrated.

Archer's book reviews the development of a most distinctive style of building which remains to this day the chief monument to the city's Victorian prosperity, the warehouse-palazzo. What should a great warehouse look like? These great and wealthy firms wanted symbols of their commercial success, to impress and welcome clients. Classical styles were tried briefly but proved inflexible and inappropriate. A model was soon provided. Barry's Athenaeum of 1830-39 marked the first use of Renaissance style in Manchester, in almost a simpler version of his later London Reform Club. Here was a flexible style that could be made to fit the needs of the 4 or 5-floor office-warehouse. It imposed no limits on size: it offered a vocabulary of forms that permitted endless variation and lent itself to contrasts of brick and stone to give a polychrome effect. It was easily married to an iron-framed fireproof structure borrowed from mill architecture. Now the Manchester merchant could have a Venetian Palace as his place of business (and most young architects had sketched the originals on their grand tours). Edward Walters and J. E. Gregan became masters of the genre. Portland Street, Mosley Street and the lesser streets close by sprouted palazzi in impressive array. Two of the finest are now converted to hotels. Many others survive, now chiefly in office uses. Walters built a fine unbroken frontage along Charlotte Street. The style proved attractive to other

SECTION OF
SLATER'S MAP
c. 1970



clients. Gregan designed Heywood's bank on St Ann's Square, while Walter's bank on Mosley Street (now the Royal Bank of Scotland) is an especially massive example. The Free Trade hall (Walters) is another fine example, like so many Manchester buildings almost invisible on its cramped site.

The very close association between an architectural style and an urban function in the palazzo-warehouse district gradually weakened. Many later examples were for banks and offices in the financial quarter round King Street. Conversely, later warehouse-office structures for the textile firms became even more massive and ornate, and now tended towards the extravagances of the Baroque. This is conspicuously true of the end-of-century and Edwardian group along Whitworth Street and nearby Oxford Road. These terra cotta ornamented structures with their undisciplined medley of architectural features (of which the 'Refuge' is the most flamboyant) marked the ultimate extension southwards of the Manchester central business district, stopped short by the viaduct of the Altrincham railway. They were, too, the last great monuments of the textile industry, soon to begin its decline.

Financial Manchester never matched the architectural homogeneity of the warehouse quarter. King Street was always, and remains, a medley of styles, now with modern intrusions. In this area finance and the professions mingle, and the small firms of the latter were content to convert houses, many of which survive in the side streets. For a time the palazzo was in favour, and replaced small old property: some examples are quoted above. But once the great Gothic pile of Waterhouse's new Town Hall was in place, so this new style came strongly into vogue, in many ornate, decorated and turreted variants. Offices came to resemble little urban castles or the chapels of the high Middle Ages. The Law Library is worth more than a passing glance, as are the buildings on both east and west frontages of Albert Square. Indeed, the closer one gets to the Town Hall, the stronger and richer the Gothic flavour of these streets. But prime sites in and near the financial quarter were vulnerable to renewal, and soon the combination of lift and steel frame made great height possible. Thus Ship Canal House towers over its neighbours, while on Deansgate Joseph Sunlight's semi-skyscraper reared its ungainly bulk, and a new age was clearly dawning.

Civic Pride Paraded

The great 'Battle of the Styles' in which the most spirited engagement was Palmerston's flat rejection of Scott's Gothic design for the Foreign Office, was swiftly resolved in Manchester. With two such gifted exponents of neo-Gothic active in the city, Worthington and Waterhouse, the issue was never in doubt; and indeed Italianate influences had had a good run. Now in this aspiring city soaring vertical lines replaced measured horizontals. For public buildings and increasingly for the rapidly multiplying offices, Gothic reigned supreme. The sub-contest, between the two masters of the new style, was also soon decided, for Waterhouse prevailed in a succession of major competitions over his friend and rival Worthing-

ton. Both tried, in 1859, for new Assize Courts at Strangeways. Waterhouse won: this first of his masterpieces was devastated in 1940. The victory was repeated when the city decided to build a new Town Hall. John Archer reviews what was an heroic architectural competition in a scholarly and superbly illustrated chapter. Waterhouse won only by a whisker (or should it be a finial) in the second stage of the contest but many believed that Worthington's composition had the artistic edge. In the whole of the Town Hall–Albert Square project the city paid for its tardiness in creating the sort of civic plaza that others possessed. The Town Hall site was a difficult truncated triangle, formerly the town's yard. Albert Square was cut from a warren of mean streets and shoddy buildings. It gave a site to Worthington's Albert Memorial, which ever since has looked rather enviously across the square at his rival's municipal palace. But Worthington's Memorial Hall (intact but converted) on the west of the square is a building of great beauty.

As the Gothic revival progressed Waterhouse imposed his primacy. He built the original Owens College on its new site (1872), the first in a group of quite magnificent structures in honey-coloured gritstone, finally completed by the Museum and Whitworth Hall to form perhaps England's finest neo-Gothic group around the Old Quadrangle (and far more attractive than some of the duller, later colleges in our older Universities to which tourists resort in their thousands). Worthington had to be content with a lesser academic project, Nicholls' Hospital School in Ardwick, lately cleaned to reveal its full splendour in polychrome buff sandstone, russet brick and blue slate. It echoes a slightly earlier Worthington building, to many his masterpiece, the Police and Sessions Courts in Minshull Street (1867-73). Here yellow stone and orange brick rise to a turretted tower: but the confined site in an out of the way corner of the city, even today, masks the full effect of a most attractive building of which most Mancunians are probably quite unaware. It was astonishingly advanced in technical design. Warm-air central heating kept the feet of the Bench cosy but left their heads cool. Each cell had its wash-basin and water-closet. (All this in 1867). A tower, half-campanile, half minaret, conceals the flue behind extravagant ornament and machicolations. Manchester is a city of beautiful chimneys cunningly concealed in function but boldly displayed as design features. Is this the finest or is the University's slender Gothic spire more graceful?

Social Need

Architectural virtuosity was not confined to serving the need for new commercial and civic buildings in the city centre as unashamed symbols of wealth and prestige. The infant system of local government was now creating or encouraging a first system of community provision in the form of baths, wash-houses, work-houses for the destitute and their associated poor-law hospitals. Thus was created the architecture of social purpose which is the sub-title of Pass's book and in which Worthington became an undoubted leader. He designed 3 complexes of pools, baths and wash-houses, at Greengate, Salford (extant but derelict) at Mayfield and at

Hulme (both demolished) between 1856 and 1860. His designs became something of a national model. Greengate had two galleried pools behind an Italianate facade. Mayfield and Hulme were yet more elaborate. Bathing Romans never had it quite so good as the erstwhile Manchester unwashed. The French bought the Hulme plans for application in Paris. All this was achieved through a philanthropic public company later taken over by the city. Hospitals, too, were a field of pioneer development for Worthington, as A. J. Pass recounts in some detail. No-one quite knew, in 1860, what a modern hospital should look like, though Florence Nightingale had strong views frequently voiced. The Chorlton (Poor Law) Union was to set a national model by commissioning Worthington to design a new Workhouse Infirmary. This was on the pavilion principle: there were five two-storey pavilions joined by a corridor and separated by garden courts, on a leafy site 4 miles south of the city. The poor were treated in an environment incomparably better than the better-off in the Piccadilly Infirmary. The project was built within its very modest cost-estimates and received Miss Nightingale's full approval. It survives in use as part of Withington Hospital. So do later designs for Crumpsall, Liverpool, Wigan, Halifax and Harrogate. Pass carefully elucidates the philosophical origins of this architecture of social purpose, for which Manchester was a seedbed. It can be traced to the first stirrings of a social and civic conscience among the wealthy but compassionate of the town, drawn particularly from the Unitarian community and expressed through the 'Lit and Phil' and after 1833 through the Manchester Statistical Society. The Journal of the latter published analyses of social problems that not only touched off reformist campaigns but showed also that a new social science was in process of formation as part of the extraordinary creative energy of this new city.

New Forms, New Functions

Neither of these fine books pretends to be a definitive architectural history of the city, and so both leave themes for later authors to explore. One of these is the new functionalism that came to take its place beside the Classical, the changing Italianate and the triumphant Gothic. Quite new needs were calling into being entirely novel building forms, later in the century. Railway termini were the classic cases, but Manchester was ill-served by the early companies, at least in the architectural sense. London Road was always divided between two companies, who vied with each other in drabness and squalor prior to modernisation as 'Piccadilly'. The old Exchange Station had at least an Italianate facade and a fine approach. Victoria was mundane until its handsome rebuilding in 1905-9. The great glass train-shed of Central was the chief glory of Manchester's railways, but even this was grossly flawed by a ramshackle set of timber buildings, meant to be temporary but which lasted until the station's conversion into the GMEX centre. These dismal hutments stood in stark contrast with the Midland Hotel opposite, an extravaganza of terra cotta, glazed brick and polished granite, itself an expression of the new need to surround the business visitor to the city with the trappings of opulence and luxury. Department stores set another new design problem: the

symbols of Manchester's dominant role in the regional retail system, they initially borrowed the building technology of the iron- framed mill. For a survival of the style one has to travel to Macclesfield to admire the spidery elegance of Arighi Bianchi's perfectly preserved furniture emporium.

There is another theme that neither Pass nor Archer take up in a sustained way, the growing diversity of building materials employed to give colour and texture, admittedly late in or after the Victorian heyday. I. M. Simpson and F. M. Broadhurst have covered this, in their *Building Stones Guide to Central Manchester*, another invaluable companion to the fabric of the city. Early buildings were of vernacular materials, even the grandest. Collyhurst Sandstone of the local Permian was used for St Ann's Church, an attractive but not a durable stone, so that the walls are now a patchwork of repair. The softness of the New Red Sandstones limited their use: one of the few significant exceptions is the Rylands Library, in the rich red of Cumbrian stone from St Bees. As the city grew and its canal net penetrated the Pennines tough sandstones of Millstone Grit age became more cheaply available, and were soon the dominant material where funds permitted the use of stone. An early example was the Royal Manchester Institution, begun in Lancashire stone but finished in a Yorkshire variant. This was the standard material of the grander palazzi, for example the warehouses of Portland Street and the banks of Mosley Street. The Town Hall, too, is gritstone, from quarries near Leeds.

Up to perhaps 1870 Manchester's fabric was either local brick of superb quality or stone of Pennine provenance, strong grey/fawn stuff, rugged and massive. But as the Gothic style took hold architects searched more widely for decorative materials suited to the ornamentation of the new style. Granite from many sources was employed in columns and pillars, for flooring and entrances. The Town Hall has its three circular stairways, the English, Scottish and Irish, in granites from each of these three sources. By the end of the century Shap granite, its pink crystalline surface polished like a mirror, was being used in massive structural applications, for example the lower floors of the Midland Hotel. But by then Portland Stone was in the ascendancy. An early limited use was in the Bank of England branch, but many of the office blocks presented their Baroque stylist extravagance in facades either of terra cotta or of Portland Stone. Thus stone interacted with style to make even richer the variety of the Manchester street scene: both expressed rock-solid commercial prosperity, as durable as the structures themselves. Yet when the Royal Exchange was rebuilt and extended, again in gritstones, its opening in 1921 was to mark the zenith of the city's fortunes. As depression corroded the textile-based prosperity a very different Manchester emerged by 1930.

The commercial core of any great city expresses itself in many different ways and may be studied from a variety of perspectives. The central functions that it houses – retailing, finance, civic and business administration, entertainment, culture – jostle each other as rivals for space, competing for occupancy of the highest valued land in the urban system. Each scarce acre has crammed upon it as

much revenue-generating space as it can contain or the planners will allow. Building heights are greatest here, open space severely limited, car parking a constant problem: traffic movement is congested, pedestrian flows intense. The classic geographical view of the CBD has been as a space-use system, pressured, dynamic, constantly evolving. But to define, dissect and explain causal process in the city core is not to describe it. There is the visual perspective to be explored, the architect's view. This marries form to function: it shows that the shape of the urban fabric reflects a myriad decisions taken between developer-clients and their architects, in which the functional requirements of the former, driven by the economics of urban space, are interpreted stylistically by the latter. This is merely to re-state the truism that cities are created by investment: the urban capital that is the city wears a diversity of faces, each reflecting an historical process in which functional imperatives interact with stylistic pre-occupations. What the two books that have provoked this piece remind us is that the geographer's view of the city is incomplete without a visual dimension.

Art and Architecture in Victorian Manchester (Ed. J. H. Archer) is published by the Manchester University Press and *Thomas Worthington: Victorian Architecture and Social Purpose* (A. J. Pass) by the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society.