

A Brief Architectural History of Wembley (later Brent) Town Hall

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In 1934, Kingsbury Urban District was re-amalgamated with Wembley Urban District. In the same year Wembley decided to centralise their offices. They bought a 5¼ acre site for a new Town Hall at 'The Paddocks', Forty Lane. This was in Kingsbury, but conveniently near Wembley Park station.

A Town Hall Committee was set up and an architectural competition was held, with Stanley H. Hamp as sole assessor. The winning architect was Clifford Strange, who was 33 at the start of the project. The Wembley commission enabled Strange to set up on his own.

Strange had worked for T.S. Tait from 1925-1935. Tait was influenced by the Dutch architect Willem Marinus Dudok (1884-1974), who had designed Hilversum Town Hall in the Netherlands. (A version of this had been planned as early as 1917 but was built much later, between 1928 and 1931). Strange followed Tait in imitating Dudok. Two other architects who were heavily influenced by Dudok were Charles Holden and Frank Pick, who designed modern Underground stations for London Transport.

Dudok was a modern architect but, unlike many Continental Modernists, he used brick, a traditional material, rather than reinforced concrete. He also shunned functionalism. This made him very popular with British architects, as they were more used to using brick than concrete and had more conservative patrons. (Wembley Council in particular may have had its fill of concrete buildings after the British Empire Exhibition!).

Most British town halls of the period were less innovative than Wembley's. For example most had an internal courtyard - Wembley did not. Its immediate inspiration was Hornsey Town Hall in Crouch End, where the architect R.H. Uren had merged 'Georgian', Dutch and Scandinavian influences. Wembley committee members inspected the Hornsey building, which had just been completed, and then discussed what they had seen. This led to delays, changes and higher costs.

To fund the building of the new Town Hall, Wembley Council had to apply for a loan of £160,000. The decision to do this was very controversial. The loan needed to be sanctioned and there had to be a public enquiry. Much of the opposition concerned a proposed Great Hall (also called the Assembly Hall), able to seat 1,200 people. Opponents said that if built it would be called "Wembley's Folly".

The Great Hall was included in the final design, but a proposed fire station was abandoned. The building was however fitted with a bomb-proof first-aid post.

Changes in the design made room for improved landscaping. Strange's more fussy, Tait-inspired details were omitted, improving the appearance.

The building has an asymmetrical plan with an off-centre main entrance. It is effectively an asymmetric 'T' with the bar, the 350' main frontage of the building, longer than the stem. This design enables offices, library and Great Hall to be separate yet all easily accessible from the main stairs.

The Town Hall is built of Lincolnshire bricks. Much of the building has a steel frame. Internal glass screens give a sense of light and space, while the warm veneered wood is more old-fashioned.

The seating in the elegant semi-circular Council Chamber was, and remains, traditional, unlike the individual loose chairs in a Continental Modernist town hall. This is another example of a British compromise with Modernism. Wembley Town Hall is unique in portraying the conflict between tradition and modernity, and the British solution to it. In addition to the Council Chamber the building has three committee rooms.

In 1937 Wembley became a Borough. The Mayor-designate, George Titus Barham, sadly died on the day the charter was sealed. Work on the Town Hall started on Saturday, 9th October 1937, a week after Incorporation. Cllr Gauntlett, Chair of the Town Hall Committee, laid the foundation stone. The building was completed in 1940.

Writing in 1951, the architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner described the Wembley Town Hall as "the best of the modern town halls around London, neither fanciful nor drab". In his view the Great Hall is "airy and sensible". Local historian and former Mayor of Brent Len Snow calls the Town Hall "a modern, clean-lined building". Some Wembley people were less impressed, calling the structure 'the barracks' or 'the factory'.

The mid-late 1940s twice saw the Town Hall become the focus for major celebrations. Shortly after VE Day over 1,000 people danced in the Great Hall and on the forecourt outside, while three years later the 1948 Olympics saw the entrance to the building decorated with Olympic rings.

In 1964 Wembley was combined with Willesden to form the new Borough of Brent. Being both modern and large Wembley Town Hall became the new Brent Town Hall and the Victorian Willesden Town Hall was demolished. Brent Town Hall's location also made political sense as it was pretty much at the junction of the three old Urban Districts of Wembley,

Kingsbury and Willesden. Despite the proximity of the Underground its position has however proved a problem, as it is too far from any of the main population centres in Brent. It is also not large enough for all its staff. Architecturally speaking, various additions, both inside and out, now detract from the simplicity of the original design.

Several photographs of the building are kept by Brent Archives at Willesden Green Library Centre, 95 High Road, Willesden Green, London NW10 2SF. Three, including an excellent aerial view that makes clear the asymmetric design, are reproduced in Adam Spencer - *Britain In Old Photographs: Wembley & Kingsbury* (Alan Sutton, 1995). The best single account of the building of the Town Hall is in Geoffrey Hewlett (ed.) – *A History of Wembley* (Brent Library Service, 1979). For more on W.M. Dudok visit www.hilversum.nl, which contains a great deal of detail (in Dutch!) on Hilversum Raadhuis, or www.archinform.de/arch/20.htm, which gives a brief biography of Dudok (in German), together with a list of his buildings.