

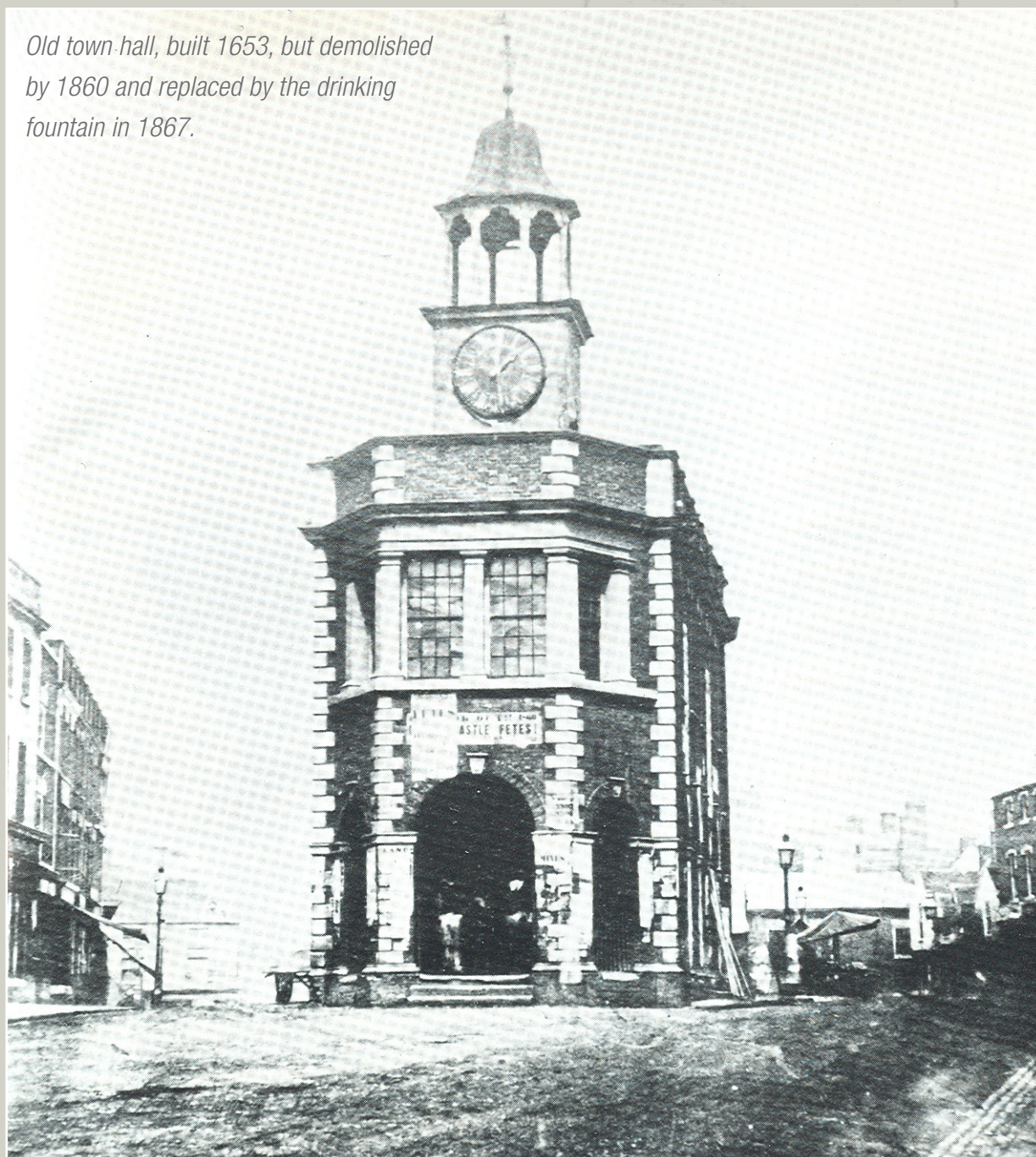
DUDLEY TOWN HALL

HERITAGE OPEN DAY



DUDLEY'S FORMER TOWN HALLS

The town hall in the modern sense of the term, as a centre of local government combining civic and administrative functions, is largely a creation of the nineteenth century. With the exception of London, no medieval English town possessed a town or guild hall on the scale of those of Italy, the Low Countries or Northern Germany. English town halls were small, often sharing accommodation with guilds, law courts and more frequently, markets. The classic form - a first floor meeting room for town officials, raised on arcades, incorporating an open-sided market hall on the ground floor often on an island site - was remarkably long-lived.



Old town hall, built 1653, but demolished by 1860 and replaced by the drinking fountain in 1867.

The old town hall, built in 1653 within the market place, followed this form, with an open ground floor with arches and a room (or rooms) on the second floor, and with a clock tower and a cupola. The town hall was used as an indoor market on the ground floor and as a meeting room on the first floor. It remained the centre of public activity into the mid 19th century.

After the introduction of the Metropolitan Police Force in London in 1829 and the instructions of every borough to organise a salaried police force in an Act of 1839, a police force came to Dudley. Their base was the old town hall until a new police station was built in 1847. By 1850, it was felt by the town commissioners that the old town hall had served its purpose

and was being used for unsavoury behaviour and it was decided that the building should go - the drinking fountain stands on the site. A new town hall was built in 1858 in Priory Street in a Gothic style, in keeping with the police station next door.

Ground Floor

MEMORIAL TOWER

ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY OF TODAY'S TOWN HALL



Photograph showing town hall of 1858 in centre next to the Old Police Buildings and the map of 1903 showing the buildings on the island site prior to the building of the new town hall complex in the 1920s.

The new town hall, museum and coroner's court, were built in memory of Brooke Robinson and his wife, Eugenia. Robinson was a prominent local solicitor, who had served as the borough coroner and also as the town's MP for four parliaments.

The town hall is part of a group of civic buildings, which also includes the coroner's court, museum room and the former magistrates' court and memorial tower. They were designed by Harvey and Wicks, following an open competition for the new public buildings which attracted 55 entrants.

Alexander Harvey came to prominence as the architect involved in the design of the Bournville village for George Cadbury. In 1903, he left the company and set up in practice on his own and later took on his nephew, H Graham Wicks as a partner. The work on the town hall led to the award of an RIBA medal and diploma in 1934 and to a further commission to build a new council house on the other side of the police buildings, started in 1935.

The competition brief had stipulated a design that should blend with the neighbouring police buildings. The initial design drawn up by Harvey and Wicks and shown in *The Builder* in January 1924 was consistently Tudor Gothic in style, with a battlemented parapet which blended with the appearance of the police building. The decision to erect a new police headquarters elsewhere in the town and to adapt or demolish the former buildings meant that plans evolved and a more complex synthesis of various styles was drawn up.



The buildings were constructed between 1924 and 1928, adjacent to earlier municipal buildings occupying the rectangular site bounded by Priory Road, Priory Street and St James's Road which include the police buildings (designed in 1847 by Harvey Eginton of Worcester) and the library buildings facing onto St James's Road (designed by G H Wenyon and opened in 1908).

Left: Dudley library prior to the construction of the town hall buildings.

Ground Floor

MEMORIAL
TOWER

EXTERIOR

The town hall has five bays to the street front, the three central bays being closely grouped. At ground level there are three central arches, approached by a flight of steps. These have arches and cable mouldings to the outer edge of their surrounds. The arches lead to a covered lobby and have wrought iron gates and grilles with the date '1928' to each surmount. At either side of these are set plain, two-light mullioned windows, lighting cloakrooms.

To the first floor are mullioned and transomed windows which light the banqueting room. The central window has a projecting stone balcony incorporating a memorial tablet which records the gift of the hall and museum to the town by Brooke and Eugenia Robinson.



To either side of this window are barley-twist columns which rise to flame finials at either side of an overthrow with pointed arch which has the coat of arms of Dudley to the tympanum in relief. This rises up into the area of the second floor, which is blank, except for a lattice pattern of blue brick diapering in the red brick walls.

The patterned walling, together with the balcony and arched entrances, give the building façade the air of a Venetian building, which adapts and blends with the theme of Italian architecture in the adjacent public library of 1908, designed in an Edwardian Baroque style.



Above: RIBA plaque situated on Priory Street elevation of Coroner's Court.

Ground Floor

MEMORIAL TOWER

INTERIOR

The town hall also has an impressive set of interiors, retaining as it does its internal plan and all of its original decoration.

The town hall has an outer lobby with iron gates to the street and an inner crush hall allowing access to the staircases which lead to the balcony and restaurant. The hall itself has a stage with a proscenium arch at its north-east end and a balcony to the south-west with its original tiered seating. There are six bays of windows with spiral twist columns to each side, supporting an overthrow. Set between them are large brackets supporting ribs which stretch across the segmental barrel vault. Large brackets set between the window bays support deep ribs which have lattice decoration.

Roundels to the centre of the ceiling in each bay are similarly decorated. Each window has barley-twist columns to either side supporting an overthrow and to the bottom are miniature balconies which house up-lighters. The balcony front has similar twisted columns set in pairs and is approached by a pair of stone staircases with bronze handrails. The lower walls of the hall are panelled.



On the back wall of the stage is a mural by Hans Feibusch, dated 1948, showing a medieval scene of Roger de Somery stag hunting in Kinver Forest. The mural is regarded as one of his best works and is referred to in his entry in the Dictionary of National Biography as a 'notable work'.

(Top left and right) Architectural detailing inside Dudley town hall.

(Above) Hans Feibusch mural.

Ground Floor

MEMORIAL TOWER

THE LISTING OF THE BUILDINGS

The group of buildings were listed in 2010 at Grade II*, being considered particularly important buildings of more than special interest. Only 5.8% of listed buildings are of Grade II* status.

The vast majority (almost 92%) are of Grade II status.

English Heritage concluded that:

“In summary, the town hall building, incorporating the former sessions court, coroner’s court and Brooke Robinson museum is a well-designed building which has distinct architectural presence at the heart of Dudley. It was carefully designed to co-exist with neighbouring buildings of sharply different styles and also to have a distinct character of its own and this care is carried through to a series of impressive interiors and to the treatment of structural detailing such as sculpture. The degree of intact survival is remarkable and although there has been some adaptation to changing functions, the retention of so much of the original fabric of the building is a testament to its fitness for purpose and the regard in which the buildings are held. The architectural and artistic quality of the group, combined with its high level of intact survival, mean that it has clear claims to more than special interest and should be designated at Grade II*”

The principal reasons for listing were as follows:

Architectural: The design of this group of buildings with varied functions by the noted architectural practice of Harvey and Wicks is inspired and bridges the stylistic gap between the Edwardian Baroque library building and the medieval style of the old police buildings with flair.

Planning: The handling of the internal spaces and the planning throughout the complex is carefully judged to reflect municipal ambition and allow smooth functioning.

Decoration: The buildings contain sculptural decoration of high quality to both the exterior and interior and a large mural by the noted artist Hans Feibusch.

Intactness: Despite some adaptation to changing functions, the buildings contain a high proportion of their original fittings and much of their original plan.

Rarity: The existence and retention of the complete furnishings of the Coroner’s Court is a distinct rarity.

(Top) Relief by William Bloye, above central window (bottom) Detail of stone carving.

Sources:

Law and Government Buildings: Listing Selection Guide (Historic England, 2017)

National Heritage List for England

J Bennett, Dudley Metropolitan Borough Public Art Guide (Dudley MBC 1990)

An Illustrated Chronicle of Dudley Town and Manor, John Hemingway (MFH Publishing: 2009)

