‘WORKTOWN’ REVISITED



A Saturday Stroll in Bolton

11 June 2022

C20 Twentieth Century Society Northwest

Bolton

The Twentieth Century Society (C20) last visited Bolton in August 2007. Today's walk follows the same route through the town centre only, noting the changes over the past fifteen years. Bolton's town centre has suffered badly during this period with many landmark shops closing and with many vacant sites awaiting redevelopment. An example is the Odeon which was demolished in 2007 with the site remaining vacant since. The Grade II former Whitakers/Beales department store (George Crowther, 1907, with a relatively intact exterior featuring later additions) closed in 2016 and is now empty. The new bus station by AHR Architects is a more positive development.

In the early 20th century, Lord Leverhulme commissioned the landscape architect Thomas Mawson to provide a masterplan which comprised a series of boulevards radiating from the Town Hall. This was not implemented. In 1966 the Shankland Cox plan (featuring sketches by the nationally important architectural artist Gordon Cullen) introduced the pedestrianised town centre which we see today.

A number of architectural critics have had positive things to say about Bolton. Nikolaus Pevsner in 1969 stated: "Bolton has been much maligned. It has in fact a centre of some dignity." Ian Nairn described the Octagon Theatre ''the best of its kind in Britain''. Gavin Stamp in 1988 noted: ''Above all there is the Town Hall, one of the finest municipal buildings of the North... This civic pride survived into the inter-war years when new municipal buildings were erected behind the Town Hall. Nor was the classical tradition then dead, for Bolton could call upon the services of a local firm, who were the 20th-century masters of municipal monumentalism: Messrs Bradshaw Gass and Hope... In its native town, the firm produced a grand design that complemented the Town Hall: a smart classical quadrant." Most recently, Owen Hatherley in ''Modern Buildings in Britain'' says of the town "it feels as if you're in a real city, like in Europe, and you can drink your cup of tea in repose while admiring the monuments."

Bolton architects

The most notable architectural practice in Bolton is Bradshaw Gass & Hope (BGH), founded in 1862 and still in business. Among BGH's more notable commissions are town halls at Wimbledon, Luton, Chesterfield, Stratford and Padiham; the Miners' Convalescent Home at Blackpool; extensions to UMIST and the Royal Exchange, Manchester. They were also responsible for the offices of Crittall Windows at Witham, Essex; Methodist College, Medak, India and much later, the Bolton Arena football stadium.

Bolton has also been the home of some famous architects who left for fame and fortune elsewhere. Charles Holden (1875-1960), of London University, 55 Broadway and Underground stations fame, had his childhood in Great Lever, Bolton. John

Parkinson (1861-1935) emigrated age 21 to Seattle then Los Angeles.
With his son Donald, he designed landmark Art Deco buildings in Los Angles including City Hall (1928), Bullocks Wilshire (1929) and Union Station (1939). He was born in Scorton, Lancashire, but he served a six-year apprenticeship in Bolton. Other important 20th century local architects and designers include Greenhalgh and Williams (post-war Catholic churches), Edith Norris (stained glass) and Hermon Crook.

“Worktown” and Mass-Observation

Bolton was immortalised as ‘‘Worktown’’ by the social researcher Tom Harrisson, when he undertook his ground-breaking Mass-Observation study in 1937. Mass-Observation was a large-scale investigation into the habits and customs of the people of Britain. The project initially focused on Bolton and during the Second World War was enlisted by the Government to monitor public morale in the population as a whole. The project still exists and the archive is held at the University of Sussex.

Mass-Observation was founded by: Tom Harrisson, an anthropologist who had made a name for himself studying cannibals in the New Hebrides; Charles Madge, at the time a promising poet and a member of a London based artists movement called the Blackheath Group and Humphrey Jennings, an artist, poet, historian, translator and film-maker, also a member of the Blackheath Group. Jennings became widely known for the influential war documentaries he made after he left Mass-Observation. They felt that there was a gap in real knowledge about the lives of ordinary people. Tom Harrisson instructed the observers to record hand gestures, hats, clothing and all kinds of minute detail. For instance, observers recorded how many pieces were in a six-penny portion of chips (25 and one sixth!) or the proportion of black to brown shoes worn on the high street.

Harrisson was very interested in public houses, work life, political rallies and so forth. It was these kinds of themes that he asked Spender to observe and photograph. Once the Second World War had begun the project was co-opted by Duff Cooper, Minister of Information. Mass-Observation was utilised to monitor public opinion and morale and to gauge the effectiveness of public information campaigns. It earned the title ‘‘Cooper's Snoopers’’ from the popular press of the day.

Bolton Walk

Bolton Town Hall (1873) was designed by William Hill of Leeds, with Bolton architect George Woodhouse. The town wanted a classical town hall, unlike nearby Rochdale (1871) and Manchester (1877). With its 200ft (60m) tower and Corinthian columns, it is similar to Portsmouth and Leeds Town Halls. The original building was extended in 1938 by Bradshaw Gass & Hope; the half facing Le Mans Crescent, including the wood veneer-lined Mayor's Parlour, is thus firmly twentieth century. The Great Hall was burnt out in 1981 and rebuilt in two storeys, the Albert Halls, by the Borough Architect's Department.

Le Mans Crescent (BGH, 1932-9) complements the Town Hall extension. Its Neo-classical design is assured and confident. Pevsner remarked that, ‘‘there is, surprisingly enough, no tiredness, the panache is kept up.’’ Three arches pierce the Crescent's centre but today they lead only to a potential development site linked to the University of Bolton, a key driver in regenerating the town centre. One end of the Crescent contains the Art Gallery and Library; the other used to house the former Police Headquarters and Magistrates' Courts. George Grenfell Baines, the founder of the Building Design Partnership, was involved in this project when he worked for BGH in the 1930s. The Art Gallery has a good collection of works by important 20th century British artists such as Vanessa Bell, Edward Burra, Roland Penrose, Sandra Blow, Henry Moore and Lynn Chadwick.

The Octagon 1966-67. Originally by Geoffrey Brooks, the borough architect. Rebuilt 2018-2021. The original theatre auditorium has apparently been retained. Pevsner (2004) states of the former building: “a welcome dose of honest brutalism”.



Wellsprings House successfully complements the Town Hall.

The former 1931 **Co-op department store**, on the Oxford Street corner, is by BGH. The entrance has Doric columns in deference to the Town Hall’s Corinthian ones – and Le Mans Crescent uses the Ionic order for the same reason.

We pass **Paderborn House** clad in moulded concrete (Sutton of Birmingham, 1968-9). Distinctive grooved columns, with travertine around the entrance. The town is twinned with both Le Mans and Paderborn in Germany. The **former Lloyds Bank** (Deansgate corner), clad in cream faience, looks BGH-ish.

Whitakers “pastiche timber-framed of 1907 with pepperpot turret” by George Crowther. It incorporates genuine Tudor timbers from a demolished building nearby. To the north of Deansgate, down Knowsley and Market Streets, is G.T. Robinson's 1851-6 **Market Hall**. The interior is, according to Matthew Hyde, a ‘‘lucid structure simply revealed’’. He contrasts it with Chapman Taylor Partners' Market Place Centre ‘‘in that most ephemeral of styles, a jokey Postmodernism’’. It does however echo

Victoria Hall (BGH 1898-1900) opposite. Chapman Taylor also did the 1980-88 Market Place Shopping Centre. Gavin Stamp noted of this: “It avoids the usual vulgarity of this building type and has a strong Victorian character.” The Market Hall was built over an impressive brick undercroft above the River Croal which has recently been opened up and is a “destination”.



At the Oxford Street corner, **Slater Menswear**, above Caffé Nero, has Art Deco white faience upper storeys. Further down is the imposing **Marks & Spencer,** faced in dark stone (1965-67). The mansard roof was added later.

Along Market Street, **Clinton Cards** is clad in white faience with Art Deco window details. At the corner of Bridge Street is a charming 1960s (?) clock (not working); the building would not look out of place in Coventry.

Other buildings of interest on Deansgate include **Superdrug** (with some Art Deco features); **Greggs** (by Ernest Prestwich of Leigh who trained with W.E. Riley); **Sally Beauty** and the **Nationwide** (entrance by William Owen of BGH).

The former **Preston's jewellers**, on the corner of Bank Street, has terracotta, by Thomas Smith & Sons (1908-13), a prolific local firm. It had a time ball, on the clock tower, which was raised daily at 9am and dropped at 10am, on receipt of a telegraph signal from Greenwich.

The 1909 **Bolton Cross**, in Dartmoor granite, (by BGH) replaced an earlier one which is now kept at Bolton School. Churchgate contains the 1636 **Ye Olde Man & Scythe**; the former coaching inn **Swan Hotel**, reconstructed in the 1970s to look more ‘‘genuinely Georgian’’ and **Ye Olde Pastie Shoppe** (1667).

Stone Cross House (1991) was built for the Inland Revenue in an aggressively red brick and spiky style. It has a rather desperate chandelier in the foyer.

The gates of St Peter's church (E.G. Paley, 1871) are framed by **Travel House**, **Newspaper House** (1998) and **Churchgate House** and **Huntingdon House** (1974). St Peter's has a Neo-Gothic font and cover by N. Cachemaille-Day (1938). The gates and gate piers may look early C20 but they are late C18. Samuel Crompton (1753-1827), ‘‘the inventor of the mule’’, is buried under the large granite monument, erected in 1861.

At the corner of Silverwell and Institute Streets is W.T. Gunson & Son's 1970 **Friends Meeting House:** decent with a light elevated roof corner. It has a tilted roof floating on the glazed upper walls. **Scott House** has a charming 1926 plaque commemorating Sir James Scott and his wife Lady Anne. Scott started the Provincial Insurance Company. The two storey offices of **Fieldings and Porter** are a successful piece of infill by BGH.

Silverwell Street (1810) is named after the Silver Well. **Bradshaw Gass & Hope** now self-described as ‘‘Construction Design Consultants’’, not architects, are at number 19. Note the plaque to J.W. Wallace, founder of the Eagle Street College, dedicated to the works of the American poet, Walt Whitman. Wallace worked there from 1867 to 1912. The plaque is ringed by a quote from Whitman: ‘‘All architecture is what you do to it when you look upon it.’’ Whitman corresponded with his Bolton admirers; the Museum contains early editions of his works and his stuffed canary.



Further down Silverwell Street is the 1903 **Estate Office of the Earl of Bradford** who still owns a large area of Bolton. At the end of Silverwell Street is the former **Sun Alliance House**, to be converted to flats. The colourful panels are a later addition.

Bradshawgate and Silverwell lane corner has a **former café bar** with original curved Moderne windows. This was originally Vose's tripe restaurant (later UCP - United Cattle Products). It was most stylish and elegant, decorated in 1930s streamline Moderne style, with starched white tablecloths, silver service and smart waitresses. Down the right hand side of the facade, a vertical neon sign descended from the roof: UCP RESTAURANT. There are plans to convert it to flats.

Nelson Square was opened on March 23, 1893. The cenotaph memorial to the Bolton Artillery is by Ormrod, Pomeroy & Foy (1920). Calder Marshall sculpted the statue of Samuel Crompton (1862). The shiny red former Prudential Assurance office (1889) isn't by Waterhouse but by Ralph B. Maccoll of Bolton. Matthew Hyde in Pevsner describes the early C20 faience facades of Bradshawgate as ‘‘a ‘plateful’ of ‘mushy pea, ginger nut, liver, tripe and blood orange shades’.

Infirmary Street has a 1970s office block with an octagonal, nicely lettered plaque to W. F. Tillotson, newspaper publisher. Round the corner in Mawdsley Street, the former **County Court** (T.C. Sorby, 1869). Opposite, at the corner, is GWBD Partnership's **St Andrew's Court** (1987), containing a somewhat whimsical recreation of a Victorian shopping street in miniature. The job architect was J. Holland. Matthew Hyde says: ‘‘neatly contrived on a tight site’’.

Into Exchange Street and through the former **Arndale Centre** (1971; “low and mean” according to Pevsner 2004), now re-branded as **Crompton Place** (Bradshaw, Rose & Harker, 1989) and still dreary, we go to Victoria Square and the Town Hall. The classical building on the left is the former **Bolton Exchange** (Richard Lane, 1824-5).

The square was pedestrianised in 1969, to the Planning Department's designs, under R.H. Ogden. It was quite an early scheme which won three awards including one, unsurprisingly, from the Concrete Society. The fountains were designed by Geoffrey Brooks and the trees were planted by the Earl of Bradford.

On the **Town Hall**, the pediment sculptures are by Calder Marshall. The central figure is ‘‘Bolton’’, holding a shield with the town's elephant and castle symbol. She is surrounded by Manufacture, Earth, a figure representing ‘‘Africa’’ with cotton, Commerce and Ocean.

The 1928 **War Memorial** is by Arthur John Hope, of BGH, in Kemnay granite. The bronze sculptures of ‘‘Peace restraining War’’ and ‘‘Peace sees the Horrors of War’’ are by Walter Marsden. They were cast by A.B. Burton Foundry. Marsden was Lancashire-born; he also completed war memorials at Heywood, Tottington and St Anne's on Sea. The statues were completed after the memorial was unveiled in July 1928. They were installed on Armistice Day, 1932. The memorial is listed Grade II.

The statue of Lt Col B. A. Dobson (1900) sculpted by John Cassidy, who also sculpted the Bristol Edward Colston statue. He worked in Manchester and was responsible for several statues in the city, including ‘‘Adrift’’, now outside the Central Library.

The Bradshaw Gass & Hope Archive

This town tour was prompted by an exhibition of the BGH archive at the Museum and Art Gallery (2 April-19 June) and concludes with a visit to it, led by the curator responsible. The archive spans the full breadth and nature of the work undertaken by the practice between 1862 and the 1960s, comprising several thousand architectural commissions. It ranges from large perspective drawings created for architectural competitions to business correspondence and photographs. The archive is remarkable for the variety and quantity of material, showing how changes in architectural styles reflected large-scale changes in society and technology. The archive was recently acquired by Bolton Library and Museum Service, with the support of the Arts Council England/V&A Purchase Grant Fund and the Art Fund.

Acknowledgements

Tour notes compiled and researched by David French, with acknowledgement to Eddy Rhead for the use of notes he prepared for the 2007 Twentieth Century Society tour. The notes have also benefitted from the advice of Michael Shippobottom.
The tour was led by Steve Marland.
Thanks to Matthew Watson, Museum Access Officer, Bolton Library and Museum Services for taking the tour of the exhibition.

Cover photograph: Le Mans Crescent, ca 1930s © Bolton Council
Other photographs by Steve Marland © Modern Mooch

Thanks to Andrea Crooks, Oli Marshall and Peter Ruback for assistance with online booking and promotion through the Twentieth Century Society. The tour was also promoted by Jack Hale and Eddy Rhead (the Modernists), for which we are grateful.

Howard Smith
Chair
Twentieth Century Society, Northwest

https://c20society.org.uk/regions/north-west