

Leyton Town Hall

Victorian and Edwardian community
pride

Leyton & Leytonstone Historical Society

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The former Leyton Municipal Offices in the High Road were the second town hall for the local authority area of Leyton, which included Leytonstone. The blue plaque on the front reads “Grade II listed building. Designed by John Johnson in a rich eclectic style after a competition involving over thirty entries. Erected 1894-6 to replace the original public offices now Leyton Public Library.”

There were of course some people including members of the Leyton Local Board (which was about to become the Leyton Urban District Council) who did not see the need for the new building, or one of such expense, and representatives of Leytonstone tried to postpone a decision until they could propose an alternative in their own area. Member Christopher George Musgrave argued in a speech at the original Town Hall: “In the first place the inhabitants of the parish have decided to adopt the Free Libraries Act, second, this building has now been erected for thirteen or fourteen years and was built when the place was small. It had become inadequate to the requirements of the officers. . . . The offices should be contiguous to the works of the Board, because the officers should be close to the men employed. . . . The Leytonstone people were not anxious to have the sewage farm, the mortuary, or the [isolation] hospital near them. These luxuries were all confined to Leyton. (Laughter.)” There was a public enquiry at which the Chairman of the Board, James Gallaher, of The Limes, Goldsmith Road, a Protestant fruit merchant from Londonderry, Conservative, and Musgrave, a Liberal, succeeded in convincing the inspector.



Public Offices

The new Town Hall was built in vivid red brick, contrasting with the yellow London stock brick used in the area until then, and had Portland stone bands and dressings. F J Coxhead of Leytonstone was the contractor. Construction took nearly 2 years and there were design changes in that period.

The ornate main entrance was on the High Road. It led into a hall and a corridor of offices for the surveyor (3 rooms), the medical officer, sanitary inspector, road surveyor and rate collector, then a waiting room placed next to the rate collector, and finally connecting with the public entrance hall. “Off the principal entrance hall open the hall-keeper's office, three rooms for clerks, the private room of the clerk of the Council, a chairman's room, a large committee room, and another waiting room.



“The council chamber, which is a most handsome apartment, measuring 76 feet long by 46 feet wide, occupies the greater part of the first floor, and is approached by two fine staircases, the one leading from the public entrance being particularly imposing.” The public entrance was in Adelaide Road. “The large arcaded windows considerably enhance the beauty of the chamber, as also do some very skilfully carved heads by Mr Lawlor, representing Temperance, Prudence, Wisdom, Fortitude, and Integrity. The plaster of the ceiling is richly ornamental, and the floor is of polished oak.”





“There is seating accommodation in the room for 700 people.” Concerts were envisaged from the start and artistes’ changing rooms were provided.

“On the same floor is a large and very comfortable committee-room, measuring 35 feet by 21 feet, and on the second floor are the hall-keeper’s apartments, which are most conveniently arranged. The basement is principally given up to store-rooms, heating chamber, coal cooking range sufficiently large for banqueting purposes. The building is heated throughout by hot water.”



On Wednesday 18th March 1896 the Duke and Duchess of York opened the newly erected Public Offices and Technical Institute. They arrived at Maryland Point Station of the Great Eastern Railway where they were met by Edwin Bare JP, now the Chairman of the Council, and the Duke of York's Own Loyal Suffolk Hussars. Other uniforms lining Leyton High Road were the Forest School Cadet Corps of the 1st Volunteer Battalion Essex Regiment and members of the local and other fire brigades, and the Leyton and Leytonstone Division of the St John's Ambulance Association. The Leyton Technical Institute Orchestra played music until the Royal party arrived, to those waiting in the Council Chamber. The Royals went along Leytonstone High Road and then Wallwood Road, Fairlop Road, Hainault Road and Leyton High Road. They returned along Grove Green Road, Union Road and Leytonstone High Road and took a special train at Maryland Point Station.

Edwin Bare, a Lloyd's broker and fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society, had been born in Spitalfields in 1844. He became Chairman of the District Council when James Gallaher resigned from ill-health that led to his death. Bare opposed construction of the new Town Hall on the grounds of cost but seems to have been happy to make full use of it once built. He was an enthusiastic Freemason, the founder and first master of the Guelph Lodge in 1877 which used the Town Hall assembly room and committee room. Freemasons also used rooms in the basement of the Technical Institute. W G Shadrake was another Councillor (Conservative and Unionist in politics) who made such bookings.

1896 was also the year in which an electricity generating station was built on Cathall Road to the rear of St Patrick's cemetery. Electric light was turned on for the first time in the Town Hall on 8th September 1896.



Technical Institute

A wing to the rear of the Town Hall along Adelaide Road was incorporated in the design for the use of a Technical Institute and a Secondary School. These would offer men and women in technical and commercial industries instruction in applied science and art - and for women training in cookery and dressmaking - with classes in art, science, language, literature and general knowledge. Secondary science and commercial education were taught to boys and girls.

The Technical Institute's salaries paid in the period to 31st March 1895, before it could occupy the new building, were for teachers of chemistry, drawing (2), clay modelling, electricity, physiography (physical geography; topography; description of natural phenomena), building, construction, wood carving, carpentry (3), Sloyd (a Swedish system of manual training, especially woodcarving) (2), shorthand (2), book keeping, typewriting, French, German, choral singing, orchestral music, photography, hygiene, plumbing, cookery, cutting out, and caretakers, hall-keeper and acting secretary.



The Technical Institute had a connecting corridor with the Town Hall but also its own entrance, above which was an allegorical group representing 'Industry' by a Mr Woodington. Double swing doors led to an entrance hall 30 feet by 12 feet. There was a secretary's office, a waiting room and a room in which the Technical Education Committee met. Off to the right of the entrance hall was a corridor from which 6 classrooms opened, each 20 feet by 25 feet and intended to hold 60 students. On the first floor up a stone staircase was the art classroom, "the principal apartment in the building", occupying almost its whole length, 60 feet long by 25 feet, lit from the roof.



There was also a chemical laboratory, a needlework room and a cookery classroom with cooking range, several stoves and a pantry. In the basement were held classes that were noisy. 6 workshop classrooms, paved with wooden blocks, contained carpentering, plumbing and modelling classes. A lift served all floors. "As is the case with the Public Offices, the Institute is heated by hot water and the electric light has been installed."



The architect had provided estimates for filling 9 panels with subjects such as painting, sculpture, architecture, building, photography and printing, electricity, engineering, manufacture, navigation, chemistry and agriculture, but only one panel, 'Industry', was installed.

The cost of the new Leyton Town Hall was £ 17,286 and of the Technical Institute £ 9,991.

The Technical Institute was opened by the Council in 1896 and offered mixed day classes from 1898.

The Institute and the Secondary School charged fees (the School for tuition, stationery and use of books at £2 2s. per term for children living in the Leyton District and £3 for those from outside). Education was provided for girls as well as boys, with only a limited amount of segregation. A photograph of the Chemical Laboratory shows 2 long benches, girls at one, boys at the other.

The 1902 Education Act gave Essex County Council responsibility for secondary education. The County continued the evening and day departments of the Institute.



Frank Dobson, born 1888 the son of an illustrator of birds and other natural history, started education at Harrow Green School and at 12 or 13 went to the art department of Leyton Technical School (also described as Leyton School of Art), though not apparently for long. He contributed sculpture and drawings to the Group X exhibition organised by Wyndham Lewis in 1920. He created 'London Pride' for the 1951 Festival of Britain, of which a cast is now outside the National Theatre.



When classes began at the South-West Essex Technical College in 1938 the Technical Institute became part of the town hall.



Extension with its entrance on Ruckholt Road

In 1910 an extension was built to Leyton Town Hall in Ruckholt Road, again in reddish brick with Portland stone. It was designed by the Council's architect W Jacques. The need was ascribed to the Council taking over 'the entire rate collection' and the tramways, for the medical inspection of schoolchildren, and to an increase in the sanitary department.



There was a long hall beyond the entrance doorway paved with Italian terrazzo. On the right were the accountant's and rates departments, with private offices for the head officials. On the left were the sanitary staff, and at the rear were the private offices of the chief sanitary inspector and the woman inspector. There was also the medical officer's department, a waiting room for school children who came to be medically examined, and a consulting room. There was direct communication to the offices on the Town Hall side of the building.



The extension contained a new council meeting chamber, clearly more suitable than the large hall in the 1896 building. The new chamber was some forty feet square with a domed roof resting on four pillars, with squarish lower-ceilinged spaces in each corner of the chamber, perhaps inspired by Christopher Wren's St Stephen's Walbrook Church, and perhaps appropriate for Masonic ritual. The walls were oak-panelled.





A stained glass window facing the entrance (now blocked) had a scroll bearing in monogram the initials L.U.D.C. (Leyton Urban District Council).

The members' seats were arranged in the form of a crescent before the Chair, and on a dais were places for the chairman, vice-chairman and the principal officials. A public 'gallery' seated 100 people, and was divided by an oak screen from the members and slightly raised. It had a separate entrance and staircase in Ruckholt-road. The press had seats in front of the public 'gallery'.

The basement contained a new heating installation to supply the whole Town Hall block. A turbine pump and electric motor distributed hot water to the radiators.





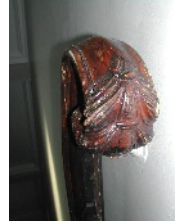
First Town Hall later the Borough Library

The blue plaque on the front of Leyton Library reads “Grade II listed building. Designed by John Knight in an Italianate style and opened in 1882 as Leyton Town Hall. Outgrown by 1892 and replaced by the new Town Hall alongside. Later adapted to serve as a public library.” It is of white brick and has a corner clock-tower.



The information in this booklet has been drawn mainly from contemporary newspaper reports and Council records. The photographs were taken by the author, David Boote, who is very happy for the whole or part of this publication to be copied, provided his authorship is acknowledged.





The former Leyton Town Hall is now owned and managed by Lee Valley Estates.

