

**Case Name:** The Shirehall, Shrewsbury

**Case Number:** 1471581

### **Background**

We have received an application for a Certificate of Immunity from listing for the Shirehall, Shrewsbury.

### **Asset(s) under Assessment**

Facts about the asset(s) can be found in the Annex(es) to this report.

Annex	Name	Heritage Category
1	The Shirehall	Listing

### **Visits**

Date	Visit Type
31 July 2020	Full inspection

## Annex 1

The factual details are being assessed as the basis for a proposed Certificate of Immunity from listing.

### Factual Details

**Name: The Shirehall**

#### Location

Shirehall, Abbey Foregate, Shrewsbury, SY2 6ND

County	District	District Type	Parish
	Shropshire	Unitary Authority	Shrewsbury

#### History

The Shirehall was built for Salop County Council between 1963 and 1966 to the designs of the County Architects' Department, led by County Architect Ralph Crowe, with Alex Jeffries and assistants, and structural engineers Ove Arup and Partners.

Salop, now Shropshire Council, had outgrown their existing Shirehall in the town centre some decades earlier in the C20, leading to their dispersed occupation of a number of buildings. The consolidation of council services at a single site was under consideration in the 1930s, but not until after the Second World War was the plan taken forward.

A ten-acre site was acquired, a mile from the town centre, adjacent to Lord Hill's Column (listed Grade II\*). The brief was based on the organisation's existing requirements, with some room for further expansion, and included office accommodation for 650 staff, with a council chamber and committee rooms, assizes and juvenile court, parking, a canteen, and a detached storage building.

The design of the building is certainly influenced by the proximity of the column. Wide, low, and with a strong horizontal emphasis, the building defers to the historic landmark, while being unashamedly modern in its design. The column provides a marker to the entrance concourse, which occupies the broad space between the low front wings of the building. Adjacent is the council chamber: a drum-like mass elevated to first-floor level, supported on wide tapering stilts. This curvaceous form contrasts with the strict angular geometry of the rest of the building, and with the courtroom wing, on the opposite side of the concourse: built in dark brick with a vertical emphasis achieved through its series of closely-spaced slit windows. The most marked change to the building, which otherwise survives very well, is the underbuilding of the wing oversailing the entrance concourse, inhibiting pedestrian passage through the building complex. A low pool in front of the courtroom wing has been converted to a flowerbed, its fountains having been problematic in windy conditions.

The main reception area has been reconfigured, with the doorway from the main concourse relegated in favour of that to the west, leading from the courtyard in front of the canteen. Internally, the office floors were laid out as a combination of cellular offices and open plan. As requirements changed, the layouts of both have been reconfigured. The juvenile courtroom is no longer in use, and has been stripped of its fittings. The former assizes courts have recently been replaced by a new facility adjacent, to the east.

Ralph Vernon Crowe (1915-1990) was County Architect at Salop from 1958 until 1966. As Pevsner notes, the Shirehall was his *magnum opus*, though another notable achievement was his leadership of a consortium to establish a systematic model for the development of school buildings: a successor to the successful CLASP system pioneered by Hertfordshire in the late 1950s. Bridgnorth Primary School is a product of the new consortium. Prior to working in Shropshire, Crowe was an architect and planning officer in Barbados from 1947 until 1950, and then worked for the London County Council. After Salop he took the

equivalent role at Essex County Council, and then became the Head of Architecture at Newcastle upon Tyne University in 1976.

### **Details**

Shirehall Council Offices and Law Courts, 1963-1966, designed by the County Architects Department under Ralph Crowe, Salop County Architect.

**MATERIALS:** a structural frame of in-situ concrete posts at 40 ft centres, with reinforced concrete floor slabs. Various claddings are used, including Portland stone to the council chamber and white mosaic beneath; grey-green mosaic to the fascia bands of the office blocks; and matchboarding to various soffits. Most windows are steel-framed Crittalls; various glazed entrances are in aluminium frames. The wing containing the courts is constructed from Staffordshire blue brick in Flemish bond. Within external concourses and courtyards there are low blue brick walls and other features, with metal railings and timber balustrades.

**PLAN:** the building occupies a large plot on the north side of the Column Roundabout, where a number of roads converge and Lord Hill's monument (listed Grade II\*) forms an impressive entrance to Abbey Foregate and the town beyond.

A multi-functional building designed as a complex of interconnected blocks around landscaped courtyards. Slab blocks ranging from three to five storeys (with basements and rooftop plant rooms) intersect to form an irregular H-plan, framed by single-storey blocks around the road-facing front and sides of the building. There are a number of different entrances to the large building, depending on the type of users/visitors, though the main entrances, providing access to the offices and council rooms on one side, and the courts on the other, were originally to the south-west, towards the column.

The multi-storey slabs contain offices and ancillary accommodation; these are laid out internally as a series of individual rooms leading off spinal corridors, or as open-plan areas occupying the width of the slab. Council committee rooms are within the first floor of the southern range, with an open foyer linking them to the council chamber.

The council chamber, the building's a distinctive tapering drum, stands at first-floor level on the south-west side of the complex, adjacent to the main entrance. The ground floor is an open concourse, with pillars supporting the structure above, surrounded by a square canopy.

The courts are within the single-storey brick block at the southernmost point of the complex. No longer in use, there were two assizes courts and a juvenile courtroom, along with associated back-office areas, and holding cells and ancillary rooms in the basement below.

**EXTERIOR:** the building has a strong horizontal emphasis, most keenly provided by the slab blocks, where pale mosaic fascias and contrasting strip glazing wrap around the perimeter of each of the upper storeys. Windows, generally, are in slender metal frames with alternating tilting casements. Those areas of the slab blocks with a special function, such as the canteen and committee rooms, have full-height glazing.

From the south-west, the six-storey slab forms the centrepiece, and is flanked by lower wings on either side. The main entrance is between the low wings, recessed beneath the slab, which at ground-floor level stands on a pair of square pillars. Originally an open arcade, this wing of the slab has been underbuilt. Left (west) of this entrance is an open concourse beneath the first-floor drum of the council chamber; four stoutly tapering legs support the structure above, and there is a glazed stairwell. A square canopy frames the drum; it stands slightly lower, forming a ring of light around its base. The drum has a blind front, with full-height glazing on the sides; the curved form contrasts with the strict angularity of the rest of the building. Left again the canopy aligns with the fascia of another single-storey block; the land falls away to the west, exposing the basement, the brick elevation of which is recessed from the ground floor building line, supported on square pillars. The return elevation of this

section has the vehicle entrance to the basement car park, and a pedestrian subway leading to a courtyard to the west of the main reception. This courtyard, now containing the main entrance to the building, has full-height glazing along the elevation to the canteen, with an over-hanging roof supported on steel posts providing a covered walkway.

To the right (east) of the main entrance is the single-storey brick block containing the courts and now, the Register Office. The elevation is punctuated by a series of full-height narrow windows, separated by stacked brick mullions. The return elevation is largely blind; a series of narrow openings recurs toward the rear, lighting the foyer of the former juvenile court. On the rooftop are low tapering rectangular forms: lanterns to the three courtrooms.

The main car park is on the north-east side of the building. Facing this side is the banded elevation of the three-storey northern slab block, with the four-storey linking slab projecting roughly centrally. The ground floor beneath the projection is open, supported on square piers, and the main rear entrance is recessed beneath the north slab.

INTERIOR: the main public reception is lit on two sides by full-height aluminium-framed glazing. The blue brick of the external courtyard wall continues internally, meeting the plain plaster that is used on most internal surfaces. The reception is punctuated by the square posts of the concrete frame. The solid geometric string and deep timber handrail of the stair form a backdrop to the reception counters, which are flush timber panels studded with brass leopard's heads. There is an abstract mural relief by Rosalind Alexander, inscribed 'Coalbrookdale 1965'. Lightweight partitioning has been inserted in the reception. To the south are kitchens and the canteen.

Directly above the reception is a large open area, noted on plans as the 'council suite', which acts as an anteroom to the council chamber and committee rooms. It has full-height glazing on two elevations, and a coffered ceiling with globe pendant lamps above seating areas. The long open well of the stair has a glass balustrade with timber handrails. A wide corridor provides access to a series of large committee meeting rooms. These have flush panel doors with shields with leopard's heads, with stained plain timber architraves with a solid over-light; this arrangement is replicated for doorways throughout the building, with different varieties of timber denoting function and status. Committee rooms have full-height glazing on one side, a wide timber dado rail and suspended ceilings. A folding flush-panelled screen partition separates two of the rooms.

The council chamber is a lofty oval-plan room, laid out symmetrically with full-height glazing on two sides, and slatted timber panelling lining the walls. Member's access is via two doorways emerging on either side of the rostrum bench. This has a backdrop of flush timber panelling and a central plaster section with a shield with the coat of arms. Above, a curved and textured panel forms a sounding board. Recesses behind the bench lead into small cubicles. There is a lower recessed section at the rear of the auditorium, intended as a public gallery, with a stair leading from the concourse below.

The wing containing the courts is intricately planned to provide appropriate access, service, waiting and assembly areas for the public, defendants, jurors, police and judges. General entrance to the courtrooms and associated antechambers is via the assizes hall, which has white marble cladding along one wall, and a matchboarded ceiling. Flush panel doors, again with timber architraves and panelled over-lights, provide entrance to the courts and ancillary rooms. The two courtrooms are identical, except for different coloured marble cladding the furniture, and the dock to one has been enclosed with protective glass. Both are lit from above by a high lantern with coffered glazing, and there is matchboarding and a vinyl covering to the walls. The fittings in both survive; banks of seats, balustrades, desks, the dock and bench are clad in dark green or grey marble with a timber trim, some with writing tops. Behind the bench a white marble backdrop panel bears an incised and gilded royal coat of arms. Floor levels change in line with courtroom ritual, and some seating has been replaced. A narrow stair from the dock leads to the basement and the custody suites: a series of cells, interview rooms and ancillary rooms. To the rear of the courtrooms are back-office areas and accommodation for the judges. The juvenile court has been repurposed, and retains no fittings. The coffered ceiling survives, with some lights having been infilled.

The office floors of the slab blocks were a combination of open-plan and cellular. Those cellular areas were laid out with long spinal corridors with rooms on either side. While they have been subject to some reconfiguration; some of the original partitioning and detailing survive, identifiable by the timber skirtings and plain cornice rails. Offices have timber flush panel doors and architraves; some have glazed over-lights, and/or margin-lights. Some offices have clerestorey glazing, admitting natural light into the corridors. Doors within the corridors and stairwell areas are timber with two glazed panels. Some sections of the internal walls are lined with slatted timber panelling; this treatment is often applied to the areas adjacent to stairwells, and to some offices. The open-plan areas, punctuated by the square posts of the structural frame, have undergone some subdivision. Five sets of dog-leg stairs provided access between floors at the junctions and extremities of the slab blocks. Stairs are in-situ concrete, clad, generally, with terrazzo; a non-slip surface has been overlaid. They have hardwood panel balustrades and handrails, with box profile steel balusters.

**SUBSIDIARY FEATURES:** to the north-east of the main building is a square-plan, single-storey block, originally providing storage, garaging, and other facilities. It is brick, laid in stretcher bond, with clerestory lighting, a modern fascia, and half-glazed doors. The north-west elevation, originally a series of garage door openings, has been infilled.

Internally the layout has been reconfigured, though some partitioning survives.

### **Selected Sources**

#### **Books and journals**

Pevsner, N, Newman, J, *The Buildings of England: Shropshire*, (2006), 77, 516

'Shirehall and law courts' in *Architects' Journal*, Vol 145, issue 13, (29 March 1967), 767-784

**Map****National Grid Reference:** SJ5065312171

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The above map is for quick reference purposes only and may not be to scale. For a copy of the full scale map, please see the attached PDF – 1471726\_1.pdf.