

Case Name: The Shirehall, Shrewsbury

Case Number: 1471581

Background

We have received an application for a Certificate of Immunity (COI) 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	List Entry Number	Name	Heritage Category	HE Recommendation
1	1471726	Shropshire Shirehall and former storage building	Listing	Do not add to List

Visits

Date	Visit Type
31 July 2020	Full inspection

Context

The application for a COI was submitted in anticipation of the potential disposal and redevelopment of the building complex. Since the COI application was submitted, we have received two listing applications for the building. These listing applications have been associated with the COI application. The process of assessment for listing and COIs is the same, and hence the outcome of the assessment must be either a positive listing recommendation or a recommendation that the COI should be issued.

There have been several newspaper reports about the fate of the building. An organisation titled 'Save Our Shirehall' has recently been established, and has set up an online petition proposing that the Council reconsider their disposal decision; it has 70 signatories (01/10/2020).

The building is not within the Shrewsbury Conservation Area, the boundary to which is a short distance to the south. There are several listed buildings in the immediate vicinity; most notably, Lord Hill's column, listed at Grade II*, stands at the front of the building, marking the entrance concourse.

Assessment

CONSULTATION

We invited the local authority, the Historic Environment Record (HER), the Twentieth Century Society and the listing applicants to comment on our consultation report.

The HER responded providing additional information about the site.

We received around 24 additional emails opposing the potential COI, in favour of listing. Many of these included comments about the transparency of the COI application process, and the future use and proposals for the building.

* The COI application was made under our enhanced advisory services, and the normal process of notification and consultation was followed.

* Listing/COI assessments are limited to a consideration of the architectural and historic interest of a building; the use, management, economics and future of the building are not factors for consideration.

Other comments related to symbolism within the design; Ove Arup and Partners as a notable contributor; comparison with other listed post-war civic building; and the scarcity of modern architecture locally. These factors are considered in the discussion, below.

Further information was also provided, and where appropriate has been included in the history and description. Full consideration of the historic context, the siting, the quality of design and construction, and historic interest are given in the Discussion section, below.

After the consultation period closed, we received a supplementary submission. While this was received after the official period for comment, we were able to give the content full consideration prior to the submission to DCMS.

DISCUSSION

Buildings are listed when they possess special architectural or historic interest, as defined in the Principles of Selection for Listed Buildings (DCMS, 2018). This states age and rarity as key determinants of special interest, and highlights the necessity of careful selection of buildings dating to the post-war period. Civic buildings were erected in large numbers in the inter- and post-war years, as the increasing scope and responsibility of local authorities necessitated larger facilities, and an increase in the provision of office accommodation. Our Selection Guide for Law and Government Buildings (2017) notes that while post-war town halls became less formal and more accessible, they often remained buildings of note, though due to the rates of survival, rigorous selection is required. Architectural interest will be the principal determinant in assessing modern civic buildings, and because of their symbolic status, quality and finesse will be of great importance.

Shrewsbury's Shirehall dates from 1963-1966, and was designed by the County Architects' Department under Ralph Crowe. Like their predecessors, town or county halls in the 1960s were intended to instil civic pride and to project civic identity, embodying associations of authority and reliability, with symbolic gestures alluding to power and social structure. References to the locality, through the use of materials and artworks, were sometimes incorporated. Council chambers were frequently expressed as distinct units, and buildings were designed to be highly permeable, reflecting the transparency and accessibility of the local government. In some ways the Shirehall is an archetype, though the question remains as to whether it is special, or typical, for the period.

Undeniably a striking building, it is a large complex at the entrance to Abbey Foregate and the town beyond, and when viewed from the south, its composition is strong. It is carefully positioned, set back from the highway and the vertical landmark of Lord Hill's column (listed at Grade II*). A broad concourse marks the entrance, and is flanked by humanely-scaled, single-storey blocks which wrap around the front and sides of the building. The scale increases as the building steps back, with a six-storey monolithic slab forming the backdrop to the features at the front. It is this aspect of the building, with the drum of the council chamber and the blue-brick courtroom block against the strong horizontal banding of the slab which is of most distinction. The junctions between these elements are well-handled, particularly the way the curvaceous drum integrates with the angularity of the wider building via the canopy, and the concourse beneath is a striking space. Materials are carefully selected and sometimes symbolically deployed: prestigious Portland stone on the council chamber; mosaic tile, popular on buildings of the period, on the curved soffit beneath and on the slabs' fascias; traditional local brick to the courts. The building's architectural presence diminishes, however, towards the rear. Although this is perhaps to be expected, it should be noted that due to its location a mile from the town centre, many visitors and staff were likely to have arrived from the car park at the rear. The intersecting slabs facing this elevation and forming the rear entrance are formidable in their geometry and uniformity, but lack the thoughtful treatment of the southern side.

The isolation and articulation of the different functional areas of the building externally continues inside, and the form and treatment of spaces reflects both function and hierarchy. A consistent language of joinery detailing was developed, with door-cases and panelling across the building taking the same form, though the type of wood varies according to its place within the building. Aside from the courts, it is the committee suite which is most notable. Full-height glazing distinguishes this ceremonial area. The council chamber foyer is impressive for its generous scale, dual aspect, and coffered ceiling. The council chamber's interest is gained from its drum-like form, lit from either side by great glazed openings, with its sculptural sounding board and slatted timber cladding. The committee rooms are relatively plain, and, besides the joinery, there is little else that enriches the spaces, though the relief mural in the main reception, referencing the nearby industrial

Coalbrookdale is a highly positive attribute. The courtrooms, on the other hand, are lavish, with marble cladding, coffered lanterns, and vinyl and timber cladding. The coffered lanterns create striking spaces, and the over-cladding of the light-studded perimeter ceilings only slightly lessens the impact. The great proportion of the building, however, is occupied by office accommodation, and this is relatively plainly detailed, as would be expected.

The building was not widely reported upon in the architectural press, though received a measured critique in the Architects' Journal in 1967. Usefully, the account notes the artworks commissioned for the building; those which were fixtures, and therefore which could contribute to the building's architectural interest, were limited to the reception mural, and to a sculptural mobile, which is not believed to survive. The account, along with the architect's model, enables alterations to the building to be identified. While these have been relatively few, the under-building of the principal slab and the bridging slab blocks has had a detrimental effect. The 'processional way' was truncated, access into the core of the building inhibited, and the connection between the north-west and north-east courtyards was severed. These changes have impacted on access and permeability of the building complex, and thus part of the symbolic intent has been compromised.

For post-war buildings, a comparison with similar buildings will aid the assessment of their interest. Comprehensive study has been made of civic building complexes, and a number from the period are listed, including some at the higher grades. One of the most remarkable is Newcastle (National Heritage List for England ref 1242692), which is listed at Grade II*. Designed by the city architect in 1950, and built in phases from 1956 until 1965, it is a tour de force of the type: slabs blocks of varying storey heights form a courtyard; an elliptical council chamber stands on piloti; materials, externally and throughout the interior, are of high quality and excellent craftsmanship; there are integrated landscape features; and numerous artworks are incorporated. This is one of the most important public buildings of the period, whose influence is apparent at the Shirehall, certainly in the raised, drum-like council chamber. Listed at Grade II, Plymouth Council House and former Civic Centre (NHLE ref 1392038), 1958-1962, is another source of influence; its carefully-massed and balanced intersecting blocks float on piloti, straddle landscape features and enable a high degree of permeability. This comprehensive design has great compositional integrity and substantial architectural presence. Internally, numerous references, though artworks and materials, relate to Plymouth and its maritime history, and the quality of construction and detailing is exemplary. Truro's new County Hall (NHLE ref 1323700) is contemporary with the Shirehall, also by the county architect. This bold concrete structure owes much to Le Corbusier's priory of Sainte Marie de Le Tourette, while referencing and incorporating local building materials. The cantilevering council chamber forms a monumental entrance canopy, and internally is 'in the round', with dramatic ceremonial spaces adjacent, and a consistent application of high-quality finishes throughout the interior. Jellicoe's landscape design is integral, and incorporates a Hepworth sculpture in the courtyard.

These examples achieve a level of sophistication through their holistic, comprehensive designs, which encompass various architectural and artistic disciplines. Works of art and integrated landscape designs add to their interest; these elements were always limited at the Shirehall, with the primary landscape feature – the fountain pool – being unsuccessful from the outset and infilled, and the linked courtyards dislocated. Against these examples, the Shirehall does not compare favourably.

In terms of its historic interest, the Shirehall reflects the general pattern of development of civic buildings in the C20, necessitated by a growing workforce; the requirement of plentiful desk-space; and the grouping of functions in a single complex. The architect is certainly significant; Crowe had an admirable career culminating in a university professorship. His development of the successor to the CLASP system building programme is of particular note. While Ove Arup and Partners became one of the country's most important engineering firms, the Shirehall is not of particular note within the firm's very extensive oeuvre.

The degree of special interest required for post-war buildings is high. The Shirehall is clearly a building of some distinction, and, as stated by Pevsner, is the county's major monument to post-war Modernism. However, listing assessments are made in the national context, and only buildings with special architectural or historic interest can be recommended. While the Shirehall has elements that are well-composed, distinctive, and richly detailed, these make up a limited proportion of the extensive complex. Additionally, the highly permeable plan form, with linked courtyards leading from the processional way has been lost. On balance, the Shirehall falls just short of the standard required for civic buildings of the period, and so cannot be recommended for listing. A Certificate of Immunity from listing should therefore be granted.

CONCLUSION

After examining all the records and other relevant information and having carefully considered the architectural and historic interest of this case, the criteria for listing are not fulfilled. The Shirehall is not recommended for listing, and a Certificate of Immunity should be granted.

REASONS FOR DESIGNATION DECISION

The Shirehall is not recommended for listing for the following principal reasons:

Degree of architectural interest:

- * from the south, it is a distinctive, well-composed, and carefully-scaled building which respects its landmark location, but these qualities of interest diminish towards the rear;
- * the rounded council chamber forms a successful, eye-catching counterpoint to the angularity of the rest of the building, and has a particularly good concourse below, but is a conventional feature for the period;
- * designed as a highly permeable building, but the under-building of two slabs blocks means those connections, and thus the symbolic intent, have been lost;
- * the council suite is a generous space provided drama in its full-height glazing and coffered ceiling, but, along with the committee rooms, is otherwise relatively sparsely detailed;
- * while a consistent approach is taken in the style of the building's joinery, there are few other features, and a limited palette of materials, which enrich the interior;
- * the courts are the exception, but the rich materials within this small area of the building as a whole, is insufficient in compensating for the treatment elsewhere;
- * the fountain pool, which was the principal landscape feature, was problematic and has been infilled.

Degree of historic interest:

- * the national stock of civic buildings of the post-war decades include a number of high-quality examples, exhibiting innovative design and planning, rich, symbolic materials and art works, and with integrated landscapes, and against those listed examples, the interest of the Shirehall falls just short.

Countersigning comments:

AGREED. Shirehall, Shrewsbury, of 1963-66 by the Shropshire County Architects' Department under Ralph Crowe, is a building of remarkable scale and extent. It has elements of good interest, such as the court wing and council chamber block, and the thoughtful handling of the main entrance approach. However, the interest is not sustained throughout the building, and as a whole it falls short of the level of interest required to merit national listing. A Certificate of Immunity should therefore be issued.

S MEE

01-OCT-2020

Annex 1

Factual Details

Name: Shropshire Shirehall and former storage building

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. An alternative, more constrained, site on Smithfield Road was considered, though the column site was preferred as the brief could be fulfilled with fewer storeys.

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, and that linking the north and south slabs. This has inhibited pedestrian passage through the building complex, and thus its symbolic permeability. 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. Partitioning has been inserted. 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.

The building was opened by the Queen on 17 March 1967. It was not widely reported upon in the architectural press, though received an appraisal in the Architects' Journal in 1967. The accounts notes the artworks commissioned for the building; these included a relief mural by Rosalind Alexander, and a sculptural mobile by Michael Eastham, which is not believed to survive. Furniture, by Douglas Webb and Evan Pardoe, was also commissioned.

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 linked landscaped courtyards. Slab blocks ranging from three to six 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, and with courtyards in between. 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 reflective 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, conceived as a Japanese gravel garden, now contains the main entrance to the building; it 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. Two further courtyards are formed between the north and south slabs and linking slab blocks; these were originally adjoined on the ground via an arcade beneath the linking slab. This connection has been lost through the infilling of the arcade.

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 a foyer to the council chamber and committee rooms. It has full-height glazing on two elevations, and a coffered ceiling with replacement 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 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; surrounding the lantern is a suspended ceiling. Matchboarding and a vinyl covers the walls. The fittings in both courtrooms survive; banks of seats, balustrades, desks, the dock and bench are clad in dark green or grey marble with a timber trim, some with sloping 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

Other

'The new Shirehall - and you' (leaflet), Shropshie Archives ref XLS25193

Map

National Grid Reference: SJ5065312171



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