

## Birmingham Town Hall

In every great city there is a building that serves to gather the place together, and to be the focus for its civic pride. In most cases that building is the cathedral, a grand and soaring tribute to the endeavour of centuries.

In Birmingham it is different. With the best will in the world, St Philip's is modest in ambition and small in capacity. Indeed, it was felt to be too constricted even in the early 19th Century, when the Triennial Music Festivals were held there.

One needs to look elsewhere for the building that the Birmingham people keep closest to their heart. You do not have far to look. A short walk down Waterloo Street and it hoves into view, a little piece of Ancient Rome transferred to the Midlands of England. They call it the Town Hall.

In most cases a town hall would be the centre of local government; in Birmingham it reverts to its original meaning. Here is a hall for the town, a people's palace, an embodiment of civic ambition. And primarily the Town Hall has always been a place to play and hear music. Frank Salmon calls it "the first great civic concert hall to be created in this country", marking the point when music was, for the first time, taken out of the sacred and into the secular.

Anthony Peers has lived with this great concert hall for the last dozen or so years. In 1999, working for Rodney Melville & Partners, he was helping to draw up a conservation plan for the hall. By that time, the old lady of Paradise Street was rather feeling her age. Call it architectural arthritis. The music had died, and the orchestra had switched to Symphony Hall.

That conservation took a further eight years. Only in 2007, after much investment by the City Council, the Heritage Lottery Fund and many other private donors, was the Town Hall returned to the arms of the people of Birmingham.

"It's a generational thing," Anthony tells me. "Parents remember their first great concert at the Town Hall, and they tell their children. And so the cycle of affection continues."

Anthony Peers is modest about his own roll in the process of conservation. But he can be less modest about the magnificent book that traces the Town Hall's birth and re-birth. *Birmingham Town Hall. An Architectural History* is published by Lund Humphries and English Heritage, price £30.00.

Much of that story is woven into the familiar fabric of Birmingham's history. We know of the architect's bankruptcy, the hurried attempts to get the hall finished in time for the premiere of Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, the rise and fall of the Music Festivals, the riots outside during the visit of David Lloyd George in 1900.

What Peers' book also does is to make us pause, as we cross Victoria Square in a hurry, or thread our through the German Market, and consider the meaning of this great structure to the city of Birmingham as a whole.

It would, for one thing, be music to the present government's ears, for here was greatness under tough budgetary constraints. The full cost of the hall was a mere £35,000. Built a generation later, Peers tells us, St George's Hall in Liverpool (which fulfils a very similar purpose) cost ten times as much. Manchester Town Hall was thirty times as expensive.

Birmingham Town Hall, however, was created in the early 1830s, when civic endeavour was still in its infancy, and the body who commissioned it - the Birmingham Street Commissioners - were hard-nosed businessmen, well accustomed to driving a hard bargain.

Ambition, the Street Commissioners knew well, must always be clothed in modest dress in Birmingham. Unelected they may have been, but they were acutely sensitive to public opinion, and to the pockets of their ratepayers. The money to build the Town Hall would have to be borrowed, and then recouped through the rates.

For the middling classes the level of the rates were an ever-present grievance. They paid any number of poor levies, as well as church rates and county rates and Street Act rates. A further rate for the Town Hall needed very careful handling indeed.

Yet a bargain the people of Birmingham undoubtedly got, albeit at the expense of the architects, Joseph Hansom and Edward Welch. Hansom filed for bankruptcy in March 1834, with the building some distance from completion. It was not truly finished until 1850, and further changes, some more substantial than others, have continued ever since.

Birmingham Town Hall was born in perhaps the most turbulent decade in Birmingham's political history. Work began in 1832, the year when the Reform Act finally gave the town representation in Parliament, and municipal incorporation followed within the same ten years.

In the campaign to press through the Reform Bills Birmingham had flexed her muscles and displayed a new-found zeal. But those vast meetings had been conducted in the least august of settings: on a hillside in the Jewellery Quarter, or in a horse repository in Cheapside. Cheapside was indeed what it was.

If Birmingham had come of age, then, it needed a building to match its growing status. And where better to look for inspiration than in the Forum at Rome, that once beating heart of republican values. With the end of the Napoleonic wars, as Peers shows, architects were once more free to find their models in Italy and France, and so the fragmentary remains of the Temple of Castor in the Roman Forum became Hansom's ambitious template. Peers demonstrates how even that idea was subject to cost-cutting.

By the time it was complete, however, Birmingham at last had a building to match its industrial and political might. In its grand Corinthian columns and inspiring great hall, the Town Hall showed that even this most workmanlike of places could do culture and the arts. It was the first step along the road from town to city.