

West Bromwich Town Hall

The year 1882 represents a major milestone in the history of West Bromwich. It was in this year that the ratepayers of the town successfully petitioned the Queen for a charter of incorporation under the Municipal Corporations (New Charters) Act of 1877. Her Majesty graciously acceded to the request and, behold, West Bromwich had its very own town council, with six wards and eighteen councillors. The citizens of the town probably considered they were arriving a tad late for the local government party. Close (and larger) neighbours like Birmingham had already taken advantage of an earlier Municipal Corporations Act in 1835 to petition for incorporation. The supplementary Act, four decades later, had spread this enfranchisement wider.

But in one particular aspect West Bromwich was ahead of the game. Whereas Birmingham had elected its councillors, and many years afterwards built itself a council house to accommodate them, the Black Country borough already had one, thank you very much.

Down the High Street, at the corner with Lodge Road, West Bromwich Town Hall was already waiting for an elected council to move in. Its tall tower, done in fashionable Venetian Gothic, declared the town to be quite the equal of its neighbours in culture and aspiration, just a little behind the curve in political emancipation.

So if West Bromwich Town Hall was not built for a town council, who was it built for? The answer to that lies in the body which, in many towns and cities, preceded elected councillors. In Birmingham they were known as Street Commissioners; in West Bromwich they were Town Improvement Commissioners. This group of men had the power to set a rate, plan new streets, organize lighting and commission necessary public buildings. In many ways they are the unsung missing link between the old manorial system and the local government we know today. In West Bromwich they were in office from 1854 to 1882.

It was the Town Improvement Commissioners who, with more than an air of grandeur about them, decided that their town merited a fine public building, with a proper concert hall to boot. That it would also provide them with meeting rooms, and offices for the various functionaries of evolving local government, was all part of the cunning plan. At last the surveyor and marvellously named inspector of nuisances would have desks and ink-wells to befit their exalted station.

The Town Hall was planned in 1871, built in 1873-4 and opened in 1875. The fact that the architects - Messrs Alexander & Henman - hailed from Stockton-on-Tees was something of a blow to local pride, but at least the builder came from Wednesbury.

So complex has municipal government become in this part of the Black Country, that we are apt to forget the separate authorities which now shelter under the generic umbrella of Sandwell. Nor is it easy to find uses for the (listed) town halls that once proclaimed independent ambition. The town halls at Smethwick and West Bromwich stand to remind us.

Within a relatively limited budget, and in the face of penny-pinching ratepayers, the West Bromwich Town Improvement Commissioners fitted out their new hall as grandly as they might. The floors were laid with tiles from Maw & Company of Coalbrookdale, the ceilings richly decorated and the exterior adorned with carvings by John Roddis, depicting (in true medieval style) the labours of the twelve months. Roddis had on his CV work at Castle Howard, Blenheim Palace and Gloucester Cathedral. There was (and is) stained glass too, supplied by a local manufacturer, Martin Dunn, whose shop was in the High Street. In normal circumstances this would surely have boasted many copies of the town's coat of arms, but, at the time of building, of course, West Bromwich didn't have one.

No matter, the commissioners cobbled something together, which was reflective of local tradition, without making any specific heraldic claims. Their chosen logo showed a blast furnace between two glass kilns, together with a Staffordshire knot. Only in 1882, when official borough status came along, could West Bromwich install a proper coat of arms in the glass, with an appropriately aspirational motto. "Labor Vincit Omnia" it said, with the usual pile of stags, plumes and medieval helmets. The wording sounds like an early declaration of the town's political views.

When - in August 1875 - the new Town Hall was suitably equipped and finished, there was time for the obligatory banquet, though the presence of the police force outside suggests that ill-feeling over unwarranted expenditure had not entirely gone away. Nevertheless, the invited guests dined and toasted for all they were worth, and a band accompanied their repast.

The excitement of the occasion was all too much for one of the local MPs, Alexander Brogden, who - inflated with civic pride - stood up to announce that he would pay for a grand organ to grace the new hall out of his own pocket. That fine instrument still takes pride of place in the hall today.

Yet only seven years after erecting their great statement, the West Bromwich Town Commissioners were no more, gracefully yielding place to the elected body that supplanted them. Thanks to the Commissioners, however, the newly elected council had a building in which to celebrate

incorporation. There was the opportunity for a second banquet - in December 1882 - to mark the occasion, and there must have been many who had an invite to both.
And so West Bromwich had come of age, at least until the next local government reorganisation.