

Town halls

The Exchange was Sunderland's complete public building, the seat of local government offices and commercial activities, and a venue for social events, political and protest meetings. It replaced meeting rooms at Assembly Garth and Holy Trinity, and became headquarters for improvement, bridge and River Wear commissioners, turnpike trustees, and other local societies. There were brokers' offices on its piazza, a post (and later telegraph) office, coffee house and vast news-room.

Building was authorized under the improvement Act of 1810, but ultimately the Exchange's £8,000 cost was funded by private subscription. Shares of £50 were speedily sold, and a foundation stone laid amidst masonic ceremonial in 1812. By John and William Stokoe of Newcastle, plain and classical in the 18th-century tradition, the Exchange's frontage faces the High Street, uniting 'ornament and utility'. It is now finished in white stucco and the arches, some originally open, have been filled. Local limestone on the side and rear elevations was largely concealed by surrounding buildings but is now exposed to view. A basement visible only from the rear housed service rooms and a police station. In rooms above, the various commissioners met and magistrates sat.

By the 1860s, the Exchange struggled to cope with the demands placed on it, not least those by the traders based there. When Mowbray Park extended north in 1866, space was left on Borough Road for a town hall and offices. After delay and indecision, a large public hall was built on part of the site, backed by the Backhouse family. This, designed by G.G. Hoskins in 1872, was the Victoria Hall, a large brick building with Gothic details and a prominent tower, and site of a disaster in 1883 when 183 children were crushed to death in a rush for the exit. The council acquired the hall in 1903 and built a matching extension, Edward Hall, by John Eltringham in 1906.

Yet the plan for council offices and council chamber on this site ran much less smoothly, a design competition in 1874 mismanaged and eventually abandoned, to the council's humiliation. By the time of a second competition, in 1886, it had been decided to build on the Shrubbery in Fawcett Street, at the centre of the Victorian town. The architect Brightwen Binyon chose a French inspired classical style with prominent clock tower, in keeping with neighbouring buildings. Not really a town hall, this was already too small for its purpose when it opened in 1890. An extension planned in 1904 was never built. Furthermore there were issues with noise, from Fawcett Street at the front and the railway station behind. The town hall, though, was a symbol of the town's pride and aspiration, and was held in great affection before its demolition in 1971.

The River Wear Commission moved into its own splendid headquarters in John Street, 1904-7. These have a particularly fine board room with stately fireplaces carved from Cuban mahogany and lime wood, emphasizing the commission's role in making Sunderland a gateway to the world economy.

The civic centre designed by Sir Basil Spence, set alongside Mowbray Park in 1968-70, is very much a focus of administration. It has committee rooms and council chamber but was not intended as meeting place for the wider community.

NOTES:

Pevsner, 452-3, 456; *Tyne Mercury*, 14 July 1812; 18 Aug. 1812; Garbutt 1819, 325-30; DRO, D/Lo/E 671; *Kelly's Dir.*, (1894), 361; *Sund. Daily Echo*, 5 Aug. 1903; 6 Nov. 1906; G.R. Potts, 'Sunderland Town Hall', Milburn & Miller, RTP, 164-5; G.R. Potts, 'Frank Caws: Sunderland Architect', *Sund. Hist.* 10 (2003), 7-22; T&WAS, SDP/A15/1/1, pp. 2-3; *Sund. Herald*, 6 Nov. 1890; *British Architect*, 4 Mar. 1904, 168; *Builder*, 87, 17 Sept. 1904; 98, 18 June 1910, 696; *Sund. Year Book* (1907), 113