

The History of Barrow-in-Furness Town Hall

In 1857 Barrow was still little more than a large village. By 1877 it was an incorporated town with a thriving iron and steel industry and a population approaching 40,000. It was a time of dramatic growth and unbounded optimism, a time for Barrow to have a town hall worthy of its new stature.

The outdoor market on Duke Street was identified as the site for this exercise in civic pride. In 1877 architects were invited to submit designs in an open competition. The winner was an Irishman, W.H. Lynn, who had designed civic buildings in Belfast, Chester and Australia. There was a slight hiccup – entries were submitted under codenames, but Lynn had forgotten to include his true details in a sealed envelope, so Barrow Council had to advertise for the architect coded “Ira” to make himself known!



Lynn's design was solid Victorian Gothic, complete with a dominating tower. There then followed years of delay before building work began in 1882. Why? Partly as a result of financial constraints but also because of changes in design. An enclosed courtyard was removed but a banqueting hall was added.

By 1885 the town hall was almost finished. Then cracks were discovered at the base of the tower, probably the result of the contractors trying to cut costs by using sub-standard stone. The tower had to be dismantled and re-built.

All viable salvage was re-used, including the 1885 datestones, even though by the time the town hall was ready for occupation it was October 1886.

This unhappy episode did have one fortunate result - the official opening could coincide with Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in the summer of 1887. So on the 14th July the Marquis of Hartington, later to become the 8th Duke of Devonshire, turned a golden key to symbolically open the Town Hall.



Since that day the Town Hall has changed very little in outward appearance and it still dominates Barrow's central area. And no, it wasn't - despite a persistent local myth – built “back to front”.



The front was designed to be on Duke Street. Confusion has arisen perhaps because there was open land to the rear, allowing space for carriages and later for motor vehicles. Consequently the back entrance was more often in use than the front.

Barrow Town Hall was built of Hawcoat sandstone, though most of the outer surface has been replaced by almost identical stone from St. Bees. It is 72 metres long and it is 50 metres high to the top of the flag post. Like many large buildings throughout the centuries, it was never completely finished. Look carefully and you will see niches awaiting statues and plain blocks that were to have decorative friezes.

The town hall is a working environment with offices crammed into every square inch. Yet space has been retained for more ceremonial civic functions.

The ground floor entrance hall is the official means of access into the building and now houses a reception and information desk for public enquiries. The decoration of the building is always liable to change but, at the time of writing the entrance hall displays photos of the Queen and Duke of Edinburgh (in 1956 the Queen was the first reigning British Monarch to visit the Town Hall), a plaque unveiled by Princess Margaret in 1967 to commemorate the Centenary of the Borough, and stone tablet which records the opening of the Town Hall.



In 1987 a triptych depicting various wildlife environments was placed beside the Duke Street doors. The paintings are the work of Christine Isherwood.

Stairs lead off the entrance hall to the first floor Queen's Hall. This is by far the most impressive of the Town Hall rooms, dominated by the panels of stained glass on its western side. The three top windows feature Lord Frederick Charles Cavendish; the 7th Duke of Devonshire and Lord Edward Cavendish. Beneath them are six rectangular windows symbolising the lineage of other members of the Cavendish family.

Four modern windows have been added to symbolize the importance of industry in the development to the town - shipbuilding, commerce and trade (winged serpents), metallurgy and the iron industry are all featured.

In the doorway is a large panel devoted to the Borough Coat of Arms. The main features are a paddle steamer (docks and trade), a stag (Cavendish crest) and a ram (signifying the Founding role of Sir James Ramsden). A bee and arrow form a visual and phonetic pun to describe Barrow.



On the opposite wall, is a portrait of the Duke of Devonshire, presented in 1888. There are also local busts of the philosopher Locke and poet Dryden, and, for some reason, the nymph Clytie. The bust of Queen Victoria was presented to the borough in 1887 to mark the Royal Jubilee.



Immediately off the Queens Hall is the Council chamber, venue for the formal meetings of full Council. The stained glass panels were the gift of H.W. Schneider and depict the arts of Drawing, Painting, Sculpture and Minstrelsy. Opposite is a full-length portrait of Sir James Ramsden. At the rear of the Chamber, on the ground floor, is a recess that was originally the Press Gallery and above the Public Gallery, originally called the Strangers' Gallery.



Next to the Council chamber, and connected by doors behind the Mayoral Chair, is the Drawing Room. This is still occasionally used for receptions but is more often pressed into service as a meeting room. Outside the Drawing Room in the Ante Room stands a replica of the statue of Sir James Ramsden that dominates Ramsden Square and a dinner gong from Abbotswood. The final public room is the Banqueting Hall that is now used mainly for large meetings and as the centre for Local and General Elections. To the side of the stage is a Minstrels' Gallery, whilst above the rear of the hall is what was originally termed a Ladies' Gallery.

**Written by Bryn Trescaheric
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