

# THE TWENTIETH CENTURY SOCIETY

Founded in 1979  
as the Thirties Society  
to protect British  
Architecture and Design  
after 1914

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## ***New evidence in the Redcar Library case for consideration for EH***

The Twentieth Century Society has already forwarded this building for listing and we would ask that English Heritage would refer to the previous application and their strong recommendation to list the building at Grade II for the architectural merits of the architecture.

The new evidence that the Society now present is the result of a number of meetings with Norman Reuter, an architect whose task at the DES was to research and report on library design. Reuter visited over 80 libraries in the course of his research for the DES and much of that work feeds into the design of Redcar Library.

English Heritage do make mention of the fact that Redcar's library was prototypical and that it constituted a new template for library buildings nationally. The Society hopes that this new information will show just how significant the building was in that regard.

Post-war libraries follow two major trends. In the larger towns and cities the emphasis was on rebuilding old libraries, usually dating from the late nineteenth century, that had become too small for growing populations or which could not provide space for the record libraries, student study areas or meeting rooms, which had become important services by the 1960s. In younger towns and suburbs, and in rural areas, library provision was in the hands of the county councils, who had been granted this power only in 1919. Very few libraries were built in these areas in the inter-war years, and the post-war period saw a rapid growth of new facilities there. Redcar is unusual in library provision in standing somewhere between the two, and the Society believes that a greater understanding of its context will help explain its very special importance.

Most counties built large numbers of very small libraries, often to a standard plan. Some of these used building systems, notably Nottinghamshire, whose new libraries used the CLASP system pioneered for its schools. Lancashire built dozens of libraries to three general plans: large, medium or small, and the North and West Ridings were also prolific. These repetitive buildings were almost all single storey, the larger models with distinct lending, reference and children's rooms and a central courtyard. Many counties grouped their provision into regions based on a slightly larger library that housed a larger book store and a mobile van for visiting more remote areas. More individual libraries of greater interest were concentrated in new or expanding towns, and in towns like Whitby that surrendered their independent status in return for a new building.

Town and cities commonly followed the model provided by Holborn Library, opened in 1960 and currently being considered for listing by the Minister. This library was designed by the Borough Architect's Department under Sydney Cook, working closely with the librarian J. Swift. Cook visited Sweden and Denmark in July 1956, but had already lectured to the Library Association on 'Library Buildings of the Future' that May; when stressing the importance of natural light and flexible fittings, and recommending a mezzanine, he described the Holborn scheme. The internal arrangement of the lending library, with its balcony housing the non-fiction collections, was derived ultimately from that at the Frederiksberg Library, Copenhagen, built in 1935 by Hans Andresen. Holborn also had, packed on to its tight site, a basement children's library with a theatre area for storytelling, while a staircase lined in timber and Formica led to a first-floor reference library and third-floor lecture theatre. All the shelving, which incorporated signage and fluorescent lighting, was by the architects, as were the trolleys, counters and desks. The cost was half that of Kensington, but, claimed the Library Association in 1960, 'This library puts British design on the level of all that is best in post-war continental library building. It is a librarians' library, which an architect of brilliant parts has interpreted magnificently.' It is a reminder, too, that most of the leading post-war libraries were the work of borough architects, rather than by well-known names in private practice.

Holborn's model was widely imitated, especially its feature of a mezzanine to the lending library, housing the less popular non-fiction books so that the main floor area could be freed of bookcases to create open sitting areas, exhibition space and free space around the control area and issuing counter. Stoke, opened as late as December 1970 to the designs of the City Architect, J. W. Plant, still firmly of this kind, arranged on four floors. More suburban libraries had more space and were generally of two storeys. The only listed example of this kind is at Hornsey, from 1963-5, where the large lending area is a double-height space with a mezzanine on one side, while the reference library, exhibition space and meeting room is set over the children's library and administrative offices around a small courtyard on the other. Kirkby, one of the most interesting county libraries, dating from 1964, also follows this plan. In 1965, J. D. Reynolds, reviewing the year's achievements for the Library Association, recorded that 'the Scandinavian influence, which began to make its presence felt in the late 'fifties, is now so well established over here that to follow it has come to be the rule. It would seem that librarians and architects, thus freed from overmuch concern about the ways of achieving light, staff control, storage, furnishings and colour, might be giving more attention to function, but they are not. Many of the resulting buildings are adequate for carrying on the job that libraries have been doing for over a hundred years. From time to time, however, it occurs that given a different kind of approach, a different and more useful kind of building might emerge' (*Library Buildings 1965*, p.1). Reynolds called for a move away from housing separate collections in different rooms and for more spaces for communal activities.

Reynolds was to be disappointed, however. In his editorial for the next year's edition of *Library Buildings*, he wrote of 'lost opportunities', and that 'the design of public libraries is in a rut', that local issues and settings were not taken account of, nor were the public consulted. Libraries also needed to be integrated more thoroughly with other services. In 1967 a working party was set up to look into these issues, which led to a further

publication of *Library Buildings* in 1972. Here, at last, were a handful of libraries that broke the mould, and Redcar was the chief of these.

The Roberts Report recommended that towns with populations under 40,000 should cease to be library authorities, a policy endorsed by the Ministry of Education in 1962. Redcar and Maidenhead, targeted for expansion, objected. They eventually developed new buildings with the new Department of Education and Science in an initiative to make libraries more approachable. When Redcar Borough Council asked the DES to suggest an architect, it 'strongly recommended' one firm, Ahrends, Burton and Koralek, who were duly appointed in March 1966. The DES and Peter Ahrends deliberately selected a site adjoining other civic buildings. The council were anxious that the building be constructed of steel, to support the principal local industry. Tenders were approved in March 1968 but by the time building began that October Redcar had been subsumed into the new County Borough of Teesside. An exposed steel frame, painted bright yellow, has lines of industrial rooflights and full-height windows facing the sea, although covered ways linking adjoining public buildings break down its pavilion qualities. Inside, the hexagonal holes of the exposed steel beams become a decorative motif. Redcar was one of the first libraries with a coffee bar, included to attract people visiting the adjoining buildings.

The Library Association was concerned with the comfort of its staff and their customers rather than with architectural ambition. Here, however, its reporters noted that 'here is seen the very strong influence of an imaginative architect. [The] structural motif is highly appropriate to the community and a very good solution to the problem of community attraction and involvement. The coffee bar and the feeling of space for leisure give a welcome to the casual user. The water garden in the children's library, open plan and low shelving, all combine to give a picture of a single, integrated library of service to all citizens' (*Library Buildings 1972*, Library Association 1973, p.30). In particular it admired the forecourt space, which had room for prams, and an exhibition space that could be used independently of the library. The adult lending and children's libraries were only partially separated, with a courtyard garden and ornamental pool, while the reference library provided seating for school children and students. This flexibility was made possible by the open steel roof, a motif that featured in subsequent work by Ahrends, Burton and Koralek, notably their Eastfield School at Thurmaston, Leicestershire, and the much larger library they built for Portsmouth Polytechnic, now the university.

Redcar Library was the first venture of this important post-war practice into steel, having previously been masters of concrete construction, well seen in their pioneering library at Trinity College, Dublin, of 1963, and in their other listed buildings in England and Scotland. The firm's one other public library, the slightly later example at Maidenhead from 1970-3, used steel in the form of a space frame roof with red brick, and was listed when it was barely thirty years old, in 2003.

Redcar is also significant as an example of a library built by a small local councils that was about to be absorbed by a larger authority. Redcar Urban District won its right to build an independent library only to be pushed into the new County Borough of Teesside in 1968. A new library was a good way of spending the reserves on its own citizens rather than seeing them taken over for the greater good of the much larger

authority – and one likely to be solidly Labour, unlike Conservative Redcar. This pattern began in London, notably with Hornsey and Hampstead (Swiss Cottage) Libraries in 1963-5, and rose to a peak ahead of the local government reorganisation in 1974. Bebington, on the Wirral, of 1972 is one good example, Ewell in Surrey from 1970 another. But by the early 1970s museums and theatres had become more fashionable routes for these windfall capital projects, as Robert Hutchison reported in *The Politics of the Arts Council*, London, Sinclair Brown, 1982, p.105.

In light of the above and in addition to the information contained in the initial English Heritage assessment, the Twentieth Century Society would ask that Redcar be reassessed for Grade II listing.

There is an imminent threat to the building which has been approved for demolition. The Society would therefore ask that with no interim protection in place and a COI request in place, that English Heritage expedite this request. The Society feel strongly that this is a building of national special interest that needs urgent protection through listing.

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