

The Victorian Society in Manchester

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EDITORIAL

THE BATTLE OF THE STYLES CONTINUED?

Anyone with more than a passing interest in Victorian architecture will know about the 'battle of the styles' that began at the start of the Queen's reign and reached its climax with the commission for new government offices on Whitehall between 1856 and 1860. The three-section competition, launched during Lord Palmerston's first administration, resulted in victories for little-known architects peddling versions of contemporary Parisian architecture. The block-plan section was even won by a Beaux-Arts-trained architect, Alphonse Crépinet. The ensuing debate about British national identity, which centred on the appropriateness of neo-Gothic precedents for secular as well as for sacred buildings, resulted in the insertion of George Gilbert Scott as architect for the government offices in 1858, during the brief Tory administration of Lord Derby.

On his return to the premiership in 1859, however, Palmerston would have nothing to do with Scott's Gothic Revival designs. Scott declined to take Gladstone's advice that he should resign the commission. Instead, he attempted to retain his neo-medieval principles by switching the style of his design from Gothic to 'Italo-Byzantine'. In 1860 Palmerston's patience ran out and he ordered the architect to abandon that 'regular mongrel affair' and make 'a design in the ordinary Italian' - or face the sack. Swallowing his pride, Scott (with the assistance of the East India Company's architect, Matthew Digby Wyatt) went on to produce the magnificent neo-Renaissance building that is today's Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

The story is very well known and

has, indeed, been the subject of monographic books by Ian Toplis (1987) and Bernard Porter (2011) – as well as of a number of scholarly articles, beginning with David Brownlee's 'That regular mongrel affair' in 1985. Brownlee conceptualized the contretemps as the moment when the High Victorian movement in architecture was derailed by an elderly survivor (Palmerston was 76 in 1860) of the earlier nineteenth-century Reform movement, whose architectural ideas were retrogressively late Georgian. Although more nuanced interpretations have emerged subsequently, that idea has basically stuck.

for in other comments on the question he clearly distinguished between the 'Greek' idiom of the ancient world and the 'Italian' of the Renaissance. What he surely meant was a building in the Victorian Italianate style which, by the end of the 1850s, had become the expressive idiom for a far greater proportion of British architecture than was encompassed by neo-Gothic churches, educational buildings and the like. It was an idiom that had just as much right as the Gothic Revival to claim to represent 'the modern school of English architecture', as W.H. Leeds called it in the title of his 1839 monograph on Charles



Burnley Mechanics Institute (1854-55) architect James Green

It is not, however, Palmerston's remark on Scott's 'regular mongrel affair' that catches my eye, but rather his subsequent instruction to the architect to make 'a design in the ordinary Italian'. What did the Prime Minister mean by this? Not, of course, that he wanted a mundane building and not, I believe, that he wanted an old-fashioned building. Neither did he mean a generically classical building,

Barry's pioneering Travellers' Club in Pall Mall. Joint stock and private banks, insurance buildings, clubs and mechanics' institutes, hotels and suburban villas are all building types in which the Italianate predominated, at least up to the 1860s (much later outside London). The warehouses of Charlotte Street in Manchester exemplify it, as they do in Bradford and Glasgow. There is also good



Heywood's Bank, Manchester (1849-50): architect John Gregan

representation in public architecture - with Edward Walters' Free Trade Hall in Peter Street and Blackburn Town Hall as prime examples. Indeed, the outcome of the government offices competition set Whitehall on a path of neo-Renaissance and neo-Baroque architecture that would only come to an end with William Whitfield's retiring neo-Elizabethan building opposite for the Department of Health of 1987.

The Italianate has been forced to play second fiddle to the Gothic Revival for too long in our understanding of early and mid-Victorian architecture. Even in James Stevens Curl's magisterial 2007 history 'Victorian Architecture: Diversity and Invention' it is largely bundled up within a single chapter (among twelve), significantly titled 'Some Styles other than Gothic'! There are many reasons for this, of course. Even now we are still engaged in a process of reclaiming the validity of Victorian architecture from a twentieth-century view that, insofar as it recognized the nineteenth century at all, chose to see the Gothic Revival and its Arts and Crafts progeny as the antecedents of its own Modernism (though members of Victorian Societies tend to take a more catholic view!). Then there are the texts, from Pugin to Ruskin to Eastlake to Morris, that make powerful polemical arguments - so attractive to scholars and journalists - for the role of the

medieval and vernacular in nineteenth-century architectural design. There are really no equivalents for the 'ordinary' Italian. The source books for Italian Renaissance architecture used by Victorian architects were French, not English. More than half of the non-French subscribers to Paul-Marie Letarouilly's *Edifices de Rome moderne* in 1840 were British - including Manchester's own Edward Walters. The copy of Letarouilly now in the Deansgate Library belonged in 1855 to James Stevens, an architect who lived and worked in Macclesfield but kept an office at 32 Princess Street (and was later, in 1882-83, President of the Manchester Society of Architects). Then there are the lacunae in the secondary literature: for Walters we have never had a monographic study, and the same is true for most of the other greatest exponents of the Italianate in Victorian Britain, such as David Bryce and David Rhind, both in Edinburgh, Charles Lanyon in Belfast, Yeoville Thomason in Birmingham, the London City architect James Bunstone Bunning, and even Sir Charles Barry.

As these examples indicate, the Italianate story is a truly nationwide one and we lose essential aspects of it if we view Victorian architecture centrifugally, from the capital outwards. Indeed, northern England is - along with Scotland - probably the major region for the idiom. With the County

Courts Act of 1846, responsibility for the erection of new buildings for hearing small debt cases was handed by the Home Office to the Metropolitan Police architect, Charles Reeves. From his London base he designed over sixty County Courts across England and Wales. Almost all of them were Italianate palazzi and the finest examples are found in the growing towns of south and west Yorkshire, where they evidently became representative of civic rivalry and pride. Salford's handsome County Court dates from c.1865 and was thus probably designed by Reeves' assistant and successor, Thomas Charles Sorby. The strong commitment to the Italianate in the north-west can be seen further in buildings like Burnley's Mechanics' Institute, erected in 1854-55. Its architect, James Green of Todmorden, had evidently been studying John Gregan's bank for Sir Benjamin Heywood in St Ann Street, Manchester, completed in 1849/50. No history of banking architecture in Britain would be complete without this stellar Mancunian example, although the building has not yet been fully understood. Only the basement and ground floor of the stone section housed banking activities. The two upper floors provided palatial accommodation for the Manager and his servants, whilst the brick section to the south, generally referred to as the Manager's House, in fact contained service quarters above a pair of ground-floor reception rooms for the use of Sir Benjamin and Lady Heywood.

Most of the buildings mentioned so far have been versions of the astylar 'palazzo' manner pioneered by Charles Barry at the Travellers' Club in 1830 and reiterated at the Athenaeum on Princess Street in 1837. It must be recognized, however, that this represents only one genre within the overall idiom that can be defined as 'Italianate' in Victorian Britain. Indeed the term itself seems first to have been associated with those earlier nineteenth-century villas, also astylar but given belvedere towers, of which the Queen's own Osborne House was to become the most iconic example. At Ellel, near Lancaster, the Liverpool whisky merchant and Mayor William

Preston built himself one of the best Osbornes-in-miniature in 1857-59, but there are many others nationwide, especially when one includes the middle-class suburban villa.

Other genres of 'Italianate' architecture in Victorian Britain must include derivatives of Florentine or Venetian Quattrocento architecture, such as J.A. Picton's Hargreaves Buildings of 1859 in Chapel Street, Liverpool - a good reinterpretation of what Ruskin called 'Early

In an essentially pluralistic age like that of Victoria's Britain, it would be perverse to claim that Italianate architecture can be conceived as a clearly defined and 'pure' stylistic alternative to the logic of the Gothic Revival. Hardly any architect worked solely in the Italianate style; the exclusive use of a single architectural style is only found among some Gothic revivalists. Moreover, the Gothic and Italianate idioms both became submerged in the neo-vernacular and eclectic approaches of late Victorian

remarkable, as John Booker pointed out in his 1990 study 'Temples of Mammon: The Architecture of Banking', that so many hundreds of banks across the country were erected in the Italianate idiom, often as the most prominent and distinctive buildings in town centres, without any indication at all in directors' minutes of stylistic debate or uncertainty at the point of commission. That's just what the image of a bank was to the average Victorian in 1860 – a building in what even the Prime Minister recognized as 'the ordinary Italian' style.

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County Courts, Encombe Place, Salford (c.1865).

Renaissance' in 'The Stones of Venice'. It should be recalled that Ruskin did not despise this type of architecture, reserving his famous comment on the 'foul torrent of the Renaissance' for what we would recognize as the later developments of Mannerism and the Baroque. None the less, both Mannerist and Baroque buildings in Italy did come to serve as models for Victorian architects, as did the richly sculptured 'High Renaissance' work of Sansovino in Venice (which the Victorians rather confusingly tended to call 'Palladian'). As Richard Jenkyns has observed, when we consider William Gingell's fabulous West of England and South Wales District Bank, begun on Bristol's Corn Street in 1854, the year after the third volume of *The Stones of Venice* appeared, 'it is as though [Ruskin] had never written'

architects – although Robert J. Johnson's Hodgkin, Barnett, Pease and Spence Bank on Collingwood Street in Newcastle shows that the palazzo genre was still alive and healthy into the 1890s. Nevertheless, there is a case for re-conceptualizing Italianate architecture – not as the conservative choice of a Liberal Prime Minister foisted onto an unwilling nation, but as a new approach to the classical tradition originating in the early 1830s that, by the end of the 1850s, had become more or less ubiquitous and was deemed symbolically appropriate for the burgeoning Victorian nation. We see this most clearly in the architecture of banking, effectively a new industry in the nineteenth century with the advent of Joint Stock and Savings Banks, but with roots stretching back to Medicean Florence and maritime Venice. It is