



## C20 Society SW Region visit to Devon County Council, County Hall, Exeter

22nd April 2017

Led by, Bill Horner, Devon County Council Historic Environment Manager

County Hall, Exeter, was designed for Devon County Council by Donald Hanks McMorran (1904-1965) and was formally opened in 1964. It is a grade II\* Listed Building (National List Entry: 1323701).

The decision to build County Hall, bringing the authority's many dispersed departments together in a single building, required special dispensation from central government for such spending at a time of post-war austerity. 22 acres (9 hectares) of land, including the suburban villas of Bellair and Coaver and their grounds, were acquired in 1952. Permission to build was granted in 1953.

McMorran was appointed the following year, from list of six architects recommended by the Royal Institute of British Architects. He was one of the most important British architects still working in a neo-classical idiom (His style is variously described as: 'neo-Georgian', 'sophisticated neo-classical' and 'idiosyncratic classical'). McMorran had worked with H Farquharson and E Vincent Harris and had a reputation based on significant housing, education and public building projects. However, County Hall was his first major work outside London and was a significant contract, described as '*the plum job*' in the *Architects Journal* of 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1954.

The brief was decidedly (but fortuitously) vague. H G Godsall, Clerk to the County Council, suggested that the building should be in a '*dignified sort of style, but incorporating perhaps some suitable modern touches in design*'. The Chairman of the County Council, Sir George Hayter Hames, wrote that the requirement was for '*a building as modern as possible in its arrangement and engineering, but not too much, as it should not clash too severely with its surrounding buildings or pleasant rural setting ... I think we want something really attractive and graceful*'.

Design work began in 1954 but proceeded slowly, evolving as the County Council's requirements changed and budgetary constraints became ever tighter. Wet weather, shortages of bricklayers, strikes, holidays and the transfer of workmen to sites at Exeter University were also cited as causes of delay. The granite foundation Stone was eventually laid on 16<sup>th</sup> October 1958, the first office block structure completed in 1959 and occupied by the Education Department in 1961. On 14<sup>th</sup> July 1964 County Hall was formally opened.

The work is very English through the influence of Farquharson and Harris, and Lutyens behind them. However, the influence of late Scandinavian Classicism, particularly Ragnar Ostberg's Stockholm Town Hall, is also evident in the plan and in the detailing of the Committee Suite and Council Chamber. The listing documentation of 1998 states that: '*The building is of a very high quality throughout in terms of its materials, finishes, furnishings and craftsmanship including the use of many local materials*'. The building's reinforced concrete structure is mostly clad in McMorran's trademark golden-brown brick. These are handmade Ibstock bricks, with 'fat and unpointed' mortar. Dartmoor granite was used for the building's plinth, string courses, lintels and arches. The expansive roofs are covered in Westmoreland, rather than West country slate. However, local materials such as Purbeck Marble, Doultling Stone and Ashburton Marble feature in the main public and ceremonial areas, alongside chestnut and pine panelling. Portland Stone, which at the time was mostly earmarked for the post-Blitz reconstruction of London, also features

in the inner courtyard. The hard landscaping also utilises local volcanic stone for kerbs and Dartmoor granite cobbling and steps, alongside Yorkstone paving.

In plan, a central block is comprised of the Committee Suite over the 'Great Gateway' with the Council Chamber and a clock tower as the terminal feature. Off this central spine, the main office blocks form an open quadrangle. The surrounding and intervening squares and gardens allow the parkland of Bellair and Coaver to penetrate and 'touch' the building. Mc Morran himself envisaged that the '*parkland can extend right up to the walls of the building and the main entrance becomes a 'gate house' like that of a medieval palace or collegiate building*'.

The planting of McMorran's own design, around Bellair, the Council Chamber and along east side of the office block, was in the Lutyens and Jekyll tradition. However, much of the planting of the pre-existing grounds was retained, including Monterey Pine, Gingko (*Ginkgo biloba*), Southern Beech, Holm Oak, Magnolia and a fine Lucombe Oak (*Quercus X hispanica lucobeana*) - one of only 7 hybrids raised from acorns by William Lucombe at his Exeter nursery in the 1760's.

Donald Hanks McMorran died aged 61, only the year after the opening of County Hall, Exeter. According to one obituary McMorran '*Sought to humanise the monster buildings demanded by modern society*'. County Hall remains substantially as completed in 1964 and it confirms McMorran as '*the underrated master of an undervalued genre*' (Howard, 2003).

**Bill Horner, Devon County Council Historic Environment Manager, after:**

Denison, E. 2009. *Twentieth Century Architects: McMorran and Whitby*.

Gould, J. 1999. Listed Building Management Guidelines for Devon *County Hall*.

Howard, E. 2003. *England: A guide to post-war Listed Buildings*.

<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1323701>

The committee of C20 SW region would like to thanks Bill Horner for his support in agreeing to lead this event and preparing these notes.

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