

Preston Past: Sir George Gilbert Scott's Preston Town Hall

By Paul D. Swarbrick

An Architectural Gem for Preston.



George Gilbert Scott's Town Hall standing majestically in the Market Square, Preston. 1886—1947

Gilbert Scott's magnificent Town Hall was built between 1862 and 1866 standing on the site of the former Moot Hall between Fishergate and the Market Square. It was designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott, a leading architect in the Gothic revival type of architecture. The clock tower, the second largest in Britain after the 'Big Ben' tower in London, was south west facing on the corner of Fishergate and Cheapside. However, during the planning stage officials were not sure in which direction the clock tower should face but Gilbert Scott, a man not known for his modesty, reputedly went on to say "It would look superb regardless of which elevation was chosen for the main street".



As with the exterior of the Town Hall, the interior was also rather salubrious in design. The detail on the walls, doors, ceilings and floors was in every aspect quite outstanding. The image to the left shows a glimpse of Scott's Town Hall interior entrance in 1939.

Disaster Struck.

On the night of March 15th 1947 a fire mysteriously started and the building was destroyed. One of Preston's local and eminent historians, the late Marian Roberts, who at that time lived

at the Castle Inn on Cheapside, recalled this event by saying "My own first view of this being from my bedroom at 1am, when I awoke just as the fingers of the clock fell to the ground". Prestonians of that time were reported to have said that you could hear the sound of the hour bell clanging against the masonry of the tower as it fell to the ground.

When the fire damage was assessed it was decided by the Town Council to demolish the building but this was entirely and absolutely against the wishes of the public, who had put together an eight thousand signature petition to have it saved and restored to its former glory. However, this never happened and the lower part of the building was stabilised and used for various purposes until 1962 when it was completely demolished to make way for the new and modern Crystal House which remains today and was once voted Preston's least favourite building and the one that would be most gladly demolished.

Gone – But Not Quite.

As a point of local interest, some of the masonry from the town hall still remains today and can be seen along the River Ribble banks at Howick. Anyone looking for a little nostalgia may care to walk down to the river and take a look. There is quite a lot to see. The image below shows a part of the Ribble banks where the masonry can be seen.



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