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# Hillingdon Civic Centre & Middlesex Suite, Uxbridge Heritage Assessment

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# 1 Introduction

## Purpose

- 1.1 This report has been prepared to support the change of use application to facilitate the relocation of Uxbridge Library to the Middlesex Suite at Hillingdon Civic Centre. In addition, refurbishment and improvements to the Main Entrance and Reception Area are proposed to improve the access to the proposed library and other services provided within the Civic Centre.
- 1.2 The proposals include for the internal rearrangement of Level 1 of the Middlesex Suite to provide improved and rationalised spaces for services currently provided in the Civic Centre.
- 1.3 The purpose of the report is to set out the history and heritage significance of the site and its context and to consider the impact of the proposals on that significance.
- 1.4 The report should be read in conjunction with the plans and Design & Access Statement prepared by Hunters Architects.

## Author

- 1.5 The author of this report is Nick Collins BSc (Hons) MSc MRICS IHBC. Nick is a Director of Portico Heritage. He has thirty years experience in the property sector, including working with KMHeritage and as a Project Director in the conservation team at Alan Baxter & Associates. Nick spent nine years at Historic England where he was a Principal Inspector of Historic Buildings & Areas leading a specialist team of historic building inspectors, architects, and archaeologists on a wide range of heritage projects in East & South London. Previously a Conservation Officer at the London Borough of Bromley, Nick began his career at real estate consultancy Jones Lang LaSalle as a Chartered Surveyor.
- 1.6 Nick is a member of the Institute of Historic Building Conservation and the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors and sits on the Historic England London Advisory Committee.

## 2 The site and its context

### Hillingdon Civic Centre

#### Background

- 2.1 The London Borough of Hillingdon was formed from four smaller authorities in 1965 as part of the government reorganisation of London: Uxbridge Metropolitan Borough, and the urban district councils of Hayes, Ruislip-Northwood, and Yiewsley and West Drayton. Uxbridge was seen as the communications hub for the area and the natural location for the civic centre. It also partly replaced the local functions of the disbanded Middlesex County Council.
- 2.2 Designed in 1971, it was largely built between 1973-7 with the civic suite completed in 1978 and external works like landscaping in 1979. The site chosen had been home to the Middlesex County council offices, library and health centre, a building of 1939 by CG Stillman and still incorporates part of that building, now known as the Middlesex Suite.
- 2.3 In March 1970 Robert Matthew, Johnson-Marshall and Partners (RMJM) were appointed to the job, with Andrew Derbyshire the partner in charge, later joined by Alan Cranshaw. Initially the RMJM team produced a modern building, but this was rejected by councillors who demanded it be redesigned in a traditional style. This as a reaction to the factories and offices in which they worked by day and to problems the borough had experienced with its modern, flat-roofed housing. The councillors and local residents sought something more like the houses they lived in or aspired to.



Figure 1: Hillingdon Civic Centre

2.4 In a revised design Derbyshire grasped this aspiration and offered instead ‘familiar and friendly materials, and a formal vocabulary well-known to the public’. Sources for the design were based on models from nearby counties, in particular the Arts and Crafts Movement, with Derbyshire admiring JP Seddon’s church at Ayot St Peter and that by J Harold Gibbons of 1939 at Kempston, both near his home in Welwyn Garden City. It was also from the Arts and Crafts style that much mass housing, such as that found in suburban Hillingdon, had its origins.



Figures 2&3: The ‘arts and crafts’ inspired quality of craftsmanship and detailing to the brickwork

2.5 The stepped section and serrated perimeter of the main offices were exploited to give the elevations complexity, with balconies and planting boxes. These were enhanced by pitched roofs set on the diagonal, which step down almost to the ground level so that more roof is seen than wall. Derbyshire considered it unsatisfactory to have more than three storeys, as it is easier to communicate horizontally than vertically. He divided the large, square floor plate into four quadrants by a half-storey change in level, creating distinct areas each accommodating about a hundred people. The landscaping was developed in-house marking a close relationship between it and the building.



Figures 4&5: The main entrance and piazza

2.6 Hillingdon Civic Centre reflects the change of emphasis in new local government buildings of the later post-war period. The tradition of building imposing statements of civic authority lost traction in favour of more informal approach, intended to resonate with

the communities being served. It is hard to appreciate the novelty of the building's appearance at the time of its construction, other than through the controversy it sparked.



Figures 6&7: The semi-basement and cascading bays

- 2.7 Coming from a practice like RMJM, and the committed Modernist, Andrew Derbyshire, it was seen by some as a betrayal of Modernism; the wrapping of a conventional office building in a historicist skin. To many commentators at the time, Hillingdon's new civic centre represented a new way of celebrating civic pride.

### The Building

- 2.8 The building has a reinforced concrete frame clad in narrow handmade brown brick in English bond. Brick planters are incorporated at ground floor and on upper balconies. There are covered ways at ground level reached from an open square to the front, these are paved in brick and concrete slab. Courtyards, paths and garden spaces are paved with brick. The very steep pitched roofs are tiled and the windows are of hardwood.
- 2.9 The building is sited on an irregularly shaped corner plot, between the High Street to the approximate north, and the curving dual carriage way of Hillingdon Road to the east and south. The building is reached across a large square which opens from the High Street. The main entrance is to the South of the square. Behind, the council offices have a diamond-shape footprint and a stepped profile of three and four storeys set over a semi basement car park. To the east of the square, connected behind the main entrance, is a second, more irregularly-shaped, part of the complex. This contains the council chamber, civic suite and registry office, and also has parking beneath.

### Middlesex Suite

- 2.10 To the rear of this, visible to the South and from an internal courtyard, is part of the earlier 1939 'County Buildings'. Fitted out as the 'Middlesex Suite' in 1978, this part of the building survives from the original Middlesex County Council buildings that sat on the site.
- 2.11 Truncated from its original form, it was originally designed to house a clinic on the ground floor and library services on the first.
- 2.12 The design combines a plain 'modernist' design to the south with sleek lines and expressed plain curved staircases and pared-back classical detailing around the side

entrance that was once the main entrance to the building, but now lies almost hidden in a courtyard within the Civic Centre (figures 8&9).



Figures 8&9: The integrated 1939 'Middlesex Suite' by CG Stillman and part of the original Middlesex County Council buildings

## The Middlesex County Council Buildings & Library<sup>1</sup>

- 2.13 Following adoption of the Libraries Act by Middlesex County Council in 1922 a number of branches were opened across the County. Uxbridge did not have any premises so Cllr. Bayliss offered the use of a room behind his tobacconist's shop in the High Street which opened in December 1922. However, it was in 1930 that the first professionally staffed public library in Uxbridge opened its doors at the former Cowley Road School.
- 2.14 The library rapidly outgrew its premises in Cowley Road and a new library was planned within the new Council Offices (known as County Buildings). The following plans show the layout of the library in what is now known as the Middlesex Suite.

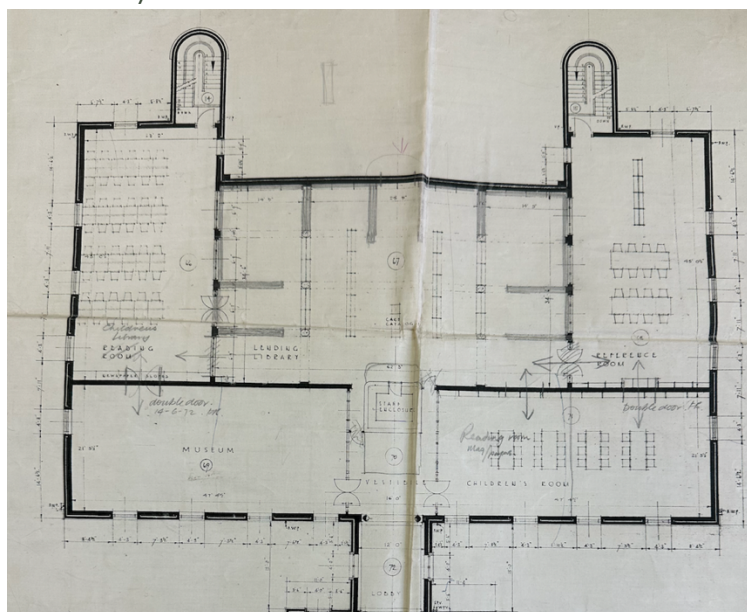


Figure 10: Plan dated 1938 showing the proposed layout of the new library (© Uxbridge Archives)

<sup>1</sup> Much of the information on the history of Uxbridge Library drawn from 'Uxbridge Library 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1930-1980' a pamphlet published by Hillingdon Borough Libraries and kept at Uxbridge Local Studies & Archive Library

- 2.15 The space was, structurally, largely open plan with bookcases used to divide the space.
- 2.16 When war broke out in 1939 there were fears that these premises would be lost to some other department, but on July 8<sup>th</sup> 1940 the new Uxbridge Library was opened “without fanfares – the only Middlesex Library never to have been officially opened”.
- 2.17 The opening was, however, marked by the following handmade poster – announcing the move to the ‘County buildings’ and displaying a small map showing the building’s location just off the High Street (the Wartime realities noted with reference to the ARP stations on the High Street).

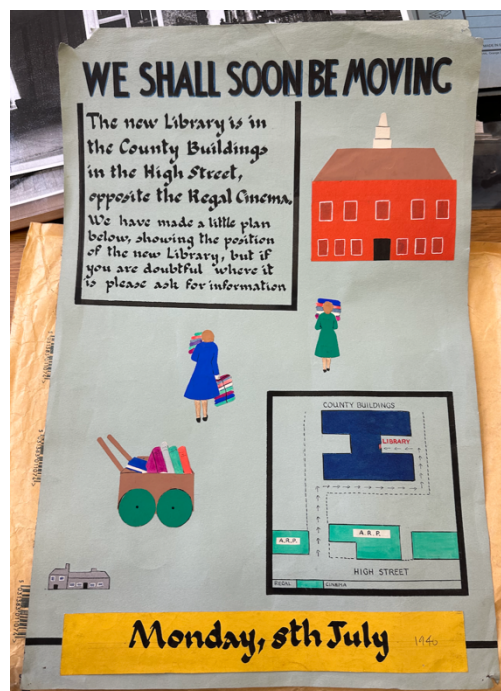


Figure 11: Poster advertising the move of the library to the County Buildings in 1940

- 2.18 In 1965 the London Borough of Hillingdon was created and took over the functions of Middlesex County Council. A new Borough Library Service was formed and it was decided that Uxbridge should become the new central library.
- 2.19 It was originally intended to incorporate this new central library into the new Civic Centre building but complex construction timetabling meant that this was not possible. In 1974 the library premises in the old County Building were incorporated into the new Civic Centre and the Library was moved to a derelict supermarket premises in the High Street.
- 2.20 The Library did not move to these new premises until just before the new Civic Centre opened and instead had to endure the construction of the new building immediately



around them. The staff kept a 'Scribbling Diary'<sup>2</sup> of their frustrations during 1974 with extracts including:

*"Sitting in Archivist's Room, terrific crash of falling timber followed by clouds of black smoke as they set fire to a heap of it in pits just below my window. Blazing bonfire ensued, just like medieval siege. Fortunately it burnt lower fairly soon but alight at pm".*

2.21 On 28<sup>th</sup> May 1974 the entry read:

*"Somebody parked their car right across bicycle shelter – required extremely tricky manoeuvring to get out. Narrow access on slipway. Electric drill right outside window of Archivist's Room, noise v. bad 1<sup>st</sup> half of morning".*

2.22 The Library moved (perhaps gratefully by then!) to 22 High Street, Uxbridge in November 1974 and their previous home was converted into the Middlesex Suite - a remnant element of the former County Council buildings retained within the brand new Civic Centre.

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<sup>2</sup> Extracts from 'Uxbridge 'On-Site' Conditions Scribbling Diary 1974: May-September 1974 during building of Civic Centre and just before removal of Library to 22 High Street, Nov. 1974. Document held at Uxbridge Local Studies & Archive Library

## 3 The heritage significance of the site and its context

### The heritage context of the site

- 3.1 Hillingdon Civic Centre is listed Grade II in April 2018. The Old Uxbridge/Windsor Street Conservation Area lies just to the north but does not include the site.

### Assessing heritage significance

- 3.2 The conservation area, listed building and conservation areas are 'designated heritage assets', whilst other structures (including any identified as making a positive contribution to the character and appearance of the conservation area) are 'non-designated heritage assets' as defined by the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).
- 3.3 'Significance' is defined in the NPPF as 'the value of a heritage asset to this and future generations because of its heritage interest. That interest may be archaeological, architectural, artistic or historic'. The Historic England 'Planning for the Historic Environment Practice Guide' puts it slightly differently – as 'the sum of its architectural, historic, artistic or archaeological interest'.
- 3.4 'Conservation Principles, Policies and Guidance for the sustainable management of the historic environment' (English Heritage/Historic England, April 2008) describes a number of 'heritage values' that may be present in a 'significant place'. These are evidential, historical, aesthetic and communal value.
- 3.5 The Planning (Listed Building & Conservation Areas) Act 1990 refers to the 'special architectural or historical interest' of a listed building and the 'character and appearance' of a conservation area.

### Hillingdon Civic Centre

- 3.6 The reasons for designation, i.e. the significance, of the Civic Centre is articulated in the Historic England List Description<sup>3</sup>:

Architectural interest:

- As an early example of English Post-Modernism which creatively reinterpreted the Art and Crafts tradition as an expressive composition of revivalist form and detail;
- Through its planning and elevational treatment the building's large mass is broken down into more intimate spaces and forms, offering a revised approach to civic architecture;

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<sup>3</sup> Historic England LEN: 1451218

- For its high level of craftsmanship, with a creative take on traditional brickwork detail, finely executed;
- The building stands little altered externally, complete with extension integrated hard landscaping.

#### Historic interest

- As one of the first major works in England by a Modernist architect to embrace an overtly historicist aesthetic, marking the emergence of a new architectural zeitgeist.
- 3.7 It should be noted that the list description specifically declares that ‘the interior of the building (that is, those areas enclosed on all sides) is not of special architectural or historic interest.

## 4 The proposed scheme and its effect

4.1 The proposed scheme is illustrated in the drawings prepared by Hunters Architects and described in further detail in the Design & Access Statement.

### Relocation of Library & other Services

4.2 The application seeks to change the use of the existing disused Middlesex Suite to facilitate moving the existing Uxbridge Library, located on the High Street. The proposal includes internal alteration and forming an enclosed link between the Main Entrance area and Middlesex Suite.

4.3 In addition, internal alterations to Level 1 of the Middlesex Suite are proposed to provide the following functions:

- Mobile Library
- Shared Staff Training and Meeting Space and Welfare

4.4 In terms of all those elements of the proposals that are solely affecting internal spaces, listed building consent is not required as the spaces are specifically excluded in the Historic England List Description.

4.5 However, the historical research undertaken and outlined in the previous section highlights the appropriateness of the proposals – returning the space to its originally designed purpose and reinstating the physical civic connection between various council services. This is especially the case with regards Uxbridge Library.

4.6 Similarly, the ‘change of use’ to Library can be regarded as a positive heritage outcome – returning the use of the first floor to its original function.

4.7 Listed Building Consent has already been granted for the associated works to complete the link between the Middlesex Suite and the existing main reception link.

4.8 The alteration will not alter the ability to fully appreciate the architectural composition and significance of the civic centre and will not fundamentally affect the appearance of the Civic Centre. It will however much improve circulation and legibility around the complex.

### Compliance with legislation, policy & guidance

4.9 The conclusion of our assessment, contained in previous sections of this report, is that the proposed scheme, preserves the special architectural and historic interest of the listed building thus complies with S.66(1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990.

## The National Planning Policy Framework

- 4.10 This report has provided a description and analysis of the significance of the Civic Centre and its heritage context, as required by Paragraph 200 of the National Planning Policy Framework. In addition, the report describes how the proposed scheme will affect that heritage significance.
- 4.11 The proposed scheme complies with paragraph 207 of the NPPF – it certainly does not lead to ‘substantial harm to or total loss of significance of a designated heritage asset’. It also complies with Paragraph 208 for the reasons given above – following an assessment of heritage context we do not believe that the proposals will cause any harm to its significance. The relocation of the Library to the Civic Centre will not only consolidate civic and community facilities in one location but is also historically appropriate.
- 4.12 In terms of Hillingdon’s Local Plan Policy DMHB 1, the proposals will avoid harm to the historic environment. They have been designed in sympathy with the Civic Centre, without detracting from, or competing with, the heritage asset and as such sustain its significance. The re-use of the Middlesex Suite for its original purpose will arguably enhance its significance.
- 4.13 Those changes which have already been granted Listed Building Consent will help facilitate the reuse of the Middlesex Suite for the purpose it was originally intended. They will improve legibility and circulation and contribute to ensuring the principal function and purpose of the Civic Centre as the centre of local government and services in Hillingdon.
- 4.14 We therefore believe that the proposals comply with legislation, national and local planning policy and guidance for the historic built environment.

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