

The Destruction of Durnford School

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Figure 1 Durnford School on the eve of its destruction.

Durnford School, Middleton, a two-star listed building by Edgar Wood and James Henry Sellers was demolished during the autumn of 2002. At the last moment, at the instigation of J.H.G. Archer, this bad loss to architecture in Lancashire was mitigated by the preparation of a set of record drawings. The building had failed due to problems with the walls and roof and by way of an autopsy the survey continued as the building was pulled down revealing hitherto hidden parts of the construction. A selection of the drawings compiled on a single sheet is reproduced as figure 2. The results of this survey are described below along with an architectural appreciation of this remarkable building.

Opened in 1910 and closed in 1992 the school stood empty for a decade as plans to repair it came to nothing. By the time the end came it was in an incredible state of decrepitude, though as may be seen in the photograph in Figure 1 it made a very noble ruin. Situated on high ground to the north of Middleton its windowless towers attracted children from a wide area. Attempts to secure the property with fences and steel plates failed as intruders bent the fence open then, like miners, tunneled through the wall to enjoy their sport of arson, general wrecking and throwing bricks from the roof. Not a single piece of joinery remained, in fact absolutely everything made of wood had been burnt and the children were reduced to carting material into the building to keep alight the fires that had left the interior black like the inside of a camera. It was a tribute to the thoroughness of their tireless vandalism that although the floors were everywhere covered in a layer of crumbling debris there was, as happens along canal towpaths, not a single thing left worth picking up to throw. It was in these strange conditions that the smouldering wreck was measured.

Accounts of the careers of Wood and Sellers may be found in J.H.G. Archer's¹ 1966 article from this journal and in his foreword² to the Whitworth Art Gallery's 1975 exhibition of their work. In brief, the dynamic and artistic Edgar Wood was a mill owner's son who was already had an international reputation for his houses and churches when he took up with Sellers in about 1904.³ The development of Wood's ideas makes him hard to classify, a founder member of Walter Crane's Northern Art Workers' Guild he borrowed from vernacular buildings and has been described as an Art Nouveau architect, but expressionist might be more accurate. In contrast Sellers was a bookish man of humble origins who worked as an architectural ghost before the partnership with Wood gave him the opportunity he needed. Sellers knew about modern methods of construction such as flat roofs and concrete and his architecture, influenced by Soane with its layers and geometrical purity, contains some of the earliest expressions of Art Deco. Their most original and important work together was done in the years before the Great War halted private building. Their partnership was unusual in that each worked independently with Wood gradually leaving the practice to Sellers after receiving his inheritance in 1909 before retiring completely in 1922 to travel and paint. Their two schools at Middleton, Durnford and Elm Street, are the only large buildings in their joint names,⁴ and even these are said to have been designed mostly by Sellers.⁵ The smaller Elm Street School is still standing today and although altered and extended some parts of it, the twin cubic towers especially, are sufficiently similar to Durnford to give the visitor an idea of what it was like.

1 J.H.G. Archer 1966. Edgar Wood (1860-1935) A Manchester 'Art Nouveau' Architect. Reprinted from the Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society vol. 73-74, 1963-4. p. 179

2 J.H.G. Archer 1975. Foreword to Partnership in Style, Edgar Wood & J. Henry Sellers. Manchester City Art Gallery exhibition catalogue, October 1975. pp.5 -10.

3 Archer, 2004 Edgar Wood, DNB.

4 Archer 1975 p.5

5 N. Pevsner 1969. South Lancashire. Buildings of England series. Penguin, p. 349.

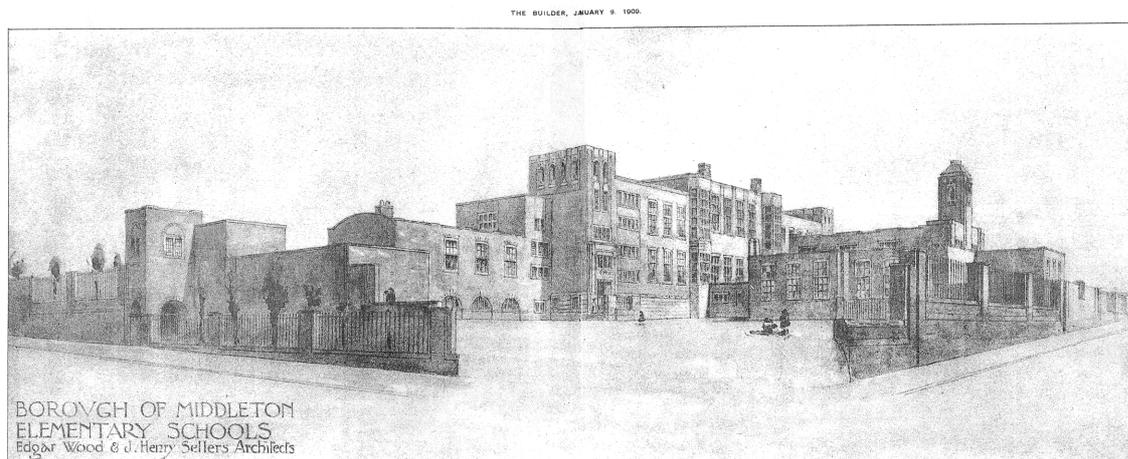


Figure 3 *Durnford School, early drawing from The Builder 1909*

The first appearance of Durnford School in print was in *The Builder*, 9 January 1909, in which the following paragraph appeared accompanied by a double spread perspective with plans that is reproduced here as figure 3.

Schools, Middleton.

THESE Schools are proposed to be built in thin red bricks for all walls, with dressings of Portland stone to doorways, windows, upper part of towers, and copings. The floors throughout the building will be of concrete, covered with maple boards; the roofs of concrete, covered with asphalt. The heating is to be by the low-pressure water system. The three towers are to be used for the extraction of the foul air from the classrooms, halls, etc., by electric fans. The site slopes from west to east, the floor of infants' school being 5 ft. 6 ins below the main block, and about 5 ft. above road. The view is from a water colour drawing by Mr. Edgar Wood. Messrs. Edgar Wood & J. H. Sellers, of Manchester, are the architects.

Schools, plural, here refers to departments for Infants, Juniors and Seniors joined in one building for a thousand children. The references to the thin red bricks, which crumbled, and the asphalt flat roof, which leaked, are significant, since problems with them caused the building to fail. No less interesting are the modern methods of heating and ventilation: improved standards of construction were a matter of municipal pride after the Education Act of 1902 allowed schools to be built on the rates by the newly formed local education authorities. The perspective is fairly close to the finished scheme, and shows that the setting of the building with its elaborate

boundary wall treatment and the picturesque entrance to the girl's playground (left of figure 3) were integral parts of the design from the start.

Durnford School has been described by both Archer⁶ and Pevsner.⁷ It was a building in the round with five entrances for boys and girls of different ages. The east elevation (top of Figure 2) might for courtesy be called the front since it was the most elaborate, but most visitors would have entered through the other side. The plan was a 'T', the upright part being the Infants school most of which remains to this day though in a damaged state. The larger cross member was for Juniors and Seniors on two floors and has been pulled down. The two parts did not communicate. Pevsner describes the Infants as looking like an afterthought but this was likely to have been a deliberate arrangement since the Building Regulations⁸ asked for a separation between infants and older children. The 'T' shape divided the site into four playgrounds each with their own differently styled entrance from the street. These playgrounds were further enclosed by outbuildings used for lavatories and shelters and by a wall at the back of the pavement. This wall had modular cast iron panels between brick piers with dressed stone copings that matched the style of the building. The ironwork was similar to the striking fence at the Dronfield Brothers Offices, Oldham, designed by Sellers the previous year.

The building was full of odd and imaginative details. In no particular order the following are worth noting: Interior fanlights had radiating glazing bars in a sunset pattern, an early appearance of the motif that became so characteristic of the 1930's. The undersides of stone lintels were given little indentations like negative dentils. On the west elevation, described by Pevsner⁹ as stark as a cotton mill, some top floor windows had curved stone Art-Nouveau over-panels. All the stone architraves to external doors had oversized curved mouldings, especially fine was the North Tower entrance for the Senior Boys. Its Portland stone surround projected from the brick wall in a huge concave moulding fitted with dentils like teeth. The brick corner of the South Tower changed from square to round and back to square for no known reason. Stone panels over entrances were beautifully inscribed BOYS, GIRLS, and

6 Archer 1966 p.179

7 Pevsner 1969 p. 349

8 The Building Regulations 1907. Principles to be Observed in Planning and Fitting up New Buildings for Public Elementary Schools. Board of Education, Whitehall. HMSO London.(Cd 3571). Rule 8a

9 Pevsner 1969 p.349 quoting Archer 1966, p. 179: 'The west elevation of the building is as stark as a cotton mill'

INFANTS and so on, with large Roman style letters. The tower brickwork had inset stone diamonds and was cut back in layers that revealed themselves like sections of a telescope pushed together. The ground floor corridor ceiling was a barrel vault, a feature of many Edgar Wood buildings. Everywhere there was evidence of invention and originality; what good value they got for a bit of stone set into brickwork.

The plan was simple; on both floors the main part of the school had roughly square classrooms off a corridor alongside a large hall. The resulting block was articulated by modest projections and bay windows that were all treated differently to create a lively elevation with a mix of styles. The plan accommodated asymmetrical elements in a broadly symmetrical layout, for example, the towers at each end are different heights due to the sloping site, something the design accepts and turns to its advantage. By situating cloakrooms and staff rooms off half landings in the stone bays next to the towers the architects were able squeeze in an extra room and to make the fenestration more interesting than if there had been just two floors everywhere. There was nothing forced about the design, no axial planning or any classicism, or odd shapes in plan, but instead simple shapes and materials used in fresh ways. In this ad-hoc approach we see, possibly, the influence of vernacular architecture, and, more certainly, the beginnings of a modern sensibility in which the plan takes precedence over the elevation. Archer¹⁰ quotes Wood lecturing in 1900 when he described how he '... found it much more satisfactory to start from the plan entirely ... to the extent of almost ignoring the elevation ...'

The survey found that walls were two bricks thick, (i.e. 18 inches), plus an inch of plaster. This was made up from an inner wall of commons one and a half bricks thick then after a quarter inch cavity an outer leaf of a thin gauge facing bricks with slightly roman proportions. Three commons were the same height as four of these thinner bricks allowing the two leaves to be bonded by a row of headers every fourth course. It was the failure of the facing bricks, probably due to bad firing,¹¹ added to the leaking roof that had made the expense of repairs too great, Elm Street School had similar problems but was saved. The roof was covered by asphalt that went up the sides of, and on to the top of, the low parapet, something that would now thought of as bad practice because it cannot allow for movement in the building. Many cracks were visible and to make matters worse the rainwater outlets seemed insufficient in number. Brick and stone striped chimneys from fireplaces in

10 Archer 1966 p. 159

11 Archer 1966 p. 179

the lower hall and staff rooms that old photographs show rising above the parapet like classical statues had long ago been taken down.

One advantage of a flat roof at Durnford was that it made the building easy to ventilate. At fifty-five feet wide the School was too wide to be cross-ventilated naturally, the normal solution, to ventilate the centre through the roof, would have been difficult had it been pitched, but where the Upper Hall went through the flat main roof with clerestory windows this was easily achieved. This would not do for the Lower Hall however. The ingenious solution to this problem that allowed one Hall to be stacked over the other was a ducted ventilation system that created, in effect, an early deep-plan building. Edgar Wood had previously used air-heating ducts in his First Church of Christ Scientist, 1903, where he gave his duct a splendid grille of bronze spindles and lined it with green-glazed tiles so expressing something that later architects would normally try to hide. At Durnford ventilation was also given architectural expression in the form of the three towers. In the Infants School the tower surrounded a brick flue from the boiler room below, between it and the tower was a space through which foul air from the Hall was drawn by convection. The purpose of the twin towers on the main part of the School was to act as wind towers, the survey found no trace of the electric fans mentioned in the Builder article, if they had ever been fitted. As the wind blew through the openings at the top of the towers air was pulled from ducts to which they were connected. These rooms and ducts amounted to a hidden circulation system unconnected with the occupied parts of the school. The ducts followed the corridors on both levels and were substantial concrete structures, the top floor duct was eight feet wide and high enough to shuffle along. An intruder on the roof who broke through a timber grille would have been able, with a little nerve, to crawl along these draughty tunnels and peer unobserved into the Headmaster's study.

The floors and roof were concrete slabs. The architect's guide, *Specification 1908*, listed over twenty proprietary concrete floor systems¹² competing for architects business. In most of them the concrete spanned short distances between steel beams in variations of the brick-vaulted fire-proof floors of the previous century, but Durnford's floor and roof were of the more modern type in which concrete, reinforced with rods, did the job on its own. They were, in today's terms, ribbed reinforced concrete slabs with the spaces between the ribs filled with hollow

¹² Specification Annually. No. 11 1908-9. Published by the Proprietors of the Builders' Journal. Westminster. pp. 211-4

terracotta pots. Both the United Kingdom Fireproofing Co. Ltd.¹³ the National Fireproofing Company¹⁴ sold similar floors. In other respects the floor now seems primitive, three smooth reinforcing bars, each a colossal 40 mm in diameter, were held by elaborate stirrups in the top, middle and bottom of every rib; smooth bars cannot bond to the concrete very well and the upper bars were probably redundant. The hollow floor, overlaid with creamy maple boards on battens was good for soundproofing. Aside from the floor finish and doors and fittings no timber was used in the building so whatever problems the School developed later on dry rot was not to be one of them. The perimeter of the floor and roof slabs were thickened to form a concrete ring beam that was built into the walls to hold the building together like a hidden corset, an arrangement which is close to being a concrete frame. When it is also considered that the outer skin of roman bricks may not have been necessary from a structural point of view, and that their decorative function was expressed by the corner detail in which the outer leaf was cut back to make a triple corner as shown in figure 4, then the building really does begin to appear modern. This corner detail separated the elevations into defined planes in much the same way that Mies van der Rohe's¹⁵ famous, and very similar, steel corner detail was to do years later.

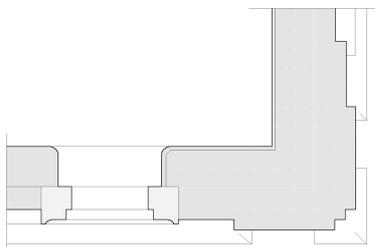


Figure 4 Plan of the corner of the tower.

In many ways the design can be seen as a response to the Building Regulations of 1907 as laid down by the Board of Education to control standards in schools. From what was forbidden; roofs open to the apex are very undesirable;¹⁶ classrooms should not be in passage-rooms from one part of the building to another;¹⁷ and so

¹³ Specification 1908 p. 214

¹⁴ Thomas Potter 1908, *Concrete, Its Uses in Building*. 3rd Ed. B.T. Batsford, Holborn p.199

¹⁵ E.g. the Lake Shore Drive Apartments, and others, Chicago 1948

¹⁶ Building Regulations, HMSO 1907 Rule 2c

¹⁷ Building Regulations, HMSO 1907 Rule 5a

on, we get a glimpse of what the Board was trying to leave behind. These were badly lit open halls overcrowded with children of all ages and sexes and no playground. What was wanted were buildings of, at the most, two storeys with sunny, airy classrooms off wide corridors with large halls for communal activity, exactly in fact what was provided at Durnford, how light and modern it must have seemed. The regulations set standards, girls and boys for instance were to be given separate playgrounds and separate entrances, something that accounts for the symmetrical form of this and other schools of the period. Walls were to be solid, staircases were to be straight and short with thirteen inch treads and five and a half inch risers; generous standards that were exactly met at Durnford. Classrooms were to be roughly square, lit from the left hand side for preference, with the tops of their windows reaching nearly to the ceiling. Such classrooms may be seen in the early plan in *The Builder*, later they were knocked together in pairs. The regulations required good ventilation and recommended hot water heating systems and set space standards for lavatories, playgrounds, and cloakrooms. In all these matters Durnford appears to have been a model of compliance.

Close to being a concrete framed structure, laid out to fulfill a programme, with integrated services and standing free in its site with a flat roof, these modern aspects of Durnford School early on attracted the attention of Pevsner.¹⁸ In his essay of 1942, *Nine Swallows - No Summer*, he described England's share in progressive early twentieth-century building. In terms of influence this did not amount to much, hence his title, but he did find nine exemplary designers doing work he thought comparable with forward looking Continental contemporaries. Two of his nine pioneers were Wood and Sellers. The buildings of interest to Pevsner were; Upmeads 1908, a house at Stafford by Wood; the Dronsfield Brothers Offices at Oldham, 1907, by Sellers; and the Durnford and Elm Street Schools. All these buildings resemble each other and all had flat roofs. For example, at Upmeads the stone surrounds to the leaded windows, the expanse of brickwork and the thin stone parapet with a flat roof behind reappear in the middle part of Durnford School. Pevsner praised Upmeads as 'the only English private house of the early twentieth century which looks as if it might have been designed about 1935 with a view to expressing the structural characteristics of concrete'¹⁹ ...then went on to point out

18 N. Pevsner, 1942. *Nine Swallows - No Summer*. From the *Architectural Review* 1942 reprinted in *The Anti-Rationalists*, 1973 edited by N. Pevsner and J.M. Richards. Architectural Press, London. p. 203 - 8.

19 Pevsner, 1973, p. 206

how similar it is to the daring Dronfield Offices, in which many of the stone and brick details at Durnford can be recognised. Pevsner praised Durnford and Elm Street as novel and adventurous describing their motifs as standing midway between Art Nouveau and the Western Avenue style.

In portraying Wood and Sellers as modernists Pevsner found it necessary to overlook the more esoteric aspects of their work and in his article even went so far as to describe Edgar Wood's First Church of Christ Scientist in Manchester as weird.²⁰ He later softened his position as regards that building when he described it in 1969 as 'the boldest religious building of the early twentieth century'²¹ but even so it is believed he never stepped inside it. What he would have made of the stupendous roof, the green marble, the sloping floor, and the Moorish decoration one can only guess. Here we reach the heart of the matter, for although we can recognise Wood and Sellers as modern and so fit them into a scheme of development and influence it is a very incomplete portrait. Their artistry and theatricality is almost unique and even though as Cecil Stewart²² pointed out, Wood's influence was negligible the last thing anyone would say about their work was that it was uninteresting. Often it seems to tell a story. For example, whilst the entrance to the Boy's playground was a dignified semicircle in brick, the Girl's playground was graced by a picturesque composition of a low gate framed by an arch next to an arcade and steps. It looked like set for light opera and is as pretty a spot for a girl to meet a boy as you could wish to find. Was Wood, who married Miss Jelly, his old Headmaster's daughter idealising some scene of his youth? What an extraordinary thing we have here: a large modern building of a new type built to a tight municipal budget with a complex programme yet it brims with romantic and artistic flourishes. Where did all these ideas come from?

This question can be answered by separating the contributions of the two architects. The differences between them are seen most easily in the First Church of Christ Scientist since it was begun at the front, by Wood, on his own, in 1903 and completed, at the back, by both of them. The front is Wood's work, an expressionist composition with its round brick tower, pointed gable, and butterfly plan. At the back where it becomes more Soanian with its play of planes and stone inlay, it is Sellers's work. Wood is direct and representational, Sellers is sophisticated and

²⁰ Pevsner 1973, p. 208

²¹ Pevsner 1969. p. 48

²² Cecil Stewart, 1956. *The Stones of Manchester*. Edward Arnold, London. p.133

abstract. At the front it is a theatrical fantasy; at the back pure architecture. If we read Durnford School in the same way, taking Sellers out of it by overlooking all the interesting details we are then left with a collage of three buildings that are discernible in the early perspective. In the middle we have Tudor-looking windows flanked by grand stone bays with leaded glass topped with a crenellated motif. They only needed a little ivy to look like a Hollywood representation of an English stately home. On either side, and also on the rear, we have a change to something resembling a Mill, with small paned timber windows. In turn these are flanked by the early Art Deco towers, the essence of municipality. Add to these the romantic entrance for the girls, a severe one for the boys and we have, working outwards from the centre, a story of nobility, working folk, government and love. And yet it all hangs together as a unified design.

We note that Wood, with his privileged background was flamboyant and imaginative, Sellers who worked his way up from a humble background and was bookish and analytical²³ The proto-modern architect, the admirer of Soane, and a founder of Art Deco, was Sellers, the expressionist story telling artist using traditional materials was Wood. Such modernist touches Wood showed, flat roofs for example, I speculate, were as a result of his involvement with Sellers after 1904. This reading of their relationship improves the reputation of the retiring Sellers, and makes the romantic aspects of Wood's work clearer. His architectural vocabulary is based on cottages, Tudor mansions, Cotton Mills, Art Nouveau, Fairy Tale Churches, Romantic vaulted gates, Moorish gilded screens and Butterfly plans. Wood was a fin-de-siècle figure who collaged these themes like Barrie collaged themes of other children's stories in Peter Pan. I venture that without the control and sophistication of Sellers Wood's later work might easily have seemed kitsch, what a good combination they made. Could things have turned out differently had Wood stayed the course after his father died instead of retiring to paint? Things were different after the war, but perhaps they could have gone on to rival the outrageous Komisarjevsky who incorporated Moorish, Venetian and Baronial Hall themes inside Art Deco cinemas, most famously in the Granada, Tooting in 1930. As it was Sellers continued in practice until 1949 designing neo-Georgian houses, whilst Wood built homes for himself, first in Hale and later in Italy. In an important sense Durnford was their last building.

And now it is gone. The modern demolition process is very thorough: the school was smashed with a hydraulic pick then put through a crushing machine producing

²³ Archer, 2004, Edgar Wood, DNB

pyramids of hardcore and a heap of scrap iron. Even the footings were grubbed up and destroyed, they turned out not to be brick but modern style concrete strips with an aggregate of crushed brick from an even older structure. Aside from a few of the Portland stone lintels taken to Manchester School of Art for use by sculptors only the Infants department remains today. Converted to council offices, with its roof protected with razor wire, its crumbling brickwork plastered with render, and now overlooked by an estate of new houses with PVC windows, this lonely rump is an odd memorial to the brief period when Middleton stood with Vienna and Paris as the home of avant-garde architecture.

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