

THE HISTORY OF THE THOMAS HAMILTON BUILDING: THE OLD ROYAL HIGH SCHOOL

Background

The old Royal High School is one of Edinburgh's most important but vulnerable historic buildings. Listed by Historic Environment Scotland in Category A and situated within the New Town Conservation Area and the Old and New Town of Edinburgh World Heritage Site, it is regarded as the masterpiece of Thomas Hamilton (1784-1858), one of Scotland's foremost neoclassical architects. It is also one of the focal points of the highly important and highly prominent Calton Hill natural and designed landscape.

Under- or un-used for more than four decades since the school left the site for its current campus location in Barnton in 1968, the old Royal High School has not been the subject of significant expenditure since the late-1970s. Attempts to give the building a sustainable new use have proved challenging, with proposals for a National Centre for Photography in the early 2000s attracting considerable support but ultimately proving financially unviable.

The City of Edinburgh Council (CEC) subsequently sought private sector partners able to develop viable commercial use for the site. In 2008, CEC selected Duddingston House Properties (DHP) as its exclusive partner for redeveloping the site as a luxury 'arts hotel'. However, the resulting proposals failed to secure Planning Permission or Listed Building Consent due to their impacts on the heritage significance of the site.

In response to the potentially serious heritage impacts of the DHP hotel scheme, the Royal High School Preservation Trust (RHSPT) was founded as a charitable voluntary organisation to develop an alternative scheme to redevelop the site in a way that would respect its architectural and historic value. The heart of the RHSPT's plan was to use the Royal High School as a new home for St Mary's Music School, Scotland's leading specialist secondary music school. The school had outgrown its current site in Edinburgh's West End some time ago and was actively seeking alternative premises.

RHSPT commissioned Richard Murphy Architects (RMA), one of Scotland's foremost architectural practices, to produce designs for new development on the east and north of the site to house the music school; Simpson & Brown were engaged to provide conservation architecture and heritage consultancy services; and Optimised Environments (OPEN) was asked to provide landscape design services.

RHSPT submitted full Applications for Planning Permission and Listed Building Consent to Edinburgh City Council for the redevelopment of the site, and the necessary consents received in 2017. It was not, however, possible to proceed with works at that time because CEC remained bound by its exclusive contract with DHP, which did not expire until 2021. However, after the expiry of the agreement with DHP, CEC announced that there would be a further open call for proposals. Following a tender period, on 7th October 2021, CEC announced that the RHSPT would be offered a long-term lease on the site to enable it to be redeveloped as a National Centre for Music.

The culmination of the decades-long search for a sustainable, long-term use for the site, that decision marked a new beginning for one of Scotland's most important but vulnerable buildings. With formal agreement between the RHSPT and the CEC having now been reached, RHSPT continued to collaborate with all of the consultees and stakeholders and in December 2022, submitted applications for an amendment and extension to its existing Planning Permission and for a new grant of Listed Building Consent. The changes were designed to introduce a greater distinction between the spaces that will

be enjoyed by the public and those areas that will be used by the music school. With approval granted, and the lease signed in March 2023, the conservation project finally got underway.

Historical summary

Thomas Hamilton's High School (1829)

The old Royal High School was built between 1826 and 1829 to designs by the great Scottish neoclassical architect, Thomas Hamilton (1784-1858). It was to be a new home for Edinburgh's municipal grammar school, replacing its existing location in the heart of the Old Town with one more conveniently placed for the increasing number of people living in the city's rapidly expanding New Towns.

The immediate prompt for this move was, however, not simple changes to Edinburgh's urban geography. The early 1820s had seen the sudden advent of serious competition to the High School in the form of the city's first private secondary school, the Edinburgh Academy. After a series of failed attempts to incorporate the Academy proposals within the city's education system as a second High School, the Academy opened in 1824 as an independent fee-paying school. It offered a consciously elitist and anglocentric educational model at odds with the more egalitarian and meritocratic values traditional to Scottish municipal education. There were immediate fears that the Academy would draw the children of the city's social elite away from the High School. Moreover, the Academy was housed in magnificent new Greek-revival-style buildings designed by William Burn. With its New Town location, fine tetrastyle Doric portico and grand oval assembly room it put to shame the High School's relatively cramped and old-fashioned buildings next to the crowded Cowgate.

Edinburgh City Council responded by developing plans for a school that would, in its scale and magnificence, provide a fitting riposte to the Academy. It would occupy a challenging but prominent site on the flank of Calton Hill, then in the midst of redevelopment as the site of a great National Memorial. The new school buildings were therefore expected to be an uncompromising assertion of the City's commitment to the meritocratic principles upon which Scottish secondary education had traditionally been founded.

This gave Hamilton exceptional scope to design a building of exceptional scale and aesthetic ambition. Hamilton responded brilliantly to the commission and to the difficult site. Like Burn, his design was in the Greek revival style, but he broke with tradition to combine its grandeur and austerity with a degree of compositional complexity and dynamism of effect more usually associated with the baroque tradition.

By ingeniously exploiting the rising ground of the hillside he was able to give the largely single-storey building an effect of exceptional grandeur. The multiple levels of the façade and the advancing and recessing planes of the central portico, colonnades, end blocks and pavilions, produce a fine effect in frontal views. But they are seen at their best on the main approaches to the school along Regent Road. It is in these views that the varied projections and levels of the different compositional units of the building are at their most effective, their visual relationship changing constantly but cohesively as the spectator follows the line of Regent Road from either east or west.

The result is an architectural tour de force that was recognised from the outset as a building of exceptional quality. Not only did it come to be regarded as the finest of the architect's major works but as one of the most impressive Greek-revival buildings of its time, not only in Scotland but on a European and world stage.

In functional terms, however, it became outdated almost as soon as it was completed. The school plan consisted of multiple self-contained classroom suites, each with its own external entrance but very restricted internal circulation to other parts of the building. This reflects a world in which pupils spent nearly all their time with a single master learning, effectively, a single subject, the Latin and Greek classics. As the curriculum came to include more and more subjects requiring subject specialist teachers and dedicated classroom spaces, the school became less and less suited to its intended purpose. The later history of the building's architectural development is largely one of attempts to adapt Hamilton's structure to a dramatically different educational world.

Later nineteenth-century changes (1875-1914)

The initial response to the challenges of a much more diverse curriculum—and expanding numbers of students—took the form of additional specialist spaces outside the main Hamilton Building. In 1885, Robert Wilson designed an entrance lodge next to the western entrance gates and a single-storey gymnasium building on the northeast extreme of the site.

The lodge provided accommodation for the janitor, enabling the West Pavilion, where had previously lived, to be converted into a swimming pool. In 1894 the gymnasium block was expanded by enlargement westwards and the addition of a further floor. The swimming pool was then relocated to the eastern part of the gymnasium building, while the space above, lit by skylights, became an art studio.

Other specialist spaces included a chemistry lab, as well as multi-purpose teaching rooms, and changing rooms for the gymnasium and swimming pool housed in the new building. Internally, a number of changes were made to improve circulation, notably by introducing wide staircases between the octagonal rooms and the ground floor classrooms in the end blocks, new passageways to connect the heads of the new stairs to Hamilton's original south-west and south-east staircases, and lobbies to provide direct access to Hamilton's smaller 'practicing rooms' or 'side classrooms' on the south side of the end blocks of the main building. These made the school more useable but at some cost to the integrity of Hamilton's original design.

The school in twentieth century (1914 to 1968)

The twentieth century saw further significant changes. After the First World War the south end of the hall was extensively remodelled to allow for the installation of a War Memorial in 1923. This consisted of a new marble doorcase in the form of a Greek Doric aedicule (columns and pediment) in place of Hamilton's wooden south doorcase. The installation of two memorial tablets on the walls on each side of the doorcase also required the removal of Hamilton's flanking gallery staircases and consequently the insertion of new newel stairs at the north end of the gallery.

Shortly after, in 1924, a lightweight extension to house a craft room was added to the south face of the east end of the Gymnasium block. This has since been demolished. Longer lasting were a series of additions and changes made in 1935-6. These included a new purpose-built Luncheon Room, on the south side of the east grounds built into excavated ground to reduce its visual impact from outwith the school. This enabled the east pavilion, which by then was being used as the lunchroom, to be reconfigured internally to serve as craft rooms, in turn allowing the gymnasium craft room extension to be repurposed for a pool filtration plant. The final addition was a further classroom block on the west of the site, immediately adjacent to the Lodge building. During this period the school acquired houses on Regent Terrace to provide additional accommodation, principally for boarding pupils.

Relatively few changes took place in the post-war period. The lunchroom block was extended westwards in 1950. Plans were also drawn up for a new science block on the other side of Regent Road, but they did not come to fruition. Instead, the school eventually decided to relocate away from Calton Hill entirely, moving in 1968 to a spacious campus site in the prosperous north-west Edinburgh suburb of Barnton.

The New Parliament House (1968-1980)

The school's move to Barnton left the buildings on Regent Road without an obvious purpose. The buildings were used briefly for displaying the city's art collection, which had yet to find a permanent home. Few changes were made to the physical structure at this time, with even the Library bookcases remaining in place and simply having their glazed doors covered with boards on which pictures could be hung.

Much more dramatic change came a decade later with the decision to implement the recommendations of the Kilbrandon Report on the Constitution (1974). This led to a proposed alternative use for the old Royal High School buildings as the home for a devolved Scottish Assembly.

There was believed to be widespread support in Scotland for devolution of powers from Westminster. In preparation for a presumptively favourable outcome from a devolution referendum, the building was purchased from CEC by the UK Government and extensive refurbishment and conversion works were undertaken from 1978 to 1980.

The most important of these works focused on the former Assembly Hall and the areas immediately behind the podium of the south portico. The Assembly Hall was reconfigured as a debating chamber, with chairs for a speaker and clerks. This involved removing the entire floor structure of the room and the insertion of new tiered seating. Ceiling rosettes were removed to allow new overhead lights to be inserted and new audio systems introduced.

The existing galleries were extended by joining them together at the south end with a new, much deeper gallery area with a curving front. This was to be the new press and public gallery. To make the gallery directly accessible from the south front of the building a new entrance foyer was formed by closing off the formerly open passageway running across the plinth under the pediment (immediately to the north of the boys' WCs) and then opening arches in its north wall into the former heating chamber immediately behind. From there the visitor would pass through the passageways under the colonnade into new staircase inserted next to the south-east and south-west corners of the Assembly Hall, which provided direct access to the galleries.

Other changes were less dramatic. The large classrooms in the end blocks of the Hamilton Building were subdivided to form smaller offices, with cornices run to match the existing cornices. New heating and ventilation services were also inserted into the refurbished structure, all glazing on the north front was replaced in polycarbonate, lavatory facilities were introduced, almost all the historic interior joinery was replaced (though using moulding profiles closely based on the historic joinery). The works were executed to generally high standards of materials and workmanship. They nevertheless involved much loss of historic interior fabric as well as the introduction of modern materials, such as cement mortars and renders, that have since proved to be incompatible with the Hamilton Buildings' traditional solid-wall construction.

An uncertain future (1980-2021)

The failure of the referendum and the election in 1979 of a new Conservative government opposed to the devolution agenda left the old Royal High School in limbo. While the building remained in the

hands of the UK government, it was used for a number of official purposes, such as meetings of the Scottish Grand committee and the Council for Scottish Local Authorities. These were stop-gap uses, however, and the building lacked any real governmental function. It consequently came to be perceived as a problem without an obvious solution.

In 1994 the site was sold back to the City of Edinburgh Council for £1.75 million but continued to be underutilised. After Tony Blair's Labour government took power in 1997 the devolution agenda was revived and there were briefly hopes that the building could be used as planned in the 1970s as the home for a reconstituted Scottish Parliament. By this time, however, the business of government had increased in complexity, meaning that the building was felt to be too small for this purpose. In addition, the Labour government, with its commitment to the Union, seems to have been averse to using a building that had become a symbol for Scottish nationalists of their aspirations to independence.

The new Scottish parliament was therefore given a new home at Holyrood, and CEC began the search for an alternative publicly beneficial use for the old Royal High School. The most promising possibility was to make it the home of a new Scottish National Photography Centre. It became apparent after a feasibility study that this proposal would not be financially viable. Other public-interest initiatives also proved unable to raise the funds needed to restore and adapt the buildings or to generate sufficient income to be sustainable in the long term.

By 2008, a combination of continued difficulty identifying potential sustainable uses and a general deterioration of the economic situation due to the financial crisis led CEC to seek a commercial partner to develop the site. After an open tendering process, Duddingston House Properties was selected to take forward plans to transform the site into a luxury 'arts hotel'. Hoskins Architects were employed to draw up plans.

The proposal initially generated favourable publicity, but it became increasingly clear that the volume of accommodation required for the hotel to generate a commercial return would require very extensive new construction over much of the site. This development would have had major impacts on the heritage significance of the site as well as its wider landscape and townscape contexts. The proposals were deemed unacceptable by HES and CEC's planning officers. Two successive formal applications for Planning Permission and Listed Building Consent were refused, and these refusals were later upheld on appeal.

The potentially destructive impacts of the hotel schemes did have one important positive outcome: they inspired the foundation of a charitable trust, the Royal High School Preservation Trust (RHSPT), to develop an alternative, less harmful scheme. The RHSPT subsequently came forward with fully developed proposals to the site as the new home for St Mary's Music School, Scotland's leading specialist school for outstandingly talented young musicians. An architectural scheme was developed by RMA which received Planning Permission and Listed Building Consent in 2016.

The National Centre for Music (2021-)

CEC had signed an exclusivity agreement with Duddingston House Properties that expired only in 2021. At this point, the council once again invited proposals to develop the building for sustainable long-term use. Only two proposals were received – one from a commercial developer to use the site as a 'care village' and the other from the RHSPT for its alternative scheme, now developed further into a project for a National Centre for Music. Although the commercial scheme promised a higher long-term financial return to the council, the RHSPT scheme was selected as the stronger submission, as its sources of finance were assured.