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The Rule of Gothic: City Police and Session Courts, Minshull Street

Located just a stone's throw from Manchester Piccadilly train station and surrounded by many sleek and unremarkable modern office blocks, the City Police and Session Courts building on Minshull Street (now part of Manchester's Crown Courts network), is passed by many a tourist and commuter venturing into town, perhaps without a second thought—unless making an appearance in front of a judge and jury! (**Fig.1**).

(<iframe
src="https://www.google.com/maps/embed?pb=!1m18!1m12!1m3!1d2374.4356664539923!2d-2.237101748547472!3d53.47854507990876!2m3!1f0!2f0!3f0!3m2!1i1024!2i768!4f13.1!3m3!1m2!1s0x487bb1be315c75f1%3A0xe2fdb92cf1c6127!2sManchester%20Crown%20Court%20(Minshull%20St)!5e0!3m2!1sen!2suk!4v1580725728613!5m2!1sen!2suk" width="600" height="450" frameborder="0" style="border:0;" allowfullscreen=""></iframe>) [Hi Emily—this URL should insert and embedded google map—suddenly realized that this would be useful for the posts!]

This imposing structure, Grade II* listed by English Heritage (now Historic England) on 3 October 1974 (list entry number 1219894),¹ was designed by the architect Thomas Worthington (1826–1909) of Manchester and built between 1867 and 1873. It also notably features a later, very interesting and modern (yet sympathetic) extension constructed between 1993 and 1996 on Aytoun Street and designed by James Stevenson of the Scottish architectural practice of Hurd Rolland Partnership based in Dunfermline, Fife (**Fig.2**).²

The City Police and Session Courts building, despite the twentieth-century extension, remains a lop-sided, higgledy-piggledy structure that, to some extent—perhaps unintentionally, though surely not—celebrated the freedom of the Gothic style that medieval architecture was cherished for in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in comparison with the more regimented Classical mode (**Fig.3**). In particular, as emphasized in comparison with Worthington's earlier Memorial Hall building (1864–66) on Southmill Street (Visit Manchester entry on the building [here](#)) that he finished the year before work on City Police and Session Courts began, this asymmetry and aesthetic freedom corresponds with the theories of John Ruskin (1819–1900) who advanced the theory that Gothic celebrated the work of the craftsman. In *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin advanced that:

For the very first requirement of Gothic architecture being, as we saw above, that it shall both admit the aid, and appeal to the admiration, of the rudest as well as the most refined minds, the richness of the work is, paradoxical as the statement may appear, a part of its humility. No architecture is so haughty as that which is simple; which refuses to address the eye, except in a few clear and forceful lines which implies, in offering so little to our regard, that all it has offered is perfect; and disdains, either by the complexity or the attractiveness of its features, to embarrass our investigation, or betray us into delight. That humility, which is the very life of the Gothic school, is

¹ <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1219894>.

² <https://www.hurdrolland.co.uk>.

shown not only in the imperfection, but in the accumulation, of ornament. The inferior rank of the workman is often shown as much in the richness, as the roughness, of his work; and if the co-operation of every hand, and the sympathy of every heart, are to be received, we must be content to allow the redundancy which disguises the failure of the feeble, and wins the regard of the inattentive. There are, however, far nobler interests mingling, in the Gothic heart, with the rude love of decorative accumulation: a magnificent enthusiasm, which feels as if it never could do enough to reach the fullness of its ideal; an unselfishness of sacrifice, which would rather cast fruitless labour before the altar than stand idle in the market; and, finally, a profound sympathy with the fullness & wealth of the material universe.³

In comparison with Worthington's slightly earlier Memorial Hall, the City Police and Session Courts building is significantly more ornate and also demonstrates an increased inventiveness over the Venetian Gothic style of his earlier work. Despite these differences, the Crown Court building is firmly in his style: namely the choice use of both brick and sandstone to create, in some instances, alternating blocks of colour—polychrome—on the top-most arches as well as choice components, such as keystones, quoins, entablatures, and machicolations (**Fig.4**).

Each façade of the original Crown Court building has a distinct, though always Gothic, appearance. On the elevation facing Auburn Street each floor a different window design—the higher the floor the more ornate the window (**Fig.5**). The basement has square-headed openings, the ground-floor has shallow triangular-headed windows, and the first-floor windows are of the typical Gothic-lancet type. Although lacking a large amount of decoration, the choice of window design not only adds variety to the elevation, but the increasing ornament reflects a shift in the importance of each floor: the upper floor being where the court rooms are located. The gabled ends on this façade with Gothic embracing arches housing oculi and lancets also make a significant nod to medieval church windows (**Figs 6a and 6b**), but the design is generally rephrased and simplified according to Victorian taste, as seen, for example, on the Park Road façade of the University of Oxford's Museum of Natural History built between 1855 and 1860 by Thomas Newenham Deane and Benjamin Woodward (**Fig.7**). Like Worthington's Minshull Street building, Oxford's Natural History Museum is influenced heavily by the polychrome style of Gothic advanced by Ruskin.

The Minshull Street façade of the Crown Court building is significantly more ornate on every floor in comparison with that facing Auburn Street both in terms of window design and sculptural ornament (**Fig.8**). This reflects its greater significance to the building given that it is its entrance front. The lancet-windows and doorways feature a type of short, stubby column that became typical of Victorian Gothic (**Fig.9**), but which was not typical of medieval architecture (even though columns were included in the style). Above the main gabled doorway (**Fig.10**) are more ornate windows where each pair of lancets under a main arch-head are crested by an oculus: this adds architectural complexity and further visually reinforces the visual importance of the main entrance. The clock tower, on the north-west of this façade, features corner turrets, known as bartizans, at the top level and are typical of

³ John Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice*, vol. 2.

military and baronial architecture that also entered into the vocabulary of civic buildings (**Fig.1**). The crenulations (also known as castellations or battlements), as well as arrow-slit windows on the tower also mimic military architecture—castles, although the crenulations are also found on church façades too. The clock tower, therefore, can be seen to indicate the militaristic—or defensive—nature of the building: in this case defending the rule of law and justice.

There are two notable additions to the building's ornament. Firstly, the tower has five empty shields on each 'face'—ideally, they would contain heraldry, but in the Victorian period empty shields were incorporated into Gothic buildings out of a sense of continuing tradition by imitating the heraldic ornament used to decorate medieval structures. Above the main entrance on Minshull Street the shield is carved with the coat of arms of Manchester: a design granted in 1842 by the College of Arms in London (**Fig.11**). The use of Manchester's coat of arms over main entrance links the proceedings of the court with defending law and order in the city. Manchester's shield is also found on both sides of the main entrance's gable, and each is held by one of the armorial's supporters (white hart on the left, and lion on the right). The second ornamental addition to the building is the grotesque animals flanking (**Figs 12a–12d**) the doorways on the Minshull Street façade. These sculptures were produced by Earp & Hobbs, a firm based in Chorlton-upon-Medlock, Manchester known for their specialism in Gothic ornament: Thomas Earp is famous for restoring the Eleanor Cross in Charing Cross, London. The Earp & Hobbs animal grotesques are not gargoyles—they may look like they are, but gargoyles are part of a building's guttering and are waterspouts to throw rain away from walls.

As already noted, James Stevenson's additions to the north east of the Crown Court on Bloom Street are sympathetic to the original structure (**Fig.13**). The extension matches the polychrome appearance of Worthington's building, and the window arrangement is mimicked. Unlike the Worthington-designed windows, they are all rectangular and have no real affinity with the Victorian Gothic fenestration. Worthington's gables above the building's parapet are also reproduced on the extension, with glazing bars added in the glazing to Stevenson's addition to mimic the originals (**Fig.14**). The twentieth-century addition to the Court building is, consequently, both sympathetic and, at the same time, modern. Interestingly, where Worthington's building is obscured by the twentieth-century addition—the Aytoun Street façade—Gothic characteristics are notably absent. This façade, now the building's main entrance, presents a modern face to the world and is entirely distanced from the historic, nineteenth-century Gothic building (**Fig.15**).

Image captions

Fig.1: Exterior façade of the Crown Courts Building, Minshull Street. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.2: Exterior façade of the Crown Courts Building, Minshull Street, showing the Victorian and twentieth-century fabrics. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.3: Exterior façade of the Crown Courts Building, Minshull Street, showing the Victorian structure's asymmetric design. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.4: Exterior façade of the Crown Courts Building, Minshull Street, viewed from Auburn Street. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.5: Detail of the windows on the exterior of the Crown Courts Building, Minshull Street, viewed from Auburn Street. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.6: Comparison of the upper gabled 'blind' windows and church windows. Both © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.7: Exterior façade of the University of Oxford's Natural History Museum. © Peter N. Lindfield

Fig.8: Exterior façade of the Crown Courts Building, Minshull Street, viewed from Minshull Street. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.9: Detail of the exterior façade of the Crown Courts Building, Minshull Street, viewed from Minshull Street. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.10: Main Victorian entrance to the Crown Courts Building, Minshull Street, viewed from Minshull Street. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.11: Detail of Manchester's coat of arms above the main Victorian entrance to the Crown Courts Building, Minshull Street. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.12: Detail of the grotesques flanking the entrances to the Crown Courts Building, Minshull Street. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.13: Detail of the Victorian structure and the sympathetic twentieth-century addition to the Crown Courts Building, Minshull Street. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.14: Detail of the Victorian structure and the sympathetic twentieth-century addition to the Crown Courts Building, Minshull Street, viewed from Auburn Street. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.15: Aytoun façade of the Crown Courts Building, Minshull Street. © Peter N. Lindfield.