on Jul 29 2020

Building a Civic Gothic Palace for Britain's Cotton Empire: the architecture of Manchester Town Hall

In Haunt

The twenty-third instalment as part of an ongoing series for Haunt Manchester by Dr Peter N. Lindfield FSA, exploring Greater Manchester's Gothic architecture and hidden heritage. Peter's previous Haunt Manchester articles include features on Ordsall Hall, Albert's Schloss and Albert Hall, the Mancunian Gothic Sunday School of St Matthew's, Arlington House in Salford, Minshull Street City Police and Session Courts and their furniture, Moving Manchester's Shambles, Manchester's Modern Gothic in St Peter's Square, what was St John's Church, Manchester Cathedral, The Great Hall at The University of Manchester, St Chad's in Rochdale and more. From the city's striking Gothic features to the more unusual aspects of buildings usually taken for granted and history hidden in plain sight, a variety of locations will be explored and visited over the course of 2020. His video series on Gothic Manchester can be viewed here.

In this article he considers one of Manchester's landmark Gothic buildings, Manchester Town Hall, which is currently undergoing restoration work (see below). As well as safeguarding/repairing the building and restoring its key heritage features, the project involves some sympathetic work to bring it up to modern safety and access standards such as extra lifts, similar to the sympathetic interventions made in the neighbouring Grade II*-listed Central Library. Indeed, opening up the building so more people can enjoy its splendours and civic treasures, making it more of a visitor destination, is one of the key themes of the project, e.g. there will be a new visitor centre.

Below - Manchester Town Hall as viewed on 20 July 2020 during refurbishment. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Dr Peter N. Lindfield FSA is a Senior Research Associate in the Departments of English and History at Manchester Metropolitan University. He has published widely on Georgian Gothic architecture and design broadly conceived, as well as heraldry and the relevance of heraldic arts to post-medieval English intellectual, cultural, and aesthetic culture. Last year, as part of Gothic Manchester Festival 2019, he co-organised an event at Chetham's Library Baronial Hall with Professor Dale Townshend titled 'Faking Gothic Furniture' (it also features, along with The John Rylands Library, in a previous article by Peter, here). This involved discussing the mysterious George Shaw (1810-76), a local Upper Mill lad who developed an early interest in medieval architecture and heraldry, going on to create forgeries of Tudor and Elizabethan furniture for a number of high-profile individuals and places at the time, including Chetham's!

Currently Peter is completing his Leverhulme-funded research project exploring forged antiquarian materials in Georgian Britain, and also working on the recently re-discovered Henry VII and Elizabeth of York marriage bed, which itself was the inspiration behind many of Shaw's so-called 'Gothic forgeries'.

Manchester Town Hall and the Gothic tradition

The most recognisable and famous example of lavish, palatial Gothic architecture to be designed and erected in Victorian Britain is, without doubt, the Palace of Westminster in London, otherwise known colloquially as the 'Houses of Parliament' (**Fig.1**). Designed by A.W.N. Pugin and Charles Barry, this building is now world famous and at the centre of British parliamentary action and the pomp of ceremonies such as the State Opening of Parliament. The building was designed by this architectural pair following Barry's successful entry into the competition to find a proposal for replacing the earlier, medieval palace that had been destroyed largely by fire on 16 October 1834.

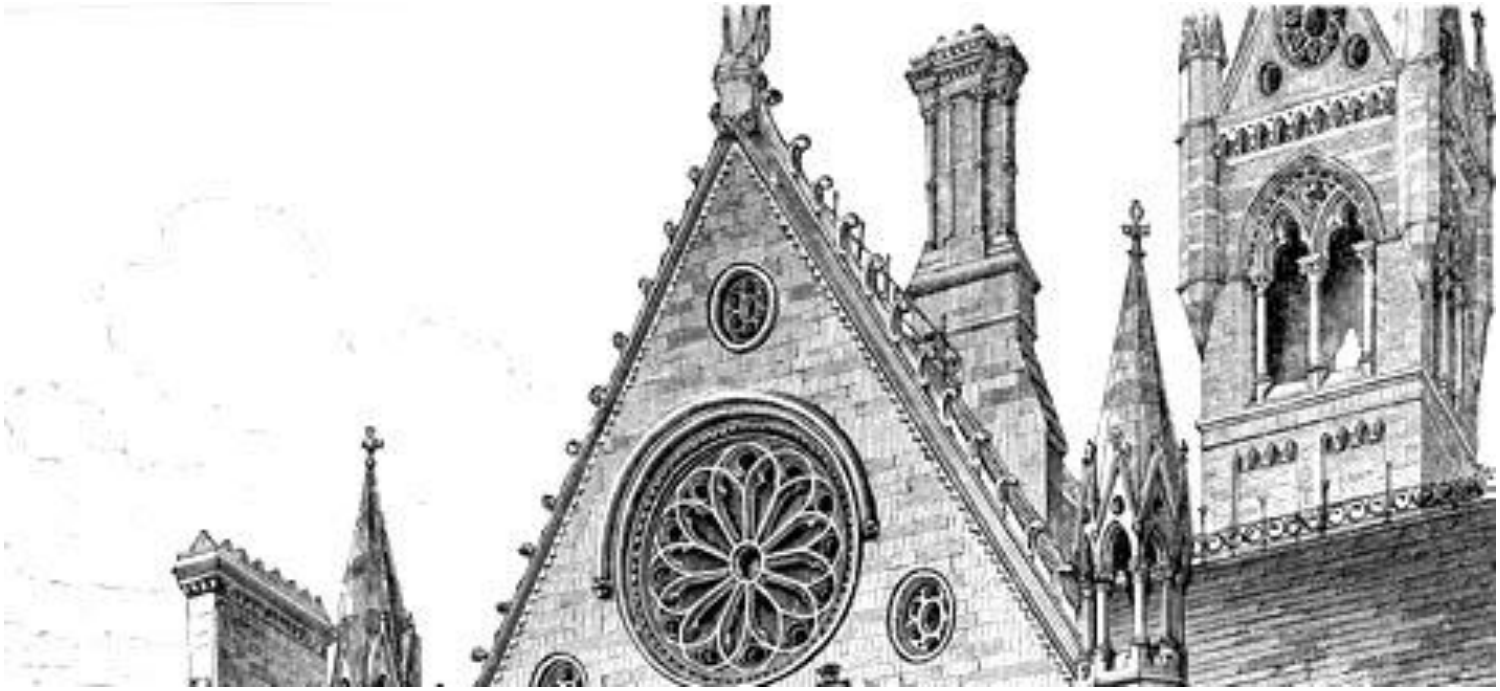
Below - Fig.1: Palace of Westminster by A.W.N. Pugin and Charles Barry. © Peter N. Lindfield.

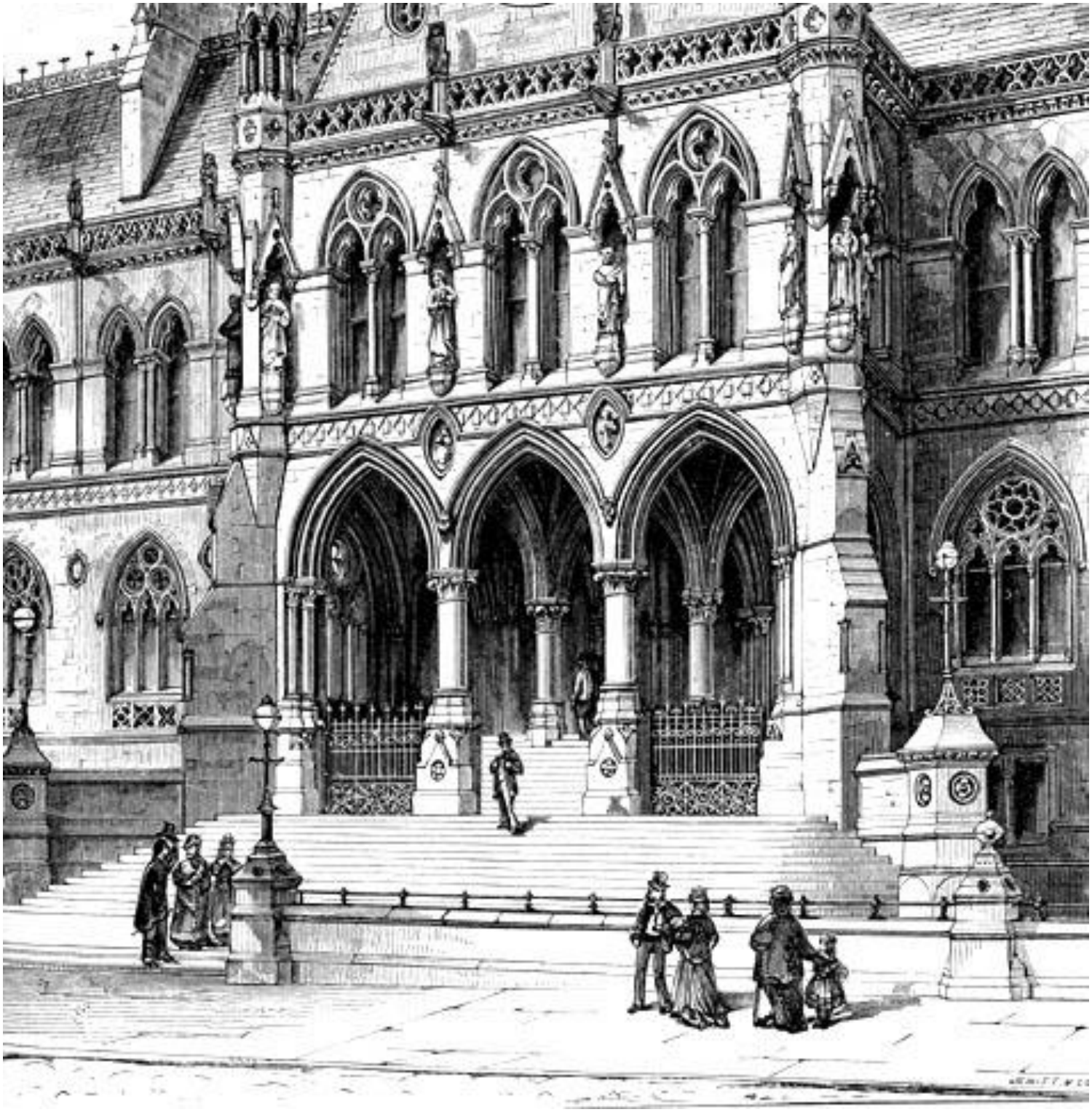
Manchester Town Hall is another important, lavish, and extensive palace-like civic building erected in Victorian Britain (**Fig.2**). Indeed, it isn't too much of an exaggeration to claim it as the period's second most significant Gothic structure following Barry's and Pugin's building in London. It was built from 1868 and Manchester's new Town Hall opened in 1877. Like the Palace of Westminster, Manchester's town hall was designed following a competition designed to solicit high-quality proposals. The building's architect, Alfred Waterhouse (1830–1905), has an extensive history of working in Manchester before this competition, with his most notable buildings being the now destroyed Manchester Assize Courts (**Fig.3**) and Strangeways Prison from 1859.

Below - Fig.2: Manchester Town Hall, before refurbishment works began. Juliux (CC BY-SA 3.0).

In 1863, when John Ruskin visited Manchester, he took an interest in Waterhouse's buildings, and he writes that:

'the Assize Courts are much beyond everything yet done in England on my principles. The hall is one of the finest things I have ever seen: even the painted glass is good [...] It is vast and full of sculpture and very impressive.'





Above - Fig.3: Manchester Assize Courts from Charles Eastlake's History of the Gothic Revival. Image in the public domain.

Reflecting upon the building in *The History of The Gothic Revival* Charles Eastlake remarks that:

'Time has shown that Mr Waterhouse's plan for the Assize Courts is admirably adapted for its purpose and, with regard to the artistic merit of the work, it will be time enough to criticise when any better modern structure of its size and style has been raised in this country.'

Waterhouse, consequently, was both highly experienced in designing Gothic buildings, and, indeed, Gothic buildings in Manchester. His most significant in the region is the subject of this post—the city's town hall, but he was also responsible to rebuilding Eaton Hall in Cheshire for the Duke of Westminster in an equally imposing manner the year after work on Manchester's Town Hall. Much like the Palace of Westminster, which is currently undergoing some remedial work, and which is scheduled for a £4bn restoration programme to make it safe and fit for the current and next century, see the project website here,

Manchester's town hall is also undergoing extensive restoration and improvement works; the building, according to current published estimates, will re-open to the public in 2024 following a 'mere' c.£300m project.

Below - Fig.4: Manchester Town Hall as viewed on 20 July 2020 during refurbishment. © Peter N. Lindfield.

As any visitor to Manchester in 2020 will have surely observed, Manchester Town Hall is being surrounded progressively with scaffolding and obscured by protective white plastic coverings (**Figs 4–7**); most of of Albert Square in front of the town hall is also now located behind wooden hoarding. Waterhouse's majestic, imposing structure is slowly being hidden from view with works progressing a pace. Some details about the project can be found here on the Manchester City Council website.

Below - Fig.5: Manchester Town Hall as viewed on 20 July 2020 during refurbishment. © Peter N. Lindfield.

As I have said, Manchester Town Hall is the most exceptional Gothic building raised in the city during the Victorian period in terms of scale, cost, ambition, and style. It proclaims, through its exterior architectural appearance and interior fixtures and fittings, the wealth and importance of Manchester within the industrialised world; it was, of course, at the centre of the cotton trade and known as 'Cottonopolis'.

Below - Fig.6: Manchester Town Hall as viewed on 20 July 2020 during refurbishment. © Peter N. Lindfield.

The style chosen for the town hall was Gothic, which resonates with the idea of British heritage—the style defining medieval churches and other architecture, as demonstrated by my posts on Manchester Cathedral, here, Chetham's Library, here, and Ordsall Hall, here. The Manchester Corporation deemed the new town hall (replacing the earlier Classical one from 1822) to be 'equal if not superior, to any similar building in the country at any cost which may be reasonably required'.

Below - Fig.7: Manchester Town Hall as viewed on 20 July 2020 during refurbishment. © Peter N. Lindfield.

The most striking aspect of the town hall's exterior is its central clock tower that can be seen to dominate, even today from certain angles, the city's skyline. Based upon the idea of medieval church towers and spires reaching to the sky to draw the eye upwards—to heaven—so the town hall's clock tower impresses by its scale. It is, nevertheless, a delicate, ornamented structure, with deep louvered windows on each side in imitation of the great English cathedrals' western towers. In particular is it reminiscent of Lincoln Cathedral's towers, save for the addition of a corona made form a spire, and an octagon (like at Ely Cathedral, Cambridgeshire). The remainder of the building features bartizans—projecting, baronial and castle-like towers that were also incorporated by architects including Thomas Worthington in his Manchester architecture, like the Minshull Street Court buildings discussed here. Other notable elements of Manchester's new Town Hall are the vast array of pointed windows on the exterior, which are still visible on Princess Street (see photos above). Despite the mass of almost identical windows on the town hall's Princess Street elevation, the corner turret seen in fig.7 at the Princess Street and Cooper Street intersection shows subtly different treatment of the windows, which are mostly of a square-headed form, unlike all but the ground floor window. The addition of a band of carved ornament running around the tops of these windows compensates for their otherwise plain form.

What is currently hidden behind all of the hoarding is the main entrance façade of the building. This main 'face' to the building is designed in a logical, symmetrical manner where there is both a wealth of Gothic architectural detail, including niches to hold statues, dormer windows (typical of Victorian Gothic architecture), and it is divided into distinct bays that create a sense of movement and dynamism through the play of light on the carved decoration. This in–out movement, as well as different heights, along with the central clock tower with projecting entrance porchway below (which is taken from medieval Cathedral architecture with its deep portal, imitating, for example, that at Westminster Abbey (**Fig.8**) in London, this building is nevertheless clearly modern (Victorian) in its overloaded detail and also plain wall space.

Below - Fig.8: The entrance portal at Westminster Abbey. © Peter N. Lindfield.

All of these elements and quotations of medieval Gothic architecture, repackaged in a modern, Victorian, manner for a civic rather than an ecclesiastical context, demonstrate Waterhouse's awareness of medieval architecture. To me, at least, the most striking example of this historical awareness is the styling of the large windows on the building's main floor, or piano nobile. They mirror, unlike the remainder of the architecture, a particular type of Gothic tracery pattern known as bar tracery that developed in France and can be seen in remarkable structures like the Sainte Chapelle in Paris, and which made its way to Britain appearing in what is termed Geometric Gothic on the now largely bricked-up entrance façade of Binham Priory in Norfolk from 1244 (**Fig.9**), and which was also incorporated into York Minster and Westminster Abbey. In particular, the lancets within the window are defined by rounded glazing bars (or mullions), and between the pointed heads of these lancets and the top of the window is an oculus, or circle, ornamented with cusps.

Below - Fig.9: bricked-up entrance façade of Binham Priory, Norfolk. John Armagh (CC BY-SA 3.0).

Turning to the town hall's interior, the rooms, corridors, and the principal staircase are all as astonishing and attractive. With overlapping and intersecting spaces, the principal staircase is certainly one of the most striking. Designed in a comprehensively Gothic style, it is one of the building's stand-out spaces (**Fig.10**). Similarly, the Great Hall, with its intricate, Gothic profiled mouldings and vaulting, along with decoration by the Pre-Raphaelite artist Ford Madox Brown, The Manchester Murals, depicting the city's history, bring what is essentially a medieval-style hall right into the nineteenth-century context (**Fig.11**). Other notable areas include the corridors, modelled medieval cloister corridors, making this a remarkably dramatic, interesting, and celebratory structure.

Below: Fig.10: Principal staircase. Michael D Beckwith (CC BY-SA 3.0).

As one of the four Grade I listed Gothic buildings in Manchester, see Historic England's listing, here, the building is not only of importance within Manchester and the region, but, indeed, throughout the country and world as an expression of civic pride. This refurbishment programme should, hopefully, restore the building to its former splendour, and also secure it for the enjoyment and use of generations to come.

Below - Fig.11: Great Hall. Tom Page (CC BY-SA 2.0).

By Dr Peter N. Lindfield

Image credits in the captions