Historic England

The Commercial Office, 1900–39

Introduction to Heritage Assets

Summary

Historic England's Introductions to Heritage Assets (IHAs) are accessible, authoritative, illustrated summaries of what we know about specific types of archaeological site, building, landscape or marine asset. Typically they deal with subjects which lack such a summary. This can either be where the literature is dauntingly voluminous, or alternatively where little has been written. Most often it is the latter and many IHAs bring understanding of site or building types which are neglected or little understood.

Commercial offices form an appreciable, sometimes imposing, component of most cities and towns. Housing the administrative and clerical functions of a wide range of commercial and industrial concerns, they were built in increasing numbers in the Edwardian and interwar periods as businesses grew, multiplied and merged. In many instances the buildings became architecturally grander. They were also were typically planned, lit, and serviced to superior levels compared to those of the previous century. Despite their growing urban presence, commercial offices of the earlier 20th century have received comparatively little scholarly attention, especially those built speculatively by property developers for sale or rent to unknown buyers or tenants. This document aims to address this gap by providing an overview of the architectural development of the building type in this period.

Front cover: No. 40 Lime Street/Nos 2–12 Fenchurch Avenue (1939–40; Messrs Henry Tanner) and Nos 37-39 Lime Street (1928-29; Leo Sylvester Sullivan; Grade II): two steel-framed offices for the City of London Real Property Company in distinct architectural dresses. [© Jonathan Clarke]

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Contents

1 Introduction

Commercial offices, in England as elsewhere in the United Kingdom emerged as an increasingly distinct building type through the 19th century and by the early 20th century were a major, visible component of most cities and towns. Housing the administrative and clerical functions of commercial concerns, they became an increasingly important facet of urban growth, enlarging and aggrandizing established business districts, and presaging new ones. In many instances the buildings became grander, and were typically planned, lit, and serviced to superior levels. Indeed, it was in this period that the commercial office became recognisably modern – in most instances disentangled from residential and warehousing functions and embracing framed construction, open planning, electric-powered lifts, lighting, heating and ventilation. Those erected in the 1920s and 1930s also responded to new thinking in architectural design, and increasingly embodied transatlantic principles of efficient and economical office design. They also reflected wider societal and cultural changes, including a more feminized workforce, awareness of staff welfare, and the growing importance of the motor car.

Earlier 20th-century commercial offices differed in many respects from their public sector equivalents housing central and local government departments and professional institutions (*see* Historic England's Law and Government Buildings Selection Guide). Within the broad category of commercial offices itself, there were two key sub-types. On the one hand, there were buildings designed and purpose-built for occupancy by a specific firm, serving as a headquarters or a subsidiary or branch office. On the other, there were speculative premises erected by property developers for sale or rent to unknown buyers or tenants. In practice, owing to the complexities of the property development process, there was overlap between the two, with an identifiable third sub-set, discussed in the Variations and associations section. In this period commercial offices were predominantly a feature of larger towns and cities, since whilst the burgeoning demand for office space in smaller conurbations might be met by adapted houses and other premises, in cities the degree of business demanded purpose-built premises.

This survey complements those that address later developments, namely: HEAG121 - *Commerce and Exchange Buildings - Listing Selection Guide* and HEAG131 - *Introductions to Heritage Assets: The Late 20th-Century Commercial Office*. [Published by Historic England].

2 Historical background

The 18th and 19th centuries saw unprecedented economic growth as a result of mercantilism, free trade, imperialism, and above all, the Industrial Revolution. Networks of production, exchange, and consumption enlarged and reconfigured, and demand for managing, protecting, and investing the accumulated wealth burgeoned, resulting in a tremendous growth in financial and professional services. Professions such as banking, surveying, architecture, insurance, legal services, and accounting emerged in more distinct and specialised form, and legislative and institutional reform (such as laws enabling the formation of joint-stock companies) reinforced their growing respectability and security. These changes demanded buildings that both housed the business activities and reflected their values and rising status, and over the course of the 19th century purpose-built offices began replacing traditional workplaces such as adapted dwellings, counting or coffee houses, and even inns. With geographical concentration came the emergence of identifiable office districts in the principal regional centres of industry and commerce, notably Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, Newcastle, Bristol, and Leeds. But it was London, the preeminent financial centre of Europe and nexus of the British Empire, that witnessed the most striking transformation, particularly the City. Redevelopment continued through the 19th century and into the next: it has been estimated that of all the City buildings that existed in 1855, some 80 per cent had been rebuilt by 1905, most as offices.

The demand for purpose-built offices also accompanied or encouraged technological developments that profoundly affected the form and function of the buildings themselves. New technologies such as the telegraph, telephone, arithmometer, stencil duplicator and, above all, the typewriter, increased the production, transmission, and management of information. This was allied with an increase in the size of many firms that resulted in ever-larger clerical workforces, and an attendant need for bigger and more efficiently serviced buildings. By the late Victorian period developments in construction and building services technology allowed office buildings to be taller, better-lit, and safer. Buildings such as Liverpool's Oriel Chambers (Peter Ellis,1864, Grade I) (Fig. 1), and London's Prudential Assurance Company (1873 -1901, Alfred Waterhouse and Paul Waterhouse, Grade II*) and the headquarters of the Institute of Chartered Accountants (John Belcher, 1890-3, Grade II*) epitomise some of the constructional and architectural virtuosity of the rising building type. However,

Figure 1: Oriel Chambers, Nos 14-16 Water Street, Liverpool (Peter Ellis, 1864; Grade I) which outraged contemporary architectural sensibilities for its brazen use of iron and glass and rejection of historical styles. [Keith Buck, November 1998, AA010801 © Crown copyright. Historic England Archive]

many offices, especially those of branch status or built speculatively, were, by later standards, poorly lit, cramped and draughty spaces, with loadbearing exterior and fixed dividing walls, interior light-wells, coal-burning fires, and male-only toilets – the latter despite a growing proportion of the clerical workforce that was female.

The Edwardian period saw great strides in the construction and planning of offices, opening the door to more efficient buildings. Fully framed construction, first in steel, and later (but to a lesser extent) in reinforced concrete, offered significant gains in planning and flexibility over loadbearing brick and iron, and after 1909 (when thinner walls were sanctioned with the passing of London's 'Steel Frame Act'), more floor space. Height (at least in London) was restricted to 100 ft and framed construction allowed more buildings to reach this limit. It also encouraged larger and deeper plans. Electric lifts, electric lighting and hot-water central heating became more widespread, raising the levels of environmental comfort, and productivity. After the creation of the Metropolitan Water Board (MWB) in 1903, which began calculating charges according to the rateable value of a property, many of the larger London offices began sinking their own artesian wells.

Demand for bigger, better offices also came from a flourishing service sector, notably insurance and shipping, and with London the centre of the world's financial and credit networks. Changes within business legislation, notably the Companies Act 1907, facilitated the creation of public companies, which also bolstered demand, and competition for building sites. Rising land values stimulated further cycles of speculative office development. In London, the pressure on City sites compelled some businesses to move beyond its confines. One office district emerged around Kingsway following the formal opening of this major new thoroughfare in 1905. Northern cities gained impressive new buildings that reflected a prosperity and confidence founded on transport and trade. Liverpool, for example, saw the construction of the Royal Liver Building, the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board Offices and The Cunard Building on Pier Head – a triumvirate (later known as the Three Graces) that gave the city a dramatic skyline (Fig. 2).

The First World War curtailed new office development, but demand for office space quickly re-established soon after, and the 1920s and 1930s saw cycles of building activity that reflected renewed growth in the professional services and commercial property sectors. This was a period in which new companies – especially small and medium sized enterprises – were formed in unprecedented numbers (the number of limited companies alone increased by 93% between1920 and 1940), the majority of which were in the service sector. Waves of company mergers resulted in multidivisional business giants such as Imperial Chemical Industries, Shell-Mex and Unilever. The Great Slump of I929-32, which had its origins in the global depression, diminished rather than interrupted office building.

Figure 2: The Three Graces, George's Pier Head, with from left to right the Royal Liver Building for the Royal Liver Assurance (1908-11; Walter Aubrey Thomas; Grade I), the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board Offices (1904-7; Sir Arnold Thornely and F.B. Hobbs with Briggs and Wolstenholme; Grade II*) and the Cunard Building (1914-17; William Edward Willink and Philip Coldwell Thicknesse; Grade II*). [Peter Williams, May 2002, AA029396 © Historic England Archive]

Figure 3: The twin-blocked Thames House (1929-31) is shown in the centre-left of this aerial view taken in 1946 of London's Millbank locality, with Imperial Chemical House (1927-29) to its right and other interwar offices ranged behind. Sir Frank Baines (1877–1933) designed both buildings in a matching Neo-Classical style; each is listed Grade II. [Extract from EAW001430, © Historic England Archive]

The interwar period saw continuing changes to the geographic location and architectural design of commercial offices. In London, the City maintained its allure for those businesses that depended on proximity to its specialized exchanges, markets, banks, and salesrooms. Long-established firms such as The City of London Real Property Company, established in 1864, continued to provide office space for those firms that could, or chose not to, build themselves. But push and pull factors saw new business districts and enclaves emerge throughout the West End, along the Thames Embankment and around Millbank, and, by the late 1930s, on the southern Albert Embankment. This growth and dispersal was an expression of the capital's size and commercial and financial importance. But other English cities with established business districts also underwent expansion and some smaller centres gained their first purpose-built speculative offices.

The trend towards increasing scale and bulk quickened, fed by the desire to extract more well-lit floor space from available sites. American and Continental influence in architectural design and real estate practice came more sharply into focus in this period, and the very largest buildings housed floor areas comparable to mid-size skyscrapers: London's Thames House (1929-31; Grade II) was the largest office block outside North America with almost three quarters of a million sq ft gross floor space spread over 11 floors and housing a tenant population of 5,000 (Fig. 3). Adelaide House, London Bridge Approach (1921-5; Sir John Burnet & Tait; Grade II) (Fig. 4) was the capital's tallest commercial building when opened, its precisely

Figure 4: A view looking north along London Bridge in 1924, with Adelaide House nearing completion and, in the distance, the recently opened Guardian Assurance and Lloyd's Bank Building, King William Street. [BL27013, © Historic England Archive]

engineered steel frame giving it the deepest open-plan floors of any English office. Such buildings were typically served by banks of high-speed elevators, mechanical ventilation, electric vacuum cleaning plant, and postal chutes, and featured amenities such as restaurants, shops, and swimming pools. Their flat, recessed roof storeys were sometimes designed for outdoor recreation. By the late 1930s, offices often had reinforced roofs and compartmentalised, blast-proof basements as provision against air raids, and very occasionally attached garages or underground car parks: the Adelphi, John Adam Street (1936-8, Colcutt and Hamp; Grade II) offered parking space beneath it for 500 cars, all on one level.

3 Development of the building type

'Mere floor space in a building is valueless unless it is lettable, and to be lettable must be lit. The most successful building owner is the one who takes the free gift of daylight, protects it from the weather, and turns it into a commodity by combining it with his floor space to let or to sell by the foot'. L S Sullivan, architect to the City of London Real Property Company, 1932.

This section profiles some of the key developments in the architectural design of commercial offices in the Edwardian and interwar periods, focusing on planning and construction, external stylistic treatment, and interior features and service technologies.

Planning and construction

Until the arrival of the fluorescent tube in the post-war era, offices were still reliant on daylight since the incandescent light bulbs of the era gave only limited illumination. Making the best use of available daylight along with obtaining the maximum usable space from an available building site were therefore two critical considerations in in the design of both speculative and purpose-built offices before the Second World War.

The traditional means of bringing light into the interior of office buildings was through lightwells, courtyards and atria. These were widely used with some localised variation. Liverpool, for example, had a tradition of arranging offices around courtyards which were sometimes glazed. By the early 20th century hollow-square plan forms were adopted for some of the grandest offices, such as The 'Three Graces' and Thorneley and Rowse's India Buildings, Water Street (1924-30; Grade II*). This plan form had emerged in America in the late 1880s and its use in Liverpool may reflect transatlantic influences. It particularly suited large plots with frontages on all sides, which gave an outer and inner ring of comparatively well-lit offices. Hollow-square plans were also employed in such monumental set pieces as London's Imperial Chemical and Thames House (Fig. 2) and Manchester's towering Sunlight House (Fig. 6). However, when an island or compact site was not available the usual solution was smaller interior lightwells. These usually ran upwards from the first floor and were lined in white-glazed brick to reflect as much light into the offices looking into them.

Framed construction facilitated lightwells in all manner of shapes – not just rectangular – but also encouraged deeper plans. This meant some interior areas might be far from exterior windows and thus poorly illuminated. And the width between windows might be anywhere between 25ft and 50ft or occasionally more. Sometimes architects would place a half-well at the party wall line, in the anticipation that when the adjoining plot was developed the new building would mirror it, creating a larger and more effective shared lightwell.

One of the most progressive changes to office design in this period was the abandoning of interior wells in favour of more complex plan forms with a greater surface area. An early instance of this is Orleans House, Liverpool (Matear and Simon, 1907; Grade II*) which originally provided offices for 'merchants, brokers and others engaged in the cotton trade'. At ground level, its plan is E-shaped, but above the second floor it rises as a double H, which admits more light into all levels. By the late 1920s, it became increasingly accepted that room depths should not exceed around 25ft. This encouraged a range of open plan forms variously described as 'alphabet' (i.e. characters such as C or E), 'comb' or 'fishbone'. An impressive example of this is55 Broadway, the London Underground headquarters (Charles Holden, 1927-9; Grade I) which employed a cross-plan for its tapering corner site to maximise both daylight and street-facing views in each office. Its planning was partly inspired by Holden's earlier work on hospital buildings but also by American precedent (specifically the General Motors Building in Detroit). On generous sites, it was possible to extend spurs or wings from a central spine block. Great Westminster House, Horseferry Road (1936–7; T P Bennett and Son; dem.) and Berkeley Square House (1937–8; Gordon Jeeves and Hector O Hamilton) used, respectively, comb and fishbone plan-forms. More compact island plots often utilised L, C or T shapes, such as North House, Liverpool (1931–2; Alfred E Sherman) and Lancaster House (1932–3; Essex & Goodman), Richmond House (1931–2; Herbert O Ellis and Clarke) and Lombard House (1933–4; S N Cooke) (see Fig 14) in Birmingham.

Bush House, Aldwych, took a slightly different approach. Described by an American magazine as 'the largest and most important office group in London', it was erected as a five-piece office complex from 1920 to 1935. This notable example of group planning closed the axial view along Kingsway (Fig. 5), and was designed for the American industrialist Irving Tar Bush by the New York architect Harvey W Corbett (1873–1954). It was developed with a central block (1920-23; Grade II) that was flanked with narrower angled wings that left plenty of space to ensure good lighting. Imperial Chemical House and Thames House were also grouped to create a uniform composition, although this was more for monumental effect than light maximisation.

Figure 5: Bush House, Aldwich, London in 1937, two years after the fifth and final block of this influential building was completed. [Extract from EPW052692, © Historic England Archive, Aerofilms Collection]

Fully-framed construction received official sanction in the Edwardian period. This had advantages for office design; for example, it permitted relatively expansive, open-plan floors with non-structural partitions that could be rearranged to suit the needs of an owner-occupant or the requirements of multiple tenants. However, steel framing only came to be routinely used for office buildings in the 1920s, and reinforced concrete in the later 1930s. This was because many designers preferred to use traditional load-bearing construction alongside steel-framed elements often for reasons of cost. Thus, it was more economical for some of Trehearne and Norman's Kingsway offices to employ partial rather than full-steel skeleton construction. Africa House (1921-2; Grade II) used just 1,000 tons of steel to create an impressive amount of open-plan floor space, and the façade's Doric stone columns shouldered some of the structural load. But from the mid-1920s, with relaxations in the regulatory environment, full steel construction reigned supreme, although there was little in the way of innovation.

More innovatory use was made of reinforced concrete, which as a framing material remained disadvantaged and was rarely used before the 1930s. Exceptions included The White House, New Street, Birmingham (1912-13; Nicol & Nicol) made adroit use of wall beams and, more daringly, (Sir) Owen Williams employed cantilevered concrete portal frames in the Daily Express building in Fleet Street (1929-31; consulting architects H.O. Ellis & Clarke; Grade II*). This allowed for a dramatic overhanging loading bay and near-continuous

curtain wall glazing (Fig. 6). The publication of the first British code of practice for reinforced concrete in 1934 stimulated its use and some modest experimentation. For instance, Commonwealth House, New Oxford Street (1938–9; H.P. Cart de la Fontaine and W.A. Lewis) exploited the space and material-saving advantages of continuous beams by setting back the columns nine feet from the perimeter.

External form and stylistic treatment

The height and exterior form of commercial offices in the early 20th century was strongly influenced by building regulations. In London, buildings were limited to a height of 100 feet (24.4m), that is 80ft to the cornice with two storeys in the roof, although ornamental towers, turrets and other unoccupied features could go higher. Thus, although the tower of 55 Broadway was allowed to reach 175ft, the London County Council demanded that its upper floors remained vacant because it was 'unsafe … to live there'. As more buildings reached this ceiling between the wars, unbroken cornice heights of 80ft became usual in many streets. The treatment of the storeys above the cornice

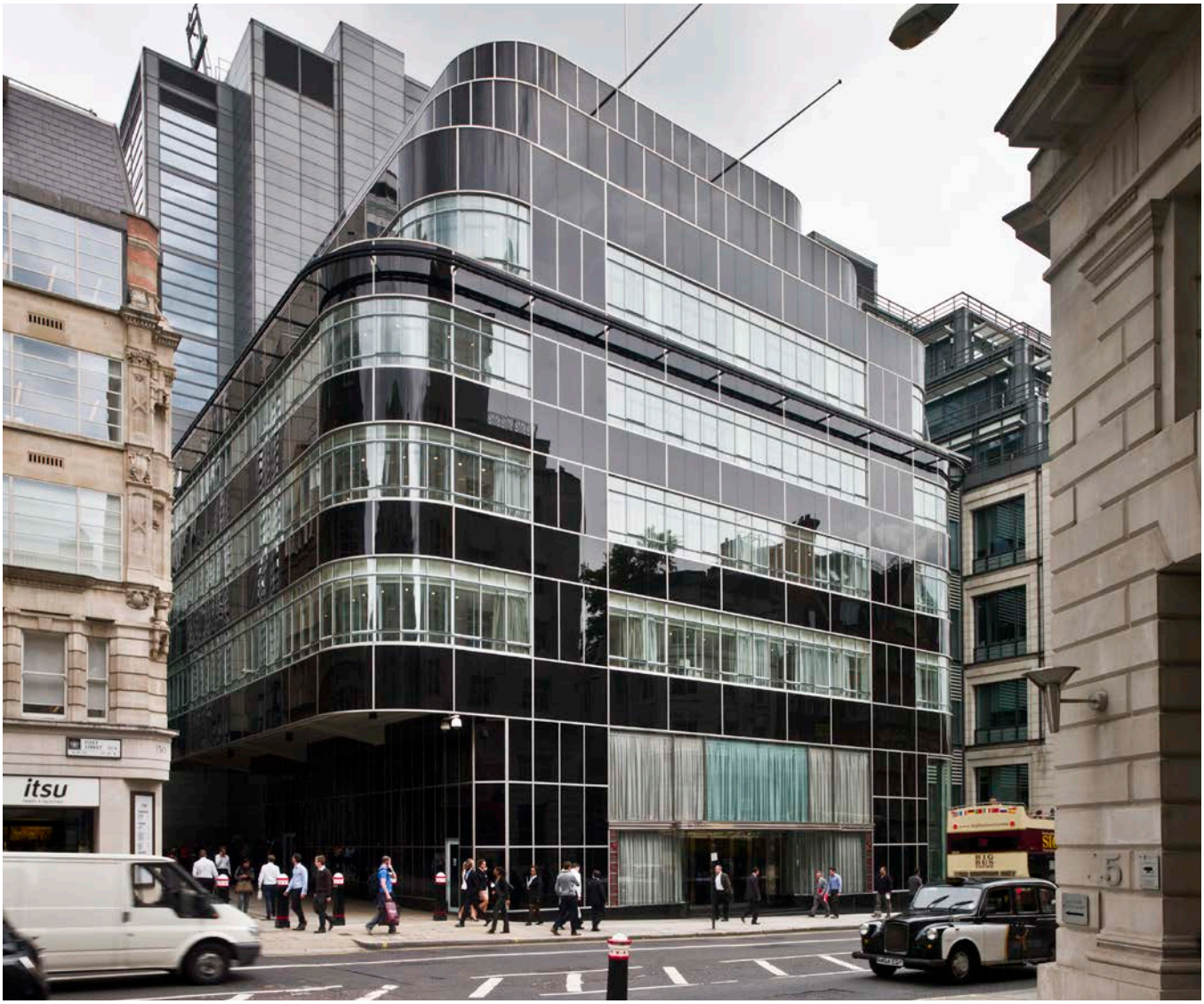

Figure 6: The former Daily Express building in Fleet Street, which was boldly framed in reinforced concrete by Sir Owen Williams. [DP132730, © Historic England Archive]

line underwent change, as the sloping mansard roof treatment of the Edwardian period gave way to vertical, set-back walls in the 1930s. This stepped profile was easier and cheaper to frame, and gave a cleaner, more modern look that many architects preferred. The side and rear elevations of offices were also sometimes stepped to ensure that daylight would reaching neighbouring buildings; infringing such rights could otherwise result in costly litigation. Outside the metropolis, building regulations could be less exacting or more easily waived. The central tower of Aubrey Thomas's Tower Buildings, Liverpool (1906–10; Grade II*) rose 153 feet (46.6 m) and was tenanted. Similarly, the towers of the Royal Liver Building which reached 312 ft (95 m) housed an additional five storeys of office space. And the era's tallest speculative building, Sunlight House, Manchester, had 14 storeys above the basement swimming pool, many in the giant mansard roof and towers (Fig. 7).

Stylistically, commercial offices exemplified – and sometimes led – the changing architectural fashions and trends that characterize the era. There was sometimes a difference in the level of architectural embellishment between custom-built and speculative offices. The type of heavy, columned stone façades seen on some of the most grandiloquent banks and insurance offices were rarely justifiable in speculatively built buildings: L.S. Sullivan, who gave the City some of its most striking interwar commercial fronts maintained that columns 'do not earn their keep'.

Edwardian architects designing smaller office buildings for commercial developers or lesser firms in the West End also sought to introduce a note of gaiety to the narrow frontages, employing an Arts and Crafts or Free Style, rather than one or other of the newly revived classical styles. A fine example of this is R.J. Worley's 3, Soho Square (1903; Grade II) (Fig. 8). But it was the classical idioms that most architects and patrons turned to at the start of the century, especially Baroque, which was felt to be suitably dignified and decorous, and had associations of grandeur and prosperity. These were particularly favoured by headquarters buildings for insurance companies and shipping firms in the City of London and major provincial cities. Even speculative offices typically incorporated some Renaissance decorative features on their principal elevations. The gradual adoption of framed construction was sometimes externally expressed through a Neo-Mannerist style. This produced such celebrated works as 1 and 17-19 Cockspur Street (respectively 1903-6 by H. Tanner junior, and 1907 by Sir Aston Webb, both Grade II) and Belcher and Joass' 156-62 Oxford Street and 161 Piccadilly (1906-8 and 1907, both Grade II*). And Neo-Mannerism saw occasional employment elsewhere, such as Liverpool's Royal Liver Building, Liverpool. But for the most part, the decorative frontages of Edwardian offices belied their structural frames.

Figure 7: Joseph Sunlight's speculative Sunlight House, Manchester (1926-32) towers above Charles Heathcote's Royal London House, erected in1904 for the Royal London Insurance Society (both Grade II). [Stephen Richards / Sunlight House, Quay Street, Manchester / CC BY-SA 2.0]

Figure 8: The delightful and highly original Free Style treatment of No. 3 Soho Square (1903) by R.J. Worley which stood in contrast to the more solemn or grandiose frontages applied to most contemporary offices. [Chris Redgrave, © Historic England Archive]

In the interwar period even more historical styles were revivified and reinterpreted, whilst new approaches such as minimal ornamentation were introduced through the influence of Modernism. Much of this was driven by new ideas and influences from overseas, and office façades were variously modulated and inflected by English, American and Scandinavian Neo-classicism, German and Dutch Expressionism, and French-inspired Art Deco. However, the classical impulse remained strong, providing a dependable and sufficiently elastic means of reconciling interior function with outward decorum. A style later referred to as 'stripped classical' was the most favoured by architects of commercial offices in the 1920s and early 1930s, not least because it suited both their clients' budgets and lingering conservatism. The verticality of the structural frame was often expressed through narrow pilasters and recessed windows or spandrel panels, an American approach first used in England in Burnet and Tait's Kodak Building on Kingsway London (1910–11). This became the basic prototype for innumerable British commercial buildings between the wars. In London it reached its apotheosis in the mid-to-late 1920s, with such severely intercolumniated façades as L.S. Sullivan's headquarter offices for Courtauld's in St Martin's le Grand, 37–39 Lime Street (*see* front cover) and 51–54 Gracechurch Street, and Hobden and Porri's Britannia House, 231-233 Shaftesbury Avenue (all Grade II). Thanks to Continental influences, the Stripped Classical style sometimes shaded into the Moderne or Modernistic,

By the 1930s, functional rather than structural expression was more important in office exteriors. Elevations were increasingly characterised by broad expanses of solid wall surfaces pierced by a regular arrangement of evenly sized windows, which expressed the 'beehive character of the big office building'. Introduced by Corbett at Bush House, this was adopted for 55 Broadway (1927–9 Grade I), Raymond Hood and Gordon Jeeves's Ideal House (now Palladium House), 1-4 Argyll Street (1928-9; Grade II) and J.J. Joass's Abbey House (1928–32). This 'punched wall' approach worked well with blocky volumes and set-backs, with surface ornament sometimes introduced sparingly to avoid monotony. The contrast with earlier vertically emphasised façades was sometimes striking (*see* front cover).

Also characteristic of this decade was a horizontal treatment of elevations, expressed through wide or continuous strip windows which emphasized the floor levels. For longer window strips this required columns to be set back from the front wall plane to allow for the glazing. Often combined with brick, stone or faience, as with Commonwealth House, and Kings Bourne House, High Holborn (1938; Welch & Lander), it was at its most visually striking when used with black vitrolite cladding, as in the Streamline Moderne Daily Express buildings in London (see Fig. 6) and Manchester, and Ibex House, Minories, City of London (1935–7; Fuller, Hall & Foulsham; Grade II).

Figure 9: Carliol House (1927-8; L.J. Couves with Sir John Burnet and Partners). Built for Carliol House, Ltd – a company formed by the Newcastle-Upon-Tyne Electric Supply Co. – it served, in common with many buildings, as both headquarters and rental space. [DP034469, © Historic England Archive]

This horizontal treatment was much influenced by the modern movement, but offices in this period rarely embraced it fully: 233 High Holborn (1929–30; Frederick Etchells and Herbert A Welch; Grade II) for the advertising firm W.S. Crawford Ltd was perhaps the fullest expression of Modernism before the war.

Interior features and service technologies

The entrance hall was the one space used by occupants and visitors alike and was thus usually designed to impress, and so might be of double height or lined with prestigious materials. Glazed brick, and mosaic faience or porcelain tiles were often used for the floors, walls and even ceilings in the Edwardian period – particularly splendid surviving examples being the headquarters of the London, Edinburgh and Glasgow Assurance Company, 30 Euston Square (1906-8 by A Beresford Pite; Grade II*) and Holland House, 1-4 and 32 (1914-16 by Hendrik Petrus Berlage; II*; Fig. 10). Marble, wood panelling and ornamental plasterwork were also popular. By the interwar period, lobbies were often clad with veneers of stone or hardwood drawn from the Empire, sometimes in an Art Deco style and featuring white metals and plastics for decorative features, lighting and signage. Because the entrance hall led to the lift lobby and stairs, it often incorporated porters' desks, kiosks and postal boxes.

Until the 1930s the main stairs, rather than the lifts, was considered the key architectural feature, with an Imperial staircase used where space and costs allowed. Single or paired lifts typically ran up the stairwell, but in grander buildings, the placement of lifts in separate enclosed lift shafts gave scope for a more satisfactory architectural treatment of the entrance hall. By the mid-1930s staircases had all but disappeared behind closed doors or else consigned to side lobbies in larger buildings. Centre stage was now given to the American-style elevator lobby, with banks of up to eight high-speed automatic lifts with colourful or shiny finishes and fittings.

The office floors were usually similar in character. These spaces might be subdivided by semi-permanent or moveable partitions and walls that formed corridors or rooms but which could be reconfigured to suit organisation needs. Where provided, directors' rooms, principals' offices and board or committee rooms would be fitted and furnished to a higher standard, with choice linings, bespoke furniture and, in the Edwardian period, imposing fireplaces. Typically occupying the higher levels on the main frontage, they might be expressed externally: Brettenham House's double-height meeting room on the uppermost floor was seen as 'the crowning feature of the exterior elevation', and the well-preserved directors' rooms, board room with common room of St Olaf House, Tooley Street (1931 by H.S. Goodhart-Rendel; Grade II*) occupy the visually distinctive centre of the river frontage (Fig. 11).

Electric lifts were the most visible service technology (Fig. 12). Crucial to the circulation of large numbers of people at peak hours, they saw considerable improvement and refinement during the early

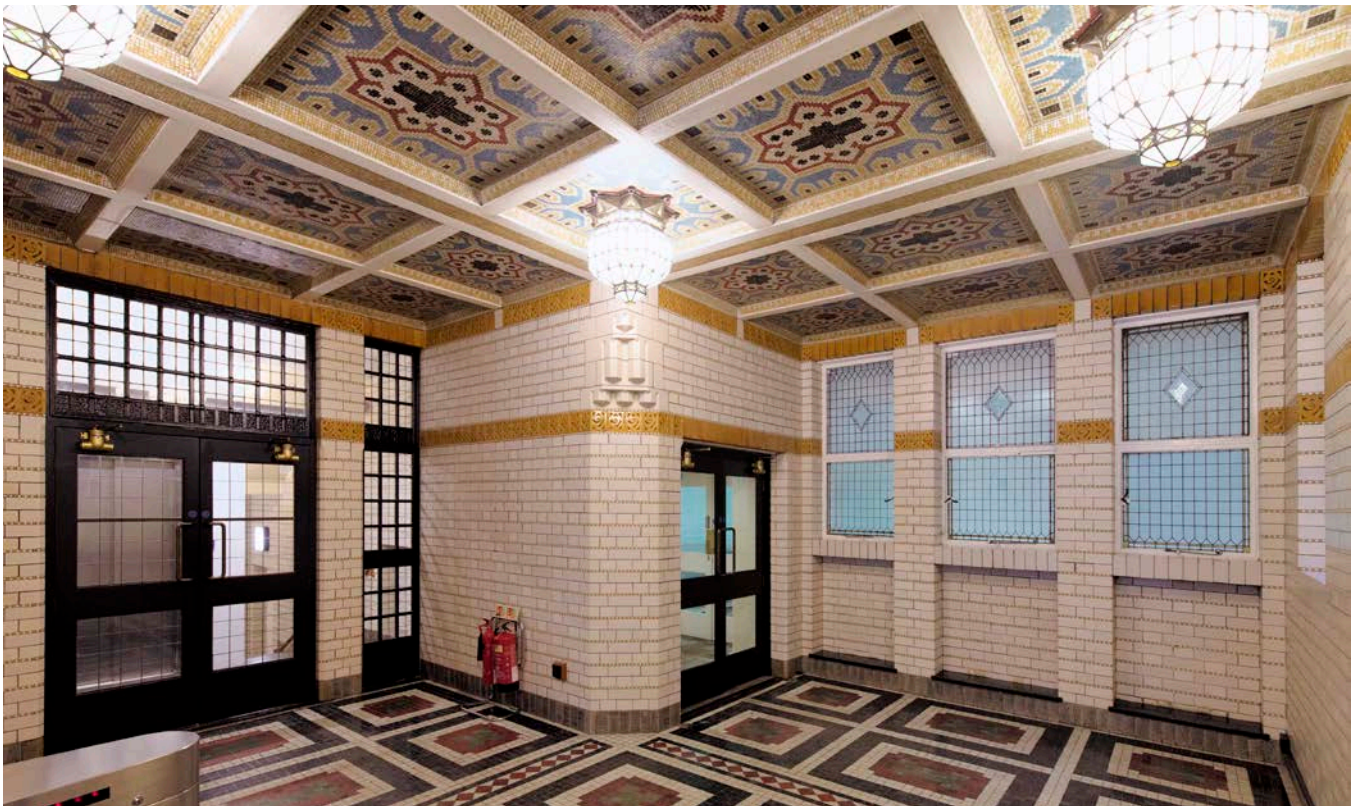

Figure 10: Ground floor lobby of Holland House, Bury Street, City of London. The ornate lobbies and the public areas resulted from the collaboration between the architect Hendrik Petrus Berlage and the artist Bart Van Der Leck, who were both leading figures in their native Holland. [© Jonathan Clarke]

Figure 11: The river frontage of St Olaf House, Tooley Street (1931 by HS Goodhart-Rendel; Grade II*) broadcast the directors' rooms and board room that occupied the centre of the building. [Image © Acabashi; Creative Commons CC-BY-SA 4.0; Source: Wikimedia Commons]

20th century, including automatic push-button control (rather than attendant-operated switch control), faster speeds and smoother acceleration and deceleration. Less obvious were the advances in heating (typically low-pressure hot water radiators), artificial lighting (tungsten filament bulbs) and ventilation (occasionally, forced ventilation and proto-air-conditioning systems). These considerably improved the environmental comfort of offices, with mechanical plant usually housed in basements or roofs. The period also saw more generous toilet facilities for both sexes, the disappearance of the caretaker's living quarters, and the provision of restaurants, attended garages, and in the grandest office buildings, basement swimming pools and rooftop gardens.

Variations and associations

Commercial offices are conventionally sub-divided into one of two categories: custom-built and speculative. One notable variation to this, constituting an intermediate, overlapping category was the interwar prestige multi-tenanted development. Often erected by wealthy businessmen to house their various businesses, such 'composite buildings' (as contemporaries called them) devoted most

of their floor space for rental income. This is exemplified by Adelaide House, London Bridge Approach, which was partially occupied by the various manufacturing and commercial concerns of its Australian developer, Richard Tilden-Smith. Buildings like this catered for larger tenants which did not want to be subsumed within an ostensibly owner-occupied building, and provided both a ready-made prestige address, and proximity to business allies and rivals. Following American skyscraper practice, developers sometimes pre-let offices or whole floors to prestigious 'anchor tenants', which raised the profile, and profitability, of the scheme.

Figure 12: Advertisement for an electric lift installation by Smith, Major & Stevens, Ltd as published in the *Architect & Building News*, 13 May 1927 [Courtesy of Library of Birmingham]

Although the office function was increasingly physically separated from industry, trade and commerce in the early 20th century, strong links and overlaps persisted. Factories, warehouses, and stores continued to incorporate office spaces or even discrete office premises. Conversely headquarter buildings might house other functions. For example, the headquarters of Hay's Wharf, Ltd (St Olaf House) provided for the interchange of goods between road and river at ground-floor level, and Adelaide House accommodated wharfage and warehousing below street level. Other functionally specialised types of buildings, such as newspaper offices had floors for type setting and printing. And offices serving new industries might require specific adaptations as was the case with 'Film Row' in Wardour Street, Soho and buildings such as Warner House (1930-32; James S Naylor; Fig. 13) which included a separate fire-resisting wing for the storage of the celluloid film stock. More typical, however, were offices sited over ground-floor showrooms, which might be separately leased or showcase the products of the owner-occupier. A splendid example of the latter is Palladium House, 1-4 Argyll Street – originally called Ideal House and the headquarters of the National Radiator Company.

Many commercial offices were built in response to new infrastructure such as road and rail, or town planning initiatives. In Edwardian London, speculative offices were built above central underground stations, such as Oxford Circus House of 1908 by Delissa Joseph. In the interwar period suburban railway stations were similarly exploited (e.g. Chesham House, 1924–5 by C.W. Clark, above Willesden Green Station), and often stimulated development nearby (e.g. Broadway Chambers, Hammersmith (1924–5; J Ernest Franck). New or widened streets were another catalyst, and the scale and nature of development was often mediated by the municipal authorities. For example, road improvement schemes in interwar Birmingham saw large offices such as Lancaster House, Newhall Street (1932–3; Essex & Goodman), and Lombard House, Great Charles Street (1933–4; S N Cooke; Fig. 14) loosely zoned around a proposed Civic Centre.

The naming of offices can also be telling. Most continued to be suffixed with the word 'house' rather than the American term 'building'. This was a hangover from Victorian times, a reference to the domestic origins of the building type when office work was conducted in or above the place of residence. Names also reference the street or historic ward (e.g. Finsbury Circus House, Portsoken House); a famous or local landmark (e.g. Alhambra House, Charing Cross Road (demolished); Lambeth Bridge House); the name of the business (e.g. Unilever House, Twentieth Century House) or places with which the business had dealings, often in the Empire (e.g. West Africa House, Liverpool). Occasionally the names had more personal associations. For example, Sunlight House, Manchester, was named after its architect-developer Joseph Sunlight (né Josif Schimschlavitch), whose father had taken the surname from the model village of Port Sunlight when he became a naturalized British citizen. Some offices evoked

Figure 13: The former Wardour House, Wardour Street, Soho – no longer the British headquarters of the American film studio Warner Bros, but until recently home to film production companies. [Chris Redgrave, © Historic England Archive]

Figure 14: Lombard House, Great Charles Street, Birmingham. Erected in 1933–4 to designs by S N Cooke, it was one of several speculative office buildings that sprang up in the wake of municipal road improvements in England's second largest city. [© Jonathan Clarke]

historical associations which might provide the inspiration for artistic embellishments to the building. For instance, St Olaf House features a mosaic of 'St Olave, King of Norway' by Frank Dobson (1886–1963) and a carved inscription commemorating St Olave's Church that formerly stood on the site.

4 Change and the future

Offices often occupy valuable sites in city centres and are therefore particularly vulnerable to redevelopment and possible unsympathetic change. Indeed, contingency was an aspect of the design of many speculative offices, which, by the 1920s were sometimes conceived with a lifespan of just 30 years. Much of the era's building stock was of framed construction, permitting interior flexibility, but the original service technologies may now be inadequate for present day needs. Consequently, even where the office function has endured, the interiors have often been rebuilt or remodelled, and modern lifts and other technologies installed. Nevertheless, the buildings may retain their more impressive spaces, such as entrance halls, lift lobbies and board rooms. A number now enjoy statutory protection.

Where office buildings have lost their original function, they often still make a recognised contribution to the townscape. Their robust construction and large and open floor plates have permitted a range of alternative uses such as residential, hospitality and leisure. Such adaptations may affect their historic character through unsympathetic extensions and additions, and replacement of windows and other fixtures and fittings, such as stair rails and lift surrounds. Developers and owners appreciate the high quality of such features and have often retained them, thereby ensuring that the special interest is persevered and the distinctive lines and look of early 20th commercial offices is increasingly valued.

5 Further reading

The Late Twentieth Century Commercial Office (HEAG131) includes a number of key sources on the history of offices. As far as those of the period covered by this document is concerned, there is a substantial body of literature, although not all of it published. The most comprehensive examination of the Edwardian period is Frank Locker's 'The Evolution of Victorian and Early Twentieth Century Office Buildings in Britain' (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1984). An overview of metropolitan developments between the wars is provided by Alex Bowring's 'Trends in Interwar London Office Design', *Twentieth Century Architecture 14: Building for Business* (2020), pp. 25-41, and a useful survey of inter-war stylistic trends with an emphasis on office buildings is Nikolaus Pevsner's, 'The Modern Movement in Britain', in *Twentieth Century Architecture 8: British Modern: Architecture and Design in the 1930s* (2007), pp. 11-38. The work of one of the era's foremost architects is examined by Jonathan Clarke in the former volume, '"Come and live in me ... let my luxury advertise your business": The speculative offices of Leo Sylvester Sullivan 1910–1940', pp. 42-57. This latter chapter draws on a larger work by the author, 'The Development of the Speculative Office in Interwar England' (PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2020). Also by Clarke are 'The exception, not the norm: pre-1940 concrete-framed commercial offices in England' in *Further Studies in the History of Construction* (2016), pp. 357-70, and 'Development: Speculative office development and public sector tenants', in Neal Shashore and Jessica Kelly, eds, *Reconstruction: Architecture, Society and the Aftermath of the First World War* (2023). The employment of steel framing in Edwardian offices is examined in chapter 11 of Clarke's *Early Structural Steel in London Buildings: A Discreet Revolution* (2014).

As far as individual buildings are concerned, especially headquarter offices, these are discussed in monographs and occasional publications including Charles Knevitt *Britannic House: A Palace Upon a Cliff* (1990); Andrew Saint, 'Americans in London: Raymond Hood and the National Radiator Building', *AA files* 7 (1984), pp. 30-43; Gavin Stamp (ed), *Britain in the Thirties* (1979), as well as broader overviews of the period such as Alastair Service's, *Edwardian architecture and its Origins* (1975) and *Edwardian architecture: a handbook to building design in Britain 1890-1914* (1977) and Elain Harwood, *Art Deco Britain: Buildings of the interwar years* (2019). The *Buildings of England* series, including the City Guides, provide invaluable historical overviews as well as descriptions and comment of most buildings of interest.

6 Where to get advice

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