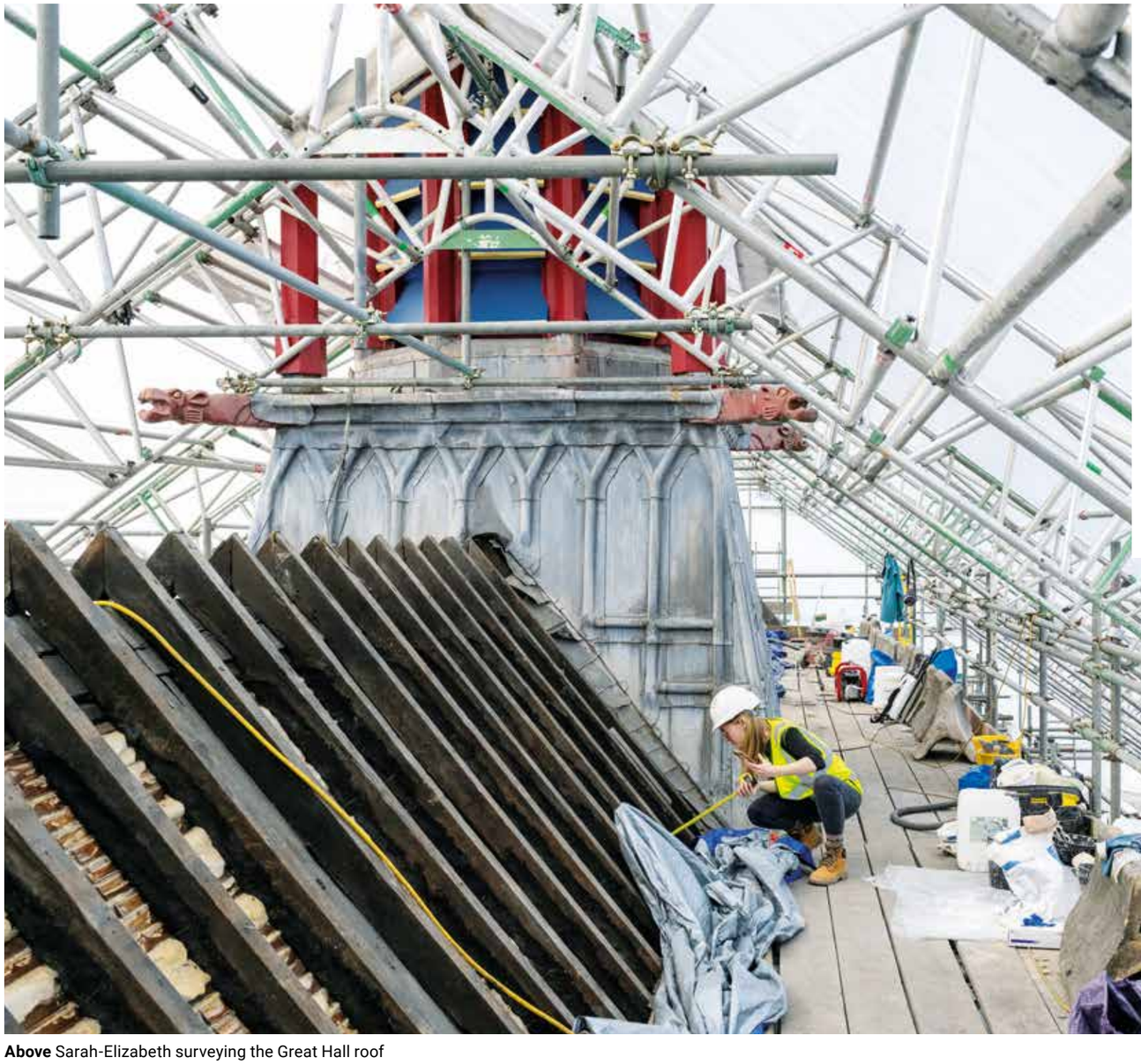
Revitalising Rochdale Town Hall

Project architect Rebecca Mills and architectural apprentice Sarah-Elizabeth Geldard from Donald Insall Associates, discuss the triumphs and challenges of this comprehensive project and what it means to be women working in the architecture industry



DAMIEN GRIFFITHS

Above Sarah-Elizabeth surveying the Great Hall roof



JAMES NEWTON

Below The Fleche

Bottom Rebecca inspecting the Fleche



ALEX WATT



JAMES NEWTON

Below Principal elevation

Rebecca is an AABC (The Register of Architects Accredited in Building Conservation) accredited architect who has worked for Donald Insall Associates for over seven years. Sarah-Elizabeth recently completed a Master of Studies in Architecture at Cambridge University, which involved over three years of study to achieve Part II and Part III qualifications alongside working in practice throughout. Rochdale Town Hall was the case study which formed part of her final submission.

History

Rochdale Town Hall is a work of art, and a Grade I listed building of exceptional interest. Designed by William Crossland, its dramatic Gothic exterior and jewel-like interior are harmonious and together exemplify the apex of High Victorian design – it's one of the finest examples of a Victorian town hall nationally. As well as being an outstanding example of the Gothic Revival, it also includes early examples of Aesthetic Movement design, then a very new movement in art.

The Great Hall is arguably the most important room in the Town Hall. The rich internal decoration scheme comprises walls made up of painted stencil work with Henry Holiday's mural of 1870 depicting King John signing the *Magna Carta* to the east gable and the much-admired Binns organ to the west. The stained glass is by Bayne of Heaton Butler and Bayne and includes two rose windows to the gables; 16 timber hammer beams, rich with painted decoration, form the main roof structure, which is supported between the wings of intricately carved timber angels; 330 painted lath and plaster panels form the ceiling between these beams.

Reflections on the project

Rebecca (RM): Re-energising this building has been a labour of love for me – from painstaking removal of more than a century's worth of inappropriate interventions, to making bold interventions such as an external terrace and fully glazed entrances to achieve a more welcoming building with parity of access for all. The project team worked collaboratively to create engaging public spaces and ensure the Town Hall is physically and intellectually accessible for everyone to enjoy.

Sarah-Elizabeth (SEG): The project made a great case study as it was so complicated in many ways – fitting the scope of works to the budget, the tight programme, progression through Covid and the nuances of the contract – were all good topics to analyse in detail. At first, I was concerned that I would only be working on one project whereas other apprentices were working on lots of smaller projects, but the breadth of experience that I gained over three ▶

phases of works was vast. The sheer amount of information that I had to digest was an invaluable learning experience. Now that we have come full circle, I have realised just how much I have learnt.

RM: So, what was your favourite part of the project?

SEG: There are too many to choose from... I really enjoyed working on the fleche (the spire with a weathervane). Going up scaffold so high for the first time was amazing and getting to see something up close that most people never get to see. Understanding the construction and working with the design team and specialist sub-contractors to produce the timber repair drawings was fascinating. Improving the original detailing so that the fleche had better drainage and would be less prone to rot, then working alongside conservators to conduct paint analysis to realise the bold original colour scheme were all highlights. I look at it from the ground now and think how incredible it is that I have touched it. What was your favourite part?

RM: I agree – too many to choose from! The realisation of the Bright Hall was a highlight of mine. The original space had been decimated by decades of inappropriate interventions and stripping it back to the hall it once was for community use felt so rewarding. Finding lots of original features along the way, such as the hidden decorative eaves beam, was also a bonus. Due to the 1883 fire, paint analysis revealed very little about the original decoration scheme in this area and the modern decoration was selected based on analysis from other areas of the building. It was very satisfying when the scaffold came down and the space looked so fresh and vibrant. I think the colour scheme really works.

What would you say was the most challenging part of the project?

SEG: One of the most challenging parts of the project for me was the unexpected items that we would find on site and resolving details for these in a timely manner, so the contractor kept to programme. For example, the dry rot we found in the roof timbers or when an element of the building was opened up and it wasn't quite as we had envisaged, so we needed to adapt details to suit the existing construction.

That said, I loved going to site each week and seeing things that I had never seen before. Observing the specialist joiners and masons carefully dismantling parts of the building to facilitate repairs gave me a real understanding of its construction. Realising how the drawings that I was producing in the office really were having an impact on site was such an eye opener and it made me think about them so much more – examining whether what I was drawing on paper could be constructed on site.



DONALD INSALL ASSOCIATES

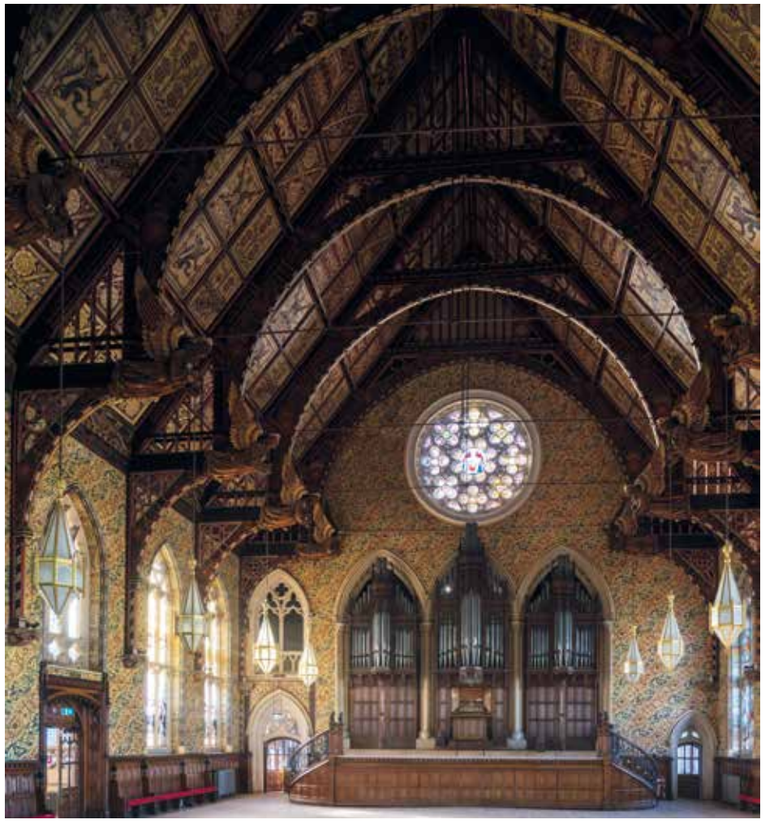
Above The Bright Hall being stripped of modern interventions



JAMES NEWTON

Above The Bright Hall

> **I found that all the female leads could sit down and talk constructively about issues to solve problems in a collaborative way. There was a feeling of mutual respect throughout the project**



JAMES NEWTON



DAMIEN GRIFFITHS

Above The Great Hall

Right The Great Hall ceiling

Left Hirst Conservation stabilising the Great Hall ceiling panels from above



JAMES NEWTON

RM: Arguably one of the most noteworthy challenges of the project for me was the repair and restoration of the Great Hall ceiling. Examining the ceiling and finding a combination of issues – cohesive failure, material fatigue and mechanical stress – led to serious concerns regarding its stability. The Great Hall ceiling works were key to keeping the programme on track as completion of them and dropping of the birdcage scaffold facilitated the commencement of so many other strands of work that could not happen in tandem. Therefore, to have to take a step back and start extensive trials of never before used conservation methods was a big decision and it took the whole team working together in a very positive and constructive manner to keep the project on track.

SEG: I really enjoyed seeing the Great Hall ceiling works come to fruition, but I don't think that I felt the programme pressures as much as you! Learning about the deep consolidation of the nibs and underlying plaster was fascinating. Seeing the non-functioning laths removed, and small holes drilled to allow the consolidant and plaster to penetrate the panels below really facilitated my understanding of the building construction. Watching the conservators clean the panels and form the pads before mechanically fixing them with stainless-steel ties and bands spanning across the joists was such a learning curve.

RM: I think another major achievement of the project was the fact that we managed to clean all the highly decorative internal timber and plasterwork of the Great Hall in conjunction with the stabilisation of the panels. Hirst Conservation removed a total of seven layers of impervious varnish, which had been applied over the lifetime of the Town Hall to both the plaster panels and the timber beams and had hardened by oxidation, becoming progressively more insoluble and yellow over time. All loose dirt had to be taken off with dry brushes and a vacuum cleaner, then more intransigent dirt was removed using cotton wool and water. The varnish was surface treated with ammonium hydroxide solution and the upper layers of varnish were carefully scraped back by hand using a scalpel blade. A gel of acetone: benzyl alcohol 4:1 was then applied with cotton swabs to remove lower levels of varnish. Trials to remove the varnish highlighted that significant touching up had taken place over the years between varnish layers and removal of the varnish would also remove later added layers of paint. This meant that careful and selective touching up of the original panels needed to be carried

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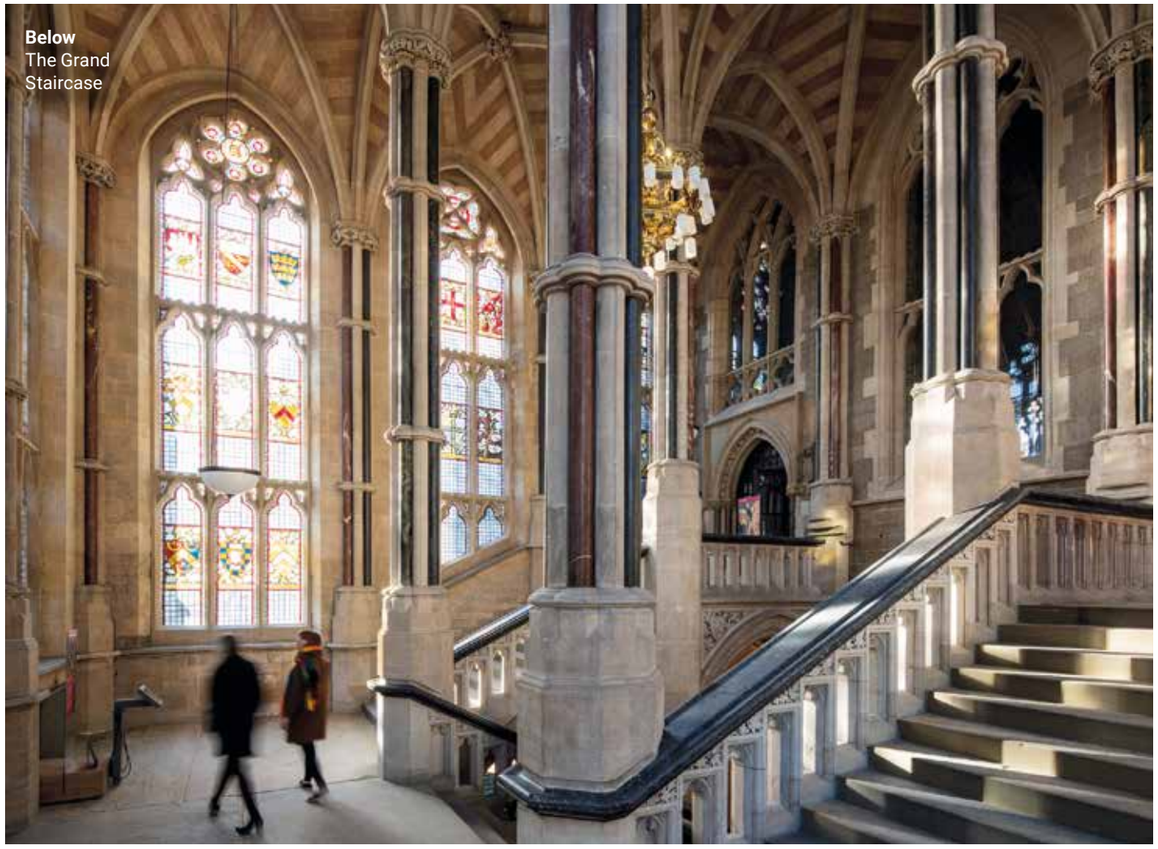

Below
The Grand Staircase

JAMES NEWTON

out prior to the final application of a modern conservation grade varnish.

SEG: The fact that the team saw an opportunity to recruit and teach volunteers to facilitate this element of the works was very inspiring. Through an existing relationship with the local college, art students were also recruited to work alongside the conservators with one student now having been taken on permanently. This approach allowed the team to reduce costs whilst simultaneously providing additional training and jobs in the local area.

RM: Being from Rochdale myself I'm proud of how the local community was able to make their mark on the building, be it through participating in the apprenticeship programme or as one of the many volunteers who helped conserve the building and co-create artwork to mark a new beginning for the Town Hall. Volunteers were, and still are, at the heart of the project. The fact that many of the volunteers were women is also a great accolade.

SEG: I really admired the way everyone worked together on the project. I enjoyed having you as a female mentor and I always felt comfortable asking you questions, knowing that you would take the time to explain things. We formed a strong bond, and I really appreciated your empathetic nature towards me. It was interesting seeing this natural empathy shift to something stronger and more powerful when it needed to, such as in progress meetings with the contractor, and I learnt a lot from this. I think women as leaders give the confidence for younger women to thrive.

RM: I'm really pleased to hear that! Upon reflection I think being a mother had made me a better leader and mentor; as it develops your emotional intelligence and sense of empathy, resilience, ability to be adaptable and ability to multi-task, to name but a few things. There were quite a high number of female leads on the design team, with two project managers, the lead Quantity Surveyor and me. Project Manager Emma Birkett (RDA) was exceptionally good at driving things through when needed and I found that all the female leads could always sit down and talk constructively about issues to solve problems in a collaborative way. There was a feeling of mutual respect throughout the project. When I studied at Manchester University there was only a small proportion of women on the course and in the construction industry, but this thankfully seems to be changing.

SEG: Yes, there do seem to be more women in architecture now; my course had more women than men in attendance. I chose the course as it was a pragmatic way for me to gain practical experience alongside studying and I was drawn to working at Donald Insall Associates as I wanted a career in conservation and heritage work. I felt like I could get on with life while studying rather than having to pause life to complete my studies. Maybe other women are drawn to this too? ■