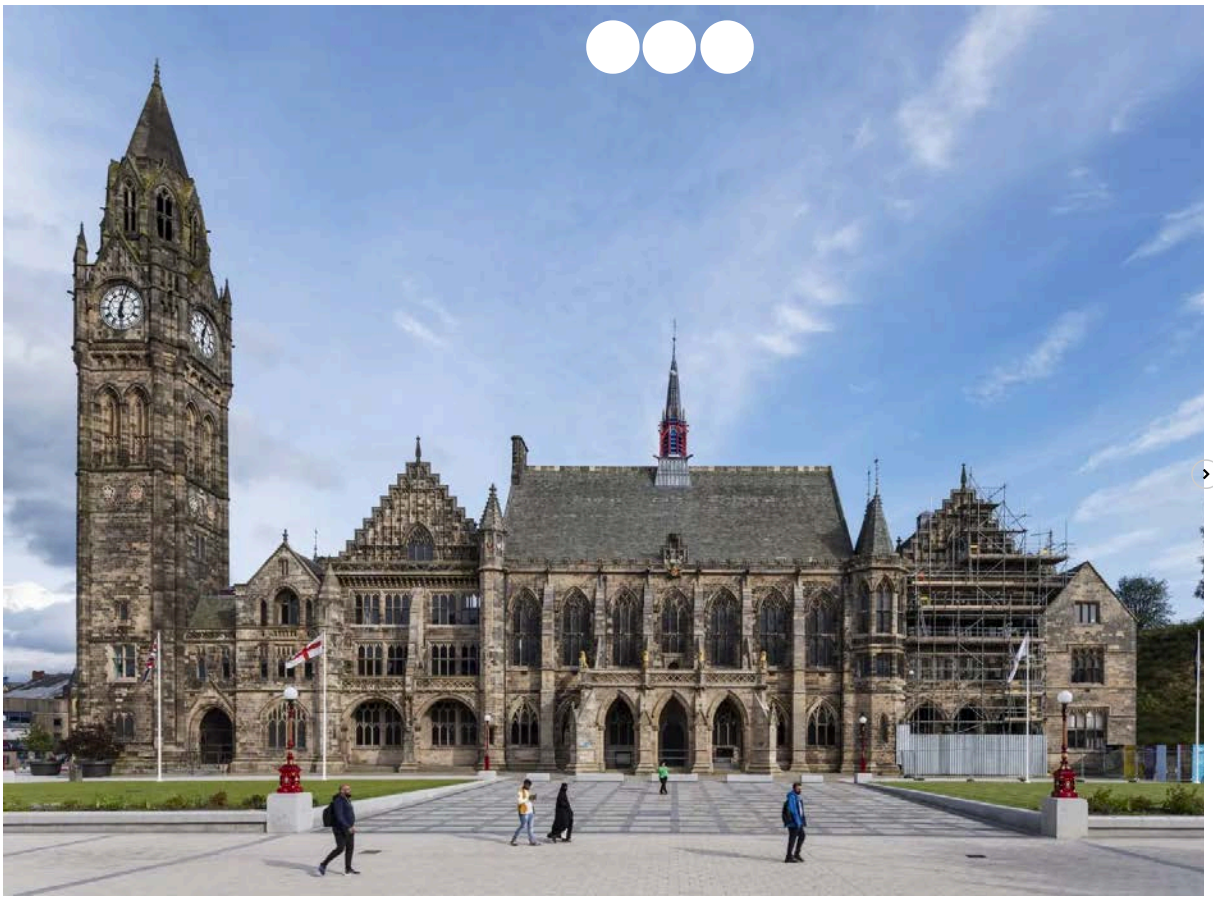
Donald Insall Associates restores Grade I-listed Rochdale Town Hall

17 OCTOBER 2024 • BY FRAN WILLIAMS. PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMES NEWTON



1/28

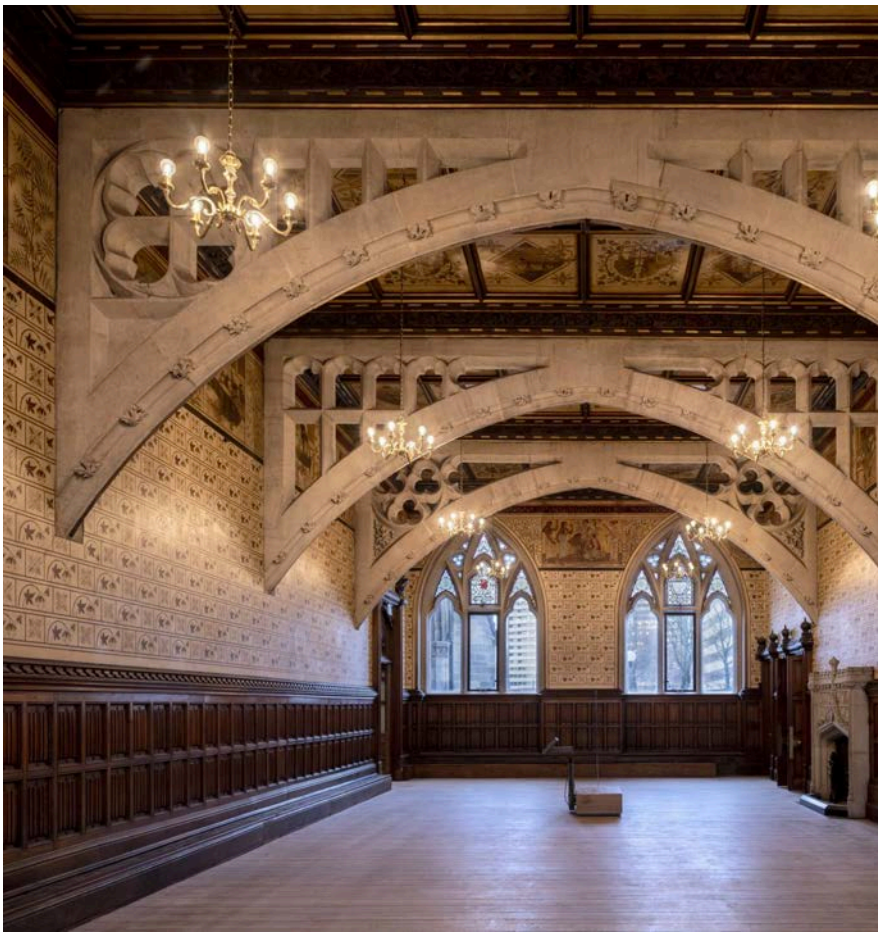
The 1871 Gothic Revival building – one of the most historically significant buildings in the country – has reopened to the public following four years of restoration work

Rochdale Town Hall was designed by William H Crossland and opened in 1871. Historic England has described it as being 'rivalled in importance only by those contained within the Palace of Westminster'.

The town hall functions as the headquarters of Rochdale Metropolitan Borough Council and houses local government departments. However, by the early 21st century, the building fabric had become deemed unfit for the changing needs of Rochdale Borough Council.

Its restoration was supported by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and led by Rochdale Development Agency. Extensive repair has been undertaken to the most historically significant areas of the building such as Great Hall and the Mayor's suite of rooms while previously unseen spaces have been made accessible to the public for the first time. The works' completion marks the second phase of a three-phase project.

ADVERTISEMENT



In the Bright Hall, unsympathetic 20th-century office provisions have been stripped away to reveal a double-height ceiling, angels on the walls and a hidden window

with views into the Great Hall. This space is now available for events and community use, and features an artwork co-created with the local community.

A series of internal and external adaptions have also been made to consolidate circulation and unlock public access. These includes accessible terracing that wraps around the building, replacing individual ramps and giving level access to all terraces.

The Porte Cochère is now fully glazed to create a welcoming entrance. This was in response to feedback from the local community that said the entrance felt 'unwelcoming'. A lift and staircase, along with glazed entrance, has been installed in the Alfred Waterhouse-designed clock tower, enabling the Town Hall to host more than one event simultaneously.

In addition to the restoration, surrounding roads and car parks have been removed, which previously detracted from the civic grandeur of the 150-year-old building. They have been replaced by a multi-functional civic space-cum-town square designed by Gillespies. This one of the largest such squares in the country and supports Rochdale Development Agency's vision for an accessible public realm across the town centre.



Architect's view

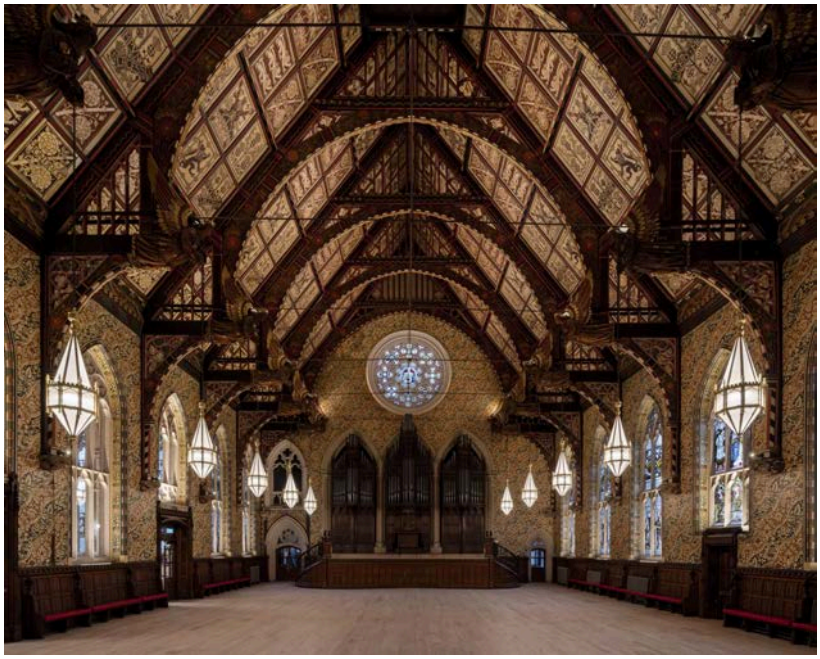
Rochdale Town Hall is a work of art, and a Grade I-listed building of exceptional interest. Designed by William Crossland, its dramatic Gothic exterior and jewel-like interior are harmonious and exemplify the apex of High Victorian design – it's one of the finest examples of a Victorian town hall nationally. 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. Sixteen timber hammer beams, rich with painted decoration, form the main roof structure, which is supported between the wings of intricately carved timber angels. The ceiling between these beams is formed of 330 painted lath and plaster panels.

The repair and restoration of the Great Hall ceiling proved to be one of the most noteworthy challenges of the project. A detailed examination of the ceiling identified a combination of issues including cohesive failure, material fatigue and mechanical stress, which led to serious concerns regarding its stability. Following extensive trials, deep consolidation of both nibs and underlying plaster using an aqueous colloidal silica was implemented.

This method of stabilisation was combined with the installation of a series of pads, suspended from above as not to add additional weight to the panels. Non-functioning laths were carefully removed, and small holes were carefully drilled to allow the consolidant and plaster to penetrate the panels below. The area was cleaned, and the surface treated, then pads formed from a build-up of Quadaxial fabric, rib lath and a plaster of Paris mix were applied before being mechanically fixed by a stainless-steel tie attached to a stainless-steel band spanning across the joists.



Great Hall

In conjunction with the stabilisation of the panels, the highly decorative internal surfaces were cleaned. A total of seven layers of impervious varnish had been applied over the lifetime of the town hall to both the plaster panels and the timber beams. These commercially prepared varnishes, commonly applied to decorative surfaces in the mid-20th century, harden by oxidation and become progressively more insoluble and yellow as they age.

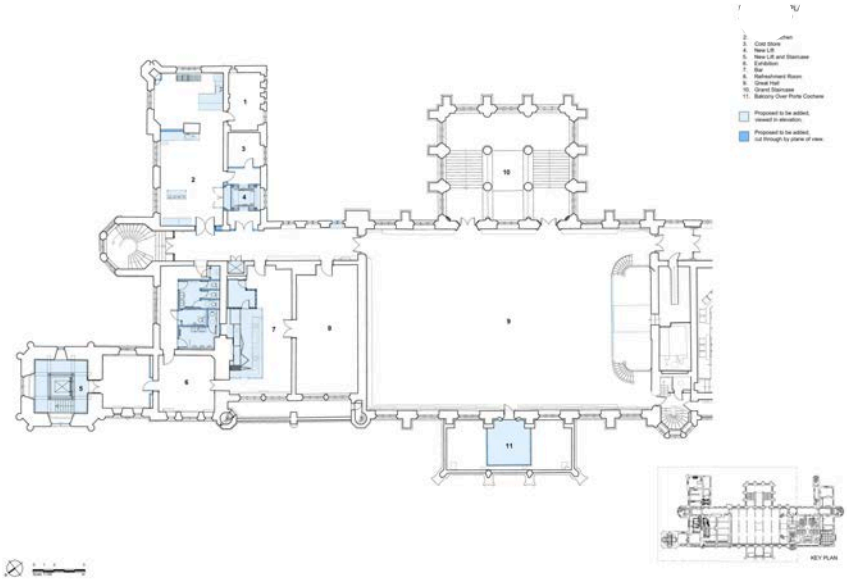
Firstly, all loose dirt was removed with dry brushes, in conjunction with a vacuum cleaner to prevent the dirt from relocating. More intransigent dirt was then removed using cotton wool and water, with the area dried thoroughly immediately after treatment. The varnish was surface treated with ammonium hydroxide solution and the upper layers of varnish were carefully scraped back by hand using a scalpel blade. Acetone: Benzyl alcohol 4:1 in a gel with appropriate dwell time was then used to remove lower levels of varnish with cotton swabs.

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

Re-energising this building has been a labour of love – from painstakingly removing more than a century's worth of inappropriate interventions, varnish and nicotine 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 in close collaboration to create engaging public spaces and ensure the town hall becomes physically and intellectually accessible for everyone to enjoy.

Being from Rochdale myself I'm proud of how the local community were able to make their mark on this 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.
Rebecca Mills, associate director, Donald Insall Associates



Client's view

By the early 2010s, the historic town centre of Rochdale was degraded and compromised accelerating the spiral of decline of the built fabric and the town's social structures, leading to a loss of civic pride and relevance. However, Rochdale is a bold and innovative town and its diverse communities are well known for their eagerness to engage in helping change happen.

In 2016, the council commissioned a small specialist team (heritage funding expert, conservation architects and cost managers) to explore options with the local communities and to define a new vision for the town centre through an extensive programme of consultation. By 2018, a programme of works had been defined and agreed and a funding strategy confirmed.

This programme of works is true heritage-led regeneration as an instrument of social and urban change. The consultation process has established need, demand and expectation, and from this a brief and a provisional cost structure were developed. The team could set out the outcomes, outputs and benefits that this significant in the town centre required to justify the significant investment that was to be committed.

As with many social projects, the funding was to come from many different sources including the local authority, National Lottery Heritage Fund, Salix, and Towns Fund.
Emma Birkett, heritage director, Rochdale Development Agency





Project data

Start on site January 2022 (Phase 2)
Completion date December 2023, landscape (predicted December 2024)
Gross internal floor area 3,237m²
Gross (internal + external) floor area 17,181m²
Form of contract JCT Standard Building Contract with Quantities (2016 SBC/Q 2016) with JCT Preconstruction Agreement 2016
Procurement route Traditional
Construction cost Undisclosed
Architect Donald Insall Associates
Client Rochdale Borough Council
Structural engineer Price & Myers
Public realm civil engineer Buro Happold
M&E consultant Max Fordham
Quantity surveyor Frank Whittle Partnership
Landscape consultant Gillespies
Project manager Rochdale Development Agency
Lead consultant and conservation architect Donald Insall Associates
Exhibition design Redman Design
Specialist conservation repairs Hirst Conservation
Specialist cleaning and restoration Lancashire Conservation Studios
Stained glass cleaning and repairs The York Glaziers Trust
CAD software used AutoCAD

ADVERTISEMENT

Environmental performance data

On-site energy generation Nil
Heating and hot water load 287 kWh/m²/yr (estimated)
Total energy load 238 kWh/m²/yr (estimated)
Carbon emissions (all) 43 kgCO_2/m² (estimated)
Annual CO_2 emissions 148 tonnesCO_2/yr (estimated)

Find out more on this topic

ask AJ

Ask a question

COMMENT AND SHARE

TAGS

CONSERVATION DONALD INSALL ASSOCIATES ROCHDALE TOWN HALL

You might also be interested in…



FCBStudios completes mixed-use scheme for Sheffield's Heart of the City



Wilkinson King designs 'garden room' flat annexe in south London



The Manser Practice refurbishes its own pioneering 1960s project



A Studio Between redesigns Frieze art fair for its 21st edition

Most popular

1. British Museum names finalists in entrances contest
2. AHMM's tweaked Shoreditch tower unanimously approved
3. Hawkins\Brown's Printworks venue approved at Canada Water
4. Stirling Prize contender wins approval for 100% affordable housing in York
5. RIBA Stirling Prize 2024: AJ readers pick their winner
6. EBBA renovates Victorian terraced house with lightweight façade
7. Wilkinson King designs 'garden room' flat annexe in south London
8. CZWG's Canada Water Library needs £1.7m roof replacement
9. The Manser Practice refurbishes its own pioneering 1960s project
10. WW+P and Aecom picked for Bakerloo Line extension plans

Leave a comment

Logged in as DIA Comms. Log out?

Type here...

POST

Please remember that the submission of any material is governed by our Terms and Conditions and by submitting material you confirm your agreement to these Terms and Conditions. Links may be included in your comments but HTML is not permitted.

COPYRIGHT © 2024 EMAP PUBLISHING LIMITED