

Birmingham Trail Three: Retail, Legal & Hospital Section

An Act of Parliament in 1876 gave permission for the creation of Corporation St. a new street cut through the densely populated city centre slums which was part of Mayor Joseph Chamberlain's reforms. This was to become the main route to Lichfield and Sutton Coldfield, and as starting opposite Stephenson Place, perhaps emphasised the area around the station as a focal part of the town. It was part of Chamberlain's "Improvement Scheme" and involved 93 acres, the Corporation acquiring the freehold of some 45 acres, costing £1,300,000. Chamberlain had a vision of, "a great street as broad as a Parisian boulevard, from New Street to the Aston Road", which would make Birmingham "the retail shop of the midland counties of England". However, sites were let to builders on 75 year leases and came up for renewal in the 60s when many were replaced by nondescript structures. By this time the buildings had increased in value over a hundred-fold.

In 1875, Martin & Chamberlain were appointed to prepare proposals for New and Corporation Streets and by 1878 demolition had begun. The buildings from New St. to Cherry St. being completed first. But, the street became so near to the existing Old Square, (the finest Georgian Square in the town) that it was eventually opened to the street and rebuilt. Development in the 1970s and the interruption of the Ring Road has left little of the street's original character, except at the north end. At the south end, the west/left hand side of Corporation St. between New St. and Cherry St. is the only block of original Victorian development along the lower part of the street to survive wartime bombardment and the major re-developments of the 1960/70s.

Start at the junction of Corporation and New Streets and walk up Corporation St. Walk up the west/left side,

1. **Queens Corner**, by W.H Ward, for Alfred Humpage. Queens Corner was originally built to complete the end of Yeoville Thomason's palazzi on New St. built for the Birmingham Post and Mail and to provide an entrance to Corporation St. Standing on the other side of the road one gets an impression of the 19thC boulevard as it might have been. The facades of Nos.1-23, have recently been cleaned and refurbished and are in pristine condition although behind the facades the buildings have been gutted and rebuilt.
2. **Nos. 1-7 Corporation St. Victoria Buildings**, Grade II, 1880. Built in stone with five storeys plus attic, and described as "a striking early example of Free Style architecture" with some Spanish and Elizabethan detailing. There are pilasters of pink sandstone, carved pediments and masses of carved fruit.
3. **Nos. 9-13 Corporation St.** Grade II, 1880 (formerly the Post & Mail Offices). Free style with Venetian style attic storey, three storey with attic.
4. **Nos. 15-17 Corporation St.** 1881, by W. H. Ward, who was articulated to James Cranston of Oxford for Alfred Humpage. Built as the Central Restaurant, it later became Yates Wine Lodge, and contained the Central Arcade, which ran through the block to Cannon St. and was the second one built in the City. The building is of stone, highly ornamented and of French Renaissance style. It was partly re-built after a fire by Essex & Nicol in 1888. One of the shops was Marris & Norton, which sold furniture and William Morris fabrics.
5. **Fletchers Buildings Nos. 19-23 Corporation St.** 1887 This is the first building to be built of brick and terracotta instead of stone and is by Martin & Chamberlain. It was designed as a frame building supported by large cast iron columns. There are prominent cornices at the second and fourth floor levels with gabled corner pavilions rising above them in a free Jacobean Renaissance style. The left shop front was built in stone in 1921 for W.H. Smith & Son. with two shallow bay windows flanked by carvings of Sir Walter Scott and William Shakespeare on the first floor.
6. **Block between Fore St. and Cherry St.** These are still intact and of red brick with stone dressings in an English renaissance style. Turn west/left up Cherry St. on the corner of Cherry St. and Cannon St. is
7. **Nos. 10-12, Cherry St. 17 Cannon St.** Grade II, 1881/2, by Joseph Lancaster Ball, (now the Carphone Warehouse). This is the first independent work of Ball, who was Lethaby's partner on the Eagle Insurance Building and the first Director of the Birmingham School of Architecture. This is one of Birmingham's first Arts & Crafts buildings, in a Queen Anne style favoured by Philip Webb & Norman Shaw. The materials for the roof and walls are hand-made bricks and tiles, used with casement windows and glazing bars. The corner to Cherry St. is

subtly moulded to give the impression of a two storey bay, but in fact the windows do not project further out than those on the main wall face. (Eighteen years before the building of the Eagle Insurance, see Trail 1, regarded as a European landmark, by breaking away from revivalism), Ball had already produced this grid of windows combined with primitive forms. Return to Corporation St. crossing the road to find Union St. On the east/right is a triangular island site adjoining one side by City Arcade and on the other side by Union Passage and Union St.

8. **City Arcade and 25, Union St.** 1898/01, Grade II*, by Newton & Cheatle, almost in an Art Nouveau style in red brick and buff terracotta and green faience work. 25, Union St. consists of a four-storey building with two basements and has a steep gable (influenced by Norman Shaw) above a frieze of sea monsters, flanked by octagonal towers, supported by figures blowing pipes modelled by W.J. Neatby. Note the warriors in the spandrels below.

Walk back to Corporation St. cross over, and walk past Rackhams northwards to what was the North Western Arcade which joined Temple Row with Corporation St. Turn left up the passage by the side of the store to,

9. **Great Western Arcade**, late 1875/6, by W. H. Ward, which joined Colmore Row with Temple Row, and is the first and was the most beautiful arcade in Birmingham. It was built on a site created by the construction of the Great Western railway tunnel and built in stone by the Great Western Arcade Co. formed especially for this purpose, following a direct route to Snow Hill (GWR) Station. The original roof and dome etc. were destroyed in an air-raid, and in 1986 it was refurbished with a new entrance to Colmore Row by Douglas Hickman of John Madin Design Group. The arcade is two storeys high and on the top floor is a series of galleries from which offices are directly accessible. In the middle the arcade is widened by a domed space with the galleries running uninterrupted around it. Return to Temple Row, turn north/left and cross Bull St. to the Minories now covered over and closed in by huge glass screens. Walk through and cross over the pedestrian crossing, to the northern end of Corporation St. This part of Corporation St. displays one of the most striking groups of terracotta buildings in the country, perhaps rivalling the museums of South Kensington. On the right/east are the stone-faced Gazette Buildings and the Crown pub. On the left/west is
10. **153-161 Corporation St. County Buildings.** Grade II*, 1896-7, by J. Crouch & E. Butler, partly for A.R. Dean, manufacturer for much of the furniture for Crouch & Butler's houses and partly for a vegetarian restaurant. It has four storeys plus two attics and is of purple bricks and buff terracotta in an Arts & Crafts style. The band of excellently moulded lively reliefs by Benjamin Creswick show carpenters at work and vegetarians dining.
11. **County Court.** Grade II, 1882, by James Williamson Stone. Not a Birmingham architect and perhaps of the "Barry School". Although late in construction it is still sharp in detail. It is surprising that it was built only five years before the adjacent Law Courts.

12. **Victoria Law Courts.** Grade II, 1887/91. This masterpiece was won in a competition from 134 designs received by the judge, "the father of terracotta", Alfred Waterhouse, by Sir Aston Webb and Ingress Bell. This was the first major public building in Britain to have a frontage faced entirely with red terracotta. They drew inspiration from the early Tudor style and from the 16thC. Flemish houses for motifs, (such as scrolls, dolphins, and cable and egg mouldings) but found a way in which terracotta could form the basis of a contemporary decorative architecture. As Nicholas Taylor says, "Aston Webb's genius lay in synthesising the brashness of terracotta and the integrity of Arts & Crafts", and decoration was designed not as part of the structure but so that it would flow out of it in curves. Much of the detailing was modelled by William Aumonier. W. S. Frith designed the figure of Justice, and modelled Truth, Patience and Plenty to the designs by Walter Crane. Harry Bates modelled the figure of Queen Victoria in the entrance gable. The dark red terracotta material was supplied by the Ruabon works owned by J. C. Edwards, but a local firm Gibbs and Canning, Tamworth, supplied the buff lining to the interior. The great hall was lined up to the roof with buff terracotta, the finest details being the royal coat of arms, flanked by a lion and unicorn, set above a pair of archways. The stained glass is by Walter Lonsdale, pupil of William Burges. It is worth having a peep into the hall if at all possible. On the opposite side, after Yates Wine Lodge and The Citadel on the right/east.



13. **The Methodist Central Hall.** Grade II, 1899/03, by Ewan & James A. Harper. This is a large red brick and terracotta assymetrical building rising sheer from the pavement and following the gentle curve of the street. It successfully encloses the forecourt created by the Law Courts and its slender tower provides a terminal feature to the northern end of Corporation St. There are two ground floor facades, both with shops and two floors of offices above. The first floor hall is strongly detailed and vigorous and there is some excellent sculpture with an Art Nouveau flavour at the main entrance. The materials were probably supplied by the Ketley Brickworks, Brierley Hill. Unfortunately at the time of writing this building is empty. Beyond the Law Courts on the west/left are



14. **The Coleridge Chambers 175-177 Corporation St.** Grade II, late 19thC. In red brick and buff terracotta. Within the entrance is a good mosaic floor and wall tiles.
15. **The Ruskin Chambers 179-203 Corporation St.** Grade II, 1900/2, by Ewan & James A. Harper. Red brick and terracotta and an appropriate foil for the Law Courts. Walk round the corner left into Steel house Lane, so called when iron was imported from Sweden in the 18thC. for refining in Kettle's Steel Houses, and Samuel Garbett was refining metals with sulphuric acid on the site of the General Hospital. Samuel Galton, gun manufacturer, one of the members of the Lunar Society lived in Steelhouse Lane.
16. **The Former General Hospital** now The Children's Hospital. 1892-7, ungraded, by William Henman whose design was also assessed by Alfred Waterhouse. (Henman's partner Cooper, had worked previously with Waterhouse on the Kensington Natural History Museum.) The building, in dark red terracotta, (made by Doulton at Rowley Regis) has features such as elliptical and round arches reminiscent of the Law Courts, polygonal towers with high pitched roofs and terracotta decoration, much of which worked into curving and interlacing celtic motifs. Its entrances were originally decorated with figures representing Medicine, Surgery and Philanthropy, and Air, Purity and Light by J.W.Rollins many of which seem to have disappeared. Due to pressure of space many extensions have disfigured the original cloisters and portes-cochere and the symmetrical plan of a building round a forecourt with wings in the form of pavilions. Many of these are being removed with the re-use of the building as the Children's Hospital. Note the intricately decorated pillars which form a line along Steel house Lane.
17. **Cells Block Steelhouse Lane,** to right of the police station on the corner of Coleridge Passage. Grade II, by Aston Webb & Ingress Bell, late 19th C. Brick and terracotta.

Walk up Steelhouse Lane and cross the road back to the Minories.