

Within these Walls: The Story of Limehouse Town Hall



“It had been said that the parish of Limehouse was rising in dignity and importance; he trusted it would also rise morally, socially, and intellectually. (Hear, hear.)“

East London Observer, 2 April 1881, report of speeches on the opening of the hall.

Almost exactly 130 years ago, on 29th March 1881, this building was opened as Limehouse Vestry Hall. The opening was a day of much ceremony, and the building was a suitably large and lavish construction. The population of Limehouse had grown exponentially in the 30 years before the Hall opened, from between 4,000 and 5,000 in 1851, to between 35,000 and 40,000 by 1881. The growing importance of the parish meant that there was a need to situate the parish administration which had previously been nomadic, to provide a place for large public meetings, and to 'dignify the public proceedings of the Board', all of which the hall achieved.

The hall has passed through many uses in its life to date, being the venue for concerts and political meetings, as well as acting as a museum and a centre for social welfare, amongst many other functions. This exhibition will give an insight into some of this history, which is a central part of the history of Limehouse itself.



Limehouse Hall, ca 1910

The Town Hall through time

October 1879: Foundation stone is laid

March 1881: Opening day

1900: Business of the Vestry is taken over by newly created Stepney Borough Council
– the building becomes known as Town Hall

Several uses, including an Infant Welfare Centre

Building damaged in the Blitz (date unknown)

1950: Re-opening after post-war restoration

1973: Building is listed Grade II

1975: Opening of National Museum of Labour History by Harold Wilson

1987: Building becomes Wapping Neighbourhood Centre

1994-2001: Several uses, including shelter for homeless people and training centre run by the Bridge Trust and the Prince's Trust

2004: Limehouse Town Hall Consortium Trust become the custodians of the building



Limehouse Hall, 1937

Architectural

Work began to build Limehouse's new Vestry Hall in 1879, and the building was completed in 1881. The total cost of the build, coordinated by builder Mr J.H. Johnson of Commercial Road, was £10,000, plus £2,920 for the site, on which used to stand the Britannia Coffee Shop. The building is fronted in Suffolk brick and Portland Stone, with an entrance portico carried on granite columns. The architects of the hall were A&C Harston. Arthur Harston was a member of the Architectural Association, and Christopher a member of the Royal Institute of British Architects. They were local architects with offices in Leadenhall Street and Bexleyheath, and they also designed Poplar Town Hall to a similar design ten years previously. The firm specialised in workhouses, asylums, and hospital buildings. Arthur Harston died in May 1912, bequeathing £1000 to hospitals in East London.

“They are also agreed that the structure should be something more than four walls and a roof having no desire to erect in so prominent a thoroughfare as Commercial-road a building that would be an eyesore to the neighbourhood, but rather a structure that from an architectural point of view shall do honour to the parish of Limehouse.”

Tower Hamlets Independent, Saturday December 11th, 1875, referring to the Vestry's plans to build the hall

Several small alterations were made to the building in the early years of its existence, primarily to improve safety for the large numbers of visitors who came to public meetings and performances. Doors were widened, fire hoses added, and in 1931, a steel fire escape was added to the East side of the building. The original fixtures and fittings have mostly been stripped away over years of changing use. A semi-permanent platform, which was at the East end of the main hall until at least 1950 and was used as a stage for talks and performances, has also since disappeared. There is still a large built-in safe on the ground floor which is used for storage, and a few other features remain.

When the building was opened, it was lavishly appointed. The tables, writing stands, hat stands, and even the boxes for toilet paper were all made of mahogany. Brass hooks held the cloaks of the Board members, and the clock in the committee room was of black marble. Chairs were covered with morocco, a red leather, and Persian rugs lined the floors in all the main ground floor rooms. The main hall boasted a Broadwood rosewood grand piano.

The balusters on the main staircase are of the same intricate design throughout the building, being replicated on the second floor landing and the side staircase. They are made of cast iron, and were produced at the renowned MacFarlane foundry in Glasgow, chosen from a catalogue of hundreds of mix and-match architectural and decorative iron components – this design is number 628. Iron castings were used as an easy, good value way of layering Victorian buildings with a wealth of detailed decoration.

The sunburner lamps in the ceiling of the roof of the main hall are referred to in the original inventory of the building. They would have originally had a circle of gas burners inside or just below each one, the light from which would have reflected off the convex centre. Note the circular grid around the outside; they are ventilating lamps which allow the heat from the gas burners to escape through the roof.



Fire escape stair cast iron balusters



Main stair cast iron balusters



Scrolled plasterwork in the main hall, beneath the musician's gallery (balcony)



Sun lantern in main hall

Political

The hall was the location for the overseers of the parish until 1900 and acted as a council building in various forms after that, but after the creation of the Borough Council amalgamated several parishes it was no longer the centre of administration for the area. The council even considered selling it off entirely in the 1920s, when they had acquired new premises in Arbour Square.

One of the original stated purposes of a new Hall for Limehouse was to disseminate political ideas. 'To Limehouse' became a synonym for giving an incendiary political speech when David Lloyd George attacked the House of Lords in Limehouse in 1909, and the area was known for its active interest in debate and politics. From the time of its opening the Town Hall has been a venue for political speeches and local meetings, and a focus for the labour movement and for celebrations of local government. Several years before the first stone was laid, an indignant meeting was held in the area regarding the plans for the hall, where ratepayers gathered to show their discontent about the potential cost of the building; a figure of £14,000 was mooted. Speeches were held in the hall on a regular basis and there was a proposed visit by William Gladstone in December 1888, in connection with the London Liberal and Radical Association. It is not known whether this visit actually took place; it may have been cancelled due to a planned march by the local unemployed to interview Mr Gladstone.

In 1975 parts of (and later, the whole of) the Town Hall opened as the National Museum of Labour History, the first museum of its kind, with displays on early trade unionism, and Owenite socialism and cooperation. Prime Minister. Harold Wilson opened the museum on Monday 19th May 1975, and was greeted upon arrival by 400 demonstrators.

“DEAFENING ROAR

Mr Wilson stepped from his chauffeur-driven limousine to a deafening roar of protest chnats from the crowd. Chants of 'Save Poplar Hospital', 'Justice for Davis' and 'Free the Shrewsbury Two' were accompanied by the strains of When the Saints go Marching In from the band. Unruffled by the din, a smiling Mr. and Mrs- Wilson entered the hall.“

East London Advertiser, 23 May 1975

From August 1931, in a situation which seems familiar today, the UK was governed by a coalition, 'National' government which had formed following economic crisis, and which resulted in a split in the Labour Party. In October, a general election was called.

Visits were made to Limehouse Town Hall by the Labour and Conservative candidates as part of their campaigns. They both enjoyed a mixed and lively reception; including 'boos' from the malcontents on the gallery' and singing of left-wing anthem 'The Red Flag' (for Girouard), and 'a hostile element' (for Attlee), but plenty of support too. Unemployment and workers' rights featured heavily in both speeches, as well as a heavy emphasis on class distinctions. Attlee was one of very few Labour candidates who kept his or her seat in the 1931 election, but Girouard achieved an unusually high number of votes for a Tory candidate in the borough.

The building was used as a location for at least two exhibitions of local government. The first of these, in 1935, celebrated 100 years of local government in Britain, and the second, in 1950, celebrated the 50th anniversary of Stepney Borough Council and was opened by Prime Minister Clement Attlee.



The 1950 Local Government Exhibition – the main hall



The 1950 Local Government Exhibition – display board

Borough of Stepney

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**SILVER JUBILEE AND LOCAL
GOVERNMENT CENTENARY**



**Opening of Local Government
Exhibition**

AT THE
**LIMEHOUSE TOWN HALL,
COMMERCIAL ROAD EAST, E.14,**

BY
THE RT. HON. LORD SNELL, C.B.E.
(Chairman of the London County Council)

Tuesday, 7th MAY, 1935,
at 3.30 o'clock p.m.

Silver Jubilee Pamphlet

ORDER OF PROCEEDINGS

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ALDERMEN, COUNCILLORS AND GUESTS will assemble at the Town Hall.

HIS WORSHIP THE MAYOR will receive the Rt. Hon. Lord Snell and will comment upon the Exhibition. The Borough Librarian and Supervisor of Museums will make a more detailed statement upon the Exhibition.

HIS WORSHIP THE MAYOR will then call upon the Rt. Hon. Lord Snell to declare the Exhibition open.

LORD SNELL to declare the Exhibition open.

VOTE OF THANKS to Lord Snell to be proposed by His Worship the Mayor and seconded by the Leader of the Council (Councillor D. Frankel, L.C.C.).

VOTE OF THANKS to His Worship the Mayor, to be proposed by Alderman Major H. C. Joel, O.B.E., and seconded by the Deputy Leader of the Council (Councillor Mrs. H. Roberts).

ALDERMEN, COUNCILLORS AND GUESTS will proceed to view the Exhibition.

Local Collection

STEPNEY METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL



**GOLDEN JUBILEE OF
METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCILS
1900-1950**

**RE-OPENING OF THE
LIMEHOUSE TOWN HALL**
Commercial Road, E.14.

and opening of an Exhibition showing the progress of local government in Stepney over the past fifty years,
by
THE PRIME MINISTER
(The Rt. Hon. C. R. Attlee, C.H., M.P.)

MONDAY, 13th NOVEMBER, 1950
at 7 p.m.

Golden Jubilee Pamphlet

Social

The Town Hall was in regular use throughout its early years as a venue for entertainment, and it proved very popular. At one architectural health and safety inspection in 1897 during an unspecified 'performance', it was complained that about 150 people, mainly children and teenagers, were packed into a public gallery designed to hold a maximum of 100.

The hall was licensed for music and dancing from 1881, and a precedent was set for its use by the festivities in the building's opening week. A ball was held with 200 people attending, and a free concert was given for local people, the programme for which included a vocal duets, euphonium and harp recitals, and a recitation of 'Charge of the Light Brigade'. In 1886, dancing lessons were given.

“...about 190 ladies and gentlemen attending to engage in the intricacies of the ‘mazy dance’, and appeared to enjoy the music played by Mr Kalischer’s excellent band.”

East London Observer, 18 September 1886

Between the 1880s and the 1920s, the hall also held 'cinematograph' showings, and was the location for several bazaars, which included stalls, sideshows and art exhibitions. Performances were always intended to be a key purpose of the hall, as shown by the fact that a grand piano, ten music stands, and three 6ft. footlights were included in the original list of fittings, and groups like St Anne's Choral Society played to crowds of locals.

Before 1931, the use of the vestry hall and committee room on the ground floor changed to an Infant Welfare centre, though by 1931 this was replaced by a small hall and a doctor's surgery. The rate collector's office became a men's cloakroom, and more toilets were put in at this time, suggesting a growing focus on entertainment.

The building may also have a Jewish connection. In June 1889, a Jewish marriages took place here. There is a star of David motif in the gallery ironwork, which seems to be a later addition. We are investigating this link: if you have any further information, we would love to know more!

A Special Thank You

The Limehouse Town Hall Consortium Trust would like to thank our volunteer Kathy Clark, the curator of the original exhibition, for her ongoing extensive research and dedication.

Acknowledgements

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Also to Daniel Frances at DanFrank Joinery for donating a sample of wood for display in the exhibition, similar to that used in the hall.