

The Architecture of Herbert J. Rowse

By Iain D Jackson

As the luxury liner *Scythia* docked at Liverpool's Pier Head on Monday 13 December 1926, one of its passengers, architect Herbert James Rowse, had a perfect view of the city he was about to radically change with his banks, offices, theatre and ventilation towers. No other architect has made such a profound impact on this cityscape and region, with residential, mercantile, cultural and infrastructural projects. Rowse was returning from a month-long fact-finding trip to New York, where he had observed the latest in American construction techniques and methods of integrating building services. The sojourn would inform the detailed design of Martins Bank headquarters on Water Street, following his successful competition win nine months earlier – his largest commission to date, received when he was 39 years of age.



The commission, perhaps more than any other of Rowse's works, was the most complete and polished assembling of form, structure, interior and sculpture. The sheer walls, stretching to nine storeys tall, and flat figurative decoration presented something of a different order to what had gone before in the UK. Its innovative massing, structural approach and building services were blended with a restrained classicism scaled to form a city block and applied to a modern office and banking typology. The interior, especially the banking hall, still reveals a luxurious array of materials set within the most generous of proportions and carefully resolved spatial arrangements and sequences. Coupled with Rowse's extraordinary attention to detail, inventive decoration and craftsmanship of the highest order, this is a good-looking, sophisticated building, in the vanguard of a business-responsive and utility-focused, commercial design. It was perhaps the ideal commission for Rowse at that time, offering the chance to incorporate American-inspired design on a steel frame coupled with lavish interiors with eclectic historical references. It would not be fair to view this commission as the pinnacle of his career, because there was much to celebrate prior and afterwards, but it certainly deserves the accolade of being 'probably the best building of its kind in the country'.¹

Opposite the Bank, Rowse had also designed India Buildings, the vast office building for Alfred Holt of the Blue Funnel Line. Rowse proposed a grand ground floor ceiling height of seven metres, which was also reflected on the rusticated exterior base, the vast expanse of wall dispersed with rounded arched openings and clerestory windows above. The mid-portion of the building is composed of a plain grid of Portland stone punched with square windows, before the restrained decoration of the attic stories and large projecting cornice. It was rational, precise and abrupt, with only the slightest flicker of emotion expressed from the Juliet balconies and keystone scrolls. *The Liverpoolian* noted, 'Straight and sheer, strong and clearly stamped against the sky, it tells a story of its own. It leaves the old age behind and looks gloriously to the new age ... a business vortex and the India Buildings stands firm in the centre.'

It was Rowse's ability to reconcile the competing demands of these buildings that singled him out to design the Mersey Tunnel ventilation towers, as well as the entrances and toll booth plazas in both Liverpool and Birkenhead. The George's Dock Ventilation tower with its *Jazz Moderne* decoration and delicate carvings by Edmund Thompson and George Capstick is considered by many to be Liverpool's 'fourth grace', and despite it being a working piece of industrial design its high-quality façades and imposing arrangement easily compete with the other grandiose Pier Head structures.



The three extract towers on the Wirral side of the Mersey lack this fine cladding and decorative motifs, and are instead faced in brickwork, relying on their geometric interlocking cuboid forms that generate bold outlines and strong abstract forms. Here the humble brickwork is carefully laid to create subtle patterns, relief and shadows, the most dramatic being the colossal Woodside tower built on the very edge of the river. Rowse did not view masonry as somehow inferior to his Portland Stone work, indeed, his Philharmonic Hall in Liverpool is a conquest of modernist brick design, and his flats in Birkenhead's St Andrews Square, Camden Street (now demolished), with their brick parabolic entrances created a refined and carefully proportioned design.