

The Review

From Arcadia to Euston Square:

a historical perspective on the RCGP's new headquarters

30 Euston Square was acquired by the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) in 2010 to become its new headquarters following the sale of the woefully overfull Princes Gate. Sensitive repairs have already been carried out to the main Portland Stone elevations, and works of internal alteration and repair are now (September 2012) nearing completion.

ARCHITECTURAL INSPIRATION

The building, whose external elevations are in a Greek Revival style, is generally agreed to be a major work by Arthur Beresford Pite (1861–1934). Pite was an exceptionally interesting figure, an educator as well as a practicing architect. He was Professor of Architecture at the Royal College of Art from 1900–1923. Although he worked elsewhere in a number of styles, he made the deliberate choice here to use an archaic Ionic order derived from the Temple of Apollo Epicurius at Bassae. This temple to the god of healing and the sun was built towards the middle of the 5th century BC in the lonely heights of the Arcadian mountains, and the ruins are now a World Heritage Site. It was a site visited and explored by the architect CR Cockerell as a young man in 1812–13, and the order was used by him on the Ashmolean Museum and Taylorian Institute in 1839–40, though he did not get around to publishing his investigations until 1860, just before his death in 1863.

As A Stuart Gray wrote in 1985, 30 Euston Square was:

1906–1908 contract drawings for the first phase of 30 Euston Square.



"[Pite's] design was a deliberate response to what he identified as the local Greek context of important buildings that had developed around Euston Square."

'The first and only scholarly building in London in the Greek style since the work of CR Cockerell. It is, however, more "Pite" than Cockerell, and more "Cockerell" than Greek.'

So why did Pite do it? In the early years of the 20th century the argument that the vast majority of classical revival buildings were based on Roman precedent, and indeed often on a Renaissance interpretation of that precedent, and that what needed to be looked at again were the somehow purer Greek 'originals' no longer carried any great weight. Indeed, as we now know, the development of architecture later in the century moved far away from any sort of classical references at all.

Pite was not a reactionary man, far from it, and 30 Euston Square was in many ways a thoroughly modern building, but he had clear ideas that buildings work together to make cities, that places have a particular character, and that new buildings should respond to that character. So his design was a deliberate response to what he identified as the local Greek context of important buildings that had developed

around Euston Square: the Inwoods' St Pancras New Church of 1819–22, and of course Philip Hardwick's Euston Station of 1837 with its magnificent Grecian Propylaea, itself so tragically demolished in 1962. Pite clearly hoped that Euston Square would become a Grecian quarter, and he was not deterred from building a Grecian Revival building long after anyone else. Euston Square, such as it now exists, is a mess. But who is to say that Pite was wrong?

As he said himself in a lecture delivered in 1932:

'We may hope that an intelligent archaeology may yet supply that vitalising background the want of which is so apparent in the forward movements of modern design.'

CONSTRUCTION AND RECENT HISTORY

There were several phases of construction, beginning in 1906–1908, but it was always a single office building for the same client. After a recent appeal by the RCGP for clarity in the listing designation, in 2011 all of the phases by Pite were confirmed as listed II*; the last phase by WH Gunton in 1932, with its long elevation onto the Euston Road, is unlisted.

(It should be noted that the listing is grade II*, not grade II. The * makes a lot of difference. There are currently about 375 000 listed buildings in three descending grades of listing: grade I, about 2% of the total, grade II* about 5% of the total; and all the rest are grade II. This means 30 Euston Square belongs to an elite group of less than 20 000 buildings nationally).

In 1906–1908 the initial client was the London Edinburgh and Glasgow Assurance Company, but by 1910 this had become part of the Pearl Life Assurance Company. The passing of the National Insurance Act of 1911 led to the creation of the National Amalgamated Approved Society (NAAS) in 1912, and the Pearl was one of the 10 initial members. The building remained

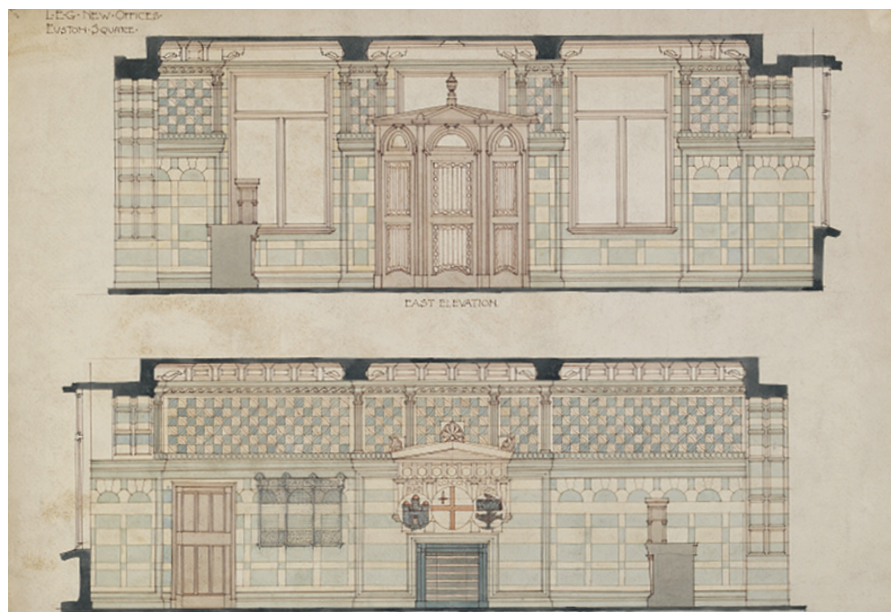


London Edinburgh and Glasgow Assurance Company motif.

the headquarters of the NAAS until the National Insurance Act of 1946 abolished approved societies.

In 1948, the same year as the foundation of the NHS, the building was transferred into government ownership, and it has since had what can only be described as a chequered history. For some time parts of it were the local offices of the Department of Health and Social Security; indeed the indignities of this can be the abiding memory of many local people. By the late 1990s the building, which had by then been sold to the private sector, was essentially empty and was quite properly described as a building at risk. Various ambitious schemes for reuse never came to fruition until the RCGP purchased the building.

The list description emphasises the quality of the Pite interiors: 'the entrance hall is one of the most remarkable tiled interiors in an Edwardian commercial



1906–1908 contract drawings: the entrance hall has survived virtually intact.

building'. This entrance hall, which had become a secondary entrance, is being repaired and will once again become the main entrance; indeed the College has made every effort to retain and repair the major spaces of the 1906–1908 construction with as little alteration as possible. The major alterations have taken place in the later parts of the building, so the new conference theatre and the various study bedrooms and examination suites are in the 1932 Gunton phase. All of the work has been carried out with full listed building consent, and the enthusiastic endorsement of both the London Borough of Camden and English Heritage.

Pite was very keen on the virtues of traditional construction. The external walls are of solid masonry. This is not a steel framed building with stone cladding (unlike the Gunton phase, which is exactly that). Even the window lintels are without steel reinforcement. Pite did use modern materials internally, including Doulton Parian ware and Dawney's patent flooring, but his emphasis on a traditional exterior has proved very durable. The whole is remarkably robust despite decades of neglect.

And despite Pite's antiquarian interest and his views on traditional building construction this was never an old fashioned building in terms of function. There was a strong emphasis on employee welfare and seeking to make this an attractive working environment for the women who made up an increasing percentage of the work force. There was a kitchen and dining room and club room on the top floor in 1908.

This was one of the first office buildings to be built in what had been, until then a primarily residential area. It was the sequence of the falling in of the leases on various blocks of early 19th century houses that seems to explain the phased development. There are early Pite drawings showing a grand palace front towards Euston Road, a plan which was not implemented the way he wanted it to be when the Euston Road was widened, and the building line of new buildings was brought forward towards it.

Nonetheless the overall size of 30 Euston Square seems to be much as Pite planned it.

1906–1908 contract drawings: the glazed brown and yellow tiles.



RIBA Library Drawings and Archives Collections.

RIBA Library Drawings and Archives Collections.

“30 Euston Square was a modern building with a modern purpose when it was built, and that is very much how the College hopes it will be seen again.”



LINKS TO THE NHS

The College is particularly pleased to be occupying a building so closely associated with the creation of the NHS. The National Insurance Act of 1911 was an ‘Act to provide for insurance against the loss of health, and for the prevention and cure of sickness’. Under it industrial assurance companies or friendly societies could set up an ‘approved society’ to administer statutory benefits.

All workers who earned under £160 a year had to pay 4 pence a week to the scheme, the employer paid 3 pence, and general taxation paid 2 pence (Lloyd George called it the ‘ninepence for fourpence’). In return workers could take sick leave and be paid 10 shillings a week for the first



13 weeks and 5 shillings a week for the next 13 weeks, they also gained access to free treatment for tuberculosis, and the sick were eligible for treatment by a panel doctor. By 1913, the NAAS had 1.9 million members. But of course all this came to an end with the National Insurance Act of 1946, and the National Health Act of 1948.

30 Euston Square was a modern building with a modern purpose when it was built, and that is very much how the College hopes it will be seen again. It intends this to be its home for a long time to come.

Shortly after the College purchased the building, plans were announced for a new High Speed Rail network (HS2), culminating in a new, and much enlarged Euston Station. The public consultation document stated that no grade I or II* buildings would require to be demolished, but close examination of the plans showed that the northern part of II* listed 30 Euston Square would fall within the ‘red line’ of the plans of the new station. The College has made plain its opposition to this part of the proposals, and has received an initial conciliatory response. But as of September 2012 it is not yet clear whether the design of the new station will be modified or indeed whether the HS2 plans will be implemented at all.

The Victorian Society was founded in 1958, and one of its first, but unsuccessful campaigns was to prevent the 1962 destruction of Euston Station. The irony that that ‘new station’ may itself last for barely over half a century is not lost on them, and other campaigners:

‘The photograph of the Euston Propylaea ought to be hung all over London as a poster to perpetuate the Cabinet’s shame.’
Nikolaus Pevsner, 1962.

A NOTE ON ADDRESSES

The RCGP has adopted the postal address of 30 Euston Square for the whole building. As built by Pite it was always given a Euston Square address, but in the post-war period, when the building had a number of different occupants, it seems to have acquired a number of different addresses. This is still reflected in the listing description,¹ from

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which it will be noted that 1–9 Melton Street is listed Grade II*, and 194–198 Euston Road is unlisted, but these are all part of the same building which is now called 30 Euston Square once again.

David Heath

Conservation architect, and Chairman of the SPAB, writing in a personal capacity.

Provenance

Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

Acknowledgement

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REFERENCE

- 1 English Heritage. *List entry summary*. <http://list.english-heritage.org.uk/resultsingle.aspx?uid=1113131> [accessed 24 Sep 2012].