

SOMERVILLE PRIMARY SCHOOL, SMALL HEATH

INTRODUCTION:

Somerville Road New Board School opened on the 28th of May 1894, as a two form entry mixed secondary school. It was designed in 1892 for the total of 1035 pupils: 60 in each classroom (boys and girls) and in Assembly Hall; 75 for infants, including the class in infants Assembly Hall. Infants Assembly Hall and two infants classrooms had tiered bench seating, while other classrooms used newly introduced dual-desks (III).

Only 748 pupils were admitted, 354 boys and 394 girls; by this time the norm set by

Birmingham School Board was reduced to 48 pupils per classroom.

Two more infants classrooms were added in the 1899, each for 50 pupils and with

built-in tiered benches, designed by the same architects. There was also an adjoining

cloakroom, with warm air under-floor heating ducts (X).

THOROUGH was the adopted school motto. Located between two newly proposed

roads off the Muntz Street (1), in the fast developing manufacturing Small Heath suburb

of the City of Birmingham, Somerville School was designed by John Henry

Chamberlain and his partner William Martin, architects to The School Board, in their

idiosyncratic version of Venetian Gothic style. One of 41 schools and a number of Free

Libraries (one in Small Heath), it features ornate red brickwork, terracotta detailing, cast

iron structural arches and decorative railings and gateways (IX). It also made use of

already established 'Plenum' system of warm air heating, ventilation and fumes

extraction (VI,VII,VIII).

Although coupled with the demands of civic pride (IV), it was non the less "firmly

believed that school architecture should offer children some compensation for the drab

homes from which they came and, by being progressive and economical in their design

and use of materials, convey a message of educational enlightenment."2

The *Pall Mall Gazette* wrote at the time that "in Birmingham you may generally

recognise a Board school by its being the best building in the neighbourhood. With lofty

towers which serve the utilitarian purpose of giving excellent ventilation, gabled

windows, warm red bricks and stained glass, the best Birmingham board schools have

quite an artistic finish"...

EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND:

“Schools are not only institutions for instruction, but at the same time visible symbols of educational conception of their time.”*
Introduction of universal elementary education, reduction in class size, the need for proper ventilation, lighting and standards of hygiene, better requirements for open playground (30 sq. feet per child), helped by the creation of local administrative bodies and by the greater involvement of the central authority in the school curriculum, “resulted in architects achieving an almost complete redefinition of the concept of schooling during the thirty years after 1870... in a building program of unprecedented scale. “~
The school was designed on central-hall principles, with classrooms leading directly from it, but with the windows overlooking the hall, thus allowing for supervision of assistants and pupil-teachers by the Head Teacher (P22,25). New classroom-based teaching method offered broader education, introduction of new subjects, such as science, history and “object lessons” and specialist facilities for teaching to smaller groups and individual tuition.
In Somerville School science was taught in the Assembly Hall, by peripatetic science demonstrators, each equipped with his own tools and apparatus (PH II).
Requirements ensured that school sites were light and airy, with latrines stationed far away from the main building, but always with separate playgrounds for boys and girls, with entrances preferably on different streets. Somerville Road School conformed to this model (II).
The pressures of providing compulsory education (1880) meant also building of temporary premises: “in 1899 there were over 8000 London children still using sixty-two remaining prefabricated iron school buildings.”⁶

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS AND CHANGES:

1894 - While still under construction, changes were made to the original design of two Masters Rooms and associated washroom facilities. The height was reduced from two storey to single storey (P7).
1899 - Extension, consisting of two new infants classrooms was added, with its

own entrance and a cloakroom (P4,5).

1924 - Introduction of electric lighting to school and outside facilities.

16th of May 1929 - The school organ was installed in the large hall of the school, as

a war memorial to Somerville boys who fought in the Great War,

purchased out of

the proceeds of May festivals, school concerts etc. arranged by the Head Teacher

and Staff during preceding years' It was removed in year 2000 (PH I, P39).

1920's - The school was reported by H.M.I, to be among the most successful large

schools in the City, the outstanding feature being emphasis laid on the aesthetic side

of the pupils training through Vocal Music, Dancing, Painting from Nature and

Decorative Needlework (PH V); it is also characterised by the strong corporate

spirit and bright and vigorous activity. However, the working conditions were very

difficult: nine classes had 58 or more children on roll; there were always three

classes in the hall, exceeding the accommodation throughout the year.8

1 f June 1931 - The school was reorganised as a Junior School, henceforth known

as "Somerville Road Junior Mixed School". In the 1930's Infants Cloakroom was

converted to Infants Head Teachers Room (SK3).

Feb. 1940 - Arrangements were made for home tuition until suitable air-raid

protection was provided. Voluntary attendance on part of the pupils, in small

groups, for Art, Games etc, was allowed. New voluntary activities were carried out

by school teachers: formation of National Savings Group, Salvage Work, Wings for

Victory Week, Government Evacuation Scheme, regular fire-watching from the

first floor room. School attendance dropped to 480 pupils."

Open play-sheds were enclosed and used for coke/coal storage (SKI 1).

No. 8 air-raid shelters were provided, 6 of them internally, by enclosing entrance

and cloakroom areas and bricking-up of windows. It is possible that adaptations

made in this period, initiated future changes of use in some areas of the school

(SKI 0).

Post WW2 years saw the role of the school and that of the teacher redefined, in

assuming increasingly greater involvement in the welfare provisions of the state:

"...we see the school no longer as a mere machine for giving lessons but as a social

unit concerned with the all round development of boys and girls."

It is particularly relevant to Somerville School today where over 90% of the

children are of Asian and immigrant origin.

Soon after the end of WW2, new remedial classroom was added, adjacent to the

Boys entrance (main school entrance at present); it was later to become the

Reception and the Head Masters Room (PI 5).

New toilet block was added soon after, adjoining infants entrance from the playground (SK9, PI 1).

In 1980 new Nursery classroom was built, adjacent to the converted Caretakers

House (SK7, P8, P9). In the same time, land facing Muntz Street was acquired, to

be used as an extended infants playground and for the location of temporary

classrooms. Further land acquisition happened on the opposite corner of Muntz

Street and Somerville Road and has been used for the past 10 years as the junior

playground. The area in the immediate vicinity of the school became increasingly

taken over by temporary classrooms.

In 1991 new toilet block was added to the infants entrance facing Muntz Street and

the earlier one refurbished (SK8, PI 0).

In the area of former play-sheds and latrines, the only remaining building, "Somerville Playgroup" retains original 1894 construction (SK4,5,6).

Internally, former Infants Head Teachers room became fully fitted kitchen for

serving of school meals.

PRESENT: The school is now three form entry Primary School, divided into three

bands: 'early years', infants and juniors. There are 30 pupils in each class, 723 in

total; assembly halls are used for Physical Exercises, Religious Worship, Drama

and school dinners.

There are 240 pupils in outside temporary classrooms.

The school has adapted to new the new educational and cultural demands, through

more flexible use of space, allowing for one-to-one tuition, introduction of new

computer technologies and apparent greater involvement of parents in everyday

activities.

Tradition of Art and Musical Education, with singing is still maintained and of a

high standard.

EXAMPLES OF PALIMPSEST:

1. Extension to Infants Classrooms and subsequent conversions

Extension was built in 1899 by Martin & Chamberlain, in a manner sympathetic to the

main building (X, SK2). Flat terracotta arches to windows and doors and terracotta

features to window cills were introduced in the new design (P4,5,6).

Heating and ventilation were achieved by extending the existing "Plenum" system to high and low level grilles in both classrooms and to the under floor duct in the cloakroom.

There is a noticeable difference in the way the new brickwork has weathered over the period of time. It seems to be of the better quality and shows less deterioration compared to that of the main school (P5).

One of two original entrance doors was converted into the window, in one of the later changes of use (P4).

The pipe that served oil fuelled central heating system is still visible on the classroom elevation (P5).

Internally, changes to the low level of previous openings to Infants Hall are noticeable.

Two sets of doors do not line up with windows above; serving hatches were built-in,

below two centrally placed windows (P6).

In the three infants classrooms little is left of the original fittings and finishes, as these have recently been converted to computer studios and almost completely remodeled (P31).

Former Cloakroom is now used as a fully fitted kitchen, serving school dinners; under-floor warm-air outlets and ventilation grilles have been covered by new finishes.

2. Masters Room and Office (facing Caretakers House)

Part of the Ground Floor was already built, when decision to change the design took place, resulting in an inconsistent elevational treatment and bricking up of already created window openings (SK2, P7). Window lintels to two windows are in terracotta and apparently added later. The brickwork, where previously attached garden wall and gate have been removed, has been rebuilt in a different bond.

3. Caretakers House and New Nursery

Adaptations to the Caretakers House consist of new openings, modifications to the existing ones and in internal conversion from the private dwelling to educational use (SK2, P8).

It is clear from the large gable wall that it was built on the boundary with residential units, fronting Muntz Street. The temptation to link the new nursery to the main school has been resisted, thus avoiding further damage to original buildings (SK7, P9).

4. New Toilets

Two new toilet blocks were built, attached to the main building (SK2). Earlier one probably in the 1960's (PII), second in 1991 (PI0). Both are unmistakable additions, built in accordance with the prevailing architectural practice of the time. It is to the credit of the latter, that the original entrance, to which it had been attached, was fully preserved and thus probably even protected (PI2). Its equivalent on the opposite side, was completely removed.

5. Head Masters Office

The extension was built as a remedial classroom in post WW2 years, removing part of the original boys entrance; it was more recently converted to Reception and Head Masters Office (SK2, PI 5). It was constructed in imperial size bricks, matching English bond and bull-nose strings and cill features, sympathetic, if not identical, to original terracotta features (PI 3, PI 4).

6. Playground, Covered Play-sheds and Latrines (SK2)

The Playground was divided into Boys and Girls area by cast iron railings and gates, supported by brick piers. Damage to the terracotta capping and the brick pier, made by removal of the fence, is still visible (PI 7). Covered (Boys and Girls) Playsheds were enclosed and used for coal storage (SKI 1), only to be demolished, together with Latrines, in post WW2 years; the only remaining part of Boys Playshed, still contains the well preserved original structure (PI 8,19,20). The original roof line is still visible on the boundary wall (PIS). Blue brick string courses behind Porter cabins and at Swanage Road entrance are the original feature (P21).

7. Heating, Ventilation, Lighting

Original heating system was coal fuelled and consisted of 100mm diam. hot water pipes, feeding radiators and distributing heat through the system of under-floor ducts, to warm-air grilles, in classrooms and assembly halls. Temperature during school hours was kept at 52°-60°C. Fresh air intake came through window opening lights. "Plenum" ventilation system was designed for the extraction of hot and foul air, through the

system of flues and ducts in the roof space, leading to the ventilation tower (V,VI,VII,VIII). The ventilation tower, once an important feature, is in the process of reconstruction, although not to its original appearance (P2). The system is no longer in use, as it has become a health hazard. Grilles have been boarded over and the tower capped, in order to prevent the deposition of debris (P25,36, PH V). Only ceiling grilles in assembly halls are still visible (P24). Heating system has changed from coal to oil and finally to gas central heating system. Radiator fittings have also been replaced (P26,27). It can be assumed that the original radiators had perforated covers, as timber paneling is clearly not designed to extend around the comers of the recesses (P26). Cloak areas had warm air inlets, built into the floor finish, designed for drying of pupils clothes; they have been covered with new floor finishes. Boiler, Engine and Fan Rooms in the Basement also underwent considerable changes in order to accommodate the changing nature of heating systems (P28). It was stipulated in school log books that: "flues are to be swept out every seven, and underground ducts to be hosed every fourteen days." There are still few original remaining brackets and high level pipes, for the original gas lighting to the school (P29.30).

8. School Bell Tower

It is no longer in use. The sides have been covered over and painted white, but it is otherwise well preserved (P3). It is hoped that the original construction is protected and that it can be restored (V).

9. Internal Finishes

It was recorded, at the turn of the century, that the school had been repainted over the school holiday and that it was, as a result, much brighter. **12** Original wall paneling would have been in natural, stained timber finish, at dado height throughout the school, with full height boarding behind tiered benches in Infants Classroom (PH3). There are still original pitch-pine tongue and grooved floors, blocks laid on screed in herringbone pattern, remaining in some of the classrooms. These were later replaced or overlaid by new hardwood floors blocks (P35). Different floor finish has been observed in the area where tiered bench seating was removed

(P33). The removal of the school organ revealed the original pitch-pine floor blocks, underneath the new hardwood floor (P39). Ceilings, originally plastered, have been recently recovered with the plasterboard. All windows have been replaced with contemporary PVC-u double glazed units, with the exception of some original dormer, timber framed windows (P32). Doors, especially internal, are mainly original and in original cast iron frames, with brass fittings and floor closures (PI 2). Original blackboards, if not removed, were repainted and replaced with contemporary white ones (P33, PH IV). School furniture, tables and chairs are light and easily rearranged to a more flexible use (P33). There is one dual-desk still kept in the Basement Store.

10. Staff Room, Store Rooms (SK2)

Original Girls Cloak Area has been enclosed to create additional storage. Flight of stairs to first floor staff room has been rebuilt, from the straight to “L” shaped, with intermediate landing. ‘Dado’- height timber paneling is still visible behind the new stair and at points of junction with the new block work walls (P37, 38). From the original drawing it appears that the Boys Cloak Area, had a barrel-vaulted feature, now covered with horizontal plasterboard ceiling, between the original horizontal beams. It is now a quiet, multi-purpose study area.

CONCLUSION:

Like a well designed tool, Somerville School still serves the same noble purpose for which it was built, ensuring the continuity of its use and of its fabric, through constantly evolving educational, social and cultural demands. The approach to necessary modifications has been, while not always designed in such a way as to enhance its outside appearance, practical and utilitarian, without taking away, obliterating or negating, aesthetic or educational value of the original, main building. New additions and modifications respected the importance of the main building and sought not to cause unnecessary damage to the features, fabric, structure or internal spatial arrangement of the original, sufficiently robust edifice. They are recognisable by their very contrast, allowing for the historical legibility. Repairs or replacements have been carried out in the contemporary manner and using contemporary

technologies.

Due to insufficient information about the original internal finishes, comparison can be made with newly restored 'to its original appearance' Birmingham School of Art, designed by the same architects.

Although Somerville School is not a Listed Building, any future interventions ought to be well studied and mindful of the past, while in the same time enabling its continuity of use.

FUTURE:

Somerville Primary School is the subject of two further studies:

'Comenius' Euro Project, in which, together with Prince Albert School in Aston, it will share information about its past, history, site etc. with schools in

Denmark and Holland, and of further study of the way that institutions and buildings were designed for educational purposes (to be carried out by Prof.

Martin Lawn and Ian Grosvenor of Westhill College, Birmingham).

P.S.

In my talk with the Head Master of Somerville School Mr. Richard Hornsby, plans for the future development of the school were mentioned.

The

intention is to remove all Porter cabins, demolish 'Playgroup' building and provide new accommodation, in the same location, for "early years" (nursery

and reception). The Playgroup will then move to the existing Nursery Unit. Proposed new building will be connected to the main school. This may provide

an opportunity for sympathetic, yet contemporary design, possibly enhancing

by the very contrast, the features of the older building. It ought, in the same

time, to respect the inherited legacy and try to make reference to still visible

roof line of former play-sheds; it should, in my opinion, incorporate into the new design, the original cast iron columns and trusses preserved inside

the

'Playgroup'.

Notes:

1. The English School...

Volume II

by Malcolm Seaborne and Roy Lowe

The elementary schools, page 31

2. Made in Birmingham

Chapter 2: Architectural Terracotta in Birmingham

By Michael Stratton

3. The English School...
Volume II
by Malcolm Seaborne and Roy Lowe
The schools in transition, page 10
4. The English School...
Volume II
by M. Seaborne and R. Lowe
The schools in transition, page 17
5. The English School...
Volume II
by M. Seaborne and R. Lowe
The elementary schools, page 27
6. from Somerville School Log Book
7. from Somerville School Log Book
8. from Somerville School Log Book
9. from Somerville School Log Book
10. Ministry of Education, *The Story of postwar School Building Pamphlet series 33*
(London, 1957)p.2.
...from *Silences & Images*, by M. Lawn
11. from Somerville School Log Book
- 12 from Somerville School Log Book

Bibliography:

1. The English School
Its Architecture and Organisation
Volume II 1870-1970
by Malcolm Seaborne and Roy Lowe
First published in 1977, by Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.
2. *Silences & Images*
The Social History of the Classroom
Edited by: Ian Grosvenor, Martin Lawn, & Kate Rousmaniere
1999 Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., New York
3. *Teachers: The Culture and Politics of Work*
Edited by Martin Lawn & Gerald Grace
Published in 1987 by The Palmer Press

Acknowledgements:

- Special thanks to Mr. Richard Hornsby and the Staff of Somerville School for the help in supplying the information, school archive photographs and for the use of School Log Books to create this study;
- Thanks to the staff of Birmingham Central Library, Archives Section, for supplying the original, historic drawings and for helping with the photographing

and printing.

APPENDICES

Original drawings and transparencies;

I	Site Plan-1888
II	Site Layout
III	Ground Floor Layout
IV	Elevations
V	Sections
VI	Roof Plan
VII	Basement Plan
VIII	Plan of Heating
IX	Elevation Detail
X	Extension to Infants Classroom

Early Photographs;

PH I	Assembly Hall
PH II	Science Lesson
PH III	Infants Classroom - 1900
PH IV	Blackboard
PH V	Needlework

Sketches (from the original Martin & Chamberlain and Birmingham Education Committee and City Architects drawings):

SK1	Overall Site Layout (not to scale; copied by the permission of the School)
SK2	Additions and Alterations (1898-1991)
SK3	Change to Infants Heads Room - 1930's
SK4	Section through outside toilets - 1894
SK5	Section through the playshed- 1894
SK6	Detail of original iron copings- 1894
SK7	New Nursery unit -1980
SK8	New toilets -1991
SK9	Toilets extension- 1960's
Sk10	Air-raid shelters -1940
SK11	Enclosed playsheds -1940

New photographs;

P1	View from Swanage Road
P2	Ventilation tower
P3	View of the bell tower
P4	Entrance to the kitchen
P5	Infants classrooms
P6	Infants Hall
P7	Deputy Heads Office
P8	Caretakers House
P9	New Nursery
P10	New toilet block - 1991
P11	Toilet block extension - 1960's

- P12 Link to the new toilet block
- P13 Head Masters Office - post WW2 extension
- P14 Example of contemporary repair
- P15 Main School Entrance
- P16 Original railings, terracotta and cast iron copings
- P17 Damage due to the removal of dividing railings
- P18 Enclosed playshed and the line of previous cast iron copings
- P 19 Playshed - original roof trusses
- P20 Playshed - original cast iron columns
- P21 Previously Latrines - blue brick string course and the roofline
- P22 Assembly Hall
- P23 Cast iron structural supports
- P24 Remaining air extraction grilles (system no longer in use)
- P25 Blocked-off air extraction grilles
- P26 New radiators in the Assembly Hall
- P27 New radiators in the classrooms
- P28 Examples of the "palimpsest" in the Boiler Room
- P29 Remaining gas light bracket
- P30 Gas supply, now redundant
- P31 Newly refurbished Library and IT Studio
- P32 Remaining original dormer windows
- P33 Difference in floor finish to the area where tiered infants benches have been removed; new hardwood block flooring
- P34 Painted blackboard - compare to PH IV
- P35 Original pitch pine timber floor in the front
- P36 Blocked air extraction grilles in the classroom - see PH V
- P37-P38 Enclosed Girls Cloakroom and the stairs to the Staff Room
- P39 New floor finish, following the removal of school organ in 2000
- P40 Comparable (original) finishes in The School of Art, Margaret Street