

Huddersfield Public Art: A Quick Tour

Chris Marsden

Huddersfield is not renowned for its public art; I recall a 2008 letter from a well-educated resident appearing in a local newspaper deploring the absence of art in the town centre.¹ I contend that the town is rich in sculpture, murals and other art forms, even conceptual art. I see it in abundance on our streets and public spaces. Most of us fail to notice it. Should we be aware of it? What is its significance? Is it worth the effort to make, preserve and even notice? Let's take a quick look around the town at some of the work...

Market Cross



Huddersfield Market Cross. Photograph by the author.

In the market place, at the heart of the town is a market cross. It may well be the oldest visible part of the town, dating from about 1671 when the Ramsden family acquired a market charter. Is it art? It was a symbol of authority, it marked the centre of market franchise rights for a radius of $6\frac{2}{3}$ miles. The cross can also be decoded as such; its structure representing social order. It is topped with a stone orb representing monarchic supremacy, beneath that is a cube depicting Ramsden armorial bearings indicating the marriages with other landed families; this is borne high above us by an orderly decorated circular stone column with an Ionic capital, literally keeping the hierarchy in an elevated position. At the foot are plain steps spreading out, the lower orders taking the strain of all above.

Over the centuries elements have been repeatedly replaced. Some years ago the cube was of concrete. More recently the steps have been renewed. Its actual position seems to be of no

significance. Old photographs show that it has been repositioned around the square again and again. In the early nineteenth century during Luddite fears it was removed to Longley as it was thought by authorities that it may have attracted the attention of radicals. On its return to the town centre in 1851, a newspaper letter writer described it as a 'mutilated remnant of the past'.² This critic continued: 'As a matter of taste, I can hear only of one opinion, namely that it is at once unsightly and unmeaning'.³ In the early twenty-first century it has been adopted as a memorial to local British armed forces lost in war. Is it Huddersfield's seventeenth century conceptual artwork? Bring what meaning you want to it, alter it as you will. Would we miss it if was removed?

Huddersfield Town Hall

The use of art to articulate Huddersfield's civic self-image continued. The Princess Street elevation of the 1881 Town Hall has keystone busts of Matthew Hale (barrister and judge), Friedrich Handel (musician), William Hogarth (artist), Isaac Newton (physicist), William Shakespeare (writer) and James Watt (engineer). Each man has the tools of his trade portrayed. I wonder about the thought processes of the committee members that decided upon this selection (in case you were wondering; the corporation had a 'Town Hall (Carving of Heads) Sub Committee'). Inside the concert hall fourteen further windows' keystones represent Ancient Roman deities (stage left to right): Mercury (messenger), Hebe (youth), Vulcan (iron), Hygeia (health), Diana (hunting), Concordia (peace), Agenora (industry), Astria (justice), Apollo (music), Minerva, (wisdom), Ceres (agriculture), Venus (beauty), Hecuba (chasteness) and Psyche (soul).

Huddersfield Art Gallery and Library



Youth Awaiting Inspiration (1939) outside Huddersfield Art Gallery. Photograph by the author.

A rather more light-hearted approach to didactic architectural decoration was taken by E. H. Ashburner (1896-1992), the architect of Huddersfield's 1930s Art Gallery and Library. In 1946 Ashburner was to write:

I always feel strongly that in a library, perhaps more than in most buildings, it is incumbent of the architect to do his utmost to beautify his building by making it a permanent record of the best examples of contemporary art, sculpture and other arts or crafts which are available. If artists of sufficient note are available locally, then so much the better – a further source of civic pride.⁴

Flanking the steps are Youth Awaiting Inspiration (1939), a boy symbolising literature and a girl, art. Behind, on the library are low relief panels that are confections of all manner of subjects that includes a putto in play with a contemporary airliner by sculptor, James Woodford (1893-1976). The children's library walls had large paintings portraying Colne Valley folk tales. They were produced by a team from the town's School of Art (precursor to the School of Art, Design and Architecture); staff member Reg Napier (1910-1989) and students: Stanley Broadbent, Anne E. Brooke, Sylvia J. Darley (OBE, 1987), Douglas K. Dyson, Jack Kenworthy and Sax R. Shaw. The canvases are now hung in the local history library.

Greenhead High School



Left and right: Peter Peri, Welcome (1961). Photographs by the author (2012).

In the early 1960s Huddersfield Corporation remodelled the girls Grammar School, Greenhead High School, with the Ministry of Education's own design unit as a case study. This included adding 'beauty' by commissioning art for the school.⁵ The major work was by Peter Peri (1899-1967), a Hungarian Jewish émigré sculptor whose figurative work was commissioned by several education authorities. For Greenhead he produced, in-situ, Welcome (1961). Until 2012, when it was cut down by the then Greenhead College during remodelling, it was a life-sized, pony-tailed girl whose raised arms were spread out wide. The figure cantilevered overhead, from her soles, out of the school's first storey at about 30 degrees from the upright.

Dramatic, inspiring and apparently impossible. Her loss is to be regretted; she was impressive and Peri's only Yorkshire work. A College manager reported that the figure, which had planning consent for repositioning, was cracked. Due to health and safety concerns, removal 'was felt to be the only safe and economical solution'.⁶

Town Centre



Harold Blackburn, *The Development of the Woollen Industry From a Cottage Craft Practised as an Ancillary to Farming, Up to the Beginning of the Industrial Revolution* (1966). Photography by the author.

The Corporation also undertook major redevelopment of the town centre during the 1960s. Alderman Clifford Stephenson chaired the committees that negotiated and managed the development. He was a passionate moderniser with little time for conservation of the townscape. However, for a businessman, he had unusually strong enthusiasm for the sculptural articulation of buildings. In 1956 he built a television set service centre (now demolished) for his retail business. For above the main entrance he commissioned a bas-relief in cast concrete that conveyed the power of broadcasting. It was designed by Huddersfield Art School students J. Trevor Wood and Tom Darlington, modelled by student John Dodson and cast by technician John Shaw.

Stephenson's insistence on his own taste being followed led to a colourful mosaic mural on Ramsden Street to a design by local artist, Harold Blackburn (1899-1980); *The Development of the Woollen Industry From a Cottage Craft Practised as an Ancillary to Farming, Up to the Beginning of the Industrial Revolution* (1966). The 65ft long, 8ft high, easily interpretable mural won early praise from the town and has remained a popular favourite. On Princess Street, less visible, so understandably less well known, is another mosaic, this one by Mural Consultants; *Facets of the local scene* (1967) (Mural Consultants), some think this has more charm. A third contemporary mural by Richard Fletcher is on Buxton Way; *Systematic Sequence in Line and Shade* (1968). This bears many more viewings as its abstract qualities allow greater reflection as one turns up the slope under Buxton House.

Queensgate Market



Fritz Steller, *Articulation in Movement* (1969). Photograph by the author.

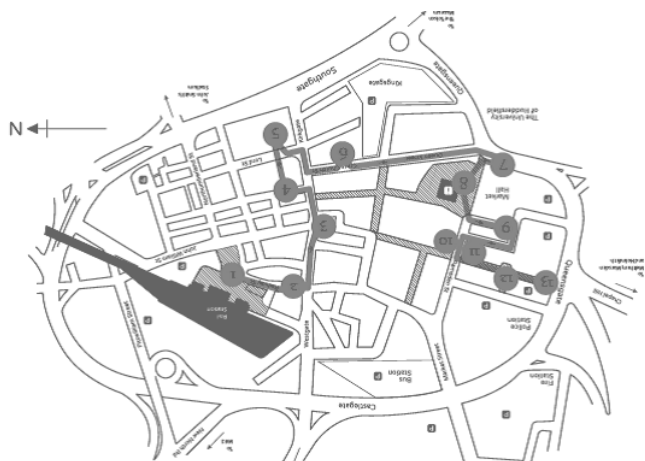
A later development phase was the 1970 market hall, abounding in examples of public art. The pioneering canopy of the elegant market hall have been described in many terms; as 'sculptural', 'flowing', 'poetic', 'stunning', 'modernist interpretation of Gothic', 'cathedral-like', 'dull concrete', 'dismal', 'greying concrete'.⁷ The project architect Gwyn Roberts (1936-2004), of the Seymour Harris Partnership) wanted to have an interesting roof structure which would return to the traditional concept of the market place with rough wooden stalls shaded but not enclosed by a canopy. From the interior the roof scape is indeed poetic; the twenty-one freestanding roof shells are more decorative than practical; sculptural, asymmetric, carefully parallel board-marked and well lit. The Queensgate façade of the market hall displays five roof shells. Beneath, against the outside wall are nineteen shop units that vary in depth alternately, so that from the outside the first floor is indented delineating each trading space emphasised by ceramic panels by Fritz Steller (b. 1941) of Square One Design. The nine relief panels (18ft x 18ft) are presented proudly between smooth ashlar stone. The panels continue across the façade, nine panels with ten ashlar intervals. Much of it is now hidden by trees that have outgrown their place in the scheme.

To the right hand end is a much larger, double-sided tenth panel through which passes through the staircase that rises from Queensgate to Princess Alexandra Walk. The work was said to be the largest ceramic sculpture in the world, being made from 50 tons of Stourbridge fire clay. The work is entitled *Articulation in Movement* (1969). Each panel has a representation of the market's mushroom-like board-marked shells that are turned 90 degrees with the low-relief stalks, asymmetric and striated caps of each resembling a trumpet's bell being harmoniously aligned with adjoining ones. This gives feeling of movement right along the building. Around the stem of each are haut-relief organic representations that reflect the nature of the goods available within the building.

The market's interior north wall at clerestory level is decorated with a metal relief *Commerce* (1969). This is made of black painted metal relief of semi-abstracted figures (again by Steller). At the left of the piece scenes of sowing, husbandry and harvesting can be seen. On the right are representations of local industries. In the middle is trade, the essence of the market with agricultural produce and manufactured goods. Rather apologetically, in a dark corner of the

market is a stone relief of the town's armorial bearings that were salvaged from the police station that had been on the market site.

Conclusion



Huddersfield Town Plan of Public Art Attractions in Public Art Trail.

This quick tour has not strayed far or considered the art on commercial buildings. There is much more to see, even on some of the buildings mentioned. There can be no single appraisal of the town's art; one could argue that it is not a collection or a gallery. I hope I have made the diversity of the work and the density of the installations apparent. One of the weaknesses of public art in Huddersfield is a representative lack of work about and/or by women and black or Asian artists. However, the commissioning of work for the town's new sports centre is being arranged.

Having completed my masters by research on this topic⁸ and in my other duties as chair of Huddersfield Civic Society, co-ordinator of Huddersfield Gem and the conservation secretary of the Tiles and Architectural Ceramics Society, I am able to gain insight into the history and conservation of such public artworks that may otherwise go unnoticed. Having developed public art trails through the town I now lead tours, including a short guide to a selection of town centre art in the Discover Huddersfield series.⁹

Notes

1. Huddersfield Daily Examiner, 17 June 2008.
2. Huddersfield Chronicle, 12 July 1851.
3. Ibid.
4. E. H. Ashburner, *Modern Public Libraries: Their Planning and Design*. London: Grafton, 1946.
5. Huddersfield Education Committee, *Official Opening of the Re-modelled Greenhead High School*, Huddersfield Corporation, 1983; Department of Education and Science, 'Re-Modelling Old Schools' in *Building Bulletin No 21*. HMSO, 1963.
6. Personal correspondence, 22 May 2013.
7. See for example G. Moyes, *Presidential Address*, paper presented at National Association of British Market Authorities the twenty-third annual general meeting and conference, Torquay 19-22 September 1971; Joanne Ginley, 'Expert Opposes Demolition of Market Hall with Murals' in *Yorkshire Post* 26 July 2004; Lesley Kipling, 'Why I Hate the Market Hall!' in *Huddersfield Daily Examiner*, 23 July 2004.
8. Christopher Marsden, *An Exploration of the Development of Huddersfield's 1970 Market Hall: Architectural Decoration with Cheap Greens; An Architect's Dream? Masters thesis*, University of Huddersfield, 2012.
9. Marsden, *Public Art Trail*: <http://www.kirklees.gov.uk/visitors/huddersfield/pdf/artTrail.pdf>