

Invisible Landmarks: The Architecture of Crematoria in the North East

Cremation was revived in the late nineteenth century as an alternative to burial and by the late twentieth century had attained cultural normality and indeed ritual dominance. Today seven out of ten people in the UK are cremated and most, at one time or another, attend a crematorium for a funeral service. And so crematoria are now the places in which many people find themselves framing their own understanding of the passage from life to death. Fifty years ago the crematorium was a place for cremation and a brief committal ceremony, following a church service – now, as society has become more secular, it is the focus for disposal, ritual and remembrance.

The first crematorium opened in Woking in 1889 and one of the most recent is Kirkleatham in Cleveland. Paradoxically, despite there being 276 across the UK, crematoria for many people remain the ‘invisible’ buildings of the twentieth century, almost absent from architectural histories. And yet they tell us a great deal about the complex and changing nature of attitudes to death and disposal and offer an architectural form that reflects the values and social life of a modern, increasingly socially and geographically mobile society. As cremation slowly gained acceptance in Britain, this progress was reflected in the design of its crematoria and each crematorium can therefore be seen as a symbol of social change.

The crematorium was a new building type for which there was no architectural precedent, in many ways analogous to the nineteenth century railway station in which form and function also sought resolution. From the outset crematoria presented a series of challenges to the architect. It is a building frequented by a large cross-section of religious, secular and ideological movements all with different, but overlapping needs. It has to provide a stage for the ritual of all denominations, and none. In conforming to the 1902 Cremation Act, crematoria must be 200 yards from the nearest dwelling (unless permission has been granted by the occupant), 50 yards from any public highway and cannot be built in a consecrated part of any burial ground. Consequently, they require a disproportionately large site and are often confined to the margins of

towns and cities, accessible only by car or public transport. At once utilitarian and symbolic, religious and secular, it is the lack of a shared and clear expectation of what is required from a crematorium that has given rise to the cultural ambivalence lying at the heart of many designs. Those using crematoria often find them unsatisfactory, both emotionally and aesthetically, their design banal and uninspiring, characterized by dramatist and actor Alan Bennett as being

Set in country that is not quite country it [the crematorium] looks like the reception area of a tasteful factory or the departure lounge of a small provincial airport confined to domestic flights. The style is contemporary but not eye-catchingly so; this is decorum-led architecture which does not draw attention even to its merits... Related places might be the waiting area of a motor showroom, the foyer of a small private hospital or a section of a department store selling modern furniture of inoffensive design: dead places. This is the architecture of reluctance, the furnishings of the functionally ill at ease, decor for a place you do not want to be . . . The whole function of the place, after all, is to do with tidying something away'.

There are fourteen crematoria in the North East – a comparatively small number, given the expansive area from the Border Country to the north; Newcastle to the west; Tynemouth to the east; and Darlington to the south. Aside from the pioneering example of Darlington, dating from 1901, cremation came late to the North East. The pattern of building was somewhat faltering - Darlington dates from 1901, Newcastle from the 1930s and, until very recently, the remainder were built in the 1950s and 60s. This mirrors the pattern across the UK where three fifths of all provision dates from between 1950 and 1970.

The crematoria of the North East therefore provide an instructive regional case study charting the move from burial to cremation. Doubtless as a consequence of population densities and distribution, the only crematorium to be built since 1966 has been at Kirkleatham in Cleveland, opened in 2014. Five of the fourteen are chapel conversions and nine new build. Only

Darlington was privately owned, the remainder funded by local authorities. Stylistically, they present a microcosm of the wider development of crematorium design in Britain in the late 1950s and 60s, torn between traditionalism, modernism and the mundane economic constraints that led to cemetery chapel conversions. In 1946 North East crematoria conducted 2,483 cremations, in 1960 the figure rose to 10,709 and by 1970 it had reached 18,2789.

A crematorium for Darlington had been mooted as early as 1890, but it was not until 1901 that the Darlington Cremation Society, a limited company, succeeded in its quest. Designed by local architects Clark and Moscrop, and built at a cost of £2000 the design is disarmingly homely, showing the influence of the English Domestic Revival. Constructed in red brick with stone dressings, with a tiled roof, it comprised a hall or Chapel and a second room containing the cremator. In 1957 a fire damaged the Chapel and Darlington Corporation bought it for £5000 and rebuilt it in a contemporary style. It reopened in 1961.

It was not until 1934 that the second crematorium at Newcastle-upon-Tyne opened. It was traditionally Gothic in style and built in a new cemetery, the plan determined by the approach road and turning circle, to take account of the rise in the use of motor transport. Although Sunderland Borough Council planned a crematorium in 1937, the war delayed its opening until 1951. Middlesbrough was agreed in principle in 1945, but opened finally in 1961, together with South Shields. The latter displayed the broader stylistic characteristics of the period – namely a well-mannered, humane and decent style, with a strong sense of contemporary Scandinavian work, which had been drawn to the attention of the British public by the *Festival of Britain* in 1951.

There then followed a series of somewhat unsuccessful conversions of Non Conformist Cemetery Chapels. The popularity of conversions in England and Wales resulted from their relatively low cost and the ease with which they obtained planning permission during the austerity of the postwar years. Examples at Hartlepool (1954) and Blyth (1956) illustrate that austerity all too

well. It is interesting to note that until the completion of Blyth, people in Northumberland faced the prospect of travelling south west to Newcastle, or north to Edinburgh for a cremation. Birtley followed in 1957- arguably one of the most dismal crematoria in the country. Tynemouth (planned in 1946, opened in 1959) and Whitley Bay (1960) followed, Whitley Bay being the finest conversion of an Arts and Crafts Chapel, with splendid carved plaster decoration.

Of the new crematoria Durham is one of the most interesting in terms of architectural style and provides a good case study. First planned in 1953 at the suggestion of the Durham clergy, who noted the growing popularity of cremation and the fact that the people of Durham had to make an hour-long journey to either Newcastle or Darlington, it was sponsored by the Central Durham Crematorium Joint Committee. After consulting with the Royal Institute of British Architects and The Cremation Society, the Committee approached architect J.P. Chaplin of Norwich. Chaplin was something of a rarity in that he had already designed crematoria in Norwich (1937), Northampton (1939), Cambridge (1938) and Peterborough (1958). Had Chaplin not been available, then H.R.W. Orr, architect of Oxford (1939), Torquay (1956) [and later Slough (1963)] crematoria was to be contacted. The reality at this time was that few local authority Architects or Borough Surveyors or indeed private practices, would build more than one crematorium. In many cases architects would visit other crematoria for prompts.

In January 1955, Chaplin produced his layout, preliminary design and sketch plans at an estimated cost of £45,000. Revised plans were approved in 1958 and Robert Costain Ltd of Newcastle won the contract and the government loan was increased from £51,000 to £63,400. The Committee Minutes, however, fail to reveal any clue about the genesis or determinants for the style of the building. For indications of these we have to turn to a symposium *Planning a Crematorium* organized by the Cremation Society at its annual conference in 1960 at Peterborough, where Chaplin's crematorium had opened two years earlier. The symposium took the form of a dialogue between Chaplin and Richard Sudell, the landscape architect of Peterborough

crematorium. Chaplin provided a revealing insight into where he felt the responsibility for the architectural language lay.

I feel we are employed by a local authority. We are building buildings not to please ourselves: we are building for that town and that particular committee and it is their building – not ours. We go away and do something else, if we are lucky, but they are left with what we have done. If we can make it something they have got a hand in, it is going to please them much better. That goes just as well for the garden’.

Sudell raised the issue of style, suggesting that the choice for the committee members might be between ‘the contemporary manner’ or ‘the old fashioned type . . . You know, with a pitched roof and the rest of it’. Both Chaplin and Sudell agreed on the importance of using local materials, although this did not rule out concrete. They also counseled the introduction of local features, and talked about Durham, *Sometimes you will find there is some fine Norman architecture in the district*, - if Chaplin argued,

You can bring something that reflects that style into your building, you instantly get a homely feeling, which is something we are aiming at in the crematorium design. I think that it is bad architecture to produce a design that bewilders your clients. They show people round and they are at a loss to explain it. I think that a crematorium should look like a crematorium and it should look sensible.’

Chair of the Joint Board, Councillor W. Johnson reported to the symposium that Chaplin *was faced, when he came to Durham for the first time, with a determined board who had regard to the fact that 800 yards from that crematorium is one of the most majestic buildings in the country, Durham Cathedral. We were determined that it had to have one hundred per cent relationship with the build of the cathedral.*

In October 1960 *The Architects’ Journal* included a snippet from its correspondent, *‘My other illustration is of a Durham building which, according to Costains, “promises to become as much a talking point as the Cathedral*

itself'. In case you want to talk about it, here are a few points culled from Costains' report.'

Basically the building is developed from Norman Architecture and can be compared in design with the Monks' Kitchen near the Cathedral. And while many of the appendages are obviously contemporary, the whole blends together in pleasing harmony ... the exterior of the building also has unusual features. The main chapel is the central point rising above the rest of the structure. Leading off from the two sides are long covered walks with batwing roof. All roofs throughout the building, including the bat-wing walks, are covered in copper and the undersides of the bat-wing roofs are also done in exposed timbers.

The crematorium had no visible chimney when it was built. This was a feature of Chaplin's designs where he sought to disguise the chimney, most notably at Northampton, in a Renaissance dome.

Internal detailing aligned the building with the locality. The Norman columns of the Cathedral were referenced in the chevron patterns carved into the pews, catafalque and the Book of Remembrance stand. The pews faced an altar fronted with a glass panel engraved with scenes from the life of St Cuthbert, another local reference. A *leitmotif* of wild flowers and floral patterns ran through the design as a whole, notably the painted reredos with its Celtic flower motifs. Much play was made throughout of decorative and coloured glass and though it is tempting to attribute Chaplin's use of glass to reference the strong local heritage of glass making in the North East, it was something that he had already exploited in Peterborough.

And so it was the Committee at Durham, rather than the architect, who determined the style of the building. They knew from the outset that they wanted a building that would make reference to local imagery, but at another, more fundamental level, one that would invoke a sense of history and belonging through an architectural language rooted in the locality.

Some four years later, Maxwell Fry, architect of Bridgend crematorium in Glamorgan would echo the importance of attaching crematorium *buildings to the local community by something much stronger than convenience and to*

make it finally as evident a piece of regional history and culture as the oldest building by which we set store. Only by doing this can crematoria gain the dignified place they should occupy in the life of the modern community.

If Durham represented a respect for tradition, heritage and architectural good manners, then Gateshead and Mountsett Crematoria, both opened in 1966 marked a dramatic change in architectural expression. Contemporary developments north of the river might account for this new approach. Redevelopment had come late to Newcastle compared with other provincial cities. Labour took control of the City in 1958 and in the following years the Chairman of the Housing and Town Planning Committee, Councillor T. Dan Smith expressed astonishment that the city had remained untouched, given that 'there is no City of comparable population that has the turn-over of Newcastle'. Smith envisaged a 'Venice of the North' leading to Newcastle being described in 1962 by Cliff Michelmore as 'The New Brasilia'. Arguably the most potent symbol of the new civic consciousness was Newcastle Civic Centre designed by the City Architect George Kenyon between 1958 and 1968. Its construction ran parallel to that of Gateshead and Mountsett crematoria.

Gateshead, by Borough Surveyor L. Berry, sought to capture this progressive mood. A modern, but classically inspired design, urban and yet positioned high up on a wooded slope on the boundary of Saltwell Park, access was by way of a busy main road. Careful thought was given to the processional approach to the main building. It invokes Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye, Poissy (1929). Corbusier admired Classical architecture and talked about the approach to the Villa Savoye by car, itself a symbol of modernity, being the modern day equivalent of the processional approach to the Parthenon on foot. The crematorium itself is simple, almost ascetic. There was no sentimentality about the bright, clearly defined space and natural finishes. The spatial planning, with its carefully orchestrated relationship between interior and exterior spaces, invoked the cool restraint of European Modernists, Gunnar Asplund, Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe. This was an architectural

expression intended to speak not only for the progressive, modern, urban approach to death, but also of the new civic pride emerging on Tyneside. Mountsett, Co Durham, designed by Charlton, Crowther & Partners of Leeds, occupies a very different kind of site, open, rather than enclosed. Here the landscape was the means by which a northern identity might be encouraged. It too has a carefully controlled approach, designed to take full advantage of the crematorium's magnificent position, high on one side of the valley looking towards Chopwell Woods to offer solace to mourners.

Newcastle, Durham, Gateshead and Mountsett emerge as the finest architectural expressions of cremation in the North East. For different reasons they succeed in providing a building that might become a significant and meaningful part of the fabric of the communities which they were intended to serve. They are linked to those communities by something much stronger than their utilitarian purpose. Each in their own way offers not only a beautiful natural landscape within which to remember the dead, but have, over time, taken their place in regional history and culture.

We remain a society unable to frame with certainty or consensus, the passage from life to death. Given the lack of a clear conceptual basis for crematoria; there are no easy solutions, but as Alan Crawford concludes

In another sense, and mercifully, it is not necessary for the design of a crematorium to carry all this heavy burden of relieving pain, or giving meaning. It is the mourners who do the work, who bring such meaning as they can muster with them. Seen in this way, the design of the building is on the same footing as the undertaker's lowered tones, the well-kept lawns, the transitory flowers, friends in unfamiliar outfits, the hint of suburbia in the background: all nothing in themselves, hopeless in the face of what has happened, but ready to be invested with meaning by the mourners.