

# **THE GUILDHALL – SWANSEA**

## **Background**

Whilst heavy industry and shipping peaked in Swansea in the 19th Century the city's population continued to increase into the 20th. The County Borough Council had decided back in 1907, that the need for a larger and better city hall was pressing.

Having played its part in the Great War in terms of industrial support and tragic human sacrifice, most conspicuously at Mametz Wood, the city elders turned their attention to finding a new civic base as the former Guildhall at Somerset Place (now the Dylan Thomas Centre) had reached capacity and beyond.

## **Siting, Design, Construction & Opening**

The aim was to build a new city hall on a site of importance. The Council realised that such a place would have to be at least two square acres (approaching a square kilometre) to meet their needs, this ruled out a city centre location.



**Victoria Park Pre-1929**

To the west of the city, Victoria Park was ideal and it was within easy reach of tramway services from all districts. It was a pleasant setting near to the sea and easily spacious enough for the vision of an ambitious civic hub. The scheme went out to competition and attracted seventy-seven submissions, from which the assessors chose the proposal of Percy Thomas of Messrs. E. Turner & Sons Ltd. of Cardiff.

In 1929 following the Wall Street Crash unemployment in some European countries was set to triple and unemployment in the UK would peak at 3¼ million. At the beginning of that year the Council had provided 2,828 men of all trades with at least a fortnight's work providing respite for many in these harsh times.

Swansea's new Guildhall was opened by the young Prince George, Duke of Kent, on Tuesday, 23 October 1934.

## **External Features**

The building has proved to be functional as well as being architecturally splendid. Its innovative design and features were widely copied in other municipal buildings during the two decades following its completion. It has functioned as the focal point of local government and justice, it is the fount of civic ceremony, and is one of the principal centres of social and cultural life in Swansea.



**The Guildhall Post-1934**

The Guildhall is clad in Portland Stone, some parts have been modelled with the aim of creating shadows and points of interest. The entrances are made distinct by huge bronze screens.

The main entrance is decorated with the arms and emblems of the four counties of the Union and of Prince Llewelyn. There are plaques commemorating the foundation and opening ceremonies for the building carved into the stonework on each side.



**Clock-Tower  
Detail**

The clock-tower is about 48 metres high and has a 'batter', or 'lean', on each face of approx. 30 centimetres from the roof to the top of the tower (i.e. it is wider at the bottom than it is at the top). The legend of Swansea's Viking origins is depicted by the huge galley prows which project as balconies at the upper stages of the tower.

Carved discs can be found around the parapets of the Brangwyn Hall and the Municipal Block that depict the various activities carried on within the building.

Over the arches connecting the Courts with the Brangwyn Hall (Francis Street aspect) on one side, and the Municipal Block on the other, are more discs, carved with the heads of Dewi Sant and a druid (y Derwydd).

The Guildhall has undergone alteration and expansion but it has retained its original character and is now regarded as an historic building in its own right, and one of which the people of Swansea are justifiably proud.

### **Internal Features**

The whole entrance foyer is lined in Bath Stone, and it rises to the full height of the building. The ceiling is vaulted and deeply coffered, with rich colouring which is enhanced by concealed lighting.

The entrance hall and grand staircase represent Swansea's Scandinavian period. Masks of Sweyn and his warriors adorn certain keystones while the bronze handrails of the staircase represent the prows and sterns of his ships.

At the top of the grand staircase, and directly ahead, lies the Council Chamber, beyond a well-proportioned ante-chamber which is built in the Roman Doric order.



**Doric Ante-Chamber**

In general terms, the interior is of colour-washed walls, with doorways marked by heavy architraves in a simplified style. The floors are paved in Roman travertine stone, relieved by borders and patterned devices of gold travertine and Swedish green marble. On each side of the grand staircase are short flights of steps, leading to the lower ground floor.

The plasterwork is decorated with cornices and pilasters, and walnut is used wherever natural wood is exposed, such as on doors and counters.



**Grand Corridor**

In contrast, the Grand Corridor, leading from the main entrance, has marble floors and deeply coffered barrel vault ceilings, made possible both by the greater height of the rooms on either side. Within the corridors 14 coats of arms relevant to Swansea are visible at high level.

This corridor gives access to the main civic rooms, which consist of the mayoral suite, committee rooms, robing and reception rooms, and the Council Chamber. These rooms contain a wealth of interest, with a greater use of walnut in panelling and furnishing, and decorative features of local interest.

Finally, and at the end of the Grand Corridor, but with its own separate entrance, is the George Hall and the Brangwyn Hall.

## **Brangwyn Hall**

Whilst a public assembly block was a part of the original brief, the development of that block was positively affected by the following sequence of events.

In 1846, Daniel Maclise, an artist encouraged by Prince Albert was commissioned by the House of Lords to paint scenes representing themes such as justice and chivalry to be displayed in the Royal Gallery at the Palace of Westminster.

In 1924 the House of Lords voted to commemorate the First World War with contemporary paintings to add to Maclise's Victorian collection. Lord Iveagh offered the fee of £20,000 and chose Frank Brangwyn for the work, supported by other lords.

Brangwyn was, amongst other things, a prominent war propaganda artist and his first designs were of tanks in action on the battlefield and of troops departing for the front but these works were set aside and donated to the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff.

Brangwyn's revised theme was "the Empire in all its majesty and multitudinous resource for that, as I see it, is the most fitting commemoration of the things for which we fought".

In 1927 Lord Iveagh died and it transpired that he had gone ahead with this commission without fully consulting his fellow peers. The Royal Fine Art Commission was brought in to judge the suitability of Brangwyn's work and the Commission pronounced against his efforts on the basis of five completed panels declaring the scheme to be 'too colourful'.

All 16 panels were shown at the Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition at Olympia in 1933, its future was uncertain. Amongst the first to see them at Olympia was Councillor Leslie Hefferman, who hurried home to tell the Council that the panels were a 'must' for Swansea.

A committee was set up with the aim of considering raising the assembly block ceiling to 13.4 meters in height to accommodate the panels. A cordial negotiation ensued, and on Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> October 1933 it was decided that the panels would find a home in what would be called the Brangwyn Hall. Amidst competition from other cities it was certainly Swansea's lucky day.



**Installing the Panels**



**Panel E – Australia (Part)**

Opinions on the subject matter are divided, some think that no geographical logic was intended; the panels have a spirit of fantasy showing a protected world of beauty and plenty, based artistically on Brangwyn's many travels. Other's claim to be able to identify regions of the Empire by the content of each panel.

A sketch by W. Grant Murray, Curator of Swansea Art Galleries (1909 – 1950) identifies England, Canada, Africa, India and the East Indies, South East Asia, the Caribbean and Australia as specific locations.

Tonal variations can be observed, these were designed to allow for the imbalance in lighting at the original location, the Royal Gallery.

Following the purchase of a 'Willis' organ from the Élite Picture Theatre in Nottingham the first public recital at the Brangwyn Hall was by Dr. W.H. Harris (organist of St. George's Chapel, Windsor) on Tuesday 23 October 1934. He was accompanied by Swansea and District Royal Male Choir and 4 soloists; Madame Sarah Kneath (mezzo-soprano), Miss Truda Mitchell (soprano), Mr. Rees Williams (baritone) and Master Islwyn Roberts (Treble).

### **Further information**

Please note that there is limited public access to the Brangwyn Hall, please see the website for events and organized tours.

**[www.swansea.gov.uk/brangwynhall](http://www.swansea.gov.uk/brangwynhall)**