



History of Gibson Hall

National Westminster Hall

When in 1862 the Directors of the National Provincial Bank of England decided to rebuild Head Office in Bishopsgate, they sought to erect 'such a building as may be adequate to the wants of the Bank for many years to come'. The design was entrusted to John Gibson and his building was to serve the bank as Head Office for over a century. In 1982, after many months of restoration work, the former Bank's conference centre. At the first function to take place in the refurbished hall - the 1982 Annual General Meeting of the Bank - the chairman, Robin Leigh - Pemberton announced that it had been named 'National Westminster Hall'.

John Gibson – The Architect

Son of a Castle Bromwich farmer, Gibson trained as an architect with J A Hansom. Building Birmingham Town Hall bankrupted Hansom, who is known for the 'Hansom Cab.' Gibson then joined Sir Charles Barry and worked on drawings for the new Houses of Parliament. The National Bank of Scotland, Glasgow, built in 1849, established Gibson's reputation as an architect. Using his innovative Italianate style, he introduced Corinthian pilasters, placed above those of the Ionic Order, to bank architecture.

Gibson died at his home, 13 Great Queen Street, Westminster in 1892, leaving behind a fine legacy of banks, commercial building, town and country houses, churches, schools and even a mausoleum. In recognition of his work, the Royal Institute of British Architects awarded him their Gold Medal in 1890. The Gibson Hall, long regarded as his finest work, now bears his name.

The Bank in Bishopsgate before 1865

The history of National Westminster Bank is bound closely with that of the National Provincial Bank, one of National Westminster's three constituent banks. It was founded in 1833 as the National Provincial Bank of England, opening its first banking office at Gloucester in 1834. The National Provincial was the first English bank established with the aim of providing a countrywide network of branches but it decided not to open a banking office in London. This enabled it under legislation of the time to secure the valued rights, as a purely provincial bank, to issue its own notes. It was nevertheless administered from the beginning from a London Head Office, first in Broad Street, then Austin Friars, and from 1839 in Bishopsgate.

The first premises of the bank at 15 Bishopsgate (then 112 Bishopsgate Street) were obtained by the purchase of 'Salvador House', a mansion-house which was extensively altered for the Bank's use, and by building two Doric lodges on either side of a carriageway leading to it.

John Gibson's Building 1865

By the 1860's the bank was outgrowing its premises and considering relinquishing its right to issue notes so that it could open for banking business in London. Other banks in the capital led by the London and Westminster Bank had shown that a note issue was no longer vital to success. Between the Bishopsgate offices and the corner of Threadneedle Street stood a shop and the 'Flower Pot Tavern', immortalised in Charles Lamb's essay on South Sea House. The bank had the opportunity of purchasing these properties and their acquisition gave it a substantially enlarged area on which to rebuild.

In appointing John Gibson as architect the bank entered into a fruitful partnership, which produced a series of notable banking offices in the northeast, midlands, and the south as well as in London. Born at Castle Bromwich in 1817, Gibson began his career well by winning a competition for the design of new premises for the National Bank of Scotland in Glasgow in 1844. His work was by no means confined to edifices of banking and he was presented with the gold medal of the Royal Institute of British Architects two years before his death in 1892.

In Bishopsgate Gibson had to overcome many problems, not least in accommodating claims for light for adjoining properties, a factor that was to influence the National Westminster Tower development a hundred years later. The building work was carried out by Trollope and completed by the end of 1865 so that the bank was able to open its doors to the public on 10th January 1866. The 'illustrated London news' of 20th January 1866 observed that Gibson would deservedly add to his reputation by this 'highly ornamental structure'.

15 Bishopsgate After 1865

In 1878 the Bank extended the building northward, two identical bays being added to the four fronting Bishopsgate. The Bank itself was also expanding, opening new branches and absorbing many smaller banks throughout England and Wales. 1917 saw the largest merger—with the union of London and Smiths Bank, and the resultant National Provincial and Union Bank of England (a title shortened in 1924 to National Provincial Bank) became one of the 'Big Five'. All this led to continuous pressure for more space at the head office and over the years labyrinthine additions were made to the north and west around Fountain Court and through to Old Broad Street.

The Bank purchased Gresham House in 1959 and so possessed a greatly enlarged site for complete redevelopment. In 1968 the National Provincial Bank joined forces with Westminster Bank and from 1970 these two major institutions, plus the district Bank which was already owned by the National Provincial, were merged into National Westminster Bank.

In the following decade the redevelopment took shape with the 600-foot National Westminster Tower rising into the London skyline behind 15 Bishopsgate. The offices that had been built to rear were demolished but Gibson's masterpiece, scheduled for preservation as a building of outstanding architectural interest, remained. It had originally been intended to refurbish Gibsons banking hall for 15 Bishopsgate offices but it was finally decided to relocate this in completely new premises next door. In 1980 the banking office was transferred to its new home and 21 months of restoration work on the old banking hall began.

National Westminster Tower has become the centre of the Bank's vastly increased international business while the head office of the bank remains at 41 Lothbury. Lothbury is the former Head Office of Westminster Bank and stands on the site where joint stock bankers in London began in 1834. It is altogether fitting that Westminster's contribution in Lothbury is complemented by the National Provincial's in Bishopsgate where the National Westminster Hall is promised an exciting role in the future of the bank and the City of London.

Some Architectural Features of National Westminster Hall

The most interesting features of the exterior of the building are the carved panels, set between the columns, and the surmounting statuary. These symbolise the industries and crafts for which finance is supplied and nationwide network of the Bank's branches.

From the curved end of the building on the left the panels represent the arts, commerce, science, manufactures, agriculture, navigation, shipbuilding, and mining. The last two are on the additional bays erected in 1878 and it will be noticed that they are bolder in relief than the earlier panels. Behind this section of the façade is the Manager's room of the new Bishopsgate Office. The circular panel over the doorway was originally filled with the Arms of England and Wales but in 1917 these were replaced by a representation of the last Bishop's Gate demolished in 1760.

There are groups of statuary over the four pairs of columns and single statues over the five single columns. The statues are one and one-third life-size. The first group, at the farthest point of the rounded end of the building consists of a female figure representing Manchester, supported by a Negro with raw cotton and a workman with a bale of goods. Next, over the main doorway, comes England, represented by St George and the Dragon, supported by Britannia holding a wreath and shield bearing the lion's head, and by female figure representing navigation. Next is St David of Wales, with an old Harper and a miner with his pickaxe. Then follow a series of five single female statues figure with a hammer and anvil representing Birmingham; a figure with a tazza (an earthen bowl) emblematic of Newcastle (Staffordshire) and the pottery districts; next is Dover with a mortar, ball-shot and a telescope; followed by a figure holding a model of a wooden ship and a wooden mallet representing the shipbuilding towns; and a figure holding a miner's lamp and the handle of a pickaxe, the head of which rest upon four rectangular blocks of coal representing the mining towns. Last is a group representing London, consisting of a female figure with a mural crown holding a key and a shield bearing the arms of the city being supported by one of old Fathers Thames, and by a female figure with the fruits of the earth to typify abundance.

The interior of the Banking Hall is 118 feet long and 50 feet wide and has three glazed domes, each of which is 30 feet in diameter. The hall is flanked with columns of Devonshire marble, while at each end there are three arches supported by similar columns, and between them are sculpturesque decorations, which form the most interesting feature of the hall. The figures and emblems on these panels represent the growing riches of the land and sea. The composition, in each case, is made up of a wreath, festoon or similar form, representing corn, flowers, oak,

leaves, or other vegetable production, shells and seaweed, having as supporters children in various attitudes. The plough, the hive, the spinning wheel, and the ship are shown, and children hold the sickle, the hammer, the shuttle, and the fishing net.

At the end of the hall farthest from the windows on to Bishopsgate are four panels representing the production of gold and its coinage and their association with the business of banking. The panel at the end of the long wall on the right has nine figures of children and illustrates the finding and washing of gold. Looking from right to left along the adjacent end wall the three panels show smelting and kindred operations, coining, and lastly banking.

Half way long each of the long sides of the Hall are tablets bearing the names of members of the staff of the National Provincial Bank who lost their lives in the two world wars.

The conversion of the original building for its present use involved the installation of a new heating and ventilation system, the plant for which is mainly situated in vault areas previously used as strong rooms. The ducts for this system run between the crowns of the vaults and the floor, which meant that the existing floor had to be removed. When this was replaced the area immediately below the three domes was covered in strip maple to serve as a dance or sports floor if required. The carpet over a corresponding area is of course, removable.

To the south of the Hall a finishing kitchen has been formed from which banquets for up to 250 people can be served. That part of the basement not devoted to plant is taken up by a catering store, toilet and cloakroom facilities. These last areas have also been formed from old strong room accommodation and the fine brick vaulting has been cleaned by shot blasting and left uncovered while modern sanitary fittings have been installed below.

In the Hall itself much of the original dado panelling and other features had been altered and in some cases removed over the years to cater for the changing needs of the banking operation. The new heating and ventilation system required certain ducting behind the dado panelling, necessitating further alteration, and much of the excellent joinery now seen is new but of a design carefully matching the original.

Lighting the Hall always presented a problem but this has now been resolved by the installation of fluorescent tubes above the cornice and three specially commissioned chandeliers. The cornice lighting also illuminates the richly coloured ceiling, the gilding of which, together with that on the Corinthian capitals and other features, is in gold leaf.

Included in the restoration is a linking feature, between the Hall and a new building fronting on to Old Broad Street, to form the main entrance foyer to the Hall and double as an ante-room where receptions, prior to events in the Hall itself, can be arranged.

The original colour scheme of the Hall is not known but the removal of the screens, counter, and the multiplex equipment of a modern banking office have enabled the visitor to see the Hall as the architect first envisaged it. We believe that the restoration has been carried out in a manner of which John Gibson would have approved.