

Grove Park School

In February 2016, Cadw received a request to consider Grove Park School for listing. The building had been considered on two previous occasions – in 1994 and 2007-8, and on both occasions had been judged not to be of sufficient quality and character to merit listing. Nonetheless, a new assessment was made in March 2016, reconsidering the building against the benchmark of other listed schools from the interwar period, in line with the principles of selection for twentieth century buildings.

This new assessment found that Grove Park School is representative of a period in school building arising from the expansion of secondary education during the first half of the twentieth century, has some interesting features architecturally, and is a distinctive feature of the Wrexham townscape, which could be considered an important building at a local level.

However, at a national level it does not meet the threshold for listing as a building of special architectural or historic interest. In order to achieve this it would need to be one of the best examples, when judged against other examples of its type. Grove Park is typical of its period rather than exceptional in terms of its construction, layout and finish. Despite its interest at a local level, it is not particularly innovative in its design or planning, and better examples of such schools have been identified elsewhere and indeed have been listed.

Following this assessment, some additional information was made available to Cadw, concerning comparable school buildings that had been listed elsewhere in the UK. This evidence was considered carefully, but the English example of higher architectural quality (a point which has since been confirmed by Roger Bowdler of Historic England), and as the approach to listing in Northern Ireland is based on different criteria, it was not possible to draw a direct inference. Information about the inclusion of an air-raid shelter in the design and construction of the building was also considered, but it was felt that whilst of interest, it was not of sufficient interest to merit listing.

The original assessment and the response to this additional information was then subjected to a peer review, carried out by Roger Bowdler, Director of Listing for Historic England. The findings of the peer review have confirmed that the criteria have been correctly applied, noting that innovation in planning and design has been a key consideration in the selection of schools for listing for some time now. It also finds no fault with the way in which the case was handled, and whilst identifying comparable schools in England that have been listed, found that they all exhibit a greater degree of architectural quality.

Since then, Cadw has received a further submission about the design of the school from Roland George. This explains that the original designs for the school were drawn up in 1914 by Walter Douglas Wiles, who was county architect for Denbighshire from 1905, but that the work was implemented by his son and successor as county architect, Gilbert Douglas Wiles. Much of this information had already been made available in a letter from Marcus

Jones in February. The latest submission includes detailed biographical information about both architects, which adds local colour and a personal dimension to the history of the building, but which doesn't bear directly on special architectural and historic interest in a national context. Information about other examples of the work of the two county architects included in this submission had also been available to Cadw previously. If it is indeed the case that the first designs had been prepared before WW1 but the school was not built for more than another twenty years, that may account for some of the conservatism of its design, and the inclusion of both classical and modern (art deco) elements.

In a further submission, Marcus Jones has challenged the benchmarking of Grove Park against a group of schools in the former county of Glamorgan, both stylistically, and on the grounds that these examples are all in South Wales. He claims that when built, the building was stylistically modern and very much of its time. Previous evidence has suggested that the original designs may have been drawn up some twenty years prior to construction, and although the building contains some modern elements, it is essentially neo-classical in inspiration rather than modern (Gilbert Wiles' designs for Ysgol Brynhyfryd, Ruthin are by contrast decisively modern). In Cadw's view it is appropriate to assess it against the benchmark of the Glamorgan schools, since like them, its stylistic references are based on a classical architectural language. On the geographical point, listing is concerned with the identification of buildings of special architectural or historic interest in a national context, and the benchmarking required for twentieth century listing identifies best examples of particular building types, irrespective of location or distribution. The point raised by Mr Jones may reinforce the value of Grove Park in a local context, but has no bearing on the assessment for listing.

In conclusion, no new evidence has been presented that significantly challenges the original assessment that the building does not meet the criteria for listing; the findings of the peer review give confidence that the assessment process has been sound. Whilst the building is not of special architectural or historic interest such as to warrant inclusion on the statutory list, it is of undoubted local significance, and should Wrexham Council be minded to set up a list of historic assets of special local interest, it would be open to the Council to consider the value of Grove Park in that context.

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