Liberty article

Liberty London – Young Pretender
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Nearly a century ago in 1922, at a prominent spot on what was Argyll Place, now Great Marlborough Street, at the edge of London's bustling Soho, building work started on one of the most brilliantly imaginative, exquisitely striking, and yet misunderstood and contradictory edifices in the capital's architectural history. Not only structurally innovative, and ultimately replete with the combined efforts of superlative craftsmanship, this was the new, expanded home of the Liberty department store founded in 1875, a one-off built to match the pioneering vision of its founder, Sir Arthur Lasenby Liberty – although he died before a single stone of its vast extension was laid. It was intended as a demonstration of 'stability and endurance' in tangible form, known almost one hundred years later to millions as a symbol of culture and rich British tradition, the quintessence of old-world aesthetics housed in something that looks like a four-storey Elizabethan manor. With its great Tudor-esque façade and lofty gables, this iconic shop was immersed in the Arts and Crafts, and resurfaced via the age of commercial nous.

And yet, all is not as it seems: as this extraordinary Grade II* listed building approaches its 100th anniversary, new evidence has emerged from a rare examination of its architectural genetics via a restoration programme carried out by Stephen Levrant Heritage Architecture Ltd, based in Chiswick. Never having undergone a major overhaul like this before, its revamped form is about to be revealed in all its grandeur after spending months obscured behind hoardings while refurbishment efforts have gone ahead. But, in the process, these first-rate conservation specialists have found out that this place is a strange fusion of outstanding artistry and bungled make-do-and-mend, a fabricated, splendid, and yet confusing oddity produced by two architects in pursuit of the Tudor age, Edwin Thomas Hall and his son, Edwin Stanley Hall. 'They just didn't understand traditional methods of building', says Stephen Levrant, Principal Architect, 'it really is a massive fake'. Uncovering this pretense, as well as its labyrinthine and sometimes eccentric early 20th century construction, has been the commitment of the team led by Francesca Cipolla, Practice Director who, over the past few years, have collectively worked on the meticulous renovation of this national treasure.

They begin with a forensic understanding of the building, its architects, its patron and his creative ambition, and all the details of its assembly, from the idiosyncratic iron of the window frames to the types of pegs fixing the timber framing. 'The first thing we did', says Levrant, 'was to write a Conservation Management Plan so we can understand what the building is about', which required an in-depth examination of documentary evidence: Liberty's own archive was replete with photographs and papers, and plans 1922 show the plan-form, although drawings held by the London Metropolitan Archives were too fragile to handle. To physically survey the structure in 2018 required dedication and copious scaffolding – an engineering feat in its own right – 'we crawled all over it' continues Levrant, 'although some access could only be done using one of the biggest Cherry Pickers around, and only during night-time hours during winter in sub-zero temperatures using torches to find our way. We couldn't work over Christmas, the most important period in the store's calendar'. The astonishing intricacy of the building meant that some places just could not be reached, but initial inspection revealed the need for repair with paint peeling off outside and leaks to deal with: Liberty needed a comprehensive strategy for the next one hundred years.

This great enterprise really began round the corner on Regent Street where Sir Arthur, cheered by his friends Rossetti, Burne-Jones and Whistler, opened his first shop in the 1870s, the original East India House, based on the merchant extraordinaire's importation of oriental silks and ornaments unavailable elsewhere. His business model, based on rejection of artistic whimsies in favour of traditional, authentic craftsmanship, usually with an exotic twist, was so successful that he acquired properties on the same road, knocking through an 18th century row as one, and calling them Chesham House. Here, he created a series of domestic-style rooms, a shrewd design which mimicked the home setting, a feature incorporated in the new store on Great Marlborough Street. Liberty's venture was unique: his was the first to offer an exclusive interior design service, and he employed his own hand-printers to create fabrics at a workshop in Merton and highly skilled joiners and carvers in another workshop in Archway (who also carried out the exquisite carvings that now embellish the building, inside and out).

Liberty died in 1917, but his nephew, Harold Blackmore, had acquired plots of land around the Great Marlborough Street site from the early 20th century for the new store, something intended in the old English mould manufactured of salvaged materials and innovative design. Plans drawn by the Halls, which were approved in February 1922, reveal the structure superimposed on the leftovers of Georgian buildings which stood on the site at Argyll Place, and which were absorbed within the new arrangement – 'which is why the back elevation is incoherent' says Levant, 'as they were building on the delicate foundations of the 18th century, which affected some of the drainage.' The duo's repertoire had also included East India House on Regent Street, the classically referenced and better built Portland stone Beaux Arts concoction also for Liberty in the 1920s (no longer occupied by the store), although Hall senior had a background in hospital construction and a keen interest in engineering which seems to have influenced the form of Liberty. What is interesting is that despite its aged appearance it has a better fire resistant design than many contemporary designed buildings.

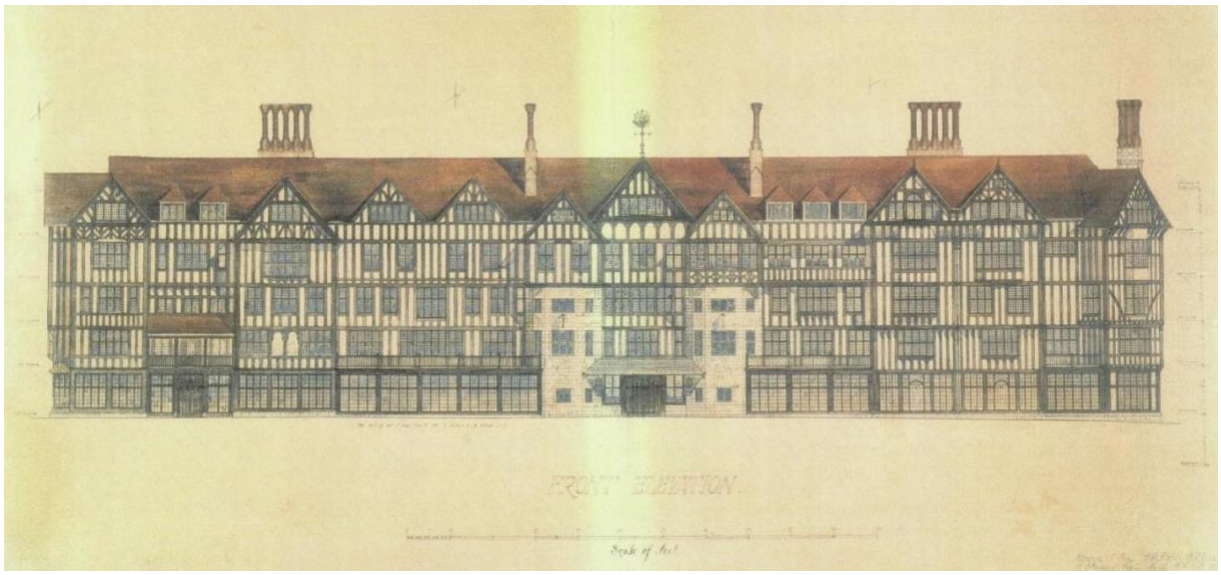
Higgs & Hill were the main contractors – who also built Tate Britain – for a construction which is more a symbol of improvisation than pristine newness, ahead of its time in the way it was built but harking back in the way it appeared. Details also appropriately refer to maritime expedition: teak, a virtually indestructible wood, acquired from the defunct HMS Hindustan was intended to be used not as a 'veneer, but constructional… the whole will be framed together and pegged so that it would stand as a structure without the walls at the back' said the Bye Law letter of 1922, although the end result didn't turn out quite like that. Oak was also acquired from HMS Impregnable, another three decker, Royal Navy Man O' War built in the early 1800s, decommissioned and broken up, providing a hotchpotch of timber, sawn immaculately in straight lines at the shipyard, but then artificially "distressed" with an adze to imitate mediaeval work for the 'authentic' 16th century framed look on the main façade. These were not superficially applied thin planks as seen on millions of "mock Tudor" houses off the same era, but whole bulks of timber – but which are now variously full of holes, defects, shakes, cracks and patched up and painted to cover imperfections.

Floors were formed out of the narrow maple boards taken from the decks of these vessels, but there just weren't enough so there are parts where the gaps have been infilled with lesser quality timber sections from elsewhere. Compellingly, the plot length on Great Marlborough Street is the same length as the HMS Hindustan, a curious detail which reveals the slightly cryptic implications of the structure – topped by a weathervane in gilded copper form of the Mayflower. Ships in the stained-glass windows add to the allusion: this really was a place in homage to seafaring pioneers. After the completion of the main bulk of the building, a bridge was added over Kingly Street complete with clock made by Chairman of the British Horological Institution, and automaton St George and Dragon which make an entrance every hour – a reference to a sense of Englishness in built form.

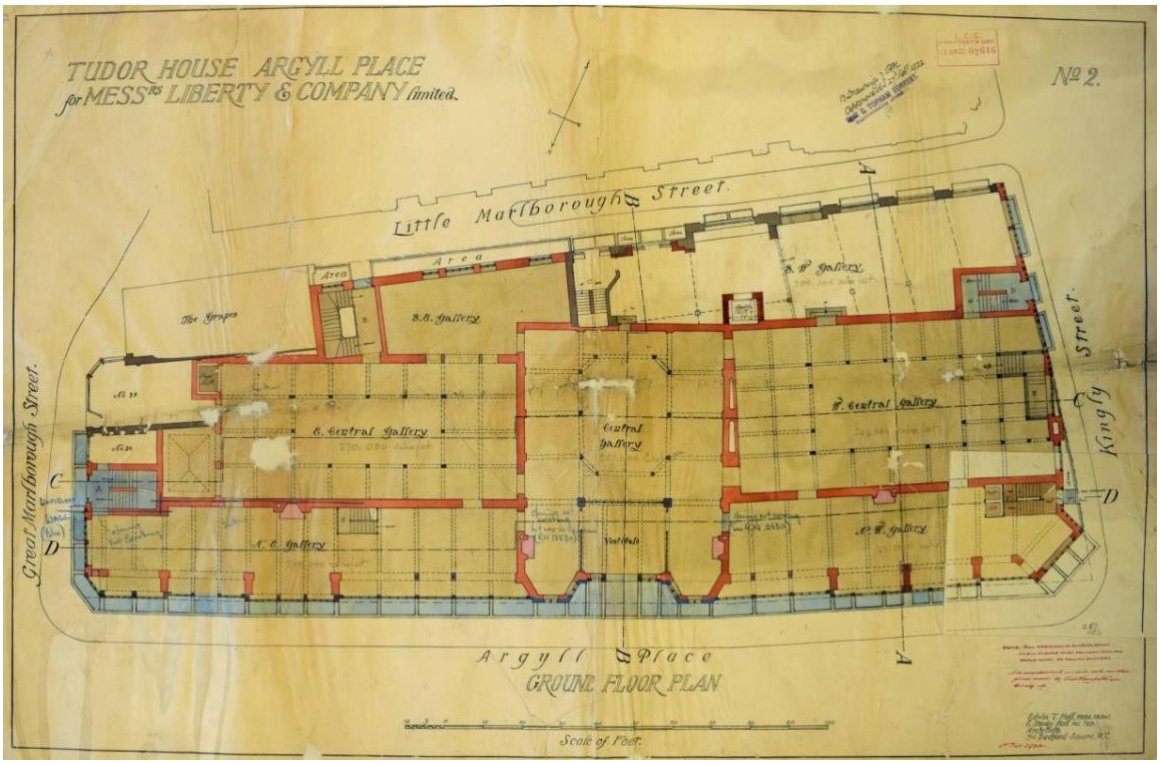
The twisted brick chimneys are utterly redolent of 16th century counterparts, and the carved Arms of Elizabeth I are found on a side gable looking towards Regent Street; those of Henry VIII's six wives have unprecedentedly been put together. Inside can be found the heraldry of Shakespeare, Jonson, Herbert and Bacon – like the British Worthies at Stowe transmuted via the prism of Liberty's pseudo-Elizabethan raison d'être. Yet, behind the store front is a "modern" steel-and-concrete framed building with asphalt roof, despite all those ancient allusions, contrasting with decorative plaster ceilings and walls inside displaying the vigorous attention to detail, evoking bygone ages. But since its inception, more alterations have been made to its interior than its exterior where very little has changed – except for a second bridge by William Holford & Partners built in 1974, perhaps not so successful as the first, and which is more intrusive in the architectural setting linking to the Liberty warehouse to the immediate south.

What makes Liberty unique is the somewhat idiosyncratic approach to construction which ignored customary practice – 'so much is bodged', suggests Stephen Levrant, 'this is the dichotomy of the building, it didn't follow traditional methods as it should have done, even though several books were around in the 1920s telling them how to do it'. Instead, what looks like a structure of the 16th century, is a mish- mash of elements, and not necessarily of consistent standard. Poorly made lead work, much of which has had to be replaced, contrasts with stupendous woodcarving which is 'wonderful' according to Levrant, while the detail in stained glass windows is 'way too good to be mediaeval', he adds. The windows were made by blacksmithing methods, but on a vast scale, producing over fifteen hundred steel-framed, layered leaded light windows with unique dual pivot openings – one example of 'great pieces of craftsmanship'. As are the three different styles of atria in Tudor court style with their varying trusses, braces and hammer beams, which are immaculate, with breath-taking carving 'as good as any mediaeval manor', he says, and 'which are important for giving a sense of volume and status'. Much of this is made from walnut, a rare indulgence in many ways as it was a scarce timber at the time, and the hand-made Loughborough Clay tiles to the roof are 'lovely, whoever did it got it just right', says Stephen Levrant.

The Liberty building was a paradox of citing the traditions of the past, while invigorating the future of the department store: Fortnum & Mason was a traditional 18th century set-up, Selfridges was more severely classical minus a tower which was never built, and Harrods was defined by its sumptuous terracotta detailing, although Nikolaus Pevsner, the great architectural historian of the 20th century, was scathing about the result at Liberty, suggesting 'the scale is wrong, the symmetry is wrong' in which he is correct, but that does not diminish its appeal and its Grade II* (two-star) status. Heritage Architecture have produced more than four hundred and fifty drawings of the building in the process of its rediscovery, uncovering its intricacies and flaws – the steel is 'over-engineered, but robust, and concrete allows for large floor plates', he notes, 'but our work will help increase the longevity of the building, keep water out with properly reinforced windows – and all utilising the right traditional methods. This is a building to enjoy, it is unique, and it is rewarding being about to do something to correct inherent faults so that it has a longer life.' Here's to the next century: completion is due in 2022.

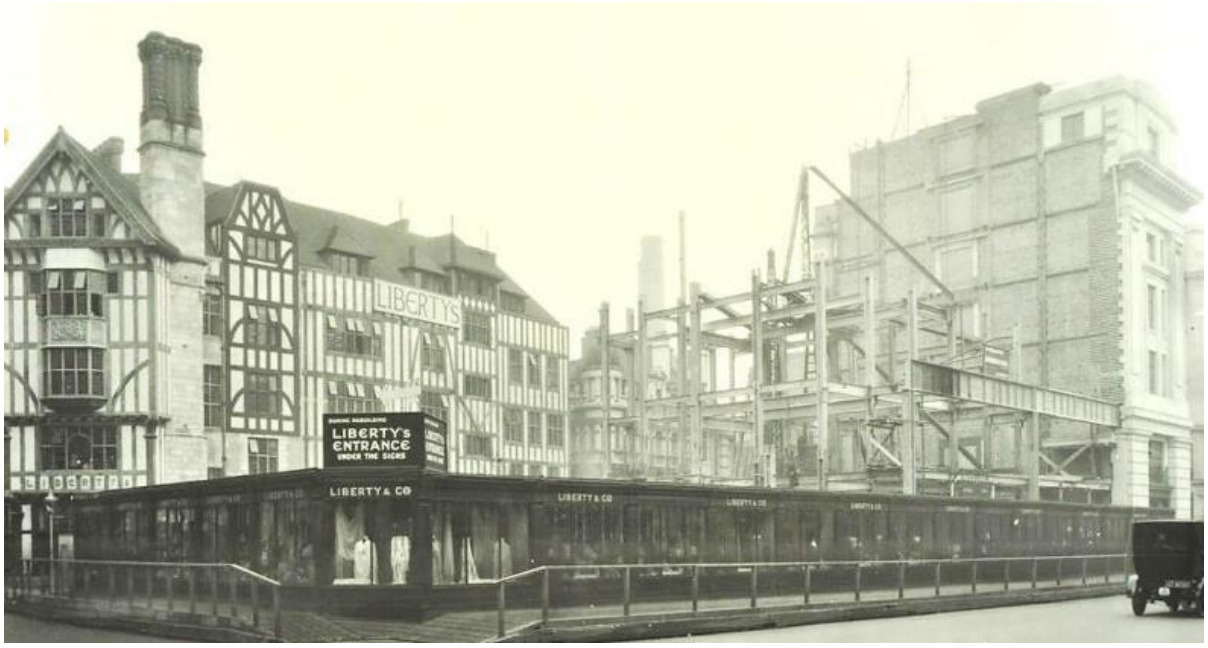


The main façade of Liberty, 1920s



Ground floor plan, Edwin T. Hall and E. Stanley Hall, Architects, 1922

Liberty in 1924, with large leaded window where the side entrance is now – and there is no bridge over Kingly Street



Liberty in 1925 with construction of the new East India House underway in the foreground
London Metropolitan Archives

Liberty in 1958, with bridge and clock
Historic England

Plasterwork in 16th century style to cover beams, hand forged light fittings in the style of lanterns
Liberty's own collection

Central atrium at Liberty – galleon-like, resoundingly "Tudor" in style

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1949-0411-1553

https://www.jstor.org/stable/1504048