**Adelphi Building**, John Adam Street, WC1

Date: 1936-8

Architect: Stanley Hamp, of **Colcutt & Hamp**.

Sculptors: B **Copnall**, G **Ledward**, A J J **Ayers**, D **Gilbert**, Newbury A Trent (entrance doors), and Joseph Armitage (general).

**The Sculptures**

There are more separate pieces of sculpture on this building than on any other of the period in London. The main pieces of figurative sculpture will be described in order around the building **[plan - A]** (except for the first four), in an anti-clockwise order. There are many panels with armourial motifs, or depicting floral and animal designs, and which are not described individually here.

**South side**

Four large carvings set in the corners of the two south-facing wings (1-4: E-W) **[A-N-O]**

1. Naked man looking upwards, with seagulls or albatrosses, depicting "Dawn" - by B **Copnall** **[R1-S1]**.

2. Naked bearded man surrounded by a cloak, depicting "Contemplation" - by A J J **Ayers** **[P1-Q1]**.

3. Naked man, surrounded by a cloak, depicting "Inspiration" - by G **Ledward** **[T1-U1]**.

4. Naked man, depicting "Night" - by D **Gilbert** **[V1-W1]**.

These were all carved under the direction of G **Ledward**.

7. - Over window to l. of S entrance: high relief of draped woman reclining.

8. - Over main S entrance: high relief figure of Mercury astride globe, with bird,
carrying staff, set over rectangular decoration. A group of prancing horses to l., and another of sea horses with fishes tails to r., both also in high relief [X1–Y1].

9. - Around door [X1]: high relief carvings of various predominantly rural industries, set within a rectilinear relief pattern. These comprise: (l.side, bottom to top) i) fishes, boat and waves, ii) hops, oast houses and sacks, iii) pigs, trough and sty, iv) farm cart, with sheaves and haystack, (r. side, bottom to top) v) lambs, shears and bales of wool, vi) wheelbarrow, sacks and building, vii) barge, cranes and towers, viii) lorry with barrels and building [Z1, A2–I2].

10. - Over window to r. of S entrance: high relief of semi-naked man reclining, holding spanners.

**East side** (Adam Street frontage)

17. - Around E entrance (19 & 20 Adam Street) [D1–E1]: ten relief figures (five on each side) within a geometric trellis pattern in relief, showing small naked girls and boys (aged about three) in various poses and activities: (left, bottom to top) - i) boy carrying wheatsheaf, ii) boy holding flagon in wicker basket, iii) boy holding large fish, iv) boy with satchel, v) girl holding piglet. (Right, bottom to top) - vi) girl with satchel, vii) girl holding piglet, viii) boy with bowl, ix) boy with flagon in wicker basket, x) boy holding wheatsheaf [F1–M1].

Abstract cloud motif around base of door frame on each side [H1, L1].

**North side** [B–D] 22. - Ground floor level: six small panels in low relief on pillars, depicting six of the signs of the Zodiac: Water pouring, 2 Fish, Ram, Bull, Twins, Crab [eg H, J].

Abstract cloud motifs below [K].

25 - L. side of main entrance: large relief panel, signed N A TRENTE MCMXXXVIII (1938)o. (on end of barrel), showing semi-naked sailors or shipyard workers, with workers moving a barrel below [F]. (This shows a vertical discontinuity in the middle of the panel,
showing it to have been carved in the studio and then perhaps cut down to fit the space).

26. - R. side of main entrance: large relief panel showing semi-naked men as swimmers, oarsmen and sailors, in the same style as no 25, and therefore also probably by N A Trent [G].

27. - R. (W) of main entrance, ground floor level: continuation of series of small relief panels on columns showing the other six signs of the zodiac: _ion, ?Reaper with wetsheaf, Scales, Scorpion, Horse/man, Goat [eg H,J].

Abstract cloud relief panels below [eg K].

28. - Above columns with zodiac signs: 5 free-standing bosses, similar to 23 [eg I].

West side (Robert Street frontage) [A1-C1]

32. - Around entrance (5 & 6 Robert Street) [L-M]: ten relief figures (five on each side) depicting small naked boys and girls (aged about three), placed within a geometric trellis pattern - on l. (bottom to top), i) boy carrying sheaf, ii) boy carrying flagon in wicker basket, iii) girl standing, iv) girl standing, v) girl with hoop - on r. (bottom to top), vi) boy with satchel, vii) girl carrying piglet, viii) boy with hoop, ix) girl with hoop, x) girl standing [O-X].

The Adelphi building, although not the largest of its period in London, is a monumental structure, built on a grand scale which fits its position overlooking the Embankment gardens and the Thames beyond [N1]. It was built on the site of the old Adelphi, a set of fine Georgian buildings whose destruction was allowed by Parliament, but is much mourned by Pevsner (1973: 343). He describes this building as "savagely ungraceful, with the reiterated uprights of a 20th century commercial idiom", an "unpardonable intrusion" (ibid: 344), and with "a rather grim facade" (ibid: 389). In my view, however, I believe that it is a particularly fine example of Modernist architecture, with a sensitive balance of masses and volumes, emphasised by well thought-out architectural and structural detail, and tempered by the decorative use of abstract designs and by an interesting combination of
brick and Portland stone. I also agree with the writer of an article in Building of Mar 9 1984, who describes it as "well-composed, strongly modelled and appropriately enriched with pattern and sculpted decoration".

The abstract modernism is furthermore softened (and also in my view enhanced) by the extraordinary profusion of sculptures on all four sides of the building. These include larger-than-life carvings on the south side, large low relief panels on either side of the main (north) entrance, signs of the Zodiac, vignettes of rural industries, semi-abstract floral and animal motifs, carvings of Mercury and other figures and, not least, some delightful scenes of little naked boys and girls in everyday activities around the side entrances, the like of which would not be acceptable in today's less innocent climate of opinion.

The massive nature of the four figures on the corners of the two wings on the south side of the building show that they were sited to make an impact when viewed at a distance from the Embankment and the Embankment Gardens (though they are now somewhat masked by mature plane trees) [N1-V1]. These are by four different sculptors, none of whom apparently had anything to do with the sculptures on the rest of the building. The sculptor of the smaller relief panels, including the naked children, the signs of the zodiac and the industrial scenes around the south door, all of which are clearly by the same hand, was probably Joseph Armitage. To my mind these smaller sculptures are amongst the most accomplished pieces of carving of the period, only equalled by the work of Eric Gill. Furthermore, the designed ensemble of carvings set within a rectilinear abstract trellis, which together with other floral panels forms the frames to the doorways, is most effective - a masterpiece of the use of figurative and abstract sculptural elements in combination. Detailed inspection suggests that all the small panels were carved in Portland stone, since even the repeated motifs - of which there are many - exhibit small variations. (It is of course possible that more detailed inspection might show that some of these were cast in cement or concrete). It is unlikely however that any of the sculptures - with the possible exception of the large figures on the south side - were carved in situ. The horizontal disjunction in one of the reliefs around the main (north) door by N A Trent,
noted above, suggests that this was carved in his studio and assembled on site.

The iconography of all these sculptures would repay detailed research. It is interesting that only the four major sculptures on the SE side of the building appear in the proposal drawings and elevation in the Builder of May 21 1937. There seems to be no logical connection either between their various subjects or with the function of the building (originally a speculative office development). The relevance to the building's function as offices of the symbolism of these sculptures, representing Night, Day, Contemplation and Inspiration, is not immediately obvious. Why for instance should the entirely humanistic and playful carvings of the little boys and girls be set adjacent to the symbolic and heraldic armourial shield bosses of the twelve major towns, and why was it thought appropriate to include the latter (or indeed the former) on this building? The figure of Mercury over the S entrance seems to bear no relationship to the rural industries depicted around the doorway. The inclusion of the signs of the zodiac in such a prominent position on either side of the main entrance, while finding parallels in other buildings of the period, not only does not relate to the subject matter of the relief panels by N A Trent on either side of the entrance itself, but also raises questions about their appropriateness as sculptural decorations to any building.

The sculptures must therefore I believe be seen as a 'humanising' gesture to the viewer (as in Holden's 'Four Winds' on the London Transport building at St James Park of a decade earlier), a visual relief to the modernistic garb of the building, and as perhaps a conscious contrast to the plain classicism of the Georgian buildings which surround it, and which it replaced. They also prepare the viewer for the lavish 'Art Deco' fixtures and fittings inside the building, such as mirrors, lighting and furniture, which are such a feature of the main entrance hall, and which were clearly designed (presumably by the architect) as part of the building's total 'persona' (and, presumably, its commercial attractiveness).

Sources:


Building, Mar 9 1984.

data: The Adelphi