4 - Wandsworth Municipal Centre (Town Hall), Wandsworth High Street, SW18.

Date: 1935-7.


Sculptors: David Evans (Wandsworth panel & small sculptures to rear), & J Lineham (the rest).

Sculptures: There are three groups of sculptures:

A - The front of the building has six substantial relief panels, each of which depicts various aspects of the histories of each of the five constituent ancient parishes of the borough (Wandsworth, Streatham, Clapham, Putney, and Balham & Tooting).

1. Wandsworth [B-C] - 2 panels on W. tower: (reading l. to r.) - early inhabitants, prelate (M. ages), Wandle bridge with industries (Dyer, engineer, smiths, woman carrying fruit, brewer, weaver), soldiers returning from war, Huguenot refugees, Vikings, early Man.

2. Streatham [G] - (r. to l.) Roman soldiers, St Leonard, knight, Dr Johnson taking tea, figures representing cricket etc on the commons.


B - To the rear of the building - two relief panels within hexagonal frames, forming the keystones to highly decorated door surrounds with carved abstract 'wave' motifs [J-M].

1. Workman (with braces and bow tie) holding brick and trowel, with houses behind, representing 'Housing' [L].
2. Woman holding small naked girl, representing 'infant wealfare' or 'health' [M].

C - Above the main vehicle entrance, an elaborate semi-abstract frieze above ground floor level, depicting a repeated design of possibly Viking boats with sails ploughing through waves. This is a small masterpiece of design and carving [H-I].

There are other carved abstract friezes on the front of the building: one forming the long balcony, the others above the carved panels [A-G].

The building itself is of Portland stone, of Modernist design, and fairly heavy and squat. Its window and other openings are plain, and the design of the whole is relatively simple. The sculptures, including the abstract friezes, are however clearly an integral and significant part of the overall design of the facade, and lift it beyond the ordinary.

Both the sculptural friezes and the abstract sculpted decoration must constitute one of the most elaborate set of friezes of the period. Their symbolism is obvious and direct, although their interpretation would have required (and still does) more knowledge of local history than the average onlooker is likely to have possessed. The Viking boat theme above the side entrance [I] is perhaps inspired by the finds of Viking artefacts in the Wandle. The small panels to the rear of the building representing 'Housing' and 'Infant Welfare' or 'Health' [L-M] have an obvious reference as symbols to two of the main functions of the Borough Council. The lavishness of the external decoration is well matched by that of the interior, which sports marble halls, superb carpets, well designed lighting and other fixtures and fittings, all of which were clearly seen by the civic leaders as expressing their rather grand self-image as London's largest borough.

Source:
