

THE VICTORIAN SOCIETY

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Campaigning for Victorian and Edwardian architecture and other arts

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Listing Section
Department for Culture, Media & Sport
2-4 Cockspur Street
LONDON SW1Y 5DH
5th December 2003

RECEIVED
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SL 1902/03 Tim

Dear Sirs

The Grand Hotel, Colmore Row, Birmingham

We are writing to request that the Secretary of State spot lists the above building. We are aware that there is likely to be an application in the near future to demolish and redevelop this site, so we should appreciate it if our request is considered as a matter of some urgency.

We consider that the building is important on three grounds;

1. It was originally designed by Thomson Plevins, and then altered and added to by Martin and Chamberlain, one of the most important firms of Birmingham architects.
2. The construction of the Grosvenor Room in 1895, with its wonderful Louis XIV style decoration, involved the use of structural steelwork, a construction technique which was relatively new at the time.
3. The contribution it makes to the Colmore Row and Environs Conservation Area, and especially to the setting of the Grade I listed St. Philips Cathedral.

We look forward to hearing from you

Yours Faithfully

[REDACTED]

Birmingham and West Midlands Architectural Adviser

Shape the future.
Join the Victorian Society.

The Grand Hotel
Colmore Row
Birmingham

Owner

Horton Estates Ltd

Location

The Grand Hotel is located on the North side of Colmore Row at the junction with Church Street, and extends almost as far as Livery Street.

Description

The Grand Hotel comprises a six storey hotel, with ground floor retail units fronting the Colmore Row elevation and additional attic accommodation. It was designed in 1875 by Thomson Plevins, and constructed in a 'French Renaissance' style, beneath a French pavilion styled roof. Additions to the building were made between 1876 and 78, before it was substantially altered in 1891 by Martin and Chamberlain. The rear building, fronting Barwick Street, was added in 1895, and designed by Martin and Chamberlain.

Thomson Plevins, son of Mr Plevins of the firm Messrs Pashby and Plevins Builders, was born in Birmingham in 1825. He joined his father's firm and trained as an architect and surveyor. Much of his work would appear to have been in property litigation and negotiating sales of land and property. However for many years Plevins was employed by Isaac Horton, a major Birmingham land and property owner and was responsible for the construction of a number of commercial buildings in central Birmingham. He designed the Midland Hotel, New Street (now the Burlington Hotel), and the Market Hotel, Station Street, as well as the Grand Hotel. He was also the surveyor to the Colmore Family in respect of the New Hall Estate, and was possibly responsible for the late 19th century warehouses in that area, notably at the bottom of Edmund Street.

The hotel was substantially altered in the late 1880s, and a number of references in the press describe the building that reopened in 1891. It would appear that the internal layout was substantially altered and the accommodation upgraded to that of a high class hotel benefiting, amongst other things, from a hydraulic lift and electric light. Apart from the usual public/entertaining rooms that one would expect to find, the hotel also contained stock rooms, latterly accessed from Barwick Street; the entrance is still in existence, where, tradesmen/commercial visitors to Birmingham once inspected examples of the goods Birmingham produced.¹ This was an example of how Isaac Horton made the railway work for him by locating his hotels near to stations (he also owned the Midland Hotel). He was providing the lounges and coffee rooms travellers required in addition to hotel accommodation, as well as the commercial facility of the stock rooms. This all encouraged the commercial development of Birmingham.

In 1895 the Grand Hotel was again subject to major works, when extensive additions were made at the rear with the construction of a new block fronting Barwick Street. The most important part of this work was the construction of a ballroom, the Grosvenor Room, which *The Builder* described as being '100 ft long and 32 ft high, and decorated in a Louis XIV style.'² The decoration includes ornate plasterwork, giant corinthian pillasters and elegant cartouches. The impressive light fittings are probably circa 1925. This wonderful, almost Baroque, interior was made possible by the use of steelwork. The description of the ballroom in William Martin's obituary in the *Birmingham Post*, states that 'some new peculiarities of construction were adopted in order to secure for the Grosvenor Room its wide expansive ceiling without any supporting pillars. This is by far the largest room of its kind in the country and it was made secure by the employment of a series of deep girders.'³ This structure was possibly the first of its kind, as the use of steel in construction was still in its infancy in Great Britain.

The 1895 work was also carried out by the firm of Martin and Chamberlain. By this time Chamberlain had been dead twenty years, so the work would have been the

¹ The Daily Post 15/6/1891, Reopening of the Grand Hotel.

² The Builder 5/10/1895, Additions to the Grand Hotel, p244

³ Birmingham Daily Post 19/7/1900, Death of Mr William Martin

responsibility of William Martin; he was considered to have been the specialist in structural matters, while Chamberlain 'was celebrated for an artistic taste'.⁴ William Martin was born in Shepton Mallet in 1828, and subsequently moved to Birmingham. He was apprenticed to the father of Thomson Plevins, and studied at Birmingham School of Design. After practicing on his own account he formed a partnership with Mr D R Hill, and they worked on a number of goals and asylums, and the firm 'obtained a great reputation in this particular line.'⁵ Following Hill's death, Martin in 1864 went into partnership with Chamberlain and they were responsible for a large number of buildings in Birmingham including the School of Art, Margaret Street (1881-5, extended in 1893, Grade I), Highbury Hall (1879-80 Grade II*) and numerous Board Schools. Following Chamberlain's death in 1883 the firm continued under the old name, Martin being assisted by his two sons, before being renamed Martin and Martin in 1899. The design of this part of the hotel reflects other work by Martin and Chamberlain, particularly in terms of verticality, but without the decorative detail that is associated with the firm's earlier work such as Margaret Street.

The Martin and Chamberlain work at the Grand Hotel was constructed by J Barnsley and Sons, a prominent firm of Birmingham builders. The firm had been founded by John Barnsley in the first half of the 19th century, and was responsible for the construction of a number of major buildings in Birmingham including the Council House (1874-9, Yeoville Thomason, Grade II*), the Art Gallery (1881-5, Yeoville Thomason, Grade II*) and The Children's Hospital (1894-7, W Henman). The firm was well connected with Martin and Chamberlain. At about the time Thomas Barnsley was taken into partnership with his father, in the early 1860s, Chamberlain began to practice as an architect. 'Mr Barnsley superintended the building of all the work designed by Mr Chamberlain in the early part of his career, and adopted a style of architecture quite new in the city. Needless to say, it attracted great attention, and it might be said that both architect and builder combined to introduce the application of the principles of Gothic architecture in Birmingham.'⁶

⁴ op cit

⁵ op cit

⁶ Daily Gazette 21/6/1909 Death of Mr T. Barnsley

The Grand Hotel is located in the Colmore Row and Environs Conservation Area. It forms part of an informal square around St Philips Cathedral (1715, Thomas Archer Grade I). The majority of buildings around the square and stretching up Colmore Row towards Victoria Square are four to five storeys in height. Their scale is broken down through the architectural treatment of the façades which are rich in detail, varied and legible. The materials are predominately stone with some brick and terracotta. The Colmore Estate insisted on the use of stone to add status, grandeur and dignity to the north side of Colmore Row. The varied and prominent rooflines add vertical emphasis. Dixon and Muthesius state 'In Birmingham the north side of Colmore Row presents the best ensemble of Mid-Victorian palazzo splendour'.⁷ The Grand Hotel contributes to the Conservation Area and complements the surrounding buildings, a significant number of them being listed, in terms of height, scale, varied roof scape, materials (it was constructed in stone, but unfortunately painted in the 1970s) and sense of verticality. As it forms almost one side of the informal square around St. Philips, the Plevins facade makes an important contribution to the setting of this Grade I listed building.

⁷ Dixon, D and Muthesius, S, 1978: *Victorian Architecture*, London: Thames and Hudson