1930s Architecture in Ipswich

The wealth of historical buildings in Ipswich has been well recorded up to the start of the twentieth century but those dating from the inter-war years are often overlooked. The style of this period is often referred to as ‘Art Deco’, and is represented by clean cut buildings with straight lines and geometric shapes, often painted white. Many people will be aware of Broomhill Swimming Pool in Sherrington Road, which was built in 1938 and is a good example of Art Deco design, but there are many other fine examples in the town. Architecture and design were influenced by the change in building materials and technology and other things such as the discovery of Tutankhamen’s tomb in 1928. All things Egyptian became fashionable and this is reflected in buildings by stepped parapets and sunray decoration; a reference to the Egyptian sun god, Ra.

Lloyds Avenue was cut through in 1929 to allow vehicular access from Tower Ramparts to Cornhill. Therefore, it could be said that the whole avenue is a monument to the architectural style of the 1930s. However, some of the buildings are more noteworthy than others. At first glance Lloyds Tavern looks unprepossessing but an upward glance reveals that it has quite a grand façade with a multi-stepped parapet, which is reminiscent of a pyramid, sided by two flaming urns. Its strong geometric lines complement the rectangle windows and the intricate pattern carved into the stonework. The building was originally an ironmonger’s shop run by Smyth Bros, and seems rather ornate for such a purpose, but perhaps it signifies the importance of ironmongers in the local community at that time. In common with many historic buildings in Ipswich it probably goes unnoticed by most of the people passing by because most ground level frontages tend to be plain plate glass.
Another significant building in Lloyds Avenue, both from a cultural point of view as well as design, is the former Odeon Cinema. The cinema was very popular entertainment in the inter-war years with its grand exteriors and luxurious interiors contrasting sharply with the living conditions of the majority of the patrons. It doesn’t have a vertical element which was a feature of many of the Odeon cinemas, but it does have a curved end and a decorative façade and column insets of ceramic tiles, not unlike the decorative edging round the doorways and shop fronts of Commerce Chambers in High Street. Curves were often incorporated into the design of a building and reference the shape of the ocean-going liners which were in their heyday in the 1930s.

At the top of Lloyds Avenue is Electric House. When it was opened in 1933 by the Electricity Department of the County Borough of Ipswich it was a milestone in the history of the town and it was commemorated in a souvenir booklet. The building, which was of the latest design, signified the importance of the new medium of electricity as it contained a Demonstration Theatre as well as a showroom. Its past glory now seems forgotten and its future is somewhat uncertain but at the time it was a landmark building in the town and was fully illuminated at night. The beauty of the building is now masked by the trees at the front and it has become a favourite roosting place for the pigeons that infest Tower Ramparts bus station, but it is well worth a visit to the Suffolk Record Office to view the souvenir brochure (SRO 621.31/stack).

LINDA ERITH

More New Homes Needed

Britain needs more new homes for two reasons. Firstly, throughout the 21st century we have not built a sufficient number to meet the ever-growing demand of the population increase. Secondly, the activity of building has an important knock-on effect to the rest of the economy – and gives us a chance to replace ageing housing stock, develop seemingly derelict ‘brownfield’ land and attract new people (and new money) into the community.

In 2011 the nation only built some 100,000 homes, half the target set by the Government and some 38% of the 2007 peak. Worryingly even this low number is dropping, with new starts down 50% in 2012. One clear reason is the difficulty in obtaining a mortgage with lenders typically requiring a 20% deposit (in early 2007 loans of 120% of the value of the property were available to first time buyers – the additional cash for furniture, electrical goods and carpets which the buyer would have otherwise purchased with shop credit).

One key problem is the planning requirement that 35% of units on a development of over 15 houses must be affordable. This onerous requirement makes the entire development unaffordable to the builder, thus contributing to the lack of starts.

You will have seen figures in this journal as to the number of houses required in Ipswich, targets that have recently been abandoned (with the demise of the Regional Assembly) but the requirement for somewhere to live remains and we must build, both inside the Borough boundary and in the parishes immediately adjacent.

JOHN NORMAN, Chairman
1930s Architecture in Ipswich, Part 2

As well as sharp geometric shapes and lines, 1930s architecture incorporated curves into its design, referencing the ocean-going liners which were in their heyday in the 1930s, and there are still plenty of buildings to admire in Ipswich that were built in this style.

Travelling into the town centre from Norwich Road/St Matthew’s Street the ‘Penningtons’ building sails into view at the junction of Crown Street and Westgate Street. Officially called Crown Hall Chambers, it was built in 1930 with a row of shops on the ground floor and offices, or chambers, above. It still retains its cement geometric parapet and its metal Crittall windows, both of them an integral part of the design of many buildings of that period.

A short walk along Crown Street brings you to Commerce Chambers at the corner of High Street. Although this was not built until the end of the decade, it is similar in style to Crown Hall Chambers with the curved end wall and metal windows. It also has a stepped parapet which is very typical of the period. As the line of the building continues down High Street the curve is replaced by a rectangular façade, with long rectangular windows and decorative brickwork adding to the overall ‘Modernist’ design. (photo opposite)

At the junction of High Street and Westgate Street, the Moss building has a curved vertical parapet which mirrors the parapet of Commerce Chambers at the top of High Street. (photo opposite) The white exterior is echoed by the neighbouring Marks & Spencer building and fortunately all retain their metal-framed windows. The corner of the Marks & Spencer building is geometric with a wrought-iron balcony and is complemented by the strong geometric lines of the windows running along both sides of the building. This is similar in design to the corner of Electric House which fronts on to Crown Street. The ground floor side of the building shows clearly the horizontal lines which were an essential part of Art Deco design. It is worth noting that when a rear extension was built, enough care was taken to replicate the horizontal lines on the new part of the building.

The theme of curved buildings continues at the corner of Upper Brook Street and Tacket Street. It was built for George William Hales in 1934, as commemorated by the plaque on the building. It has unusual gable-like structures on the parapet but it still has some typical features that denote the Art Deco style. The windows in the top of the building, which have been replaced, would undoubtedly have been metal-framed, but the beautiful coloured glass at the top of the shop windows is still intact on all but one of the windows (photo opposite) as is the curved apron on the front of the building.

The curved frontage is not so easy to see on the Art Deco H&M building in Tavern Street but when it was built in 1937 for British Home Stores, the curve at the front was echoed by the horseshoe-shaped cafeteria inside the store. However, if you gaze up you can see it retains its vertical element and stylish inset windows with the sills built as part of the building. (photo opposite)

These are just some of the many 1930s buildings that survive in the town and should be cherished and celebrated, so the next time you are out and about, don’t forget to look up. You’ll be surprised at what treasures you’ll discover.

LINDA ERITH
Some of the buildings described in Linda Erith’s article opposite
Commerce Chambers, High Street (top left) ‘Moss’ Building, High St (top right)
H&M, Tavern Street (bottom left) Windows, Tacket Street (bottom right)