

## RALPH CROWE – ARCHITECT OF THE SHIREHALL

I (Mary de Saulles) first met Ralph Crowe - a lively personality - in London in 1954. I remember he drove a splendid open-topped '1934 Vauxhall'. It looked like a 4-6-seater boat on wheels, and always seemed full of happy people. Later, visiting mutual architect friends here in Shrewsbury, I learned he was designing the new Shirehall.

It was probably Ralph Crowe who brought post-war 'good' modern architecture and design to Shrewsbury - meaning carefully considered, site-specific design as opposed to 'developers-type new building' by the yard or metre, that has often dominated since.

He died in 1990. Recently, when researching his details in the library at the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in London, I got a surprise. I was intrigued to be reading that, as "*chief assistant to the County Architect of Salop*", he seemed to have designed the earlier, new and 'modern' entrance area to the old Shirehall in the Square in 1953.

This newsworthy item related to a (probably long over-due!) local authority 'improvement scheme' to celebrate and mark the Queen's accession. It had obviously met with public approval of both its function and modern appearance.

However, I was puzzled to note that in this *Architect & Building News* report (d.11 March 1954), the architect mentioned was named "Crowe", but with the initials JT. Could this be the same Ralph Crowe who, a few years later, was himself the County Architect and designing the new Shirehall by the Column? Is it just a coincidence, or a journalist's mistake? Can anyone tell us the answer? Also, did he live in a Queen Anne house, or the Queen Anne House, now part of the Shropshire Wildlife Trust's site on Abbey Foregate? In any case, separately, or as one and the same, it appears that it was an architect 'Crowe' who first tried to bring modern architecture to pseudo-Georgian wedded Shrewsbury.

Ralph Crowe was born in London. He qualified as an architect at the *Architectural School of Architecture*, (the AA in Bedford Square), in 1938, and also studied at post-graduate level at the *London School of Planning*.

After serving in the Royal Engineers in Europe, he was appointed Chief Architect & Planner and sent by the government to Barbados. While there (1947-50), he also designed and developed low-cost housing constructed from the sugar cane waste. It was reportedly still surviving decades later, after he retired. The *Architects Journal* (The AJ) was able to say, "like much of his work, it was innovative and socially important".

Back in the UK, he was involved briefly in Basildon New Town - but then in 1953 he joined the huge architects' department of the London County Council (LCC), "at its most energetic and productive period". There, he worked in all three main departments, Housing, Schools and General, designing housing, schools, old people's and children's homes, health clinics, factories and even the architectural treatment of road improvements such as at the Elephant & Castle junction, gaining an unusually wide range of experience.

Following the retirement of CH Simmons ARIBA DipTP, Ralph Crowe was appointed County Architect to the then Salop County Council in 1958.

His reputation attracted like-minded, modern-trained architects and furniture designers to his expanding department 'out in the sticks', including, from another section of the LCC, the 'special design section', (which I had been appointed to help establish, many moons ago, by the deputy

county architect, later Sir, Leslie Martin). It included Ralph Crowe's successor, my assistant, Geoffrey Hamlyn ARIBA. Architect, fully trained furniture designer and ex-Army, he was also another good leader, as emerged later.

Apart from designing the Shirehall, Ralph Crowe was deeply involved in the evolution of those building systems which resulted in the production of high-quality schools quickly and efficiently in the 1960s and 70s. He had been involved earlier in the first consortium, called CLASP, developed by Essex County Council, who were leaders in conservation - and in producing good design guides, for example, on barn conversions, housing, shopfronts and so on. Being near London, they had several AA-trained architects on their staff, capable of working on such projects.

#### SCOLA - the Second Consortium of Local Authorities (SCOLA)

Ralph Crowe initiated, and then chaired this consortium, based on CLASP. It comprised several other counties glad to take advantage of Shropshire's lead, and of their expert team, in the great post-war national programme of school building supported by the Ministry of Education. Many schools were constructed on the system. In the hands of a good architect, it was very flexible. It was even used for the construction of the local police headquarters here at Monkmoor.

This new 'SCOLA' Consortium was capable of designing not only the buildings, but also their furniture and equipment for the many schools included - also for the Shirehall then under construction. *(That included the recently destroyed Council Chamber seating - originally so much admired for its unusual elegance and dignified but modern character.)*

In 1966 Crowe 'moved on' from Shrewsbury to Essex. His career ended with six years as Professor of architecture at Newcastle University.

To quote from the obituary written by the RIBA President, Alex Jeffries in 1990 :

*"His powerful personality made an impact on all around him." And "in each place, he created an atmosphere of enthusiasm, fun and dedication. His own restless imagination and rejection of the mediocre infected all his staff."*

Crowe's SCOLA Consortium and energetic momentum continued under his successor, Geoffrey Hamlyn. However, it sadly dissipated when he too left Shrewsbury - to go to the more forward-looking authority at Chester. (Shropshire later decided to operate without the expertise of an architect's department.)

Following 'unification' and the use of the council offices in Frankwell, there have been recent discussions on 'the future of the Shirehall building' : Of course, it needs 'expensive' maintenance - much of it probably caused by the usual client's false economies made at the times of budgeting and building which invariably lead to trouble and greater expenditure at a later date.

However, it should be a matter of considerable pride to our authority that, by 1958, Ralph Crowe was their own, in-house local County Architect, responsible for the design of their new Shirehall - **on the primary entry to Shrewsbury** on the London Road. Thus, on a site close to the iconic Column monument to Lord Hill which, as an architect, he saw as a significant element in his total 'Entry' design concept. I remember the talk about its significance.

Ralph Crowe gave us an example of how modern design can complement and combine well with the best of previous periods, as has so often been the case in UK townscapes. His influence extended into the furniture design section of 'the tech', now SCAT, (continued by 'Geoff [Hamlyn], winning national awards for their modern design work.

As Alex Jeffries wrote of him: *“He lived with passionate intensity, caring deeply about architecture and music and not a little about good food and drink.”*

Like whatever king it was, Ralph Crowe was ‘a good thing’. Not to be discarded lightly. Nor the building he gave us discarded or downgraded.