

**Factsheet G13**  
**General Series**  
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House of Commons Information Office

# **The Norman Shaw Buildings**

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# The Norman Shaw Buildings

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The Palace of Westminster is one of the most famous buildings in London. However, because of increasing demands on the space in the Palace, facilities for MPs and staff have expanded to include a number of buildings nearby. Two of the buildings used by the Commons are the seven-story redbrick buildings on Victoria Embankment known as Norman Shaw North and South. Between 1889 and 1966 the two buildings were famous as being the home for New Scotland Yard, the headquarters of the Metropolitan Police. This **Factsheet** describes the two buildings and their role in the Parliamentary estate; for information on the Palace of Westminster itself please see **Factsheet G11**.

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## Introduction

The two Norman Shaw buildings, North and South, are integral parts of the Parliamentary Estate. They house Members' offices and services including the House of Commons Information Office and Parliamentary Education Services. The buildings were not originally used by Parliament and this Factsheet looks at their origins and their uses over time as well as the current uses.

## Construction of the Buildings

### The architect

The name of the buildings is taken from the architect, Richard Norman Shaw. Shaw was born at Edinburgh in 1831, and was articled to William Burn, an architect of Scottish origin living in London, in around 1849. One of the influences on Shaw was Pugin, the principal collaborator of Sir Charles Barry, in the design of the Palace of Westminster. Indeed, in the winter of 1852-53, Shaw and a colleague spent some time sketching details of the then incomplete building. He later became the principal assistant to G E Street, who was first and foremost a church architect. By 1862, when Shaw set up on his own, he had turned to vernacular architecture, in particular domestic and commercial buildings. That was the field in which he became well known in the following twenty years.

The choice of Shaw as architect for the new Metropolitan Police Central Offices was made personally in December 1886 by the Home Secretary, Rt Hon Henry Matthews MP (later Viscount Llandaff). It was Shaw's first major public commission. The design was part based upon a draft compiled by John Dixon Butler, the police surveyor, whose knowledge of the detailed requirements of the Force was probably very welcome to Shaw. The building designed in 1887 is that now called Norman Shaw North. Initial plans of it were exhibited by Shaw at the 1887 Royal Academy Exhibition.

### The Site

The site stretched between the then relatively new Victoria Embankment and Derby Gate (or Derby Street), just off Parliament Street, on land partly reclaimed from the river when the Embankment was made. It had originally been intended for the site of a National Opera Theatre, of which James Mapleson was the main promoter. Extensive work had been necessary for preparing the foundations for the Opera House, during the excavation of which there were a number of archaeological finds. The foundation stone for the new building was laid by Prince Alfred on 16 December 1875, and the superstructure largely completed by September 1876.

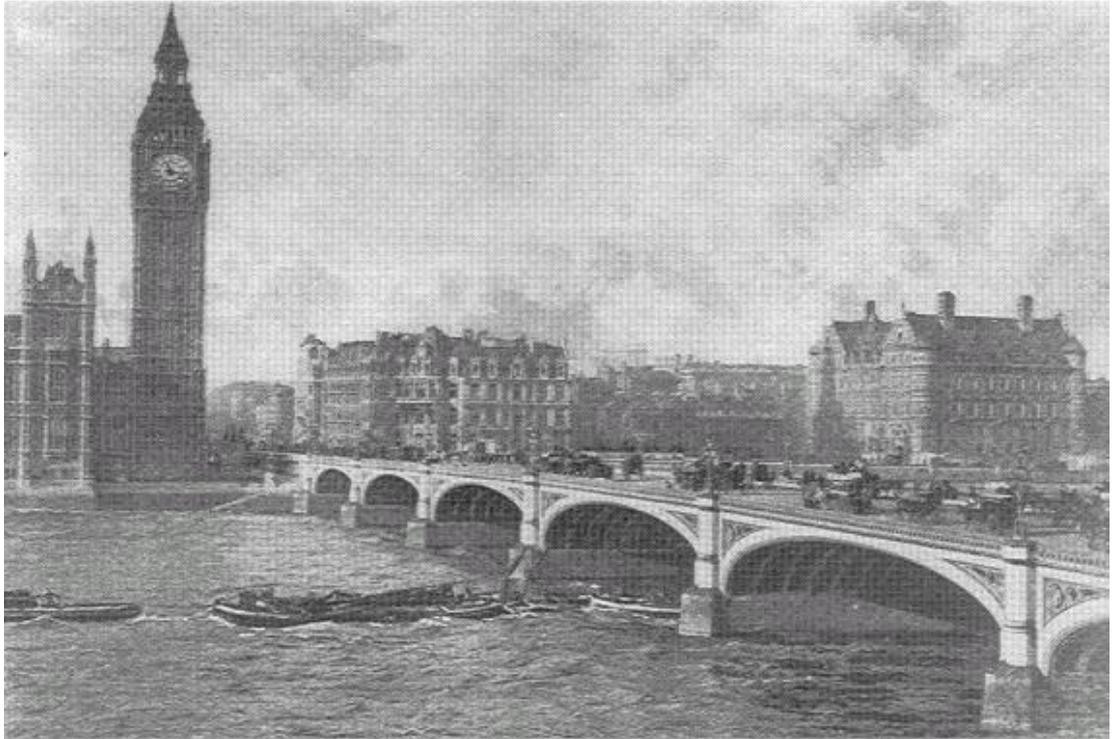
The roof was never added. The site and uncompleted building was sold to Quilter, Morris and Tod-Healey for £29,000. According to Mapleson, the underground passage to the Houses of Parliament (for silent members ... [to listen to] beautiful music rather than dull debates ... ) and connection into the District Railway station, together with dressing rooms for suburban visitors, were completed

The Government bought the site in 1880. The decision was taken to demolish the Opera House, but to reuse most of its foundations, including the passageways.

### Construction and Criticism

In many ways the design and materials of the new building were unusual for a

The original building of 1889, viewed from St Thomas's Hospital in the early 1890's.



prominent public building and it inevitably attracted hostile criticism when it emerged from scaffolding in 1890. Shaw's design was simple in outline, but the composition is powerful. He appreciated the need to make the building impressive and dominant in its magnificent position by the Thames. In this he succeeded splendidly. The Portland Stone, and cheerful brick above, is particularly sympathetic. The style, which so puzzled his contemporaries, represents a compromise between classical and Gothic traditions, with the principal inspiration probably being from Dutch sources. Shaw was, however, clearly also influenced by his contemporary, John Belcher, whose Institute of Chartered Accountants, in the City, was designed in 1888. He translated something of Belcher's picturesque neo-Baroque handling in his own lively details.

Sir William Harcourt MP was a detractor of the building. It was, he alleged, rather inferior in architectural beauty to the jam and pickle factory of Messrs Crosse and Blackwell, which face it on the other side of the river. Such value judgements, however, are fallible, and an impressive list of leading architects wrote to *The Times* in Shaw's defence. They believed that of all the public buildings erected by Government in London during the present generation, it was the one in which London may be most justly proud of. Sir Reginald Blomfield, indeed, considered it the finest 19th century public building in London, the Houses of Parliament aside.

There was a certain grim irony in the intention that part of the cost of the Police Headquarters was to be offset by employing in the construction granite quarried by convict labour at Dartmoor and other prisons. Cheap Portland stone from state-owned quarries was also ordained. Shaw had resisted this, and introduced red brick as the dominant medium, but granite and stone are nevertheless prominently featured. A major difficulty was the routing of the flues to the four great chimney stacks: some of these being carried on support girder work. It was built with three small passenger lifts and several coal hoists. The cost of erection was about £120,000.

### Norman Shaw South

The building was occupied in November 1890, but was found immediately to be too small for the Force's growing needs, and an extension was planned on the site of the old headquarters and garden of the Civil Service Commission. This building, erected in 1816 to the designs of William Pilkington, was originally the offices of the Transport Office of the Board of Ordnance and later of the Control Board (or Commission for Indian Affairs). After much procrastination and the construction of a

What might have been; Francis Fowler's design for a National Opera House, published in 1875. The building of this edifice, on the site of Norman Shaw North, was started, its walls virtually completed; but it was never finished.



web of girders, designed by Sir John Wolff Barry<sup>1</sup>, over the underground railway which cuts across the site, the additional building, Norman Shaw South, was constructed in 1902-1906. This was originally known as Scotland House and was built under the supervision of John Dixon Butler although Shaw acted as consultant during much of this time. In particular he is said to have designed the elevations, and was instrumental in obtaining the fine gates designed for a park by Sir Reginald Blomfield, which separate the roadway between the two buildings from Derby Gate, and the Embankment. In addition, a high bridge was built to connect the new building with its partner over what was then a public highway. However, generally, the extension is less splendid than the four-square fortress-like original.

Shaw had also worked with Butler on the design of the Canon Row Police Station which stood immediately to the west. This is now No 1 Canon Row.

Another extension, originally intended as part of a replacement for Richmond Terrace, was opened to the north of the first building in 1940. This was called the Curtis Green Building, after its architect, who made no attempt to match the style of Norman Shaw. Bridges to the central building connected both extensions.

<sup>1</sup> Youngest son of Sir Charles Barry, the architect of the Palace of Westminster

The Police Headquarters of 1889 viewed probably from the Clock Tower of the Palace of Westminster, in 1898 or 1899. It was this building which was first renovated for House of Commons use. The extension building is not yet erected. St Stephen's House, used 1980-92 by the House of Commons Committee Office, newly constructed, lies across both sides of the railway station in the cutting diagonal to the lower part of the picture.



## House of Commons involvement

### The threat of demolition

In March 1967, the police moved out to a tower block between the Broadway and Victoria Street, half-a-mile from the old buildings. The roadway between the two Norman Shaw Buildings was closed to the public and the buildings were occupied temporarily by the Diplomatic Service, the Ministry of Defence and the Board (later Department) of Trade. It was assumed that the old building (Norman Shaw North) would be demolished. Up to 1963 the Police had hoped rebuilding on the old site might be possible, but then the Holford plan provided for the demolition of the southern extension in connection with redevelopment of the Parliament Street/Bridge Street area for parliamentary accommodation, so they sought to move as a matter of urgency. The old buildings were sold to the Ministry of Public Building and Works for £6m and the Police rented their new building (which had been designed as commercial offices) from February 1966. The Public Accounts Committee, who later examined the move, considered the old building had been abandoned prematurely.

In fact, the Holford plan was never carried out. In 1965 Leslie Martin prepared a document entitled *Whitehall - a plan for the National and Government Centre*. This plan envisaged the retention of the original Norman Shaw building, but demolition was mooted of both the 1906 and 1940 extensions. The original block was described as an isolated building by Norman Shaw, and it would indeed have been a small part of the nineteenth century tide of modern building extending from the river to St James' Park. In a statement on the report, the Minister of Works (Rt Hon Charles Pannell MP) described the building only rather grudgingly as of some worth.

### Listing the building

The original building had been listed on provisional Grade III in 1952, but was recommended for Grade I in December 1960. After Scotland Yard moved out, the buildings came under threat of demolition. Despite Leslie Martins recommendations and the Royal Fine Art Commission declaring itself in favour of retention of the first building,, the then Minister of Public Building and Works (Rt Hon R J Mellish MP) announced on 16 July 1968 that all three ex-police buildings were to be demolished.

Norman Shaw North was finally listed Grade I in February 1970, and among those who advocated retention was Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, who argued that the main block had very strong claims to preservation. He quoted with approval the argument that it was the best on the north bank of the Thames between the Houses of Parliament and Somerset House. The Rt Hon Duncan Sandys MP (later Lord Duncan-Sandys) said that demolition would be an inexcusable act of vandalism. Westminster City Council, however, did not press for retention. The demolition threat was removed by ministerial acceptance of the Willis enquiry report (November 1972), which came out against the construction of a new Home Office on the site of Richmond Terrace, Norman Shaw North and the Curtis Green building. The Willis Enquiry concluded that the 1887 building should be preserved though not the 1906 extension.

### **House of Commons Acquisition**

House of Commons involvement with Norman Shaw's buildings began in December 1972, when the Select Committee on House of Commons (Services) resolved that agreement in principle be given to Commons' use of the Norman Shaw North building. A report by a firm of surveyors followed; and by October 1973, the Committee were making detailed arrangements, principally for conversion of the main building to provide rooms for Members and their secretaries. By summer 1973 it was obvious that proposals for a new parliamentary building alongside, to Spence and Webster's design of 1970, were not going to materialise.

### **Refurbishment**

The main building, the original construction of 1887-90, was refurbished completely in 1973-75. The exterior was cleaned as a contribution to European Architectural Heritage Year, revealing after many years the fine brickwork. The interior was remodelled to provide accommodation for Members and their secretaries, plus a new Vote Office, dealing especially with European Community documents, a Library, dormitory accommodation for staff who have to work late at night, television studios, and photocopying rooms.

The building was restored to a high standard. As many as possible of the original features were retained and subsequent alterations, for instance partitions and bakelite doorhandles, removed. False ceilings were inserted into most rooms and corridors, thus altering their proportions, but at the same time economising on heat and light. The bridges to Curtis Green Building and Norman Shaw South were closed and the private entrance to Westminster Underground station was abolished. The former Black Museum (below ground level, fronting the Embankment) used by the Police for a display of items connected with crimes and forensic science, was not converted and remains a store. The building was carpeted throughout. Accommodation was provided initially for 128 Members and 130 secretaries.

As with the original construction of the building, the conversion did not attract unqualified approval. The cost of the work was approximately £3,250,000. Particular comment was made about the costs of Members' desks, the elaborate brass direction signs, and pictures. A problem emerged with the time it took for Members to reach the Chamber from the new building; as a result, the time allowed for divisions was increased (see **Factsheet P9**). The opening of a walkway from the Norman Shaw buildings to the palace via the Portcullis House in 2000 has largely resolved this issue.

### **Occupation of Norman Shaw South**

As pressure on space in the Palace increased, plans were also made to occupy Norman Shaw South, the 1906 extension. Not long after work was completed on North in February 1976 (it had been occupied in part from January 1975), work commenced on the conversion of South. This was done under a resolution of the Services Committee in July 1976. It was completed to a much less elaborate specification than its predecessor. In particular, the stone-flagged arched passages remained, and its rooms did not have false ceilings installed. The South building was occupied during 1979, with space for 56 Members and 83 secretaries, as well as a flat for the Clerk of the House, the Sound Archives for both Houses, a Gymnasium, and some accommodation for the Library, including its computer indexing unit. The exterior of the building was not cleaned. The bridge linking the two buildings was reopened. In 1990-91 the Gymnasium was moved to 1 Canon Row (see below) and the library offices to No. 1 Derby Gate, although some rooms were retained for IT training. Also in 1991, the TV studios moved to Millbank.

The old Canon Row Police Station remained in use by the Metropolitan Police until May 1985, when the Police moved to the old north extension (the Curtis Green Building) which was converted in 1982-84 to form the new Canon Row Police Station, somewhat illogically named, since it is not situated in Canon Row, but on the Victoria Embankment. The yard between the old Canon Row, and the Norman Shaw North building was shared. It was here in October 1981 that a 50 foot plane tree collapsed, crushing several cars. The tree was the last survivor of a number planted just before the 1906 extension was built. Late in 1985 the Services Committee recommended that the old Police Station, to be renamed 1 Canon Row, should also go over to Parliamentary use.

### **Richmond House**

In 1987, a new building, part of the refurbishment and extension of Richmond Terrace, was completed to the west of Norman Shaw North. Though modern in design, the architects of this building designed it with similar coloured brick to that of Norman Shaw North and with alternate courses, typical of Norman Shaw style, of brick and stone or concrete. The building now forms the Westminster headquarters of the Departments of Health and Work and Pensions.

### **Recent changes**

The study for a new Parliamentary Building by Sir Hugh Casson and David Ramsay, published in 1979, envisaged the preservation of both Norman Shaw buildings and in addition the original part of Canon Row Police Station, in the design of which Shaw was also involved, as part of a complex of new Parliamentary buildings. The plan was considered by the Services Committee, and broadly adopted after a debate in the House on 22 November 1983. The opening of the new building, Portcullis House, in late 2000, led to another major re-organisation of the House's accommodation. 210 Members have been accommodated in the new building, many being relocated from their offices in the Norman Shaw buildings. Staff from other parliamentary out-buildings, some of which are rented, will be relocated in the vacant areas of the Norman Shaw buildings. The buildings are therefore likely to remain a part of the Parliamentary Estate for the foreseeable future.

Parts of Norman Shaw North were refurbished in the mid-1990s and in 1998, The

Public Information Office (now renamed as the House of Commons Information Office) returned to the building, occupying the sixth floor. In its previous existence this had served as a storage area for the Library for newspapers, periodicals and parliamentary papers. The offices were created following extensive re-modelling of the floor. In 2002, the bedrooms in the building were converted to Members' offices.

Norman Shaw South (now a Grade II\* listed building) was fully refurbished from April 2001 and the building was reopened by the Speaker on 7 May 2003. This refurbishment involved a full cleaning and repair programme to the exterior and new services, a new lift and complete redecoration on the interior. Scaffolding and a temporary roof were erected to allow the replacement of the green Westmoreland slates, and so as to position water sprays to wash away the dirt from the walls. The first floor link bridge to 1 Canon Row has been removed for aesthetic reasons, and the white ceramic tiling of the internal courtyard has been repaired. The accommodation is mainly used as Members' offices but also includes offices for staff of House Departments. The Parliamentary Works Services Directorate's furniture stores and workshops have returned to the lower ground and basement floors of the building.

The New Scotland Yard of the North - Norman Shaw's White Star Line Headquarters (1895) on Liverpool waterfront is externally almost a carbon copy of the Westminster building.



## Further reading

Richard Norman Shaw  
Saint, A  
Yale University Press, 1976

Richard Norman Shaw RA: architect  
1813-1912. A study by Sir Reginald  
Blomfield.  
Blomfield, R  
BT Batsford, 1940

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