

Provided by one of the Architects who worked on the 1963 Huish Grammar school.

## **Dennis Tabert's "Huish - The Genesis of the 1963 South Road Buildings"**

I entered Huish on a scholarship in September 1938, at that time the red brick building of 1892, four classrooms in an ex-army wooden hut, two other wooden huts, a gymnasium, a woodwork shop and a separate toilet block and two tarmac playgrounds.

July 1942, 5A's last lesson of the week, English with 'Mittie' (E.B. Mitford) who, the Oxford School Certificate exams being over, was in a relaxed genial mood and led a discussion on design. When the lesson was over he called me back commenting that I had a lot to say and would I like to borrow the book he had based it on - a Penguin 'Design' by Anthony Bertram. That evening at seven o'clock I picked it up. Being a war-time format the photos and illustrations were all in the middle which I immediately turned to. They covered a wide range of items from furniture, appliances, transport and buildings in the modern style. By five past seven my career decision had been made -I wanted to become an architect.

Sixth form courses were solely science oriented. Under W G Pleass (physics) and E G Broad (maths) I learnt a methodical analytical approach to problem solving, and I was reading avidly all I could find on modern architects such as Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Maxwell Fry, F R S Yorke and others. One morning after assembly 'Ginger' Rutt, at this time acting head master, handed me details of architectural scholarships being awarded by the Architects Registration Council of the United Kingdom. The art master P R Desa spent many hours after school discussing art and architecture with me and giving me drawing projects. The examination for the scholarship was a two-day one, one day of written papers including maths and one day of drawing followed two weeks later by an interview before the ARCUK board that was obviously designed to test my resolve. I was awarded a five year scholarship to be held at the Welsh School of Architecture.

During this period senior boys undertook fire-watching duties at the school. I think many Huishers were attached to the character of the red brick building but patrolling it on a bright moonlit night intensified the emotive feelings considerably, highlighting the exposed roof structure and the texture of the un-plastered brickwork. I think Gordon Baker in his History of Huish miss-interpreted my description of this effect as 'gloomy'. It was at this time that I began to wonder how to reconcile my views on modern architecture and my feelings about the red brick building.

The Architectural Review was running a series of articles entitled 'The Functional Tradition' showing simple pleasing forms derived from their practical requirements with which I had a great empathy and which became a 'plank' in my approach to design. Over the next few years including over two years in the Army before taking up my scholarship I would often imagine designing a new Huish - at this time I was not qualified, there was no building programme and no site!! The possibility of getting to be the architect of the new Huish seemed to be pure fantasy.

After qualification I worked for two and half years at Harlow and Stevenage. A colleague drew my attention to a job vacancy in the Somerset County Architect's department. I decided to apply though I thought I might find the style might not be to my idea of design. However I found that a new deputy, John Redpath, had recently been appointed from Hertfordshire which was in the forefront of architectural design. I was offered the job and the County Architect R OHarris said "We have your old school in our building programme and you can be the project architect"- the one job above all others that I wanted to do! The Huish project was delayed for three years running. In the meantime I was working on the Strode school, college and theatre complex at Street. As part of this project I had the task of designing a co-ordinated range of cupboard units for use in specialist rooms such as laboratories to be used in the schools programme generally including Huish.

By this time I had developed and refined a comprehensive approach to integrated plan and structure from which the character of the building would be derived, free of any superfluous added ornamentation. I was later to realise that the original red brick building met these criteria, the only decorative element being the tall chimneys and that was achieved by the bonding pattern of the brickwork and the Coat of Arms over the doorway. The gabled dormers to the hall, an attractive feature, provided additional light and cross ventilation - very necessary with the whole school in assembly!

At last work the scheme for Huish began in 1959. The site was the grounds of 'Elmfield,' an early Victorian house laid as a miniature arboretum - a splendid setting. The first decision was to avoid if possible the felling of any trees. The second decision was to avoid the intended demolition of 'Elmfield' - a pleasant historical link to the town - and to find alternative uses for it. A brief and schedule of accommodation was provided by the Council Education Department to be carried out in accordance with the Ministry of Education Bulletins. A briefing meeting was held in the sixth form classroom with the staff when I explained the procedure and how and when they would be consulted. (This was the first post-war school in Somerset to be built to replace an existing establishment) I would

be working with staff some of whom had taught me. The first task was to divide rooms into groups of similar use and decide the relationship of each group to the others. The first group in the hierarchy was the main teaching block consisting of classrooms, laboratories, and studios with toilets and cloak facilities. The second group consisted of the sixth form classrooms, private study rooms and common room and the library with their own toilets, the different study routine and privileges of sixth form life to be reflected in the form and finishes. Thirdly the next group consisted of the staff and administrative rooms. The final major group was the main communal areas for the whole school and the areas where public functions would be held such as the assembly hall with its stage, with entrance hall, and with the music room associated with it all to be finished to an appropriate standard. Finally provision to be made for a gymnasium with changing rooms and a craft block.

The structural frame was 'Bison' by Concrete Ltd. (part of a package deal involving several schools) It was decided to use a low pitch roof with long span aluminium interlocking sheeting to avoid the problems associated with felt roofing. It had been hoped to use a local pale buff brick to match 'Elmfield' but the local brickworks were unable to supply sufficient bricks in the time scale. A near match was found with a London Brick Co. brick which could be supplied in the required time scale. I had hoped to use complete aluminium panels and windows so cutting out any exterior painting but this proved to be too expensive and alternative savings unacceptable. The structural frame based on 5ft.(1.5m.) proved to be the most flexible allowing variation in classroom size and permitted a well portioned frame. I had previously used this size panel on Taunton Technical College and the Strode project at Street.

The main classroom block was best located in an approximately east-west direction across the site as a double row of class rooms on two floors. To introduce sunlight into the first floor rooms facing north a clerestory was formed by varying the pitch of the roof. The sloping ceilings gave greater room height more suitable for larger rooms such as laboratories while the exposed structural beams added character to the rooms. The laboratories being on the first floor enabled them to have extract ventilation through the roof if required. The individual staff members were consulted at this stage regarding their requirements for cupboards, sinks, gas & electric supplies and on the layout of the room. To avoid a long featureless corridor the preparation rooms were set back enabling a light well to be formed to the clerestory window, and further to provide greater modelling, lighting fittings were placed off centre. On the ground floor most of the classrooms were located on the south facing wall leaving only three facing north. Most of the ground floor north facing area was taken up with cloak room and toilet accommodation. It was decided to make dual use of the cloak space as an additional assembly area by providing mobile coat and shoe racks that could be stacked to one side. A drinking fountain was located outside the toilet block and manufactured with a deep coloured glaze and set in a

coloured tile recess to disassociate it from the toilet functions. Access to the outside occurs at either end.

The sixth form accommodation was laid out to suit the different study routine with pupils spending a substantial part of the time in individual study, so a series of smaller rooms with easy access to the library was provided. Being 16+ the pupils are granted more adult privileges with the circulation area developed as a common room with a room dedicated to the prefects. The sixth form had easy access provided to the library on the ground floor, the library also being convenient for staff use. Separate cloak and toilet facilities were provided for the sixth form. A bridge link to the main teaching block gave sixth form access to the laboratories and formed additional common room and locker space. Access to the hall balcony gave the sixth formers use at assembly, a privilege for their seniority. The balcony to the entrance hall also provided additional study areas. Access was also provided to an outside paved area for sixth form use with decorative planting and a pond with water feature.

On the opposite side of the entrance hall was to be found the staff room and annex with toilets and cloaks. The annex allowed staff to see and talk to boys without disturbing other staff. The staff room decoration was a vinyl textured paper to a nicotine colour reminiscent of the staff room in the red brick building !! On the first floor two specialist rooms to be used as language laboratories were located. The headmaster's office and secretary's office were located on the opposite side of the entrance hall adjacent to the library. The hub of the school and the area with which the public would be acquainted with was the entrance hall and assembly hall. The spacious entrance hall provided access to the secretary, staff rooms, and staircase to the large open balcony and to the assembly hall.

The assembly hall had also to function as a dining hall so the kitchen was located adjacent to it with a chair and table store. The assembly hall was provided with a conventional proscenium stage. On one side was access to a music room with practice rooms which could also serve as changing rooms for stage productions. On the other side was located a lighting box with two 'state of the art' portable lighting boards, also access to the gymnasium changing rooms so they could also be used in conjunction with drama productions. The music room was originally designed as a drum but this was unacceptable to the Ministry. The drama staff were keen to be able to stage 'theatre in the round' so a box grid of 2" square electrical trunking on 5ft, (1.5m.) module was devised from which the hall lighting was hung and which had numerous outlets for floodlights and spotlights linked to the lighting board. The changing rooms for the gymnasium formed a bridge from the main building so shortening the exterior route to the hard play area. The boiler house was located on the ground floor. The gymnasium was fully equipped with a games store attached.

A craft block was located at the end of the main teaching block but separated from it to avoid sound transmission from power tools. Two sets of cycle sheds were provided for boys and staff. Exterior paving was divided into two functions - casual including circulation, and play areas both formal and informal the latter being tarmac. The main areas of casual paving adjoin the classroom blocks and were laid to reflect the structural grid. It was decided there would be no cutting of paving slabs and that brick pavoids or cobbles would be used to fill between blocks of slabs so providing texture and visual interest. The area in front of the main entrance was enhanced by paving laid out on these principles. Planting schemes were designed to complement the paving layout. Car parking provision was made in the area adjacent to the staff rooms, kitchen and gymnasium. A link road was included to the hard play area to allow additional parking for special events such as speech days.

The playing fields were on the other side of the public footpath from the town running north-south. The school had funds from pre-war for a pavilion, also the Army Cadet Force and the Air Training Corp both had funds for building accommodation. It was decided to combine these to make one building to their mutual benefit.

A survey of 'Elmfield' suggested that it could be converted into several flats, one for the caretaker and saving the construction of the standard caretakers bungalow and several flats for staff. The sunken area formerly a kitchen garden was set aside as a site for a future swimming pool.

The plans were approved with two reservations by the governors. They queried the amount of toilet provision, this however was in accordance with the Ministry guide lines. They also objected to the use of the hall for dining, the Ministry were not prepared to fund a separate dining hall. The plans being approved work was then started on production drawings and bills of quantities. The production team consisted of four architectural assistants of whom three were former Huishers - Robert Matthews, Robert Harris and Clive Sweet. One of the quantity surveyors was also a former Huisher. Attention was given to the design of connections between various elements with solution applied rigorously throughout the project, no compromises were allowed. Where problems arose the plans would be worked perhaps two or three times until consistency had been obtained whilst meeting the user requirements. A particular problem arose with staircases which were all different in layout. A structural loading problem meant that cross walls at first floor level had to be of a lighter weight construction than those elsewhere. Interior walls generally were of concrete block plastered, a light weight plaster was used on the first floor cross walls. A feature wall of facing brick formed the back wall of the entrance hall. Floor finishes were vinyl with hard wood floor in the hall and gymnasium and ceramic tiles in the kitchen, toilets and changing

rooms. An Altro vinyl heated floor augmented the heated ceiling and hot air blowers in the entrance hall. Plain plasterboard and acoustic plasterboard was used for ceilings generally with perforated metal panels used for the heated ceiling in the entrance hall. Doors were solid core polished hardwood. Engineering services such as power and gas points were agreed with staff. Heating generally was by hot air fan convectors.

Normally a colour schedule is prepared for each room. A different approach was undertaken - any material wherever found was to be the same colour – the character of the building resulting from the structural form and the material colouring. Materials which had separate but related colours were :- plasterboard, acoustic plasterboard, plaster, light weight plaster and fair face concrete. All timber trim including skirtings and architraves were painted white. Rooms such as staff rooms and offices, library and assembly hall balcony had coloured textured vinyl wall paper.

Having followed a very strict discipline in design and structural principles, now was the time to indulge in a little fun ! A water feature in the pond included a round terrazzo slab with single fountain outlet and at the opposite end the impossible - a hole in the water ! This was achieved with a large concrete drainage ring set so that the bottom of the sump could not be seen when standing on the edge of the pond.

Tenders having been obtained work started on site in 1961. By this time R O Harris the County Architect had retired and B C Adams had been appointed as County Architect, also John Redpath had left to join the Ministry and Martin Kenchington had been appointed as deputy. The architect's representative on site, the Clerk of Works, an important member of the team, Stanley Mockridge, was also an old Husher. A new appointment of a landscape architect was made. He identified the tree in front of the entrance as a Wellingtonia and a mere stripling with the possibility of considerable more growth ! The decision was taken to move the school back 10ft. (3m.) to afford more growing room to the tree. Fortunately this was very easily done with minimum alteration to one or two drawings. Work progressed reasonably smoothly and to schedule. At that period school buildings were subject to different construction regulations than buildings generally and it was permissible to use timber lining to exit routes subject to the timber being treated by a vacuum and pressurising process to reduce flame spread and make it incombustible. Timber panels were introduced to the first floor walls on the staircases in the main teaching block providing a warm texture.

During their construction a pile of wood shavings was produced, the general foreman Chris Salter who had been my father's apprentice, called an apprentice and gave him a full box of matches and instructions to burn the shavings. About

an hour later the apprentice came back with an empty box of matches grumbling that the shavings wouldn't burn !

The sub-contractor for the stairs rang to say they had made one set of the terrazzo treads too short and asked if they could be used in the changing block instead of the cheaper granolithic treads specified, it was agreed subject to no extra charge. A few weeks later the sub-contractor rang again to say they had inadvertently cast the second changing block stair treads in terrazzo instead of granolithic - could they use them. We gladly agreed, again subject to no extra charge. Now all stairs were to the higher quality terrazzo finish.

I arrived on site on a sunny morning when the roof was only partially closed in. The front part of the entrance hall was roofed but the back 4ft. (1.2m.) which was at a slightly different level was still open and the covering had not been manufactured or installed. The sun was shining on the facing brick wall backing onto the assembly hall, the effect was stunning. I returned to the office and issued an order replacing the aluminium sheeting with glazing greatly enhancing the atmosphere of the entrance hall. Doors had a hardwood veneer which was to be treated with three coats of cellulose rubbed down with fine glass paper between each coat and a final coat of wax polish giving a satin finish. When the first group of doors were hung they were found to have a high gloss varnish appearance and not to specification, Stan Mockridge, the CoW, checked the delivery notes when he found that only sufficient glass paper for about half a dozen doors (if carried out to specification ) had been delivered to site. The contractor was required to rectify this at his own expense.

Toward the end of the contract, the builders estimator rang me to say that there was no item in the bill of quantities for 'take away spoil and excavated material to a dump' which were at a premium and this would 'cost a bomb'. This was the wrong thing to say to me ! Examining the site layout, I realised the spoil heap was on the axis of the rear entrance to the main teaching block and could be a focal point and that this was a grammar school so a classical approach to the solution might be appropriate. The spoil heap was moulded into a horse shoe amphitheatre facing the school, there being a considerable saving it was possible to construct a concrete stage with a segmental rear wall together with a path from the school, all axial on the teaching block entrance. This feature was presented to the school as a 'fait-accompl' - a challenge for outdoor drama or other uses. In fact the first use was by 'Bobbie' Pleass to find the centre of the circle by measuring the intensity of reflected sound ! The wall also found use in bottle breaking contests at fetes.

As an established school with a number of clubs having individual funds, special display cases were requested. Library shelving, free standing and fitted and filing cabinet were supplied. Library chairs were based on a moulded ply form discovered at the furniture manufacturer's workshop. Wall lockers, free standing lockers and under-seat lockers were fitted. Also provided was a platform table

with green leatherette top and front panel with three matching chairs. Standard desks and chairs were supplied for classrooms and staff chose their own furniture for the staff room. The library wall shelves were designed to be demountable for cleaning and decorating. Vertical dividers were placed at 2'6" ( 750mm ) centres hung from the top and bottom shelves which were of fixed height, other shelves were of adjustable height. The vertical dividers had pins top and bottom which slotted into top entry grooves which curved slightly inwards so that the divider dropped easily into position. The contractor rang to say it was going to be very expensive as it had taken an hour to put the first in. I was puzzled. I went to site and discovered the bottom slot was upside down, I walked off the site without commenting and phoned the contractor saying I would go back when they learnt to read a drawing ! Later, not having heard anything I contacted the site and found they had fitted all the rest of the dividers in less than an hour when the slots had been correctly fixed.

As I had stalwart support from my team of assistants following the strict guidelines we were working to, I got permission to make the pavilion the subject of a competition between them, the winner to carry out the project. They each prepared a one day esquisse (*Ed's note – a rough sketch*) which was judged by the deputy Martin Kenchington. Robert Matthews was the successful assistant to carry out the scheme.

The ministry architects held a seminar at one of the Council's local residential venues in the late spring 1963 where one of the concepts they were advocating was a grid lighting trunking for flexible drama use in the assembly halls. They were slightly taken aback when the County Architect Bernard Adams called me and we took them to Huish where our assembly hall grid was fabricated and wired and ready to hoist into position.

The school now ready for hand over, it was time to consider whether it had been a successful project. It had been completed on time within budget and met the brief requirements. It had an ordered and pleasant appearance. However this was not just another school - this was Huish. I had decided there were two additional criteria to be met. My first condition was that 'Ginger' would move into the new building. It was the opinion of many of the staff that 'Ginger' would not move into the new building as he was too attached to the red brick building which had been his life boy and man, and he had the option of retirement. In July 1963 I took the staff on a conducted tour of the new building. Part way around I realised we had 'lost' 'Ginger', retracing my steps I found him with plan allocating classes to rooms. His actions seemed to indicate he was moving in ! First condition met! The second condition was that I should experience the same feelings I felt when patrolling on fire-watching during the war. When the staff had all gone home I went around the building checking everything was locked up and lights were all out. It was a brilliant moonlit night and the moon shining through the clerestory

and stairwells threw into relief the form and structure creating a similar powerful feeling to the wartime feelings. I felt I had achieved my second condition !  
THIS WAS HUIISH

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#### ADDENDUM

In the old red brick building the wall above the staircase to the sixth form room was covered with the initials of sixth formers. I considered the idea of using the wall over the staircase from the sixth form area to the library to mount a random selection of desk lids from the old sixth form room many of which had sixth formers initials carved in them. However the idea proved impractical as it would have been impossible to treat them to meet the fire regulations I visited the school for an after completion inspection a short while after occupation and was shocked to find some third formers 'scooting' the mobile coat racks in the main teaching block cloakroom area ! These units about 5ft ( 1.5m ) long, 5ft. (1.5m ) high of sturdy square tube steel frame with substantial hardwood rails could have gathered sufficient momentum to do considerable damage if they crashed into anything. Specific instructions were then given regarding their use, the Head Peel Corbin saw to that. I was gratified when I visited the school for HOBA. dinner some years later to find that redecoration had been carried out and that the original colour scheme had been adhered to.

Finally, I would be interested to know what happened to the pile of American pre-war sci-fi magazines that were on the bench top in the 'dungeon' with which we tried to divert 'Bobbie' Pleass's attention during physics lessons. They had been left by "Archie", Arthur C. Clarke ( see his biography ) and were still there when I left in 1945.