

Context

Hearsall Baptist Church, Queensland Avenue, Coventry. Formerly a Baptist Sunday School, it opened on a Saturday in September 1928, later becoming Hearsall Baptist Church in 1938.

Architect: George Arthur Steane

Builder: Mr. Player and Son.

Built: 1927-1928

Site visit: 16th February 2024



Figure 1: Former Hearsall Baptist Church Hall, Queensland Avenue, Coventry (2024)

Assessment – Discussion

The Site: The Hearsall Baptist Church sits on a small, 0.45 acres of a corner plot between Fife Road and Queensland Avenue consisting of two distinct buildings blocks. The site is broadly rectangular in plan with principal vehicular access direct from Queensland Avenue to a car parking area sited between the two buildings that occupy the site. To the north of the site is the former Hearsall Baptist Church, and Sunday School (blue on the site plan) and the modern day Hearsall Baptist Church is located south of the site, the buildings sit apart from each other and are connected by a modern internal corridor that is located at the rear of the carpark.

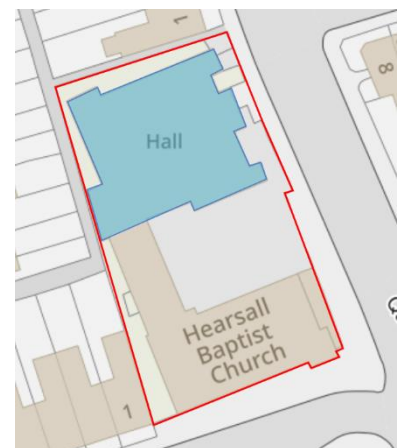


Figure 2: Site plan showing Former Hearsall Baptist Church in blue.

History

The Baptist Lord Street Sunday School was outgrown by the school group, and the building was falling into disrepair. The Church council approved a scheme for the erection of a new girls and boys' school and chapel, at a cost of between £700 and £800. In 1915 a plot of land was bought at the top of Queensland Avenue big enough for a chapel and Sunday school. The Sunday School was designed by the Coventry architect G. A. Steane, works began on the building in 1927, the school was built by local builders, W.A. Player, and Son (former Scholar of Lord St. Sunday School). Dr Townley Lord opened the Sunday School with a golden key on a Saturday in September 1928.

The thriving Sunday School comprised infants, juniors, and seniors, over the next years the numbers of attendees doubled. By 1937 the community of Hearsall had developed to such a point that it was felt it should have its own church, on April 25th, 1938, a new constitution was approved by Hearsall Council which allowed the Sunday School to become Hearsall Baptist Church.

In November 1940 following the first blitz, some of the rooms at the church were used for temporary shelter by people who had lost their homes.

In the subsequent years, a new Building Fund was created, for a new Church on a plot of land adjacent to Hearsall Baptist Church, this time dealing more specifically with the spiritual needs of the community. Donations came from various groups that attended Hearsall Baptist Church and other Baptist communities within the city. By 1956, £500 had been donated to the Building Fund and the date of 1960 was planned for the building of the new church, to be located on the corner of Queensland Avenue and Fife Lane. Further donations of £5,000 and £2,000 were added to the fund in 1958. The following year a Coventry firm of Architects, C.F. Redgrave and L.A. Clarke who had considerable experience in building churches were appointed to design the new Church (figure 3). The builders were A.G. Gale. The 1950's church is a modernist brick building with a stone-faced vestibule and memorial chapel. In 1963 there were seats for 180, and 132 church members.

It should be noted that the modern day Hearsall Baptist Church is not part of this assessment and is therefore not individually assessed. It is within the existing site, to the south of Former Hearsall Baptist church and connects to the former Church by a corridor to at the rear of the car park. The modern day Hearsall Baptist Church (built 1962) can be seen in figure 3.



Figure 3: Modern day Hearsall Baptist Church
<https://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/7003652>

External appearance

Italianate in style the former Hearsall Baptist Church is a tall two storey L-plan with a two-storey road facing range, and two storey rear projecting range. There is a single storey pitched roof element within the angle, creating a square plan form. The building is steel framed clad with red brick and has a low pitched hipped and slate covered roof.

There is a projecting three storey tower terminating in a square cupola with hipped roof on the south side, the north side has a corresponding projecting gable and matching white stone string

course at first floor, both gable ends have blue painted doors at ground level, flanked by carved memorial stones within the piers at their base. There are two smaller gables with overhanging eaves and paired decorative brackets in the main facade.

The building contains tall and narrow windows topped with shallow segmental brick arches, there are dark brick surrounds which reach to the base of the floor level. The windows are separated by central brick piers of dark colour with white painted stone string courses above first floor. The building has an interesting and rare use of polychromatic brickwork and stacked tile detailing in the facade. It is not common to find stacked tiling used in this manner.

Originally the windows would have had been wooden framed, these have been replaced with UPVC framed windows.

The central single storey porch is stepped forward, with two plain wooden doors and flat roof. It has a parapet with single, cusped, flat topped gable over main entrance. It contains a decorative art deco style date plate with blue painted relief lettering, reading A1928D in overlapping font. The porch has a stucco surround of white painted ashlar.

The road facing elevation has a red brick dwarf wall with coping stones, with disabled access behind, and alongside are three steps leading up to the entrance. Located at the rear of the car park is a modern corridor, it connects into the 1960's Baptist Church facing Fife Lane.

The building is in good repair, generally unaltered externally though the painted areas including the porch and string course are in need of repair.

Internal appearance

Internally the building is utilitarian, there is a large high ceilinged main hall with a stage, and hidden proscenium that is has been carefully adapted to the front to contain performance stage. Behind this is a vestment room. The ground floor contains an entrance hall, large sitting room with serving hatch from the kitchen, offices, and W.C.'s. There are internal partitions along corridors with fanlights and sidelights, letting generous amounts of light through the building.

The first floor has two large high ceilinged open plan rooms, with several smaller rooms around it. The original layout is largely intact with some areas of modernisation. There are typical finishes of the period, largely unaltered but in need of refreshment.



Figure 3: Main stage, ground floor, and upstairs classroom



Figure 4: Ground floor sitting room and corridor behind.

Hearsall Christmas Star

The star was created in 1952 by Bernard Baker, a member of the church, who, finding some discarded florescent tubes, created a large, illuminated Christmas Star for Hearsall Baptist Church. He mounted the tubes onto a metal star shaped frame and connected it electrically. It was initially hauled into place by a group of church members.

The star quickly became a Christmas fixture, and in 1961 Cyril Cobb, a member of the church decided to make it a permanent, by fixing a homemade I-beam into the ground, which acted as a bracket for the metal frame of the star to connect into. The star would then be winched into place with the help of volunteers. The practice continues in the same way today, except the Christmas Star has been upgraded to include LED lights, and removal of the star is done using a cherry picker. The star is understood to hold local favour, and a recent local petition was created seeking to protect it.



Figure 4: Photograph; Kirsty Brewton. BBC Article: *Petition to protect Coventry Church Dec. 22, 2023*



For most of the year the star stored inside the church. The star is approximately 3m in diameter and when displayed at Christmas time the illuminated star is raised to a height of approx. 2m above the church cupola and can be seen in distant views.

Assessment – Criteria

Assessing the heritage asset against the Local List criteria; the heritage asset is valued locally for the following:

Historic: The former Hearsall Baptist Church and Sunday School may be described as a local landmark, given the associative connection to the community of Hearsall. The former Baptist Church was built by local people. It acted as a gathering place for children, women's, and men's groups through generations.

Every year, since the 1950's the Star has been a Christmas fixture, and during the pandemic lockdown the star remained on the church, and

was coined 'the star of hope,' there was 4-minute broadcast on BBC CWR on 28th January 2021 talking about its relevance to the community during the pandemic.

Historic value considered medium to high.

Artistic: Coventry Architect George Arthur Steane (d.1957) designed the Unitarian Church at 116 Holyhead Road, and the West Orchard United Reford Chapel at 83 Baginton Road. Both churches are non-designated heritage assets, and sophisticated examples of Art Deco influenced architecture. George Arthur Steane was the son of local architect George Steane (d.1914). The father George, partnered in architectural practice with his brother Isaac. Isaac is known to have trained under the noted architects Edward Pugin and Alfred Waterhouse and worked on the prestigious Natural History Museum. The two brothers designed Warwick Road United Reform Church, and Earlsdon Primary School¹ amongst others.

Italianate architecture was a popular style between 1840 -1885. It was applied to both, residential and commercial architecture and was favoured by the railways becoming known as the Railway Style. Given its short-lived popularity, there are not many churches in England of this style.

Artistic and architectural value considered to be medium to high.

Community: Constructed by a local builder who as a child attended the Lord Street Sunday School, a precursor to the former Hearsall Baptist Church. The church is a physical representation of these communal memories, evidenced through a century of published and archival history of the Sunday School and latterly church, and its contribution to the Baptist community in Coventry. Due to a lack of attendance and the building becoming hard to maintain, the church is due to close in March.

¹ <https://www.coventrysociety.org.uk/2023/06/09/something-in-the-earlsdon-water-perhaps/>

Community value considered to be medium.

Evidence: Although late for the period, the interwar Hearsall Baptist Church is understood to be representative of a unique and short-lived period in Italianate Church design. The external appearance of the former Hearsall Baptist Church is high quality and well detailed, containing influences of Art Deco, with a delicately designed art deco date plate over the main entrance of the building. The Coventry architect G.A. Steane was an accomplished architect, evidenced by the sophisticated examples of the Art Deco and Italianate buildings he designed in Coventry alone.

See also:

- 'One Hundred Years of Baptist Witness in Chapelfields pamphlet held at CCC.
- 'The Hearsall Star Shines on,' archive, Hearsall Baptist Church, copy held at CCC.
- 'Campaign to save cherished Coventry church and Christmas landmark' Coventry Evening Telegraph 26 Dec. 2023
- 'Star of Hope' BBC CWR Breakfast show on 28th Jan. 2021.
- 'Petition to protect Coventry church Christmas star backed by hundreds' BBC 22 Dec. 2023
- 'Hearsall Baptist Church – building the new church 1960/61' video on Echo Community Newspaper, Facebook
- Thanks also to the historic notes provided by local Architect Robert Davies and local Historian David Porter.

Evidential value considered to be high.

Age. Built 1927-1928.

Rarity. Italianate designed churches are infrequent. There are known to be a small number across England, generally this is a style underrepresented in Church architecture, and is therefore considered relatively rare of its type.

Rarity value considered to be high.

Integrity. The building has lost its original windows, but the fabric survival, both internally and externally is high.

Group value. Compliments the period and set of existing locally listed Church buildings within the vicinity, i.e. St Mary Magdalene (circa 1934) and Church of The Precious Blood And All Souls (circa 1924) adjoining the Chapelfields Conservation Area.

Group value considered medium.

Coventry's identity. Hearsall Baptist Church contributes to the understanding of Chapelfields development and local identity, as well as providing a timeline of development to the pre-war city.

Conclusion

After review of the information submitted in nomination and desktop research, the application is assessed to be valid and it is therefore recommended that the nomination progress to a public consultation.

Recommendations of the inclusion of the Hearsall Baptist Church on the Local List of heritage assets will be subject to the findings of public consultation and presented to Cabinet Member in due to course.

Reasons for recommendation decision

To be completed following public consultation process

Report dated: 14th March 2024

<https://www.coventry.gov.uk/locallist>