

Former Co-op Building, 84-103 London Road, Brighton

Statement of Significance

The building and its architects

The former Co-operative Society store was designed as a purpose built department store for the Brighton Co-operative Society by the architectural practice of Bethell and Swannell and opened in 1931.

Frank Bethel and Charles Swannell were a London-based architectural practice who designed a number of buildings for the Cooperative movement in London and the South East. Bethell was the driving force behind the practice and has two statutorily listed buildings to his credit, in Eltham and Enfield. None of the known examples are comparable in style to the London Road Coop store.

The London Road Coop store was designed in an inter-war stripped Classical style with a ground floor, two upper stories in the form of a piano nobile and an attic floor above, set between two strongly projecting cornices. The frame structure is faced in stone (or possibly reconstituted stone) to the front elevation and this 180 foot elevation is divided into bays by pilasters. The wider central bay is recessed and is flanked by two giant, Roman Doric columns which bring relief to the elevation. This central bay sits over the main store entrance and is surmounted at roof level by a raised parapet. The metal windows retain the original 1930s pattern, with steel panels between the first and second floors, but are in white whereas the original windows were dark like the steel panels, so emphasising the recession between the pilasters. The fenestration shows the influence of modernism and contrasts with the Classicism of the stone façade. The original shop fronts have been lost.

The building was extended at each end and along Baker Street in 1962. Further extensions followed in 1975 and 1980 to create a floor area of c70,000 square feet. These extensions do not contribute to the significance of the building. Behind the front facade the building is a simple, functional structure, both internally and to the rear. The rear elevation is of basic utilitarian appearance with a plain rendered finish and has little or no architectural merit. The building is an example of the facadist approach to disguising large retail and leisure buildings that was prevalent in the inter-war period. The intention was to create an imposing and impressive commercial frontage in this prime shopping street.

Local context

The concept of the department store emerged in the late 19th century, though the finest examples in England date from the early 20th century. It was not until the 1920s that the department store made an appearance in Brighton & Hove, probably because there were few opportunities before then for retailers to accumulate the necessary consolidated blocks of High Street property, given the tight knit 19th century urban grain of Brighton & Hove. The 1920s and 1930s saw a boom of department store building, particularly in London Road and in Western Road, where it coincided with the road widening that occurred between 1926 and 1936. The London Road Coop as extended became the largest department store in the city and was the last of the original store buildings to remain in use as a department store.

The building's significance

The original 1931 core of the London Road Coop building is considered to have townscape interest, historic interest and communal value.

In the local urban context the building provides, through its imposing and unified frontage, a landmark focus and evidence of the street's former prosperity. It addresses London Road in a very positive manner; the horizontal projecting cornice line contains the street in near views and reinforces the sweeping nature of the street. The vertical bays counterbalance this and reflect the narrow plot widths of 19th century development.

The site is centrally located in the curve of London Road and is prominent in long oblique views, particularly from the south. The principal frontage is of a larger scale than the neighbouring buildings and has strong visual presence. This reflects its former prestige status as a department store. This status is also reflected in the use of stone ashlar facings and the imposing neo classical architectural style and composition. The later additions to the building have no townscape interest and are not part of its significance, though they are appropriate in scale. Similarly, the rear elevation has no townscape interest and does not contribute to the building's significance.

The building's historic interest lies in the fact that it illustrates the physical, social and economic development of Brighton & Hove, being one of a number of department stores that transformed the main shopping streets (particularly London Road and Western Road) in the inter-war period. It has communal value as it is perceived as a source of local identity and/or distinctiveness by the community.

Summary for Local List

Former department store, 1931 (with later extensions) by Bethell and Swanell, in stripped Classical style with modernist glazing. Stone façade divided into a series of bays with wider central bay flanked by giant Roman Doric columns. Townscape interest confined to original front elevation above ground floor level only. Historic interest as a major example of retail development in the inter war years.