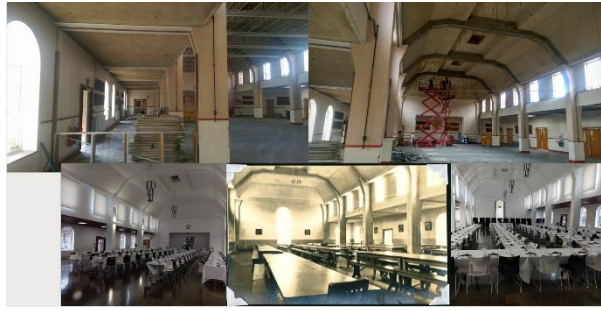


Great Hall Assembly



We sometimes forget to look at the things that are most familiar to us. This school is full of amazing things that we walk past everyday without noticing. I wonder how many of us eat our lunch in the Dining Hall without looking up at the ceiling.



When we removed a horrible false ceiling a few years ago, it revealed a beautiful 1930s barrel roof and **three paintings on wood**. These are very rare examples of work by **Eric Ravilious**, a famous painter of the early 20th Century. Here he is.



We can date them pretty accurately – Ravilious only painted in oils for a short time in 1930, which fits neatly with when the school was built on this site. **Here is the school in those early days.**



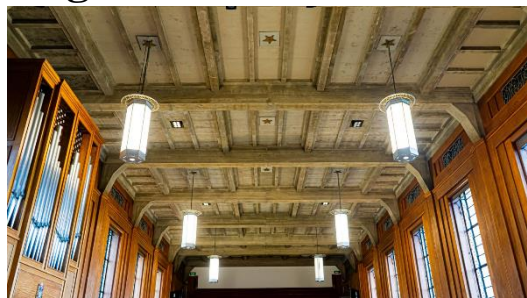
Three lost paintings by a British master – they hang over our heads every day, yet few look up.

The school was designed by an architect called William Godfrey Newton. He was born in 1885 and died in 1949. He was a distinguished man. At the time he designed the school he was professor of Architecture at the Royal College of Art.

The school was built in the Art Deco style:



you can see echoes of our school in these famous examples of Art Deco buildings.



Here in the Great Hall, as in the Dining Room, **look up**. That exposed raw concrete roof was startling at the time. It's still a pretty extreme bit of architecture. This building was making a

radical statement when it was constructed – that this school was at the cutting edge, absolutely of the moment.



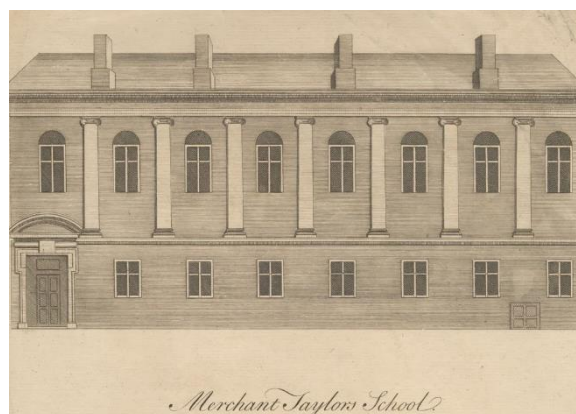
Above that concrete ceiling is another **great space** – a *salle d'armes* for fencing stretches the length of the building. Fire regulations prevent its use. We are in a massive structure. Mr Spikings estimates its weight as 2 ½ thousand tonnes, including the foyer below and the roof above.

Other Art Deco features are the metal scroll work in this Hall – look how it suggests the letters M and T. The wood panelling is also typically of the style.



Also notice the sculptures and the Merchant Taylors' Company crests. You might see that they couldn't decide which type of camel should be on the crest. These two are Dromedaries; the ones on the Roll of Honour in the lobby are Bactrian camels. You can tell the difference because the Bactrian has two humps, like the letter B and the Dromedary has one hump like the letter D.

So everything in this school was all absolutely on trend and of the moment in the 1930s. However, the architect also cleverly referenced the school's **first site on Suffolk Street** in the City of London.



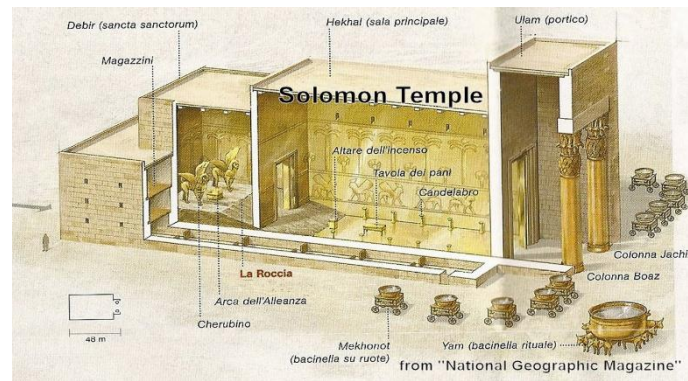
He based his design on elements of the building that replaced the Manor of the Rose after it burned down in the Great Fire of London.



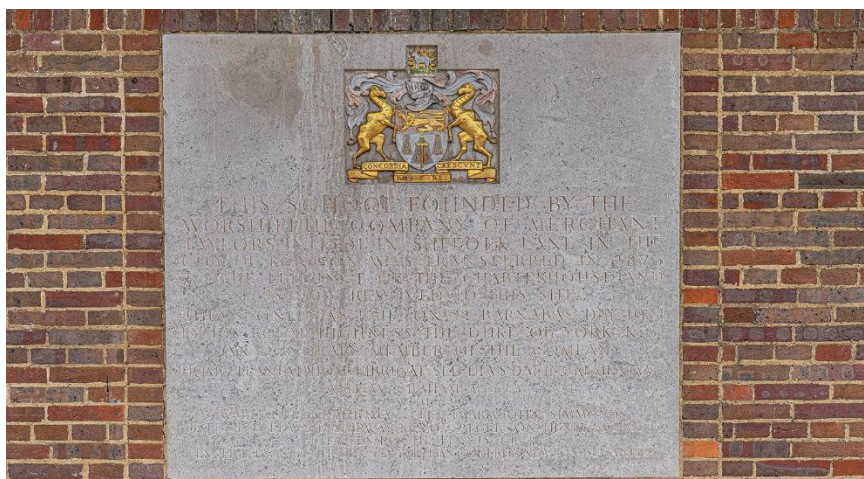
When we came to plan the look of the **Design Centre**, we referenced the Great Hall. Look how the central space of the Design Centre recalls this space we are in. Look how, once again, the ceiling is raw concrete.

There were other influences upon Newton, the architect. He designed the whole school according to Masonic principles – the two long corridors resemble Masonic mathematical compasses; there are Masonic marks everywhere you look.

The Great Hall is at the centre of it all, so it must have the strongest resonance with the mystic ideas of the Masons.



That is why the Hall we are in is a replica of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem. It follows the exact dimensions of that holy building, which stood for almost four centuries until it was destroyed by the Babylonians in the 6th century BC. The Holy of Holies, where they kept the Ark of the Covenant, would have been just behind where I stand now. In this Hall, that space is a room under my feet which would have allowed access to this stage through a trapdoor; on its walls are painted the names of the musicals we have performed here.



Although the school opened on this site in 1933, the building of the whole school took three years. **This Hall was dedicated in 1931** – by the then Duke of York, Prince Albert.

Here is the stone commemorating the event, in the Head Master's Quad. Prince Albert could have had no idea at the time that in just five years, his life would be turned upside down. Prince Albert, against all the odds, became King. He took the throne as George VI in 1936 upon his brother's abdication. George VI is the father of Queen Elizabeth.

The history of the school and of the nation are written into the fabric of this Hall. The table and chairs in the foyer to this Hall were brought from the original school site. They were for the teachers to sit on when they taught their classes. They

replaced the chairs that were burned in the Great Fire of London and date from about 1667.



Let's look at the outside now. **Have you ever noticed the difference between the two outside entrances to the Hall?**

One is one storey; the other is two storey. The taller is formed by the addition of a pill box during World War Two. There are at least two others on the school grounds. Incidentally, there were two Roman villas as well, one of which was on the other side of the road behind the Print Centre, the other was lost when Hampermill Lake was excavated.

I wonder if you have ever looked closely at the decorations and carvings outside, Perhaps the first thing you might notice are two huge empty niches for sculptures. The school had intended to place statues there, but ran out of money.

On each side of the Hall is a series of bas reliefs which depict images of school activities. I am pleased that the front of the Hall presents the extra-curricular activities that pupils could look forward to. From right to left, they show Scouts, swimming, athletics, cricket, rugby, boxing and CCF. Times have changed: we no longer offer boxing or scouts. On the other side of the Hall are the core subjects to be studied at Merchant Taylors'. The images depict Music, Physics, English, Religious Studies, Chemistry, Biology and Design Technology. There are other carvings elsewhere in the school – you can find a series of great thinkers on the outside of the library, and an image from an Athenian coin at the top of the far end of the Hall.

Of course, I have spoken only of the physical attributes of this Hall. In the 89 years it has stood, we have filled it with so many human experiences and memories. I have spoken to Old Boys who remember standing on the roof balcony spotting German planes flying overhead during World War Two. I have spoken to others who interrupted a speech by the Head Master by dropping a toilet roll through an opening in the ceiling, so it unravelled all the way down. The Head was not amused; they still gather to commemorate the act. There have been countless performances, plays, assemblies, St Barnabas and Doctors' Days. So many exams and events. Several members of staff have celebrated their marriages. At other times we have mourned the death of members of staff.

Maybe that is the point of this train of thought. I have shared what I hope has been an interesting series of facts about a building that is so familiar to you that you may no longer look closely at it. I certainly hope it encourages you to look with fresh eyes and gather the details that can make an object, and indeed a life, so fascinating.

But even more importantly, we should remember that however fascinating buildings are, it is what we do within their walls that is even more important. Our actions and experiences animate these special places. Every day we add to the history of Merchant Taylors'. Every day we enrich our school.

