Cardiff Coal Exchange

Designed by Cardiff architect Edwin Seward this elegant and distinctive building operated as one of the economic centres of world trade and is of international significance. Yet Cardiff Council are planning to support the demolition of the entire core of the building, losing all the principal elements of this magnificent structure.

The story of Cardiff's development from small fishing village to the largest and busiest coal exporting dock in the country is well known. Such developments reached their heights in the closing decades of the 19th century when the "black gold" of the Rhondda became one of the most prized and valuable commodities in the world.

Train loads of coal poured in a never-ceasing stream, down the valleys into Cardiff. And that was where most of the deals were carried out, a shipment bought here, tons of coal ordered there. Fortunes were made and lost every single day.

Cardiff had developed from a market town of 10,000 people into the central hub of commerce on the world stage at this point. Unfortunately, in the early years of the town's prosperity there was no central point where all of the various negotiations could take place. Merchants simply chalked up the price they were offering or willing to pay on boards outside their offices and businessmen met in the quiet corners of public houses and taverns to fix prices and buy and sell the coal that was rapidly making Cardiff the greatest trading port ever seen. It was a situation that could not last.
In an attempt to provide a formal centre for the coal trade, Cardiff Coal Exchange was designed and built between 1883 and 1886. It was situated in Mount Stuart Square, within walking distance of Bute Docks, in what had previously been a quiet residential square, complete with a central garden. The design was by the architects James, Seward and Thomas and the building was formally opened on 1 February 1886.

Now, at last, Cardiff businessmen had a place to go each day. It was estimated that as many as eight or nine thousand people passed through the Coal Exchange each day with the hour between noon and 1pm being the busiest trading period.

The Coal Exchange was where the leading businessmen of the south Wales area - ship owners, shipping agents, mine owners - met to fix deals, to buy and sell coal and, of course, to make themselves fortunes.

The Coal Exchange was also the place where, in 1901, the first ever £1 million deal was struck; equivalent to over £100 million in today’s money. In the closing years of the 19th century it was where every businessman with pretensions of grandeur and success needed to be seen.

The Coal Exchange has retained much of its fine and elaborate internal features which richly illustrate the history and the purpose of the building. The wood panelling on the trading wall, the oak balcony and the Corinthian columns all remain.
The Architect Edwin Seward

Edwin Seward (1853-1924), trained in Yeovil and came to Cardiff as an assistant to G.E. Robinson. By 1875 he was a member of the firm James, Seward & Thomas that went on to build some of Cardiff's most notable public buildings in the late 19th century. These included the Free Library in the Hayes (1880-82), the vast Coal and Shipping Exchange (1884-88) in Mount Stuart Square and a couple of the shopping arcades in the city centre.

Edwin Seward played a major role in pushing forward the extensive programme of public building that made Cardiff a world-class capital city.

He became one of its most prominent spokesmen. He was the Honourable Secretary of the Cardiff Fine Art and Industrial Exhibition in 1881, and his name crops up repeatedly in reports of proceedings of societies like the Cardiff, South Wales, and Monmouthshire Architects' Society, the Cardiff Naturalists' Society; the South Wales Art Society and Sketching Club (which he promoted, becoming its Vice-Chairman in 1888); the Royal Cambrian Academy (of which he became a committee member); the Camera Club, and so on.

He also proposed and supported a National Institute for Wales in 1887 to celebrate the Queen's Jubilee, and was one of the art adjudicators at the National Eisteddfod in 1889. His practice flourished and he became a Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1889, and President of the Cardiff Architects' Society in 1894.
The Coal Exchange in 2014

Far from cherishing this building, Cardiff council proposes to demolish the main body of the building, keeping only the facade.

If this happens, then Cardiff and Wales will lose the magnificent interior with its immense historical significance. Surely the grade 2* listed Coal Exchange deserves better?

The Council have been claiming for the past year that it is on the point of collapse. No works have been done, yet there is no evidence that the building is about to collapse. The photograph below was taken recently and shows all the roof areas predominantly intact, with very little evidence of imminent collapse. In fact there is no substantial evidence of the imminent catastrophic building collapse that the council claim.

So much of Cardiff’s social and built heritage has already been destroyed; it seems inconceivable that more can be cast aside with cynical abandon.

It’s unclear why the council cannot see the value of restoring the Coal Exchange, and why this iconic building, that symbolises a key point in our history, is being degraded in this way.

Public support can change attitudes.

Please contact your local councillor, the Minister for Culture and Sport, John Griffiths, and Cadw to record your concerns at this apparent imminent loss of this national treasure.

Save Cardiff’s Coal Exchange from Demolition