

THE BUILDINGS OF

EDGAR WOOD

ARCHITECT, DESIGNER, ARTIST & CRAFTSMAN

IN MIDDLETON TOWN CENTRE



ROCHDALE METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

INTRODUCTION

Edgar Wood was an architect, artist, craftsman, conservationist and town planner. At the beginning of the Twentieth Century, he had a national and international reputation and was regarded as the most important avant-garde architect in the north of England.

Wood was born into a wealthy Middleton family in 1860. From an early age he had a passion for art and spent hours sketching with his friend, Fred Jackson, who later became a prominent artist. Wood instead trained as an architect, though he viewed architecture as an "art". He filled his buildings with beautiful furniture, stained glass and paintings, often of his own design or making. Jackson and Wood sometimes co-operated on painting murals for his buildings.



As an architect, Wood rejected large scale commercial practice and worked as an artist with a small number of assistants designing furniture, stained glass, sculpture, metal and plaster work as well as buildings. Many commissions were from friends and family in Middleton, Huddersfield and Hale. Influenced by the artistic and socialist writings of William Morris, he saw himself as an artisan serving the people of these localities.

Architecture was changing. The Victorian Gothic style was on the wane and architects were looking for a new way to design. *Art Nouveau* was a new style based on extended lines and sensuous curves. It was used for buildings, sculpture, painting and the graphic arts. *Arts & Crafts*, another approach, revived traditional building techniques to create beautiful yet practical buildings. It stressed honest craftsmanship, handmade quality and the importance of art in everyday life. Edgar Wood was a leading practitioner in both.



Arts & Crafts Romance - Halecroft, Hale, Cheshire 1890

Wood's early buildings revived vernacular features, crafts and techniques. They were richly detailed and very romantic. Later, his larger buildings took on strange *Art Nouveau* forms, confirming his avant-garde reputation. Gradually, a plainer style emerged with decoration carefully placed in specific places.



Art Nouveau - First Church of Christ Scientist, Manchester 1903

At the height of his fame, Wood worked with an Oldham architect, J. Henry Sellers, and created a series of radical new buildings of a type unseen before. With their flat reinforced concrete roofs and sometimes geometric patterns, they were among the first examples of "modern architecture" in Europe.



Early Modernism - Royd House, Hale, Cheshire 1914

Edgar Wood constantly sought new architectural expression in practical and well planned buildings. Today, he is regarded as someone ahead of his time; for example, his avant-garde designs anticipate Expressionist architecture of the 1920s and Art Deco of the 1930s. His singular "architectural journey" can be divided into four stylistic phases.

The Young Adventurer 1884-1893

Arts & Crafts Romantic 1893-1899

Art Nouveau Expressionist 1899-1905

Pioneer Modernist 1905-1914

Middleton, uniquely, has examples from each phase. As a group, they demonstrate how Victorian domestic design evolved into the Twentieth Century Modern Movement.

Wood took an active interest in conservation. He helped preserve *St. Leonard's Church, Middleton* and led a campaign to save the large *Colonnade of Manchester Old Town Hall*, rebuilding it in Heaton Park. He also practised town planning and at the *Fairfield Moravian Settlement, Droylsden*, he and Sellers planned *Broadway*, in the new Garden Suburb style.



Town Planning - Broadway, Droylsden 1913-1920

In 1922 Wood retired to Italy to paint, where died in 1935. With neither students nor family to preserve his reputation, he was quietly forgotten and the modern architecture he had anticipated was taken up by a new generation.

In the 1950s, Edgar Wood was rediscovered by John H. G. Archer, who has spent a lifetime fostering Wood's architecture and reputation. Nikolaus Pevsner, the famous art historian and author of the *Buildings of England* series, subsequently praised Wood as the most progressive of all Edwardian architects whose designs were at the cutting edge of European contemporary architecture.

EDGAR WOOD

THE YOUNG ADVENTURER

1884-1893

Despite many small commissions, Wood began by experimenting with the prevailing styles of his day. He developed an architectural language that included dramatic dormers and very tall bay windows that ran through the eaves.

Around 1892, he experimented with smooth terracotta and brick creating early Art Nouveau forms such as the rainwater hopper below.



2 *Manchester and Salford Bank (1892)*

The former *Manchester and Salford Bank* [2] (1892) is the iconic building of this early phase with its ornate pink faience walls, bold dormers, projecting eaves and the unusual combination of symmetry and asymmetry.



7 *Briarhill, 37 & 39 Rochdale Road (1892)*

Briarhill, 37 & 39 Rochdale Road [7] (1892) is a large semidetached pair of houses built in bright red brick and terracotta. It is a distinctive roadside building that closes the view along Spring Gardens. Sadly, its tall chimneys have been lowered reducing the architectural effect.

Edgar Wood

Arts & Crafts Romantic

1893-1899

In 1891 Wood initiated a change in artistic direction when he created one of the first white Arts and Crafts houses in England. After 1893, most of his buildings were built this way using white render on a base of common brick with roofs of heavy stone flags or tiles. He was reinterpreting local vernacular traditions to create modern buildings rich in form, colour and texture, each a work of art in which to live.

Today, it is difficult to imagine how radical such buildings first appeared, since the style became universal in the twentieth century. They were bright, fresh and stimulating. His drawings often showed them in a state of romantic decay - in deliberate opposition to the hard-edged technology of the times.

Two of these romantic "white" buildings can be found in Middleton town centre. His very first, *Redcroft & Fencegate* [6] (1891), and one of his last, a shop and seven houses, 34 to 48 *Rochdale Road* (1898) [10] opposite.



6 *Redcroft & Fencegate* (1891)

Wood skilfully unified *Redcroft & Fencegate* [6] into a single asymmetrical design. There is visual interest, good detailing and a wide range of traditional materials beautifully combined.

Redcroft was Edgar Wood's own home and, from Cleworth Road, one can see the roof lights to his attic studio where he worked on his buildings, created paintings and designed furniture. He was so busy that he installed a speaking tube to communicate with downstairs.



6 *Redcroft & Fencegate* and **7** *Briarhill, Rochdale Road*

Look at *Redcroft & Fencegate* and compare them with *Briarhill* adjacent. The change in style is striking. *Redcroft & Fencegate* are asymmetrical and have a much lighter feel, pointing towards the Twentieth Century. In contrast *Briarhill* is heavy and Victorian. Yet, there are common features too. Each design relies on a large gable and both have the motif of a bay window breaking the eaves topped by a dormer. On *Fencegate* the bay is vernacular in style while on *Briarhill* the bays have very tall Art Nouveau pilasters. When seen together from the south, the houses form an expressive twosome, the larger red building acting as a backdrop to the later white one.



10 *34 to 48 Rochdale Road (1898)*

34 to 48 Rochdale Road [**10**] form an asymmetrical terrace which, uniquely, has a pair of overlapping gables as its main feature with a corner oriel window over the shop entrance. Doors have flat canopies held by iron stays while fanlights above light the interiors. Here, several years later, Wood's interpretation of the vernacular had become increasingly free and inventive. The early photograph shows the original beauty of the terrace now largely hidden by modern alterations. It was at once comfortable and homely, yet sophisticated and artistic.

Edgar Wood

Art Nouveau Expressionist

1899 - 1905

After 1899, Wood used white render only occasionally, instead using common brick to create a plain but subtly textured appearance. His architecture began to rely more on overall form for its effect while decoration was restricted to specific locations, such as on doors. Some buildings became increasingly expressive and he returned to using Art Nouveau motifs, this time sophisticated and fully formed.



3 Long Street Methodist Church and School (1899)

Wood built four Art Nouveau masterpieces all of which are "Outstanding" Listed Buildings. They are *Long Street Methodist Church and School*, Middleton, a large house called *Banney Royd* and *Lindley Clock Tower*, both in Huddersfield, and the *First Church of Christ Scientist* built near Manchester, one of the most distinctive Art Nouveau buildings in England. He also designed working class terraces and smaller buildings with a more traditional feel.

Long Street Methodist Church and School [3] (1899) is characterized by the integration of various buildings around a formal garden. The church is restrained and controlled and its header-bond brickwork imparts an attractive texture to the heavy masonry. Other buildings contrast in white render and all the buildings are roofed in heavy stone slates. The design integrates a series of opposites - sacred and secular, expression and restraint, axial and informal, and rational and romantic. The buildings feel both ancient and modern, and one can find the Medieval, Vernacular, Victorian, Art Nouveau, Arts & Crafts and Modern all harmoniously integrated.

3 *The Church Interior*



(copyright: Andy Marshall)



9 *51 & 53 Rochdale Road (1900)*

Further north, on Rochdale Road, lies a pair of semi-detached houses, *51 & 53 Rochdale Road* [9] (1900). These form a bulky building with a big roof and strong dormers. It is slightly raised up to impress. A counterpoint is the delicate texture of the brickwork and leaded windows. The doors have geometrically shaped panels and carved lintels. The design holds the street corner nicely and avoids absolute symmetry by having a two storey bay window to the left and a single bay to the right.

EDGAR WOOD & J. H. SELLERS

- PIONEER MODERNISTS -

1905 - 1914

Edgar Wood entered into a creative dialogue with J. Henry Sellers around 1904. The result was a new phase and the some of the earliest Modern Movement architecture in Europe.



8 *Arkholme, 1 Towncroft Avenue (1901)*

Prior to this Wood designed *Arkholme*, a photographic studio and house for Charles, brother of Fred Jackson [8]. This is angular and something of a transistional design. The austere character was new, as were the two flat reinforced concrete roofs. Nevertheless, being 1901, the building still has the expressive character of the previous phase.



5 *36 Mellalieu Street (1910)*

36 Mellalieu Street [5] (1910), dispensed with the pitched roof altogether and was one of a series of completely flat roofed buildings which firmly established Wood and Sellers as the English pioneers of modern architecture.



4 Durnford Street School (1908)

Durnford Street School [4] was England's most unusual school and jointly designed by Wood and Sellers. It was revolutionary in its construction, planning and appearance and set new standards of design for children. Sadly, the Upper School was demolished in 2002. The surviving Infant School illustrates the utility of flat roof construction for spanning the modern deep buildings of today.



I 33-37 Manchester Road (1908)

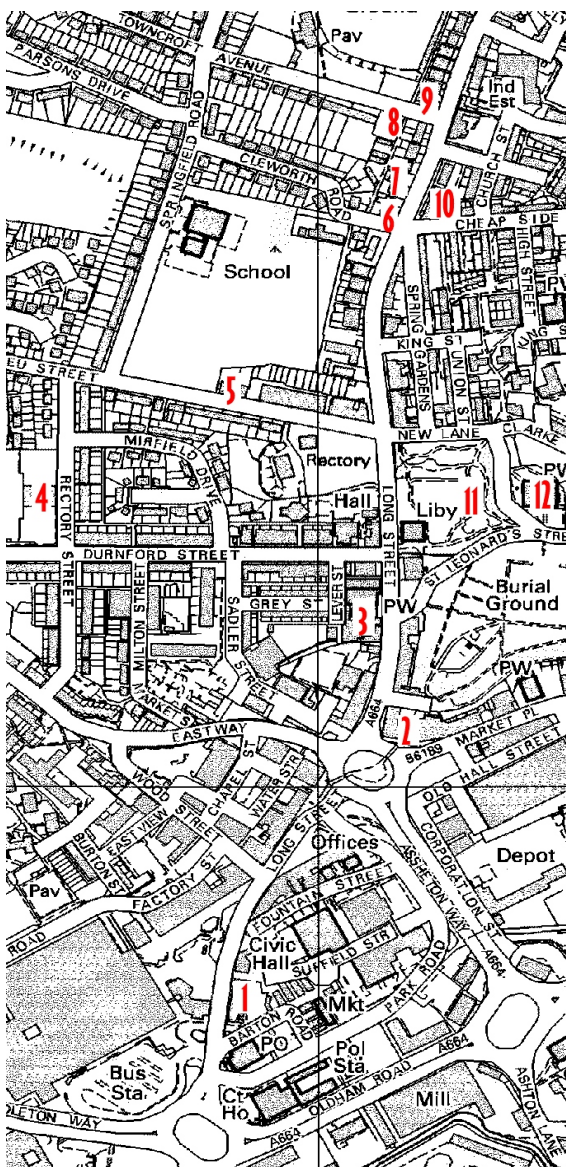
The shops, 33 to 37 Manchester Road [I] (1908) are similarly unparalleled and show Wood's interest in decorative tiles and "jazzy" geometrical patterns in architecture. These buildings anticipate Art Deco of the 1930s.



I I & I2 Staircase, Exedra and Church (1906)

St. Leonard's Church [I2] is one of the finest medieval churches of Lancashire. In 1902, Wood replaced its roof with a sensitive Perpendicular design. He also added a small flat-roofed boiler house and chimney. Finally, in Jubilee Park he designed a formal Staircase, Exedra and Fountain (now lost) [I I] to frame the view of the church tower.

Middleton has a wealth of architecture designed by Edgar Wood. This guide describes the buildings close to the town centre. Uniquely, they show how historical styles evolved into the modern architecture of the Twentieth Century. To use it as a trail, start in *Middleton Gardens*, opposite the shopping centre, and work your way northwards along *Long Street* and *Rochdale Road*. The best place to finish is at *Saint Leonard's Church*, on the hill overlooking the town.



This leaflet is based on the published work of Dr. John H. G. Archer. It has been produced in association with Middleton Heritage & Conservation Group, Friends of Long Street Church, Friends of Edgar Wood & J Henry Sellers, Middleton Civic Association and Middleton Library Local Studies. Text by David Morris MCD MRTPI IHBC.

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