

Art Deco in Loughborough

So, you think you know Loughborough? Well, think again! Too often we rush through life, barely pausing to take in our surroundings, hardly seeing what's around us, fearing that we'll eat into our precious time. But, in so doing we are potentially missing out on some very interesting surroundings!

So, what is Art Deco? The name itself was adopted after the Exposition des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, held in Paris in 1925, and its name was shortened to Art Deco in the 1960s. The heyday was 1920-1940: in the 1920s the decorative style featuring bold geometric shapes, and bright colours, applied to furniture, textiles, ceramics, sculpture, and architecture expressed the vigour and optimism of the 'Roaring Twenties', but by the 1930s had come to represent idealism and escapism.

In relation to architecture, the style is associated with the 'modern age' - garages, airports, ocean liners, hotels, restaurants, luxury apartments, cinemas, swimming pools, office buildings, department stores, power stations, and factories. Neon strip lights were often used, to emphasise the streamlined nature of the designs, and mirrors to enhance and reflect.

Some of the decorative themes associated with the style include sunbursts and fountains, skyscrapers, symbols of speed, power, and light. Ancient cultures, particularly Ancient Egypt, and central America, were also popular themes, and the rule-breaking style extended to music in the form of jazz, shocking dancing, and the wearing of short hair and short skirts.

Before we travel back to 1920s Loughborough, let me introduce you to two important families – both influential across the country, but only one settled in our area.

Francis Berrington Crittall (1825-1878) took over an ironmongery business in Braintree, Essex in 1849. The business was highly successful, but when son, Francis Henry Crittall (1860-1935) took over, he diversified into making steel windows, such that by 1918 he was employing 500 people. The firm produced munitions during the First World War, and housing specifically for the workers was built in 1926 in Witham. Walter Francis (1887-1956) then took on the role of company director, and production of aluminium windows began in the 1950s. After being acquired by venture capitalists, the company was subject to a management buyout, and is now back in Witham. One of the most striking examples of Crittall windows is the frame for the West Screen at Coventry Cathedral.

George Hodson (1844-1907) was the son of a lock maker of Wilenhall. He attended Wolverhampton Grammar School, undertook an apprenticeship with a mining and quarrying engineer, and landed himself a job as a land surveyor at Beaumanor Hall, under the watchful eye of the land steward, Henry Humphreys, at the age of 19. In 1866 George defied all odds and became the surveyor and sanitary inspector for the Loughborough Local Board. In 1874, George and brother James formed the Hathern Station Brock and Terra Cotta Company, and examples of their work can be found across Loughborough, for example, the public library building on Granby Street. George was also an architect with the firm Hodson, Price, and Hodson. Various sons joined the company, and in the 1920s they began to make faience tiles – terracotta that mimicked marble and granite surfaces, being moulded rather than carved. In 1938 the company name was officially changed to Hathernware, and the tiles continued to clad numerous Loughborough buildings, cinemas and other buildings across the country, and even buildings abroad. In later years, the company undertook terracotta restoration work, before being merged with, and then taken over by other companies, and now owned by Michelmersh Brick Holdings, who still produce terracotta and faience ware.

It has been said that Loughborough is a major showcase for Hathern's ceramics and provides a three-dimensional catalogue! Here are just a few examples of the wonderful Art Deco buildings that can be seen around the town.









So, next time you're in town, be sure to look up, look down, look all around! It's not just a mantra ... it's a way of life, and you're sure to see so many things you've not noticed before!

This article is based on the talk 'Art Deco: Loughborough's finest' which I gave to the Woodhouse and Woodhouse Eaves Local History Group in February 2024. Lynne Dyer, author, walker, talker, and blogger - aka lynneaboutloughborough