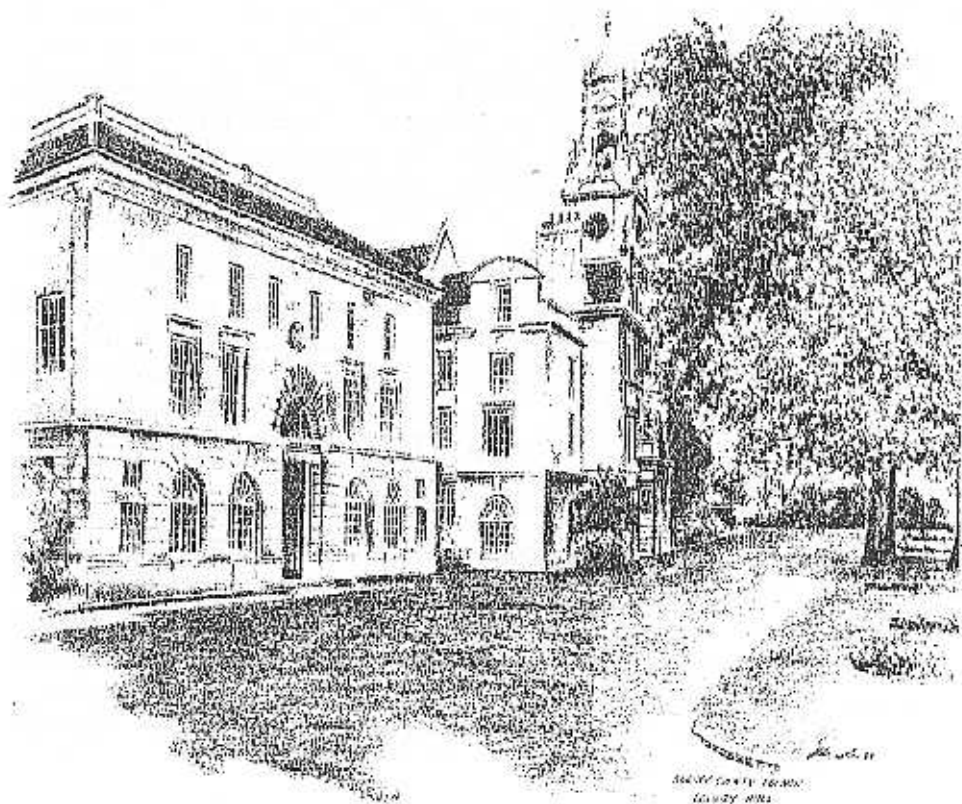




**SURREY**  
COUNTY COUNCIL



A brief history of  
**County Hall**

## The Original County Hall of 1893

In 1889 the first Surrey County Council needed to find a home. The Sessions House at Newington, near the Elephant and Castle, had been the home of the Surrey Court of Quarter Sessions for almost a century but south London had now passed into the new County of London and no longer formed part of Surrey. The County Council considered a number of possible locations for its headquarters. These included the option of remaining in London, the focal point of the railway system and the city in which many of the members pursued their businesses and professions. Nevertheless the decision was taken to move into the administrative county and on 15 April 1890, after intense lobbying and amid keen local interest, Kingston was selected as the location of County Hall, defeating Guildford, Wimbledon, Epsom and Redhill.

The site first selected was in St James' Road on the Kingston Hall estate, but running sand was discovered in the subsoil. County Hall was built on a two acre site on the Woodbines estate which was purchased from Mr C F Jemmett for £4,000. It faced Grove Road (later renamed Penrhyn Road in honour of the first Chairman of the County Council) which was being improved by Kingston Borough as the main thoroughfare between central Kingston and Surbiton station.

Charles Henry Howell, the architect of County Hall, had been appointed County Surveyor of Surrey by the Court of Quarter Sessions in 1860. He designed Brookwood and Cane Hill lunatic asylums for the County as well as police stations and bridges. His official work was not full-time and he was also a partner in a private firm of surveyors, Howell and Brooks, and a surveyor to the Norwich Union Insurance Office. Higgs and Hill won the building contract with a tender of £41,964.

Between 1891 and 1893 County Hall was in course of construction. On 3 June 1893 the 'Surrey Comet' was able to describe the 'palatial structure in Grove Road'. This covered the north-eastern part of the site and was the most imposing building in late-nineteenth century Kingston. The newspapers drew attention to the sculptures by Farmer and Brindley: Law and Liberty, Peace and Plenty, Justice and Mercy over the windows of the first floor grand hall;

the arms of Guildford, Godalming, Reigate, Richmond and Kingston; the arms of the Earl of Lovelace, Lord Lieutenant of Surrey, in the southern gable of the façade, together with the royal arms on the western aspect; and the Four Seasons on the tower buttresses.

On the first floor the building provided the Council Chamber, the Clerk of the Council's office, a committee room (committee room A), a court, grand jury room (now committee room C) and rooms for witnesses, jurors and barristers. The court has now moved out to a purpose built building alongside County Hall and in recent years various alterations have been made to the rooms to meet changing requirements and the implementation of Workstyle.

The ground floor contained offices for the County Treasurer and Technical Education Secretary and their staff, the Chairman's room and for the clerks. It also held the store, the strong room for records, prisoners' cells and warders' quarters .

On 13 November 1893 County Hall was open from 2 o'clock to 5 for viewing by invitation. A band played and the guests viewed every part of the building from the cells and heating chamber to the splendours of the great hall. The next day, following lunch as guests of the Mayor and Corporation of Kingston, Surrey County Council met for the first time in County Hall. One of the members, F S Merryweather of New Malden, wrote that 'our Aldermen and our Councillors, elected by voices of many, many, thousands met in a palatial building designed to meet the luxurious requirements of modern life, and in the construction of which art and science have lent their latest trophies to produce a Shire Hall worthy of its high significance as representative of the progress in the refinement of manners and customs, and in the increase of the population and material wealth of the County of Surrey'.

## Later Extensions

County Hall was built with the needs of council and committee meetings, courts and a minimal administrative staff in mind. As the County Council acquired new duties and powers, staffing levels increased. By 1914 the County Council was occupying five private houses in the vicinity of County

Hall and an office hired from Kingston Corporation. A scheme prepared in 1914 by the architect Henry Hare for extending County Hall southwards was a victim of the outbreak of war. By 1927 there were 39 staff in County Hall and 135 in converted houses in and around Penrhyn Road.

Vincent Harris was commissioned to design an extension to County Hall. He created a new entrance block connected to the south of the existing building with a short south wing extending westwards. This extension, intended for 200 staff, was opened by the Duke of Gloucester in 1930. By 1934 another extension was required. This was built and opened in 1938 by extending the 1930 wing westwards and adding a west wing to it. The building of the 'Ashcombe Block' completed the quadrangle.

In July 1944 a flying bomb demolished the Ashcombe block. War damage was repaired between 1945 and 1950, although shrapnel marks can still be seen in the stonework. The Ashcombe block was rebuilt in 1953 and this block extended to meet the west wing in 1961. In 1963 a new northern quadrangle began to be formed when the west wing was extended north of the Ashcombe block, facing across to the 1893 building. This was completed in 1982 by the erection of the computer block. Although successive extensions had been designed ever simpler, the computer block was the first of the quadrangle buildings to be designed in a modern style.

The County Hall complex therefore now comprises two quadrangles with buildings dating between 1893 and 1982. In addition, there is a small detached block to the south, built in 1961 as the staff canteen and extended in 1972 to provide staff recreational facilities and offices.

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