

# From Primary School to Art Gallery

Dr. Chris Upton



Building in use as theatre stores  
c. 1960s

## 5 October 1876

The Education Board approves the tender of Messrs Horsley Bros. to build the school for £10,222.

## May 1877

The building of a new board school in Oozells Street begins after the landlord of the Britannia Tavern accepts an 'inducement' of £40 to relinquish the lease early.

## 28 January 1878

Oozells Street School opens with accommodation for 807 girls, boys and infants. On the first afternoon students and trainee teachers treat parents to a concert over tea.

## July 1879

The Board buys the freehold of the whole site for £3,500. The school occupies a site of 2,271 yards as regulations require a minimum of 10 square feet per child.

## 29 May 1897

A report by the Site and Buildings committee recommends the closure of Oozells Street School because of the "Rapid destruction of small house property near to the city centre" with the children being accommodated in adjacent schools.

## 22 August 1898

In the course of two weeks the headmaster's study is burgled and twice flooded by the central heating boiler.

The building in which you are standing has been everything from a primary school to a theatrical stores. But if you had to summarize its chequered history in three words they would probably be education, education and education.

W E Forster's Education Act of 1870 aimed, "to bring an elementary education to every home in England, even to children without homes." The immediate result was an explosion of school buildings throughout the country, as the newly created school boards struggled to provide accommodation before the act became compulsory.

In Birmingham a total of 28 new schools were built in the first ten years and one of them was Oozells Street School. The contract for the Birmingham board schools was awarded to the architectural firm of Chamberlain & Martin. The former was John Henry Chamberlain, whose later commissions included the school of Art in Margaret Street and Springhill Library in Hockley. Chamberlain and Martin's schools all followed the same basic pattern: a central assembly hall, separate entrances (and playgrounds) for boys and girls and a tall tower. The latter was no mere decoration as it drew fresh air down in to the building to be circulated around the classrooms. Children, the theory went, learnt better in a draught!

Geographically, Oozells Street School was dropped from a great height into a crowded area of small industrial works, with a hinterland of back-to-back housing. The catchment area was a poor one, but the low admission price of one penny a week (the minimum charge possible under the Act) ensured a more healthy attendance. It even attracted children from the wealthier areas on the other side of Broad Street, whose parents knew a bargain when they saw one. But less than 20 years after it opened much of the surrounding area had disappeared in a slum clearance scheme and the school faced the first of many changes of use.

In August 1898 Oozells Street re-opened as the George Dixon Higher Grade School, offering a scientific and technical education to boys and girls of 11 and over. As such it was one of the three secondary schools in the city. Hurried conversion work had turned some of the classrooms into science and engineering labs. Secondary schooling at the time was not compulsory and was not free: the average fees for a year's instruction amounted to £3. There were however courses in three foreign languages – French, German and Spanish – and native instructors to teach them too.

In June 1906 the George Dixon school moved out to purpose built premises on City road and Oozells Street put on a new uniform again, this time becoming a Pupil Teachers' Centre for girls. Here pupils spent two years in secondary education (from the age of 15) before entering a teacher training college. It was, in everything but name, a girl's grammar school.

Soon after opening, the Pupil Teacher's Centre was sharing its premises with a branch of the City Technical College. A bewildering range of courses was available day and night, many of the students attending outside work hours. But the old links with Europe had not been lost, a 'Club Français' met weekly until the 1940s for conversation, drama and dancing. While the metal bashing continued in the factories next door this particular bit of Broad Street had an unexpectedly continental feel.

## 2 June 1902

School closes for the day on the announcement of the end of the Boer War and on the 25 June the children are allowed one week's holiday to celebrate the distribution of medals for the coronation of Edward VII.

## 1929

Oozells Street is offering full time courses in Mathematics, History and English as well as language lessons for workers in their lunch times.

## 1935

An innovative new course on "Electrical Housecraft" is popular with those who cannot handle their new vacuum cleaner.

## 1967

The Catering Department moves out to form part of the new college of Food and Tourism in Summer Lane. This marks the end of 60 years of higher education at Oozells Street.

## 1968

Oozells Street finds a new use, as a theatrical costume hire department and then as a road tax office.

## May 1995

Ikon Gallery wins a grant of £3.7 million for the National Lottery to convert the school into a contemporary art Gallery.



Pre-development, c.1995

## 21 March 1998

Oozells Street re-opens as the new home of Ikon Gallery with free admission to all visitors.

## 2013

Ikon celebrates 15 years in Brindleyplace.

In July 1981, after petitions from those with fond memories of their time there, the old school became a listed Grade II building, saving it from re-development that was transforming the surrounding area. All it needed, as the French would have said, was 'raison d' être' – a reason to live.

In the early 1990s, whilst Oozells Street School was looking for a new owner, across the city in John Bright Street, Ikon Gallery was looking for a new home. Founded in 1963 by a small group of artists, Ikon had grown from a kiosk in the Bullring to a warehouse building next to the Alexandra Theatre. But this place too seemed to be shrinking and unable to suit visitors' needs. The solution seemed obvious but it took a lottery grant of £3.7 million to make it happen, plus the offer of the site to Ikon at a peppercorn rent by the developers, Argent plc. Ikon employed the architectural firm of Levitt Bernstein Associates led by Axel Burrough and Paul Clark, to convert the old school into a place suitable for contemporary art.

The architects turned one building into two; preserving the outside shell of the Victorian school and putting an entirely new, steel-framed gallery inside. A total of 440 square metres of gallery space where children once did their sums! Anyone who remembers what the interior of school used to look like will be in for a big surprise.

On the outside the changes are subtler, such as the rebuilding of the Victorian tower to its original design, skillfully re-worked from old photographs. In addition a scenic glass lift and stairway as well as a service lift clad in lead have been built on to the outside of the gallery to allow maximum gallery space within. An important innovation was suggested by the artist Tania Kovats (who worked directly with the architects) which was to set the building apart from its surroundings on a dramatic slate plinth. As such the gallery refuses to be bullied by the high-rise office blocks around it.

And so Oozells Street School is re-born. When it was first built Burne-Jones the Pre-Raphaelite painter was putting finishing touches to his oil painting, 'Pygmalion', 120 years later a new generation of artists will be bringing the old model to life yet again.

© 1998. Dr. Chris Upton is a writer and historian based in Birmingham.

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Open Tuesday – Sunday  
and Bank Holiday Mondays  
11am–6pm – free entry

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