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 that 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.
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 redevelopment 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.