



Pierhead Building, Cardiff  
**BRIEF HISTORICAL ANALYSIS**  
for National Assembly for Wales

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## Pierhead Building, Cardiff – Brief Historical Analysis

The Pierhead building was conceived as offices for the Bute Docks Company, following the destruction of their previous offices by fire in 1892. The building contract for construction, by W Thomas, was dated 12 July 1894 but it was not until August bank holiday 1897 that the new offices were officially opened. By this time the Bute Docks Company had become the Cardiff Railway Company, which remained part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marquis of Bute's estate.

The architect William Frame, already working on many of Lord Bute's personal building schemes, was entrusted with the project. The elaborate red brick and terracotta details, and most likely the interior majolica tiling, were supplied by J C Edwards of Ruabon, who were reputedly the world's largest terracotta manufacturer. The characteristically red materials were made at the Pen-y-bont Brick and Tile Works.

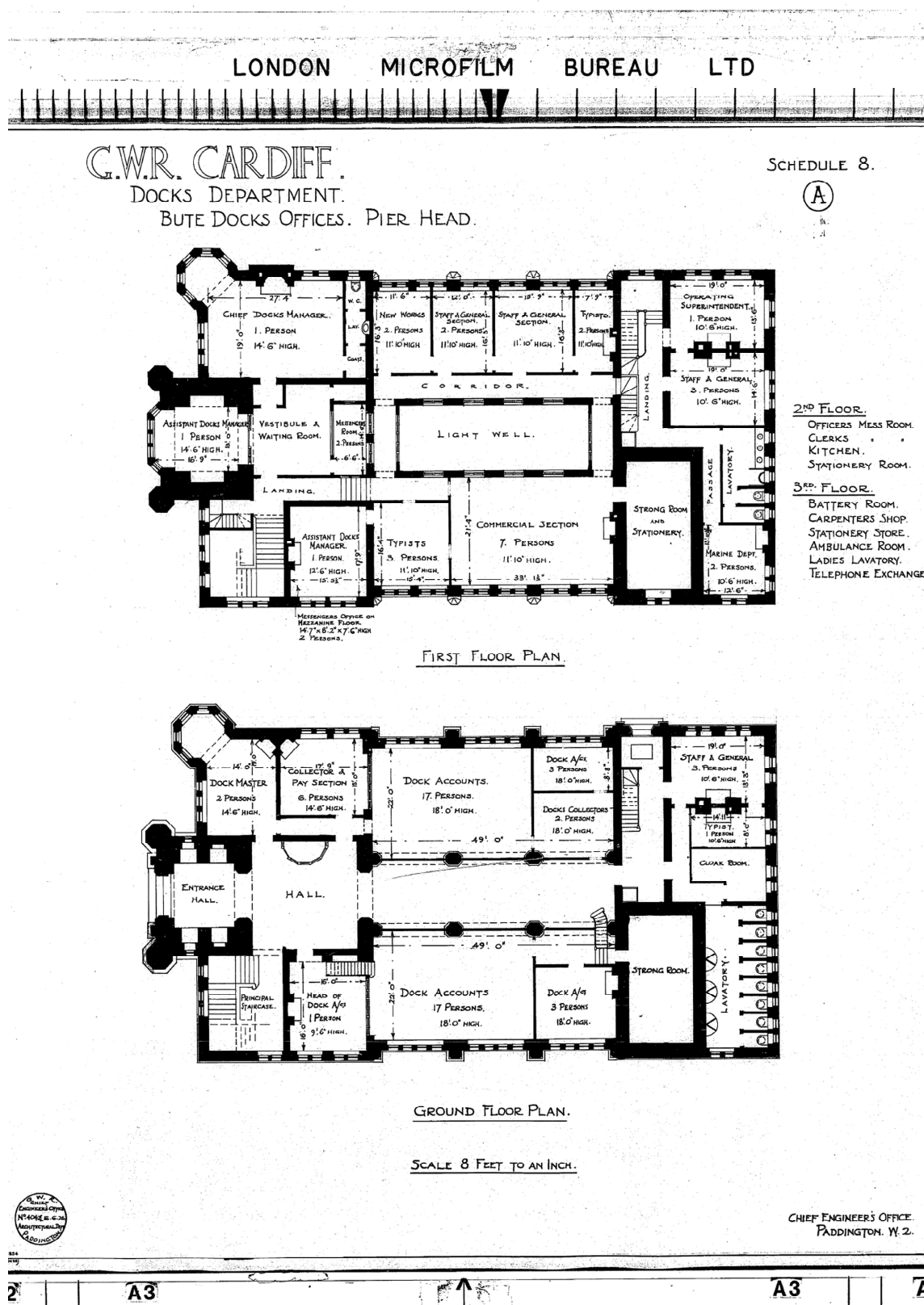
There appears to be very little archive information relating to the original construction of the building. The earliest drawings that have been located are held by Network Rail's records office in York. These date from 1926 and were prepared by the Great Western Railway's Chief Engineer's Office in Paddington, after the GWR took over the Pierhead building and Bute docks on the 1<sup>st</sup> January 1922. The drawings illustrate the layout and use of the ground and first floor accommodation and also describe uses of the higher floor levels, which are not shown. The information appears to be a record, as no alterations are indicated, and may well be very close to the original layout. Various managerial and administrative offices are arranged in a clear and functional hierarchy with managers occupying the principal rooms in the southern section of the building, general offices in the larger central spaces and storage, service and staff facilities in the northern section of the building.

Comparing the 1926 layout with the current arrangement, there are some obvious changes:

- The sanitary facilities have been updated and increased. Additional sanitary provision has been made to the south of the central light well, opening off the higher floor level; this replaces the "messengers' room" which was separated from a "waiting room" by a glazed screen to the south. The original glass block floor of the messengers' room remains intact below the modern construction and would have provided borrowed light into the reception hall below, through the north bay of the ceiling.
- Two passenger lifts have been inserted to improve access to the majority of the floor levels. This has compromised some of the secondary office spaces and confused the original relationship between the affected rooms. The steps at both external doors have also been altered to provide level access.
- Screens subdividing the central accounts section at ground floor level have been removed; scars are still visible on the terracotta piers and indicate that the screens were around 2.1m high. The level at which the bead mould starts, on the corner of the chimney breast adjacent to the strong room door, is likely to have coincided with the missing mezzanine floor that would have been reached via the open stair shown on the 1926 plan.
- At first floor level, the general offices to the east and west of the central light well, have been opened up by the removal of partition walls.
- Nearly all of the fireplaces have been removed, only the Chief Dock Manager's fireplace remains.

Regrettably the 1926 drawing does not indicate constructional details, materials and finishes or offer any idea of building services and there is an absence of further drawn information until nearly the end of the twentieth century. The robust loadbearing brick and terracotta wall

construction supports steel and concrete floors and a steel roof structure with slate finish. The materials suggest that there may have been a deliberate decision to make the superstructure fireproof, given the fate of its predecessor.



GWR Chief Engineer's Office drawing of 16<sup>th</sup> June 1926 (courtesy of Network Rail records office York)

The internal changes to the building layout have had little effect on the external appearance. Some rooflights that were introduced on the east and west facing roof slopes have subsequently been removed in the recent re-roofing works completed in 2005. The outer canopy over the central rooflight has also been replaced with a polycarbonate covering and the ventilation cowls to the central ridge, evident in a 1923 aerial view (cover photograph) of the building, and presumably relating to existing grilles in the ground floor ceiling, have been completely removed. There was a short-lived single storey extension linked to the north elevation of the building between 1990 and 1996.

Internally there are many surviving decorative features and fittings of considerable quality. Wall surfaces are punctuated by the terracotta window surrounds and tracery and further elaborate features in all of the principal spaces and main circulation areas. Unfortunately, in some areas where terracotta has been affected by penetrating damp, the internal surface is over-painted, either with red tile paint or to match the plaster wall finish, with varying degrees of success. The entrance areas, main circulation spaces and stairs have a high dado finished in polychromatic majolica tiles which remains substantially intact. There is a consistency to the surviving original oak joinery fittings and linings which is missing in later alterations and adaptations. The floor to the entrance areas is terrazzo/granolithic, relaid in the lobby to provide ramped access. Elsewhere oak blocks/parquet appears to have predominated in the main offices and circulation areas with softwood boards in the less important rooms; some badly worn areas of parquet were renewed around 2000. The plaster ceilings to the entrance, main stair and Chief Docks Manager's office all have a geometric pattern of heavily profiled ribs with various cast embellishments to the stair and office ceilings. The architectural pretensions of the interior diminish from south to north.

Painted finishes are now a uniform white throughout the habitable areas which appears rather stark against the richness of the other self-coloured materials. It is only behind the scenes that there is a glimpse of previous colour schemes; the stair providing access to the clock tower has a rather grubby chocolate and cream livery that is distinctly reminiscent of the Great Western Railway's carriage colours and may well date from their custody of the building between 1922 and 1948.

The original heating fuel would have been coal, both for the open fireplaces and to fuel a basement boiler that served cast iron column radiators around the interior. A few radiators survive along with some inter-war additions in the main function hall, but much of the original wet system pipework has been cut out in favour of modern air conditioning units linked back to roof mounted condensers. The original plumbing, heating and lighting services were closely integrated with the building fabric and largely hidden within the depth of the construction. Some remnants of the gas lighting survive in the utilitarian service areas. Later mechanical additions have, for the most part, been surface mounted and, together with the plethora of new electrical equipment and containment, this has done nothing for the character of the interior. The original clock movement, by Potts of Leeds, returned to Cardiff in 2005 after an absence of some 30 years and is being restored by Smiths of Derby; it has not yet been returned to the building.

The building was occupied as dock offices for over one hundred years before being taken over by the National Assembly for Wales as offices and a visitor and education centre in 1999.

The listing description is included below for reference.

## Listing Description

Title: Pier Head Building  
Grade: I  
Use: Commercial  
Century: 19th

Property description: LOCATION: Faces S across Cardiff Bay to E of the Industrial & Maritime, between entrances to Bute East & West Docks.

HISTORY: Built in 1896 by William Frame, assistant to William Burges as offices for the Cardiff Railway Company, successor to the Bute Dock Company. Medievalist style with strong influence of Burges (in contrast to the Classical dock offices at Barry) combining muscular Gothic and French Renaissance elements. 2-storeys; brightly constructed throughout in glazed terracotta, representing a fine example of the use of this material; abundant sculptural ornament and banding. Slate roofs; small-pane glazing, round headed to 1st floor and square headed below.

EXTERIOR: Design dominated by 2-stage clock tower at S end over main entrance; pyramidal roof and crenellated parapet with gargoyles. Clock faces recessed beneath semi-circular arches with fleuron paneled balconies; flanking lions heads and coats of arms. Splayed oriel over main entrance including crenellated transom and machiolated bracket base. Squat round arched entrance with deeply rounded jambs; battered bases to flanking octagonal and domed turrets. Panelled doors, halfglazed tympanum and swirling bands of foliage. Larger, Low Countries style, polygonal corner towers beyond, incorporated into main rooms and glazed to each face; pyramidal roof, gargoyles, colonnettes and foliage band between floors. 7-bay left hand side, the southernmost of which is taken up with exceptional chimney breast, heavily enriched with terracotta ornament including steam train and ship over the company's motto 'Wrth ddwr a than'; the whole set in a tiered frontspiece-like frame and topped by 3-linked chimney stacks; bronze commemorative plaque to base. Central 3-bays are divided by buttresses with polygonal faces and domed caps. Steep-hipped roof tower beyond over entrance inscribed Bute Docks Co. ; round arched with panelled surround; chimney stack and band of narrow round arched panels to top. Northernmost bay has bracketed gable-oriel with 3-light transomed window; gable has blind oculus and finials. Simpler right hand side with central 3-bays divided off as before; 2-windows near southern end are set in foliage surround. Plain N end.

INTERIOR: Entrance is onto square lobby, decoratively tiled and with panelled ceiling; round arched recesses to both sides with labels and nook shafts. This leads through to tall and grand hall; includes terrazzo floor, with central roundel repeating the company's motto and panelled ceiling. Church-like, double-arcaded hall of offices to rear through full height, moulded arch with foliage spandrels; terracotta detail includes twin pilasters between each arch, rising to carry the glazed clerestory roof along the central nave. The main stairwell leads off the front right hand corner of the entrance hall. The staircase is enriched by varied and colourful materials including granite treads, terracotta (stellar-section) balusters including enormous newels and green-glazed tile handrail; gilded Minton style tilework to dado (ca 1.8m high) - includes swagged band to top. The single-best room is the Port Manager's office on 1<sup>st</sup> floor with castellated and canopied 'medieval' chimneypiece with heavily foliated columns and herringbone tiled fireback; panelled ceiling with pendant to octagonal centrepiece. Round arch into corner tower bay in this office and that below. Crenellated and half-glazed partitions to 1<sup>st</sup> floor office corridors; panelled doors. Original ironwork spiral stairs inside clock-tower manufactured by St Pancras Ironwork Co, London; curved braces to treads.

LISTED: Listed Grade I as a central and especially important building to the historical and visual dockscape of Cardiff; it is furthermore an exceptional Victorian building reflecting the confidence of the period in its flamboyant architectural detail, particularly in its use of terracotta.

REFERENCE: M Parker and N Carter, Butetown, A Visitors Guide, 1989, p.5. The Inner Harbour - An Historical Appraisal. An unpublished report prepared by The Survey of Cardiff for Cardiff Bay Development Corporation, March 1989, pp 103-4.

Record number: 14055  
Listing date: 19 May 1975