

ENGLISH HERITAGE ADVICE

Printed on 13/11/95

901-1//10039

District BRISTOL AVON
Parish BRISTOL FOI Case Number 84260

Former Robinson/DRG Building
1 REDCLIFF STREET

New PRN 901-1//10039
Existing PRN
Date First Listed
Map Reference TQ::

----- RECOMMENDATION -----

----- ALTERNATIVE ADVICE -----

None.

----- RECOMMENDATION DETAILS -----

I have looked at all the papers on this file and other relevant information and have carefully considered the architectural and historic interest of this case.

The Post-War Steering Group considered this building at its meeting of 8 November, and felt that it was just of listable quality. However, the threat of alteration has recinded, as Bristol City Council have negotiated an acceptable and demountable canopy for the building. We therefore felt that it would be inappropriate to recommend listing at this time.

I attach a report on the former Robinson Building, now simply known as No. 1 Redcliff Street. It was early in the development of open-plan offices, and its grid-like use of small openings is also remarkable for the date of 1961-3. It was designed by a local architect, John Collins, and was Bristol's first tall building - hence the controversy when it was constructed.

----- INSPECTION -----

The item has been inspected.
The item has been inspected internally (Fully).

----- ADDITIONAL OBSERVATIONS -----

None.

----- INSPECTOR -----

Name ELAIN HARWOOD

Date 13/11/95

Former Robinson Building, No. 1 Redcliff Street, Bristol

The E S A Robinson company, an international packaging concern, had established itself on this site in 1846. In 1961 they began construction of a replacement office building, completed in 1963. It was to be large enough for the expanding company's need, and to have extra floors which could be sublet to prestigious firms. The Dickinson Robinson Group, as Robinson's became, have now vacated the building, which is being refurbished. Bristol City Council have now received a planning application for a large wavy canopy round the ground floor, and have applied for the building to be listed.

Robinson's was the first commercial tall building to appear in Bristol and it remains controversial, thanks to its central position on the south side of its oldest river crossing. The architect was John Collins, a local man who ran Robinson's in-house architect's department and who later developed a related private practice from within the building. The design was 'commended' in May 1961 by Basil Spence, who may have had a consultancy role but who had no part in the design; nevertheless, there is something of his and Renton's Gaiety Theatre competition/Thorn House design, especially in the treatment of the high, open tank room storey. But it is more interesting on two counts:

Robinson's was the first tall building to be designed as an open-plan office. It is fifteen-storeys high, including the double-height top floor. The first floor was cantilevered over a largely clear-glazed ground floor, its concentration of weight-loadings allowed it to house the post-room and storage facilities. The other floors were entirely clear round a central service core, which served also as a windbrace. Some demountable partitioning was permitted on the executive floors (notably the eleventh, where it survives - though it has no special interest). To the side is a single-storey conference suite set at mezzanine height over the carpark.

In the late nineteenth century Bristol evolved its own style of warehouse design, based on arcades of tiny Venetian round-headed windows and commonly known as the Bristol Byzantine. Robinson's is a modern assertion of the idiom. In this it anticipates a style much imitated subsequently, as the repetitive small window unit became a common feature of late 1960s and early 1970s design. The Builder for 16 March 1962 illustrated a mock-up of a corner of the building, to test the cladding system and internal finishes - again, then still a novel thing to do in Britain, though not in America. The result was a white Carrara marble aggregate finish which is of exceptional brilliance and quality, and which remains not only finely finished but also unstained. The large chunks of exposed aggregate do not give the building a strong moulding, but impart an exceptional shine.

John Collins (1922-) was born in Bristol and trained as an engineer. He joined Robinson's in 1946, just as he began to retrain as an architect, and he became chief group architect in 1948 as he completed his studies. He claimed that the engineering background gave him a proficiency in services, and in 1956 he founded a building centre in Bristol. He went on to design a number of other large office buildings in Bristol, and still lives in a block of flats constructed to his own design in Sneyd Park. He retains an interest in his major work to this day.

Building Design for 10 November 1972 describes how, when it opened, students from Bristol

University marched through the city with a model of the building and then burnt it in effigy. The company retained the ashes as part of its museum collection. Now the surrounding area has been filled with lower, red-brick versions of sub-Byzantine style, and Robinson's has become an established landmark in the city. It remains a prestigious headquarters office, well occupied. As the chief interest of the interior is its bareness of design, management guidelines could easily be devised.

The interest of Robinson's lies externally in the quality of its finish, and its clever adaptation of a local idiom. The open-plan interior is also of considerable historic interest. The combination suggests that it is of the grade II standard established by our earlier recommendations.

Sources

Architects' Journal, 30 December 1964, pp. 1555-70

Architect and Building News 24 May, p.677

Interbuild, November 1964, pp.24-7

Architect and Building News, 2 December 1964, pp.1067-72.

Architect's Journal, 15 January 1959, pp.88-9

Building Design, 10 November 1972, p.6

Elain Harwood

October 1995