

# The Foreign and Commonwealth Office

## History

When Charles James Fox was appointed the first Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in March 1782, he had a very small staff whose office consisted of no more than two former private houses in Cleveland Row, conveniently near to St James's Palace to which all foreign ambassadors in London were accredited. After a brief period at the Cockpit, Whitehall, the Foreign Office moved in 1793 to what had been Lord Sheffield's house in Downing Street, and by the 1820s, it was also occupying neighbouring properties there and in Fludyer Street (which ran behind and parallel with Downing Street).

This was even then an area of great historical interest: Fludyer Street, named after Sir Samuel Fludyer, a former Lord Mayor of London, was built on the site of Axe Yard, where Samuel Pepys had begun his famous Diary, and some of the many local inns could trace their origins back to mediaeval hostels established for pilgrims visiting the shrine of King Edward the Confessor at Westminster Abbey. But while the houses occupied by the Foreign Office had some large and handsome rooms, in general they provided grossly inadequate accommodation for a major department of state. Increased public business had meant increases in staff for whom no more room was available: there was insufficient storage space for the state papers in current use, while the Library was overflowing and books were banked three deep in the passages. Even more worrying were the signs of structural instability. The houses in Downing Street had been built over an old watercourse known as the Meresflete, and their foundations were giving way. The end houses had actually fallen down and the Foreign Office was propped up by large wooden posts. Subsidence was aggravated by the vibration from the official printing presses in the attic, so there were regular complaints of gaping walls, horrid smells and falling ceilings.

Such tales of woe were not entirely ignored: Sir John Soane had added a new ground floor façade to the Foreign Office in Downing Street, in order to make better use of the rooms behind, and Decimus Burton had drawn up plans for a new Office on the same site after an official enquiry in 1839. Lack of money and public support, however, prevented any significant developments until the 1850s. The mistakes of the Crimean War then stimulated demands for bureaucratic reform, and this reinforced the view that government departments needed purpose-built buildings. This view was encouraged by Lord Palmerston, a former Foreign Secretary, when he became Prime Minister in 1855. In the following year, an international competition inviting designs for a new Foreign Office was announced. By March 1857, 218 designs ranging from neoclassical to Gothic and French Empire styles had been received, for consideration by a committee whose members included Brunel.

In fact, not one of the winning designs was ever built, but a later government committee was so impressed by the skill, resources and Gothic architectural style championed by George Gilbert Scott (winner of the third prize) that he was appointed architect of the Foreign Office on 29 November 1858.

After the Indian Mutiny in 1857, the government of the sub-continent passed from the East India Company to the newly appointed India Office. The Company's old office was too small and remote for the new organization so it was decided to build a new office on the site looking on to St James' Park and adjoining that of the Foreign

Office. Scott's commission was extended to include the building of the India Office but, as Matthew Digby Wyatt was already the India Office's Surveyor, the two reached a gentlemanly agreement that Scott would be responsible for the Foreign Office and exterior of the India Office while Wyatt should retain sole responsibility for the India Office interior. In 1859 the designs for the new Foreign Office were exhibited in the House of Commons.

That same year, however, Palmerston returned to office as Prime Minister for a second term, and he dismissed Scott's Gothic design as 'the barbarism of the Dark Ages', and the subsequent Byzantine design as 'a regular mongrel affair'. He further informed Scott that if he did not produce a classical design, another more amenable architect would be appointed alongside him. Scott was so wedded to the Gothic style that he was reluctant to compromise his architectural principles, but his family convinced him that he could not refuse the honour of such a magnificent commission. He then went on an extended study tour in Europe, obtained some books on Italian architecture and produced the designs for the building we see today.

Scott began work on the new Offices in 1861, laying concrete foundations twelve feet thick in the boggy ground. In 1868 both the new Foreign and India Offices were open for business, and Scott moved on to the planning and construction of the Colonial and Home Offices. The old Colonial Office buildings in Downing Street were pulled down in 1870, and the new offices, forming an irregular rectangle with the Foreign and India Offices, were completed by 1875.

For the rest of the century, and indeed, until the First World War, these buildings were adequate for the staff they housed, but afterwards there was a desperate shortage of space. Even the building of another storey in 1925 and the post-1945 partition of the great Reception Suite into offices gave no more than temporary relief; and in 1963, as part of Sir Leslie Martin's master plan for Whitehall, Mr Geoffrey Rippon, minister for Public Buildings and Works, announced that Scott's building was to be demolished and that new offices would be built on the site. This caused a public debate on the architectural value of the Old Public Offices and led to their being classified as a Grade 1 Listed Building. The demise of the Colonial Office, the amalgamation of the Foreign and Commonwealth Offices in 1968 and proposals for some dispersal outside London, all delayed any final decision on the building until the 1980s when the Property Services Agency suggested a fresh approach.

Following Ministerial approval, and the decanting of staff into the then vacant Home Office building, work began in 1984 on the first phase of a rolling programme of renovation and modernization, planned by the FCO and managed by the PSA in collaboration with the consultant architects, Cecil Denny Highton. The first phase, covering the greater part of the Old India Office, was completed in 1987, while the second, which included many of the most significant areas of the Foreign Office, such as the Grand Staircase and the Secretary of State's Room, was concluded in June 1990. The remaining sectors were completed by January 1997. The programme overall has been designed to achieve a more efficient location and relationship of departments, as well as giving approximately 25% more useable accommodation – all for considerably less than the cost of demolition and rebuilding.

Following the restoration, all the Fine Rooms and areas such as Durbar Court are used constantly by the FCO and other Government Departments for meetings, lectures and official functions. In certain special circumstances the rooms can also be hired by outside organisations such as charities, and the fees so generated show that restoration work of this quality is even more cost-effective.