

# Rye Lane's Art Deco Quarter

Benedict O'Looney M.Arch RIBA

The central part of Rye Lane in Peckham has a remarkable cluster of Art Deco buildings, markers of the commercial vigour and enterprise of local business which made Rye Lane South London's premier shopping destination in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

These buildings also demonstrate how London's commercial architects were quick to adopt the new modernist architectural style which was making waves on the Continent and in the United States. Peckham's Art Deco Quarter comprises more than six buildings in the central part of Rye Lane, with a further three which were alas demolished in the last decade along the Lane.

This group includes the arcade and the buildings around Peckham Rye Railway Station, The former department store opposite at 117-125 Rye Lane, Holdron's department store & show rooms at 135 Rye Lane and on Bournemouth Road, the former C&A store at 72-74 Rye Lane and the former Marks and Spencer Store at 54-58 Rye Lane.

## The Art Deco Peckham Rye Railway Station Development

*Southern Railway architects, 1935*

The central group in Peckham's Art Deco quarter are the two storey buildings surrounding Peckham Rye Station, the arcade and the three story former department store on the east side of Rye Lane. These buildings were designed and built by the Southern Railway in-house architects under the direction of James Robb Scott (1882-1965). This team is, perhaps, best known for their striking 'Moderne' styled Surbiton and Richmond stations which share some of the architectural detailing found in the Peckham Rye group. Robb was also the architect for Waterloo station which was built a decade before. In this group, 10-16 Blenheim Grove have recently been refurbished to local acclaim. The distinctive horizontal masonry banding at the first floor, and 'Crittall' windows unites this group of buildings on both sides of Rye Lane fronting on to Station Way, Holly Grove and Blenheim Grove.

Rye Lane was a vital shopping area in the mid 1930s and this new ensemble around Peckham Rye Station shows how the Southern Railway looked to increase the use of their land around the station along with making significant changes to the 19<sup>th</sup> century station building. Between the completion of the station in 1865 and 1935, Rye Lane had evolved into a regional shopping centre and the development around the station was reflects this change.

The most prominent member of the station group is the former department store at 117-125 Rye Lane facing the station arcade. This building is faced in Portland Stone. Unfortunate recent overpainting obscures a jazzy chevron frieze at a high level. Tall flagpoles accented the building's chamfered corner and central 'towers'. 117-125 Rye Lane has been identified for façade restoration under the lottery funded 'Townscape Heritage Initiative'.

## Kahn's Bargain / Holdrons

*135 Rye Lane. T.P Bennett and Sons, 1935*

The ne plus ultra of Rye Lane's Art Deco Quarter must be the 1935 extensions to Holdron's department store, just south of Peckham Rye Station, at 135 Rye Lane. Like Jones and Higgins at the North End of Rye Lane, Henry Holdron ran a successful department store, building it up from a single shop on Rye line in the 1880s to occupying most of the east side of Rye Lane from the station, south to Bournemouth Road, by the 1930s. By 1935 Holdrons,

had been acquired by Selfridges and they set about modernising the store. The fashionable modernist commercial architects T.P. Bennett and Sons were commissioned to look at a series of options for renewing and enlarging the sprawling (by now) Edwardian premises, which included two internal shopping arcades. Several designs were presented to the people of Peckham and the striking faience-clad building we now see on Rye Lane was the popular choice. This was the first phase of a plan to rebuild the entire Rye Lane frontage. The building is faced in buff terracotta over a steel frame. Inside this deep plan building is a semi-circular ferro-concrete vault that filled the middle part of the extensive shop floor with daylight. This is soon to be restored.

The architects, T.P Bennett & Sons, are well known for the thin-shell concrete domed Poultry Market at Smithfield, now listed; the listed former Saville Theatre, now Odeon, on Shaftesbury Avenue, and the demolished Doulton's pottery headquarters on the Albert Embankment in Lambeth.

### **Former C&A (Modes)**

*72-74 Rye Lane. North, Robin & Wilsdon architects, 1930.*

This attractive red brick building with cast stone detailing was one of the first Moderne styled commercial buildings in Rye Lane. It created retail space, vertically, over several floors on an island site along the west side of Rye Lane. The design was by a Scottish practice that built a number of C&A department stores across the U.K. There is a near identical version of this C&A building at 180-190 Lewisham High Street. (C&A vacated the store in 1971, it is now a McDonalds Restaurant)

### **Former Marks & Spencer**

*54-58 Rye Lane. Robert Lutyens, architect 1934.*

To northern extent of this Art Deco Quarter is marked by the elegant former Marks & Spencer's premises at 54-58 Rye Lane. This building was designed by Robert Lutyens, the son of the architect Sir Edwin Lutyens. Its façade is modernist classicism and is formed from a modular cast stone system which was used at a number of M&S stores across the country. Robert Lutyens is best known for his listed black granite Marks & Spencers on Oxford Street built on the former Pantheon site. (M&S closed in 1990)

In conclusion, Rye Lane has lost many of its Art Deco landmarks from its commercial hey-day in the 1930s, let's think carefully before we demolish this unusual, intact and coherent group around Peckham Rye Railway Station, which the owners of the western range have shown can be elegantly restored. These six buildings described above form a distinctive period cluster. Perhaps we should restore and preserve these buildings?

### **Notes.**

#### **Significant, recent Art Deco losses in Peckham include:**

The RACS (Royal Arsenal Cooperative Society) at 176-178 Rye Lane built by the architect Percy Westwood in 1928. (Largely demolished in 2009)

The Peckham Odeon, Peckham High Street.

Peckham Bus Station / Garage designed by Wallis, Gilbert and Partners (Demolished circa 1995)

Co-operative House at 259-267 Rye Lane built by the architect S.W. Ackroyd in 1932

Kennedys Sausages, Rye Lane – Demolished circa 2007

n.b. There are probably enough extant details on the other surviving Southern Railway stations to re-construct any lost details at the Peckham Rye Station arcade.