

# Official list entry

Heritage Category: **Listed Building**

Grade: **I**

List Entry Number: **1264258**

Date first listed: **05-Feb-1970**

Date of most recent amendment: **20-Apr-2020**

Statutory Address 1: **The Strand, Westminster, London, WC2A 2LL**

**This List entry helps identify the building designated at this address for its special architectural or historic interest.**

Unless the List entry states otherwise, it includes both the structure itself and any object or structure fixed to it (whether inside or outside) as well as any object or structure within the curtilage of the building.

For these purposes, to be included within the curtilage of the building, the object or structure must have formed part of the land since before 1st July 1948.

**Understanding list entries** (<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/understanding-list-entries/>)

**Corrections and minor amendments** (<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/minor-amendments/>)

## Location

Statutory Address: **The Strand, Westminster, London, WC2A 2LL**

**The building or site itself may lie within the boundary of more than one authority.**

County: **Greater London Authority**

District: **City of Westminster (London Borough)**

Parish: **Non Civil Parish**

National Grid Reference: **TQ 31003 81157**

## Summary

The Royal Courts of Justice, a large, national courtroom building of 1874 to 1883 designed and built by George Edmund Street and completed by Arthur E Street and Sir Arthur Blomfield. The building is acknowledged as one of the foremost examples of High Victorian Gothic Revival design. Stylistically it combines C13 English and French architecture with Italian elements.

## Reasons for Designation

The Royal Courts of Justice building, Strand, London is listed at Grade I for the following principal reasons:

Architectural interest: \* the building has considerable presence at the heart of London and at the centre of the legal district occupied by the Inns of Court;

\* it is generally considered to be the foremost work of George Edmund Street, one of Victorian England's principal architects;

\* its meticulous planning is accompanied by considerable inventiveness in designing numerous different interiors including courtrooms, corridors, staircases, libraries and the large and impressive central hall, all of which retain the majority of their original fittings.

Historic interest: \* the building is a celebration of the reform of the legal system in C19 England, by a raft of legislation which aligned the processes of Equity and Common Law to create a fairer system of justice.

Group value: \* with numerous listed buildings on the Strand and Carey Street, notably the Church of St Clement Danes, Strand (Grade I).

## History

In the early C19 the London Law Courts were grouped alongside the Palace of Westminster. The architect John Soane had designed a new series of superior courts for common law and equity in 1820 which were connected to the west flank of Westminster Hall and used parts of its abundant space as partitioned courtrooms and also as a gathering place. As the C19 progressed, and the rise of Britain as an industrial and trading nation created more litigation, the limitations of this cramped series of courts became obvious. At the same time the existing legal system divided into Equity and Chancery, with complex overlap between the two, and a growing backlog of cases which could take

years to conclude, created a strong desire amongst politicians for reform.

Royal Commissions tasked with considering an overhaul of the legal system were set up in the 1850s and their work eventually led to a series of parliamentary acts, notably the Common Law Procedure and Chancery Acts of 1852, the Chancery Act of 1858 and the Common Law Acts of 1854 and 1860. The Judicature Act of 1873 finally fused the two systems of Common Law and Equity.

Although Westminster continued to be regarded as the home of the Chancery division, in practice the limitations in number and size of the Soane courts had caused the establishment of further courts across London. Makeshift arrangements included partitioned areas in Lincoln’s Inn hall and caused one commentator to note that ‘The Lord Chancellor of England now sits by sufferance in a dining hall!’. Following petitions from lawyers, a Parliamentary Select Committee was set up in 1841. The Committee commissioned a design from Sir Charles Barry for a new court house to be built on Lincoln’s Inn Fields and although this Doric design was not followed, its plan of a central hall with circulatory passages separating lawyers, witnesses and the public perpetuated elements of the Soane plan at Westminster and proved influential.

Instead of Lincoln’s Inn Fields, which was regarded as one of the ‘lungs of London’, the present site was chosen; an area of seven acres to the north of the Strand of ancient and poor-quality housing. This slum property could be acquired relatively cheaply and it was conveniently positioned close to the Temple and Lincoln’s Inn. In June 1865 the legislation for the new building and its financing was passed.

A competition was mounted in 1866-1867 and eleven architects were invited to compete, including some of the most respected members of the profession at that time, with a guaranteed fee for those who participated. The competition entries were shown in a public exhibition at Lincoln’s Inn. All but one alternative scheme were in a Gothic style, although this had not been a stipulation. Press comment favoured the designs of William Burges in a French Gothic style, reminiscent of Carcassonne, and Alfred Waterhouse, who had recently designed the Manchester Assize Courts to acclaim from the legal profession. However the joint winners were declared as EM Barry, for the quality of his planning, and GE Street for his elevations. The two could not agree and in 1868 Street became the sole architect subject to a radical revision of his initial plan. This delay was followed by another while a site on the new Embankment was considered and plans drawn, but the initial Strand site was eventually agreed. The final plan was drawn by 1870 and the foundation stone was laid in 1874.

Construction proved difficult, with numerous constraints from the Treasury and the eventual bankruptcy of the contractor, Bull of Southampton, but Street’s mastery of the brief, his calm determination and his attention to all details so that there could be no confusion as to what was intended (with almost all drawings coming from his own hand), led to the completion of the building and it was opened with ceremony by Queen Victoria in December 1882. Street had died the year before and was succeeded by his son, Arthur Edmund Street and Sir Arthur Blomfield who completed work on the site. The total cost was almost £2 million.

The plan of Street’s completed Law Courts was organised around strictly segregated circulation routes for different categories of users. This layout proved to be inflexible in practice and was therefore gradually eroded in the interests of efficient movement around the building. Alterations included added staircases to the sides and at the northern end of the central hall to connect the ground and courtroom floors. Space occupied by former jury rooms in the basement has been adapted to create new court rooms. The eastern, administrative block, which was initially used solely as offices, has been converted to include courtrooms at its northern end. Further buildings have been added to the west of the site and these are the subjects of separate List entries where appropriate.

## Details

The Royal Courts of Justice, a large, national courtroom building of 1874 to 1883 designed and built by George Edmund Street and completed by Arthur E Street and Sir Arthur Blomfield. The building is acknowledged as one of the foremost examples of High Victorian Gothic Revival design. Stylistically it combines C13 English and French architecture with Italian elements.

**MATERIALS:** Portland stone ashlar and red bricks laid in English bond with granite, marble and red sandstone dressings and slate and lead roofing. Structural ironwork was used in many parts of the building, as were Dennett’s fireproof arches – concrete panels cast in situ which rested on iron beams. Some of the decorative stonework was carved by machine and finished by hand.

**PLAN:** the building has four and five storeys and is arranged as two principal blocks; the courts and all of their immediately associated rooms, arranged around a central, rectangular hall which runs north-south, and an administrative office range grouped around a quadrangular courtyard to the east. The considerable number of people using the building and the need to keep different groups separated from each other led to a complex arrangement of public spaces and approaches to each court as well as offices, jury rooms, waiting and interview rooms. From the large rectangular central hall corridors led to spiral staircases which led up to the court rooms. Barristers, judges, witnesses and jury members all had different routes of approach to each court along corridors leading from separate entrances. Public wishing to view trials did so from second-floor galleries approached from the two wide spiral stairs on the Strand front. Major entrances faced the Strand and Carey Street, but judges also entered the building from West Green. The present-day use of the building has caused changes to this C19 plan, but its essentials are still evident.

**EXTERIOR:** the lengthy southern front facing the Strand is divided into several distinct parts and repeated motifs help to tie the design together into a unified whole: a band of floral motifs with square frames and round panels continues along the front below the sills of the second-floor windows; a screen of arches with wrought iron panels stands in front of the façade; tourelles with candle-snuffer roofs, circled by a blind arcade of miniature arches, appear at the corners and at either side of the two portals leading to the central hall, at west, and the courtyard, to the east. Although there is an element of calculated asymmetry to the overall design, there are also symmetrical or near-symmetrical groupings. The most striking is that which identifies the principal courtroom block and the entrance to the central hall, which is gradually stepped back from the street line. At the centre of this grouping is a large, recessed portal with a carved arch, flanked by granite columns. Above is a miniature open arcade. The southern gable end of the central hall is placed behind and has a five-light window in a richly-carved surround and a rose window to the gable. The apex carries a sculpture of Christ the Law Giver and to the ridge beyond is a flèche.

At either side of this impressive central feature are projecting pieces of wall which continue the motif of the miniature arcade. To their lower body are signs in a typeface designed by Street for the project and used for signage on site throughout the buildings. Projecting from this walling are polygonal turrets whose stepped string courses and lancet lights show them to be stair turrets. To either side, and again projecting are further, larger, angled bays whose richly-moulded upper bodies have a series of two-light windows beneath crocketed, gabled heads and octagonal roofs. The near-symmetrical effect continues with two more bays at either side and then gabled bays flanked by tourelles. A colonnade of three bays is placed at the ground-floor corner to the far left.

To right of this entrance block is the entrance to the quadrangle which has a carriage arch flanked by pedestrian entrances. Above is a recessed balcony with three openings and quatrefoils to the spandrels. The tower at right projects slightly and has an archway to the

ground floor at left. Pairs of lancet windows at left indicate the stairs. Above the arch are six floors or stages and the penultimate one has a prominent bracket bearing a clock whose faces can be seen to east and west along the Strand. The tower roof is pyramidal with metal finial and flagstaff. The staircase turret has a similar, slightly lower, roof.

In front of the eastern portion of this front is a stone screen which shields the basement area with a series of cusped arches supported by red sandstone columns and there are wrought iron panels to the lower body between the columns. At the western end of the Strand front is a later stone screen, added in around 1884, to the design of Arthur Street which divides the open area known as West Green from the street. This also has a series of pointed arches with moulded surrounds supported by circular shafts with quatrefoils to the spandrels and a wrought iron panel to each arch. At the eastern end of this screen and adjacent to the courthouse building is a carriage arch with a central pointed arch and a gabled top flanked by pairs of pedestrian entrance arches.

The northern side, facing Carey Street, has a near-symmetrical front to its west, which is faced in Portland stone which identifies the principal courtroom block. The central section here has five wide bays and the roof rises higher than the lateral ranges. At its centre is a wide, gabled bay with a doorway which leads via a corridor to the central hall. A miniature, blind colonnade extends along the front at first floor level and the large, two-light windows have gabled heads. Above the centre is a gable with carved detailing, crocketed coping and a small rose window and to the apex is a statue of Moses with the tablets.

Lower ranges at either side have further, large doorways. The three-bay rhythm at ground floor level is slightly subverted at right by an additional bay to the upper floors. Beyond this and terminating this central section are gabled wings, each with a running arcade to the upper floors which have alternately blind and windowed bays.

To the right (west) of this is a screen wall with arched openings and iron grilles, as before. To the left and recessed is the rear of the east wing. Walling is of Portland stone with flush horizontal bands of brick. This starts at the right with two gabled bays which have paired arches to the ground floor leading through to the quadrangle and ashlar walling. Projecting at left of this is a lower wing which has four bays. A projecting tower to the left has six stages with chequerboard panels of stone and brick.

The east front, facing Bell Yard, continues the theme of alternating flush bands of red brickwork and Portland stone. There is a uniformity in the range of five floors of evenly spaced windows, but this is broken up by the use of oriel windows, gabled bays and panels of carved stone. The ground floor and second floor windows all have pointed relieving arches with carved tympana and the top floor has a consistent colonnade running in front of the wall with red sandstone shafts and carved Portland stone caps. The slate roof is steep and the tall chimneys have panelled sides.

The east and west sides of the internal quadrangle continue this general theme of banded stone and brick walling with controlled asymmetry. The north and south ends are, by contrast, deliberately asymmetrical, partially as a result of the pedestrian entrance to the north and the vehicle entrance at the south being off-centre. The considerable quantity of good stone carving includes portrait busts of the architect George Street and the builder Henry Bull as corbels supporting the oriel above the pedestrian entrance.

The western side of the building is faced in Portland stone. It fronts onto West Green. Bays are grouped vertically and the long front is broken up by the inclusion of projecting towers with larger windows, changes of roof and oriel windows supported by buttresses with offsets.

INTERIOR: the lofty and lengthy central hall is of nine bays, divided by clusters of columns which rise to the quadripartite ribbed vault. The polychromatic marble and mosaic floor, designed by Street and executed by Burke and Co., is original. Stone benches around the lower wall are backed by a blind arcade of cusped arches with polished marble shafts. Above this the blank walling was intended by Street to display a series of murals and above that on either side is a row of tall, two-light windows. The end walls have balconies and that to the north demonstrates the higher ground level on the Carey Street side of the building. Above these are windows of three lights on the north side and five lights to the south. On the eastern wall in the second bay from the south is a memorial to GE Street carved in marble by H H Armstead showing the architect seated, studying a drawing with dividers in his hand. Below, the base has a relief frieze showing historic artists guiding C19 craftsmen, with a death mask of Street to one side.

A corridor leads north from the hall and connects to the Carey Street entrance. This is itself crossed by another corridor of two and three bays width which has brick vaults with stone ribs, supported by stone columns. It connects with the Quadrangle at its east end and to the West Green Building to the west. At first floor level, from which the majority of people approach the courtrooms, are further corridors, some of which have architectural treatment including mosaic and marble floors, carved ornament and marble columns. Several first-floor corridors have panelled wooden roofs and are top lit. The Bar Room or Painted Hall is placed above the archway through to the quadrangle and has balconies facing south over the Strand and north. A screen wall crosses the room with a central column of Aberdeen granite and it has a richly-coloured scheme of mural decoration designed by Street.

The Judge's Hall or 'Bear Garden' is a lofty room with a colonnade to one side, above which is a gallery. It was intended as a waiting room for those visiting the offices of the judges or legal departments.

The Library and Probate Library are placed at third floor level facing Carey Street. Both are richly fitted with bookcases which include iron galleries approached by spiral staircases. Ceilings are panelled and light fittings are elaborate and appear to be original gasoliers later adapted for electricity.

Court rooms were all designed to have an individual appearance. The largest is that of the Lord Chief Justice. Originally Equity court rooms would have been different in appearance to Chancery court rooms, however the two legal systems were amalgamated after work had started on the building but before the fitting out of the individual interiors. This allowed Street to design each of the original eighteen courtrooms with a difference. The majority have windows to one side and are also top-lit. Wooden screens with glazed upper panels shield the entrances and restrict external noise. Joinery is mostly of oak. Jury seating remains in some courts and was originally entered from external passages to the side and elevated so that the jurors could look down into the court. Panelling and bookcases cover the lower walls with ashlar facing above.

Office spaces at the top of the building have fire proof construction and ducting for plumbing and services in vertical channels let into the walls, with wooden covers.

SUBSIDIARY FEATURES In addition to the arched screens containing wrought iron panels along the Strand front, there are sets of railings, gates and low stone walls, contemporary with the building, along the Bell Yard and Carey Street fronts and designed by Street, which have decorative finials and gate panels.

# Legacy

The contents of this record have been generated from a legacy data system.  
Legacy System number: **428301**

Legacy System: **LBS**

## Sources

### Books and journals

Brownlee, David, The Law Courts: The Architecture of George Edmund Street, (1984)  
Pevsner, N, Bradley, S, The Buildings of England: London 6 Westminster, (2003), 311-314  
Summerson, John, Victorian Architecture, (1970), 77-107

## Legal

This building is listed under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 as amended for its special architectural or historic interest.



## Map

This map is for quick reference purposes only and may not be to scale. This copy shows the entry on 30-Mar-2022 at 10:15:02.

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End of official list entry



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