

Chapter 22

BINGLEY HALL UNDER ATTACK

The Council was already considering redevelopment plans for the area. The local *Evening Despatch*, in April 1934, quoted Mr C M Walters, an official of BAES, as saying that:

The officials of the society had been aware for some time that with the expiry of the lease in 1949, Bingley Hall would pass into the hands of the ground landlords. It was reasonable, however, to assume that the City Council, before pulling it down, would provide a larger assembly hall in the centre of the city . . . it was certainly not easy to visualise the general public visiting Castle Bromwich for general exhibitions to the extent to which they have flocked to Bingley Hall for many years. (7)

As it transpired, within a few short years all the Council's demolition plans had to be put on hold. They were compelled instead to deal with rather a lot of unplanned demolition city-wide, the indiscriminate kind carried out by the Luftwaffe! Oddly enough, despite serious bomb damage nearby, even next door at the Prince of Wales Theatre, which was virtually destroyed, the old

exhibition hall was barely touched. Taken over by the government at the start of World War II, Bingley Hall had acquired a new name for the duration. It had become Depot 94 and was used for storing Ministry of Supply equipment. In March 1947 the hall was released to resume its former life, as the *Birmingham Mail* reported.

The fall of an auctioneer's hammer today on the first of about £30,000 worth of Ministry of Supply equipment was the initial step in the change from the Ministry's official Depot 94 to its peacetime and better known description of Bingley Hall. (8)

Later in the year, in September, the Ideal Home Exhibition, always, as mentioned earlier, one of the greatest crowd-pullers at Bingley Hall, returned to please the populace. Fittingly perhaps, the stall that attracted everyone's closest attention on this occasion was occupied by none other than that war-time tenant, the Ministry of Supply. Their stall's centrepiece was a complete aluminium house. After the war, due to the widespread destruction of houses by German bombers, there was, quite naturally, great public interest in housing matters in Birmingham, as in many other war-damaged British towns and cities. Several former aircraft factories, expert in fabrication with aluminium sheeting, had switched to manufacturing these novel houses. (9)

Three years later, in November 1950, the old building seemed, once again, to be approaching the end of the road. Fresh development plans for

the area were approved by the City Council. Although provision was to be made for a site suitable for the erection of a replacement building, Bingley Hall itself was to be demolished. (10) But there was life in the old dog yet. Bookings throughout 1951 were the heaviest in the long history of the hall. This came about partly because of the Festival of Britain events described in the previous chapter. In the meantime the 1950 threat blew over, but within the decade a further set of redevelopment plans was revealed, as the *Birmingham Post* reported In November 1958.

Birmingham City Council is to promote a one-clause bill giving it power to build an exhibition and entertainment hall on the West End car park . . . Alderman Watton said that the city wanted to complete the new hall before Bingley Hall was pulled down under civic centre schemes in three or four years. (11)

Public debate rumbled on for some time, disclosing considerable opposition to any proposal for getting rid of the old, but much-loved hall. In 1961 the *Birmingham Post* reported that one particularly vocal opponent of this latest scheme, Mr Michael Rix, addressing Birmingham Archaeological Society, had developed a fresh line of thought on the subject.

[Rix] introduced its members to a comparatively new form of study – industrial archaeology . . . This country is thickly strewn with the early remains of the

Industrial Revolution [he said] and Birmingham has a number of specimens of value to industrial archaeology. They include Soho Hall . . . and Bingley Hall . . . They are often thought to be ugly, but are a key part of the British Heritage. (12)

Although the threat to Bingley Hall's existence passed over once again, there always seemed to be a fresh set of redevelopment plans for the area on the Council's agenda. In May 1965 the *Mail* reported the details.

An £8m civic centre scheme . . . will include a £2,160,000 exhibition hall . . . with a floor space of 106,000 sq. ft – 25 percent more than Bingley Hall Bingley Hall will disappear. (13)

In the event Bingley Hall failed to disappear but the plans certainly did, following all the others into the scrap bin. Predictably however, yet another set soon found their way on to the agenda. According to the *Mail* in September 1968:

Birmingham may get a new exhibition hall to replace Bingley Hall within the next few years . . . the proposal is to build an exhibition hall in the Hurst Street theatre and entertainment area of the city. (14)

This scheme followed all the others into the shredder, but the next one – there was always a next one! – would prove to be a much more serious threat.