

DEVON BUILDINGS GROUP

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Central Station, Queen Street, Exeter

The first station in Queen Street was built for the London and South Western Railway. It opened for traffic on the 18th July 1860 as the terminus of the LSWR, not being connected to St David's station until 1862. The LSWR line in Exeter was erected in the northern moat of the Rougemont Castle and the first station buildings were largely timber. It was called Queen Street Station. Under the Railways Act of 1921 four railway companies including the LSWR were combined and by 1923 these made up the Southern Railway (SR).

The timber buildings of the Queen Street station were damaged by a fire on the 3rd June 1927. After what were described as 'economy plans' for a new station had been submitted to the City Council, the chairmen of the streets and planning committees went to London to complain that they wanted something more imposing and a revised design was accepted in 1931. The new station was opened by the Mayor of Exeter on 1st July 1933 and renamed Central Station (Fig.1). It cost £198,000. It was in a grand, finely-detailed, neo-classical style, as was appropriate for the Georgian character of pre-war Exeter, but this was suavely combined with elements of the 'moderne' or Art Deco style.



Fig.1. The Queen Street front of Central Station in 2024. The cupola was removed in 2018, leaving only its base as a stump. It is ready for reinstatement, seven years later, in August 2025.

The building was almost certainly designed by the Southern Railway Architects' Section under the supervision of James Robb Scott (1882–1965). He had joined the Chief Engineer's Department of the LSWR in 1907 and was the only 'Architectural Assistant' in a 1921 census of LSWR staff. This was in the period of the reconstruction of Waterloo Station between 1909 and 1923, including the grand Grade 2 listed neo-Baroque Victory Arch, designed as a WW1 memorial to railway workers (Fig.2). Sometime early in the evolution of the Southern Railway he was appointed Chief Architect with a small team of assistants. The Architects' Section was a tiny element in an enormous department headed up by the Chief Engineer, with only nine members of staff out of the 12,000 supervised by the Chief Engineer (Tremellen 2022, 294). An article by Tremellen teases out the difficulties of attributing SR station design to an individual in the Architects' Section. Firstly, the character of the railway was hierarchical. Legal responsibility for the construction of new buildings was not with the Section, but with the Chief Engineer. It is known from documentation that the Engineer's Office Conference made some global decisions on matters of station design detail, e.g. the use of opaque glass in ladies' waiting rooms and paint colour for interiors. The EOC also effectively standardised the products of the SR's concrete works at Exmouth Junction and after 1922 waiting shelters, huts and footbridges were produced pre-fabricated at Exmouth without any input from the Architects' Section.



Fig.2. The grand Victory Arch at Waterloo Station attributed to James Robb Scott and designed to commemorate the 585 LSWR employees killed in WW1. This included a lunette style overlight and sculpture groups showing war and peace. (Photograph © The John Alsop Collection, reproduced with kind thanks)

Within the Architects' Section only three individuals in addition to Robb Scott have been identified by name: Rodney Thomas, Guy Morgan and Edwin Maxwell Fry. Guy Morgan had worked in Lutyen's office (information from Guy Collins). Fry is the best known. He worked in the Section from 1927 to 1930 and later practised with Walter Gropius and Le Corbusier. His *Autobiographical Sketches* published in 1975 is very unflattering about James Robb Scott and he claims credit for having designed all the stations produced in his time at the SR, a claim which Tremellen suggests should be taken with caution. It has proved impossible to establish who was responsible for individual station designs although SR archives that are not publicly accessible might shed light on this. Setting aside Fry's claims, the usual practice of station historians is to attribute the designs after 1930 to Robb Scott, in the manner of attributing designs to architectural partners in a practice, although much of the work may have been done by others in the office.

The stations were in a variety of styles: neo-Baroque, neo-Georgian and 'moderne', popularly known as Art Deco. If Fry was responsible for introducing Art Deco elements to the Southern Railway station designs it should be noted that the most striking and expensive example in this style, Surbiton Station, was rebuilt in 1937 after he had left the Architects' Section and is attributed to Robb Scott (Fig.3).

Designed in 1931 and presumably under the supervision of Robb Scott, Exeter Central combines neo-classicism with Art Deco elements. It includes favoured features from earlier Southern Railway stations: external stone escutcheons, as at Ramsgate, 1924–26, attributed to Robb Scott and Fry (Fig.4) and an elegant cupola, as at Bromley North, Grade 2, 1925–26, also attributed to Robb Scott (Fig.5). It makes use of the lunette window, a feature of Victorian stations but extensively used in the SR's station buildings of the 1920s and 1930s. It has some superficial similarities to the much smaller Exmouth station, rebuilt c.1925 and sadly demolished in 1976 (Fig.6). The contractor for Central Station was A N Coles (Contractors) Ltd of Plymouth. They were said at the grand opening to have carried out many West Country buildings of the period.



Fig.3. The thoroughly moderne Surbiton Station, 1937, in a brilliantly moody photograph held by the RIBA, 41891. Reinforced concrete with a flat roof and composed as a series of geometric blocks, this is considered to be Robb Scott's masterpiece and an important example of the moderne style, popularly dubbed 'Art Deco' (a phrase not found in print until 1966). The station is still very intact, inside and out, probably thanks to its Grade 2 listing. Surely it deserves a 2*? (Reproduced with kind permission of ribapix)



Fig.4. Ramsgate Station, 1924–6, planned as a central block with curved wings. Like Central Station it has a good quality stone entablature. Between the giant lunette windows stone escutcheons are carved with 'S' for the Southern Railway. Attributed to Robb Scott and Fry. (Geograph images)



Fig.5. Bromley North, 1925–6, attributed to Robb Scott, was designed, like Exeter Central, with a striking cupola. (Photograph © the Bromley Civic Society)



Fig.6. The neo-Baroque Exmouth Station, c.1925, attributed to Robb Scott. This was demolished in the 1970s and replaced with an outstandingly ugly supermarket style design. (From a postcard)



Fig.7. The rear elevation of the Central Station in August 2025, scaffolded pending the instatement of the replica cupola. The concrete structure to the right is a footbridge to the northern platform. This was probably made of elements prefabricated at the SR's concrete works at Exmouth Junction.

The station is a handsome building of red brick with cream freestone dressings and hipped tiled roofs. Lozenges of glazed tiles decorate the rear pitches of the roofs of the wings. The front is two storey, the rear four storey in the centre, reflecting the sharp drop in the ground down to the platforms and line in the old castle moat (Fig.7). The front of the two-storey entrance block is flanked by long lower-roofed two-storey curved wings that contained offices and shops, as they still do. The booking hall is in the centre, the booking office projecting back from the line of the rear elevation. This has a flat roof with a brick and stone balustraded parapet from which there are views down to the platforms, probably for the station master. Undated and unsigned plans in the Devon Heritage Centre (DALSS, 9Z13C/11) are annotated 'Exeter City Engineer'. These show the booking hall incorporating a bookstall and, flanking the booking office, offices for a telegraph,



Fig.8. Extract from an undated plan in the Devon Heritage Centre. (DALSS, 9Z13C/11, reproduced with kind permission)



Fig.9. A certificate issued by the Southern Railway's Exeter Central Training School for the session 1936–7. Was this school in the Central Station buildings? Or somewhere else in Exeter? (DALSS, 4110Z/27/10/5/1, reproduced with kind permission)



Fig.10. Freestone details: the entablature with a dentil cornice and orders of moulding.



Fig.11. Freestone details: one of the stair cell windows.

enquiries and inspectors (Fig.8). Wrapping round the booking office at the rear there is a two-storey block which might be an addition but could be original, perhaps for freight or parcels with offices above.

There was a southern railway training school in Exeter in 1936–37. This seems to be known only from a couple of examination certificates held in the Devon Heritage Centre (Fig.9). Whether this was accommodated somewhere in the station complex or elsewhere has not been established.

The station front is nicely detailed with fine brickwork and a grand entablature with orders of moulding on the front block (Fig.10). The recessed flanking bays of the front block are stair cells with Art Deco style square-headed doorways and very elaborate stone-framed windows with open swan-necked pediments on brackets ornamented with carved flower-filled vases with spilling flowers and brackets to the sills. They are glazed with timber sashes (Fig.11). The curved wings are set back from the central block and have hipped blocks at the outer ends in pavilion style (Fig.12). Variations on this plan can be found in numerous SR stations of the period, e.g.



Fig.12. The roof plan shown on google earth.



Fig.13. The shop front into the north end pavilion.

Margate and Ramsgate. The returns of the wings have central round-headed stone-framed doorways flanked by large stone-framed windows, the bays divided by reeded pilasters with ornamental capitals (Fig.13). The first floors are decorated with textured stone escutcheons. The shop fronts are under a stone platband and divided by Art Deco piers with a central strip of brick with Art Deco stone mouldings on either side (Fig.14). The shop front divisions survive but there has been some reglazing. There is at least one good quality Art Deco staircase in the central block. This has an iron balustrade in panels decorated with Art Deco motifs (Fig.15). The booking office has a coffered plastered ceiling with classical mouldings and is lit by high-set lunette windows with radial glazing.

The crescent was deliberately designed to enable cars and taxis to draw up and drop passengers but is now pedestrianised. A routeway alongside the end of the south wing is said to have been for transporting freight in and out of the station. On the Exeter City Engineer's plans the yard to rear, now a car park, was a parcels yard.

Before 2018 the entrance block was crowned with a tall cupola. This was removed for



Fig.14. One of the Art Deco piers to a shop front window.



Fig.15 The Art Deco staircase in the north wing.

repair leaving only a stump (Fig.16). The Devon Buildings Group pursued this loss in 2024 and were advised by Network Rail that the cupola would be reinstated in 2025. Scepticism about this promise was dispelled in August this year (2025) when the cupola (a replica rather than a repair) was reinstated (Fig.17). Congratulations are due to whichever current department of Network Rail cares enough about a good building to recreate this important feature of the station front: seven years without it can be forgiven. With the exception of one plastic window in the north wing facing Queen Street, some reglazing of the shop fronts and a flimsy canopy, the front of the Central Station entrance building and wings is very well-preserved. There has been some re-glazing to the rear of the building but the majority of the window openings are intact.

The fusion of neo-Georgian and Art Deco styles is very appealing and with the very high quality detailing the building makes a significant visual contribution to the public realm in Queen Street. Central Station is an important part of Exeter's railway history and has high community value as one of the busiest stations in Devon. In the opinion of the DBG committee this building richly



Fig.16. The front entrance in 2024, sans cupola.



deserves listing to celebrate its architectural and historic interest, not only to Exeter and in a setting that includes Northernhay Gardens (registered), Rougemont Castle (scheduled) and, opposite, the Rougemont Hotel, begun in 1877 and sited to serve railway passengers, but as one of the inventive designs of the Southern Railway stations.

The DBG has made an application for the station to be listed. The application system seems to be made as unwieldy as possible, with limits on the number of characters that can be used to make a case and glitches in the system which can unexpectedly lock out the applicant. While one can pay £550 (including VAT) for a listing application to be expedited if a building is under urgent threat, say of demolition, the threat to Central Station is more subtle: the possibility of more plastic windows or inappropriate additions like the flimsy external canopy. Over time relatively small changes like these could ruin the quality of the building. The standard system, which also includes extensive consultation, is free and may provide an answer in six months. Our application for the listing of Larkbeare House, Exeter, which was

turned down, took longer than this to process, however. If DBG members know of other unlisted buildings that can be shown to deserve protection, please let the Committee know.

Jo Cox

Sources Consulted

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Threads on 'Rail UK forums'

Undated plans in the Devon Archives and Local Studies Centre, DALSS, 9Z13C/11

Acknowledgements

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The replacement cupola in position. Photos © Barry Honeysett.



The front elevation of Central Station, Exeter, with the replacement cupola in position.



The rear elevation of Central Station, Exeter, with the replacement cupola in position.