



Brompton Barracks Chatham

Refurbishment of the historic Barracks which has been in continual military use for 200 years

Historic Home

Brompton Barracks is the historic home of the Royal Engineers and is a self-contained military base built on the high ground overlooking Chatham Dockyard. The site lies within the defences of the Brompton Lines, built in the eighteenth century, and the later artillery defences built to defend the dockyard from landward attack.

North, South and West Blocks were built as an Artillery Barracks between 1804 and 1806, to the designs of James Wyatt. The barracks were the largest built by the Ordnance Board during the Napoleonic War, and originally housed some 1300 soldiers in dormitories, with stables and gun carriage sheds nearby.

As at Woolwich, Wyatt achieved his architectural composition through the utilisation of standard 'modular' components. The three blocks were arranged to frame a spacious quadrangle, forming a splendid backdrop for military parades. The formality of this arrangement was later reinforced by placing the War Memorials and Institute Building on the main east-west axis of the quadrangle.





Brompton Barracks is listed Grade II* and described as being 'one of the largest and most impressive examples of military architecture in the country, having a compositional system, shared with Wyatt's other large artillery barracks at Woolwich, of Palladian monumentality'.

All blocks have a basement level, with narrow areas facing the Parade Ground and much wider spaces to the rear, which in the case of the North and South Blocks originally housed stables and gun carriage sheds. West Block was extended circa 1870 with the addition of a large Officers' Mess at the north end, incorporating an elaborate Dining Room, Conservatory and other Mess facilities.

Aims of the Project

The project involved the repair and refurbishment of the three early nineteenth century barrack blocks ranged around the parade ground of the Royal School of Military Engineering, Brompton Barracks, Chatham.

The barracks had remained in continuous use for the whole of the 190 years since they were constructed. Inevitably, they had been altered and refurbished internally on a number of occasions, the last some 35 years previously, and the original bare dormitory rooms had given way to a variety of smaller but equally bare 1960's rooms.

It was accepted that to bring the accommodation up to current MoD standards a very major refurbishment and a complete redesign of the interiors would be necessary.

Existing facilities were of a very basic standard, especially in the basement ablutions areas, and had suffered considerably from wear and tear. Poor detailing carried

out in earlier refurbishment had led to damp penetration in some areas, causing structural problems which had been left unresolved. For example, where some of the timber floors had been affected by dry rot, temporary 'acro' props had become permanent fixtures in South Block. As a consequence many services required complete renewal.

Comprehensive external repairs, including re-roofing were carried out in the early 1990's. However, works to the exterior of the buildings were still an important part of the architect's brief and included the removal of earlier inappropriate features, such as metal windows and peaked roof ventilators. The restoration of the railings and light wells, had been particularly neglected, and also the reinstatement of the many chimney stacks which had been either removed completely or significantly reduced.

Externally, the appearance of the blocks has remained virtually unchanged, although many subtle alterations and conservation repairs have been carried out.





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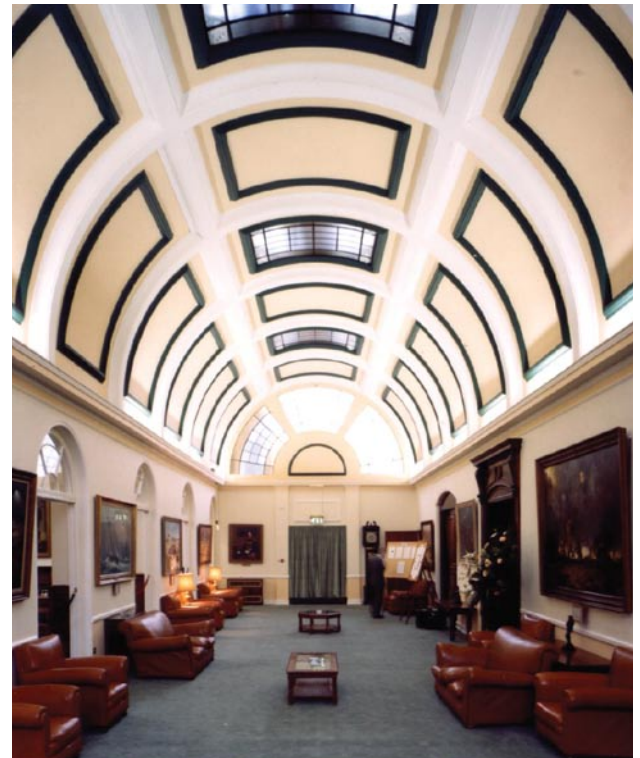
Internal Improvements

Internally, the three blocks have been entirely re-planned and re-serviced, with accommodation largely provided in the form of self-contained flats or bed sitting rooms. The re-planning of North and South Blocks called for some major interventions, such as the insertion of new staircases, in order to meet the client's brief and satisfy Building Regulations and fire escape requirements.

Officers' Mess

West Block, which did not originally form part of the project, was not included until design work on the other two blocks was well advanced. This was treated in a different way to the other two blocks as it already contained officers' accommodation in the form of individual rooms. Although extensive minor remodelling was carried out to provide each room with an 'en suite' bathroom, significant structural alterations were not required. At the North end of the block, the Officers' Mess was completely re-serviced and service routes were carefully investigated to ensure minimum disturbance of the existing fabric. Fire protection and means of escape were also improved. A full internal redecoration was also carried out, faithfully reinstating the previous colour scheme, for which detailed records were available.

Although seldom mentioned in the context of conservation, when one takes into account the lifespan of the building (over 200 years and still going strong), together with the lack of waste and the limited amount of embodied energy when compared to an alternative new building, this project is also a model of sustainability.



Key Outcomes:

- The early involvement of an expert conservation architect and the input of stakeholders (notably English Heritage) aided the delivery of an excellent refurbishment project.
- A good example of the Whole Life-Loose Fit approach to construction – in particular how some older buildings can be adapted and reused over a long lifespan.
- The energy embodied in the existing buildings at Brompton reduced environmental impact during the refurbishment.