

## Wallis, Gilbert & Partners: The Architecture and the Mystery

by Russ Willey

In the first half of the twentieth century the London area boasted a robust manufacturing base – Acton alone was said to possess the largest industrial zone south of Coventry. Like the latter city, London's factories were devastated during the Second World War, and though some were rebuilt afterwards, the Blitz proved to be only one phase of the capital's progressive industrial decline, which was subsequently due mainly to the relatively high cost of land and labour.

Wherever new factories are built nowadays, whether in Sheffield or more likely Shanghai, they tend to be shed-like blots on the landscape – featureless and soulless. But the years between the two world wars were a golden age for industrial architecture. In particular, American corporations would spare no cost in setting up imposing European production units that served as showcases for their wares. In the 1920s and 30s prestigious factories sprang up along the North Circular Road and newly-built arterial highways like the Great West Road and the Eastern and Western Avenues.

One architectural practice stood pre-eminent among those working in that era: Wallis, Gilbert & Partners. The partnership was commissioned to work on several monumental projects in what was then Middlesex and is now part of Greater London, including factories for Wrigley's chewing gum in Wembley, the Gramophone Company in Hayes, the Hoover Company in Perivale, and Firestone tyres, Pyrene fire extinguishers and Coty cosmetics on the Great West Road's 'Golden Mile' in Brentford – as well as central London's Victoria coach station.

Built in 1928, the Firestone factory was perhaps the most impressive of all of these, with a sweeping white façade and a remarkably grand main entrance. My grandfather was in the tyre business, and he visited and admired the factory several times when it was newly



*Victoria Coach Station.*

built. Somewhat curiously, my mother recalls him taking her to see a couple of boxing matches there when she was about 12 years old. The Firestone factory's savage destruction in 1980, shortly before it was due to gain statutory protection, must rank with the demolition of the Euston Arch as one of London's worst instances of authorised vandalism in the latter part of the twentieth century.

The Hoover factory opened on the Western Avenue in 1933 but work continued on various extensions (upwards as well as outwards) and annexes almost until the outbreak of the Second World War. It was this piecemeal process that's to blame for the most legitimate criticism that can be aimed at the building: its lack of a cohesive overall form. Contemporary critics also condemned what they saw as its brash, vulgar appearance, but history has judged it much more favourably, as did the company and its employees at the time, as well as the general public. Wallis, Gilbert & Partners branded their style 'Fancy' but modern architectural commentators usually treat the Hoover factory as an art deco design. The building's ornamentation is said to have been inspired by the art of Central and North American Indians, though there are Egyptian elements too. Vacuum cleaner production ceased here in 1982 and the factory



*The Hoover Factory, detail.*

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## Wallis, Gilbert and Partners (cont.)



closed. It reopened ten years later – magnificently restored, with most of the building converted into a Tesco superstore, with access from the rear. Although its glory resides primarily in its frontage, there are pleasing design touches inside too, so keep an eye out for them as you navigate your trolley around the aisles.

For a firm of such distinction, remarkably little is known about the genesis of Wallis, Gilbert & Partners. Initially Wallis, Gilbert & Partner, singular, the practice was founded in 1916 in order to collaborate with an American company that specialised in providing the reinforcement technology and materials for large, concrete-built factories. In my own published works, I've ignorantly identified the architects as a New York-based partnership, to my shame. In reality, Thomas Wallis (1872–1953) was born in West Norwood and gained most of his early experience as an architect with HM Office of Works and Public Buildings before branching out on his own, based at offices in Tothill Street, Westminster.

The mystery is: who was Gilbert and who was the other original partner? In fact, there's no evidence that Thomas Wallis had any associates at all at first. He seems to have invented Gilbert and his anonymous colleague to make his nascent business sound bigger than it was. There are some loose theories that Gilbert might have been a real person, possibly an employee of Wallis's concrete collaborators who had intended to join the practice but never did. Alternatively, Gilbert might have been so named in an aspirational allusion to a real but unconnected person, perhaps Sir George Gilbert Scott. However, it seems most likely that Wallis simply plucked the name out of thin air. The firm might just as easily have been called Wallis, Gromit & Partners.



*The Hoover Building, frontage*

### About Russ Willey

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