

Old Market Hall

Grade: II

Community: Ffestiniog

Locality: Blaenau Ffestiniog

Street: Market Square

269785, 345941

Location

On the SW side of the parish church and immediately N of the railway line.

History

Built 1861-4 by Owen Roberts of Dolgarregddu to plans drawn up by Owen Morris of Porthmadog. Extended in 1870 by the construction of a lower N range.

Exterior

A 2-storey building of rock-faced stone under a replacement slate roof with ridge tiles and brick dentilled eaves. Openings are under round arches with voussoirs or stone lintels. Most of the openings have been boarded up and many original windows replaced by wooden louvres.

The block comprises the main market hall with a lower added range in the N side. The E front of the market hall is 5 bays, the central 3 bays brought forward under a half-hipped roof, where there are 2 boarded loading doors in the upper storey, with windows and doors in the lower storey boarded up. In the L-hand outer bay are doorways in both storeys, but which in the upper storey retains original double doors (with small-pane margin-lit overlight visible on the inside). In the R-hand bay is a link to the N range.

On the W side is a narrower polygonal projection with arched windows and doorways and a second narrow polygonal projection in the centre with inaccessible corbelled balcony with cast-iron balustrade. Windows in the lower storey have segmental heads and in the upper storey round heads. There are large round-headed doorways in the main splays, with replacement doors. Two further doorways are on the L side, one of them reached up external steps with slate treads, and a further doorway on the L end of the central projection. The 2-window S end wall faces a railway cutting and has lintelled windows, one of them blocked.

The lower N range is gabled and has openings under lintels. Its 4-window front has paired sash windows in the upper storey, replacement windows in the lower storey and double-

boarded doors L of centre under an overlight boarded up. The 2-window gable ends have replacement doorways and windows.

Interior

The market hall consists of one large space on each floor, and is therefore much simpler than is suggested by the complicated plan as seen from the exterior. Walls are exposed rubble stone. In the lower storey are four rows of cast-iron columns supporting the long beams that carry the first floor. In the SE corner is a dog-leg stair with turned balusters (inaccessible at the time of inspection). The upper storey was evidently used as a theatre and retains remnants of an elliptical proscenium arch in plaster and wood. The roof has 2 bays oriented E-W with 5 bays at R angles to it. All have king-post trusses with raking struts, of Baltic pine and of unusually large dimensions. The roof is also strengthened by iron tie rods.

In the N range the walls are faced with random rubble painted white. It is divided into 3 unequal units, with the stair and landing occupying the central unit. There is one fireplace in the lower storey, and fireplaces in both main rooms in the upper storey, all with large slate-stone lintels. The straight stair has replacement stick balusters, and moulded tread-ends. The landing balustrade is similar.

Listed

Listed for its special historical interest, and notwithstanding loss of original windows and doors, as a large and distinctive market hall that embodied the commercial ambitions of Blaenau Ffestiniog in its emergence as one of the most important industrial towns of nineteenth-century Wales.

The external appearance of the building has changed considerably. An early photo shows a mixture of small-pane sash windows and wood-mullioned windows, which have all been replaced. The doorways that have not been boarded up are also mostly replacements. Therefore there has been significant loss of fabric, and hence original character.

The interior is more impressive and less altered. The market hall is plain but essentially intact, as alterations amount to no more than thin added partitions. The upper storey was evidently used as a theatre, which is unusual, although whether this was a later modification is uncertain. The proscenium arch and stage are poorly preserved. Otherwise the upper storey is plain and featureless (like a market hall), with the exception of the Baltic pine roof trusses. These, and floor beams below, are particularly impressive, but for their scale rather than their design, and are the main feature of note. According to the character study of Blaenau Ffestiniog, several other large buildings are said to have trusses made from imported pine, including slate mills and chapels, but none of them are listed.

The building is large but not in a prominent position in the town, and is not especially distinguished architecturally. (There was previously a large hotel on the west side of the building, now a car park, so the open view of the polygonal west side of the market hall that can be had from the A496 is not a historic viewpoint.) Very few of the town's buildings are listed. The market hall's near neighbours are the Commercial Hotel and parish church but neither is listed, so there is no group value.

Other market halls have been listed so the importance of this type of building has been recognised. The examples I have found all have group value, as well as architectural merit, e.g. Caernarfon and Pontypridd are grade II, Cardiff is II*.

Visited 3/2/2020 and 18/2/2020

Disused at the time of inspection.