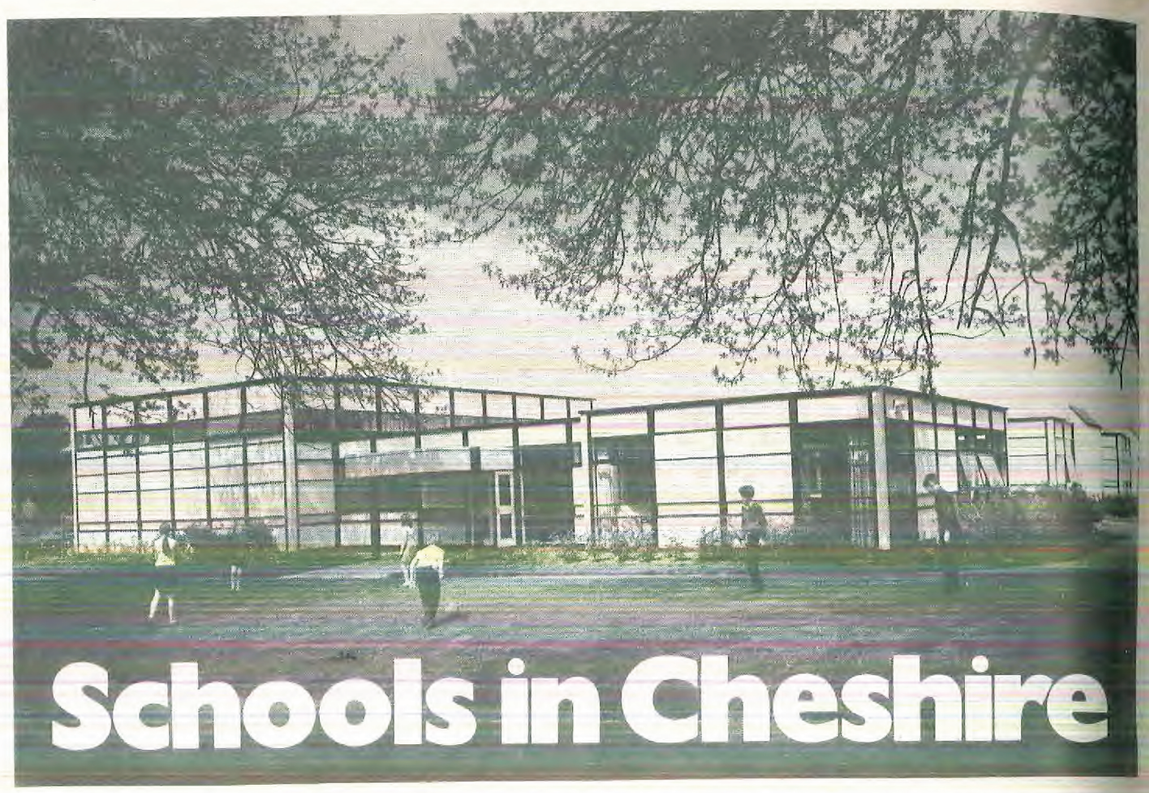


Schools in Cheshire

Educational buildings account for much of the work by the Cheshire County Architect's Department, which has used the SCOLA system extensively for the last ten years. *Paul Hamilton* takes a look at the department, one of its recent schools, and its latest prototype design which uses the SCOLA system with a diagonal plan form.

Cheshire is a large county with scenery contrasting between some of the most dismal relics of the industrial revolution and some attractive countryside. Wedged between the North the West Midlands and North Wales it has a population of 1½m and a character of its own. The coming local government reorganisation will have a great effect on present boundaries. Chester, the county town, is remote from the centre of gravity of the county and has preserved its historic character. The Conservative County Council has a progressive outlook.

Jack Whittle succeeded Edgar Taberner as County Architect in 1970, the change from being Deputy Architect to the GLC having been stimulating both for him and his new team. The office is responsible for most social building types except housing, some 70% of the annual building programme of over £10m being for educational buildings. The department has a multi-disciplinary establishment of 300 and considerable use is made of consultants. The Count Architect has two deputies and the work is divided between four sections led by experienced Assistant County Architects specialising in separate building types. Interchange of staff between sections is encouraged. A productive relationship has been built up with the clients and the office gives an impression of dedication, competence and enthusiasm.

Judging only from a brief visit the standard of design is high and at its best is superior to the work of some better publicised counties. This lack of publicity may account for the difficulty of attracting enough new staff to Chester.

SCOLA and changing school requirements

With 200 000 school children in the county there is much pressure to expand educational facilities. Despite at least three areas with different building costs, DES ignores local variations and the architects have a hard struggle to maintain standards in the more expensive locations. A more realistic understanding of the Council's problems and greater delegation of decision making by Whitehall would be welcomed. Productivity has been maintained by an extensive use of the SCOLA system for the last 10 years, although revolutionary changes in educational needs have barely been matched by the gradual evolution of the system. The variety of spaces and environments for differing age groups dictated by new teaching methods is beginning to stretch the system (which was originally designed for classroom schools) to the limits of its considerable potential. Changes in educational methods have made many schools built as recently as the '60s obsolescent and this process is unlikely to slow down. All systems are by definition producer-orientated at a time when society demands buildings to be more and more user-orientated. As always the problem is how to reconcile individual needs with the demands of economic production. The initiative for future change will continue to come from the client and in education architects will be unable to forecast future directions with confidence. However it would not be surprising if we see some return to more formal teaching in infant and junior schools and a widening syllabus in secondary teaching, while future wider use of school buildings by the whole community will demand a more general design approach. In Cheshire it is the Junior and Infant Schools that have shown most progress. A new standard plan is designed each year as a prototype and is adapted for each site. This is claimed to be the best method of reconciling the need for change with an urgent programme. The creation of better secondary schools is more complex. Organisational changes due to the extension of the leaving age, comprehensive education and incorporation of community and youth facilities have been great while educational changes have been slower than in primary education. SCOLA has functioned adequately for secondary schools but does not lend itself to the architecture of big buildings.

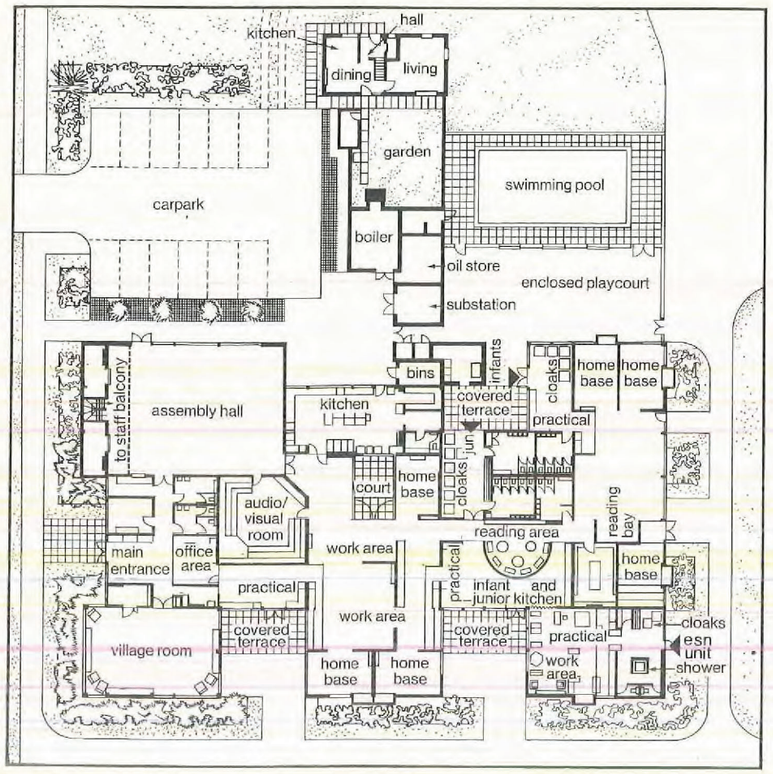
A built example assessed

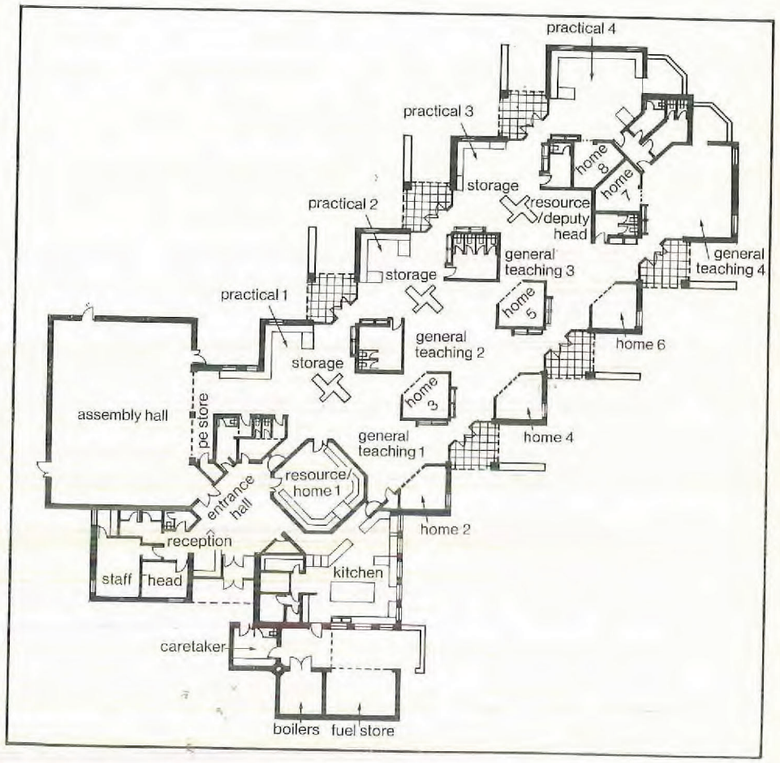
Tattenham County Primary School was designed in 1968 in co-operation with local civic bodies to form the focus of the community. On an open site of nine acres a 280-place JMI school was combined with a unit for 15 educationally sub-normal children together with a swimming pool and a village room housing a branch library. Following the Plowden report, the accommodation is arranged on a free plan giving a great variety of spaces. Six semi-enclosed home bases linked to three covered outdoor teaching terraces surround the general and practical areas. The assembly hall, the village room and the audio-visual room are fully enclosable, while a small covered swimming

Top left: *The main entrance to Tattenham County Primary School with 'modern Japanese' exterior cladding*
Above: *Village room on left, junior home bases in centre, and esn unit on right are separated by recessed terraces*
Left: *The infant section with enclosed play-court and service buildings just visible on right highlighting the weakness of combining traditional construction and system building*
Below left: *Children at play*

pool adjacent to the caretaker's house is entered via a walled play court. Meals are served from heated trolleys in the junior and infant areas.

The interior is animated by cheerful, polite and clean children engaged in activities which look more like play than school work. Although the spatial organisation with its succession of broken vistas appears too intricate, it appeals to the children. The major spaces are handled in an assured fashion particularly the assembly hall with its staff balcony reminiscent of a ship's bridge. The diagonally planned audio-visual room has integral tiered seating and is absolutely first rate. In the open parts of the school, imaginative incidents are provided by the semi-circular reading area and the externally projecting aedicules containing superimposed rest bunks. The multiplicity of expressed junctions between components looks restless in the small spaces but this is inherent in system building. In the absence of solid planes the furniture appears over dominant, and a more systematic colour scheme with fewer colours would have been more tranquil. The potential conflict between open plan and reasonable noise levels has been avoided.



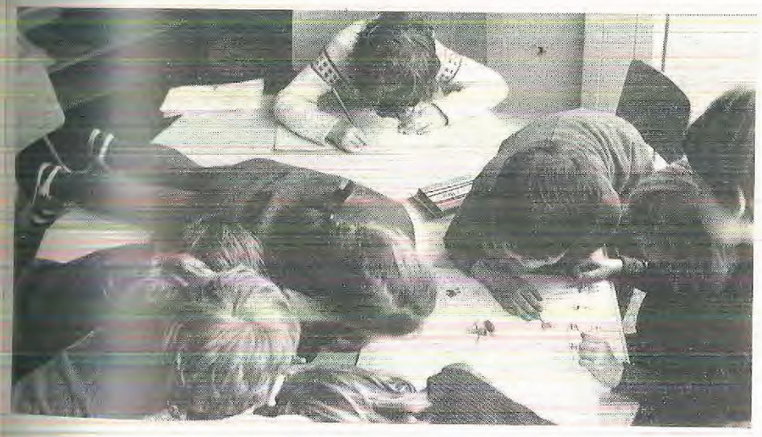


Above: *Plan of Tattenham School*
Above right: *Interior of junior section animated by 'activities which look more like play than school work'.*
Right: *The library which is surrounded by the infant, junior and esn sections*

The elegantly ordered black and white exterior timber cladding, intended as a continuation of the Cheshire vernacular, is in formal contrast to the relaxed styling of the interior. Seen in the context of the site the stylistic allusion appears not so much as 'old English' but more like 'modern Japanese'. It is none the worse for all that. Unfortunately the illusion is shattered by the immediately adjacent yellow brick complex containing the swimming pool and caretaker's house. Although the latter are well designed the brutal juxtaposition with the stick and panel façade of the school is unfortunate, the weakness of combining traditional construction and system building being made obvious. This is not a plea for purism. Contradictions of form and spatial ambiguity have characterised many notable buildings, but there can be few examples where continuity of materials has been sacrificed with impunity. No doubt there were practical reasons for not using the SCOLA system for the whole group but this building is of such quality that it should be judged by the highest standards. The headmaster and teachers are full of admiration for the architects. This is a school of which all concerned can be proud and which is very good value for £103 000 in 1970.

A prototype for the future

There are a number of interesting buildings in the design stage: the March 72 prototype County Junior School presents



Above: *Plan of latest prototype which suggests a conflict between the design concept and the SCOLA vocabulary*
Left: *School furniture under severe test*
Below left: *The diagonally planned audio-visual room is 'absolutely first rate'*

a great contrast to what has gone before. The SCOLA system has been used to provide a diagonal plan form. This concept increases the number of possible space combinations and offers more directions for future additions. The inherently inflexible sanitary blocks punctuate the off-centre diagonal main axis, the teaching areas being grouped like ribs on this spine. Each teaching area opens directly on to its own pentagonal covered outdoor terrace, while at the base of the spine the common resource areas are in two clusters split by the central entrance hall. The resulting layout is at once controlled and flexible at the same time, the plan being rooted in a design idea rather than a process of additive problem solving exercises. The integrity of the spatial concept looks strong enough to provide continuity during the expected changes in the building's life. As Kenzo Tange has said: 'Architecture results when a typical form is given to a typical function'.
There seems to be a certain conflict in the design concept and the vocabulary of the system. The architects will need much ingenuity to detail the junctions arising out of the diagonal form using a system conceived for right angles, and one is bound to wonder if with such a large proportion of solid outside walls most of the perimeter columns could be omitted. It is interesting to speculate on the quality of the buildings that will result from this prototype and in what direction the county will move after that.