

# **LAWRENCE ISRAEL 1909 – 1990 [KGS 1921-1926]**

## **INTRODUCTION:**

I knew Laurie Israel from playing hockey alongside him for the OC's in the 1960's, usually being transported to matches by Ron Jeffries, who had already picked up Laurie. I knew that he was an architect, and subsequently realised that he was not "just an architect", but Partner in a prominent UK practice, Lyons Israel Ellis.

Laurie died in 1990, aged 80, and his death was recorded in OC News 97, with a short unattributed paragraph, acknowledging his distinguished career, but with no fuller description of his work. Obituaries appeared in both the national and professional press, written by David Gray, the last surviving partner from the practice.

My own interest in architecture came about by accident: training to be a librarian (part time professional study) I worked at the then Hammersmith College of Art & Building, and enjoying the subject involvement spent the whole of my career after qualifying with professional practices within the construction sector.

Fast forward to 2010, when working in the library of the Royal Institute of British Architects, where enquiries came from the general public as well as from within the profession, I picked up an email enquiring what information the RIBA held on a member, Lawrence Israel. I responded to the email offering assistance and indicating that I had known Laurie personally.

It transpired the enquirer was Laurie's great niece, Helen Gerald, who was researching family history. As I was working free-lance at the time, I could offer more time to assist. I met up with Helen and her mother and introduced them to the resources available from within the RIBA, including the nomination papers for membership, in Laurie's own hand. With the further professional information available Helen wrote a personal biography. I also put Helen in touch with Ron Jeffries, who I felt had more personal knowledge of Laurie than I did.

As I looked into the work output of the Lyons Israel Ellis practice, not only was it clear that the partnership was one of the prominent architectural practices in the UK in the 1950s & 60's, but it became apparent that the output of the firm was severely underestimated by the profession at large.

## **PERSONAL LIFE:**

Lawrence Israel was born on 18 April 1909, always known as Laurie, he used 'Lawrence' in his professional life. He was one of twins, the second set born to his parents, who were both teachers. There was also a younger sister, and later three half siblings when his father re-married following the death of his wife. The family lived at 4 Carlisle Road, NW10.

Following his time at KGS [he must have been one of the nearest to the school], he began his apprenticeship to become an architect, attending evening classes at Regent's Street Polytechnic. He completed his exams to become an Associate of the RIBA in 1934. He became a Fellow of the RIBA in 1963.

His early professional career was interrupted by the war. He saw active service with the Royal Engineers, being awarded the appropriate WWII service medals. He served first in

West Africa, and then the latter part of the war in Normandy in a field company maintaining road communications. All brothers who served returned safely from war service.

Laurie had several sporting interests, playing hockey for the OC's, and also football and cricket [was this for the OC's also?]. He was also a member of the MCC. He played hockey well into his fifties, and Ron Jeffries wrote the following note to Helen:

I was a good friend of Laurie's. We played hockey for the OC's for many years. He was a delightful man, kind and generous. He would call round on Saturday at lunch time and I would drive him to wherever we were playing. The Club went on an annual weekend tour to Jersey and I recall that, as Club President, he would host dinner for players, wives and friends, on at least one night. He normally played at full back, but occasionally in goal. He was very clever at playing the ball with his feet, and getting away with it, and on one occasion when in goal he saved a shot by heading the ball away. He had a dry sense of humour, and kept me amused in the car with funny stories, frequently Jewish jokes. I can honestly say he was one of the nicest people I have known.

Throughout his life Laurie lived at Carlisle Road. After the death of his father and stepmother, he stayed on at the house with his twin, Harold, and half-brother Gerald. Harold died in 1984, and Gerald lived on in the house until early 2011, ending 110 years of occupation by the same family.

Laurie died suddenly on 12 March 1990, just short of his 81<sup>st</sup> birthday. He is buried in Bushey Cemetery.

## **PROFESSIONAL CAREER**

**Lyons, Israel 1935-1939 and 1945-49**

**Lyons, Israel, Ellis 1949-1970**

**Lyons, Israel, Ellis, Gray 1970 - 1984**

At the age of sixteen Laurie started his career as an articled pupil of Ernest Joseph in the practice of Messrs. Josephs, attending Regent Street Polytechnic in the evenings to study for the professional examinations of the Royal Institute of British Architects. It was there he met up with Edward Lyons, and subsequently at Josephs, where and they collaborated on entries to numerous architectural competitions for prospective projects.

During the 1930's the architects achieved eleven placings: a second place being their initial success in 1932 with a design for Norwich Town Hall. The scheme for Wolverhampton Civic Hall was successful, and was the catalyst for the establishment of their own practice. This project was built (and still survives with subsequent alterations, though listed in 1992), although several other projects were abandoned on the outbreak of war. Lyons' talent for design together with Israel's attention to detail proved to be a successful combination, as during this pre war period, they achieved three first and four second places in architectural competitions - to the extent that an assessor was once reported to have told Israel that he had been placed second only because he had enough work already.

Lyons and Israel resumed their partnership after the war, although the first few years only provided a modest income, but, with an emerging post-war building programme lending itself to the style of working that Lyons & Israel had established, the practice flourished.

At this time, Tom Ellis joined the practice in 1947. Also training during the 1930's, he served as Chief Works Design Officer in Cairo during the war and worked on hospital projects in Newcastle before coming to London. He became a partner in the practice in 1949.

With the pace of job production required, the philosophy of the partners towards assistants developed. Lyons and Israel had always been hands-on designers, originally recruiting assistants in their own mould, who would work alongside the principles, but the requirement for staff to progress projects through their own initiative saw more independently minded assistants join the practice, who were not only "learning on the job" but rapidly contributing ideas and skills of their own. These recently qualified recruits took advantage of the opportunities afforded them, and many left to form, their own practices of considerable renown, the practice of Stirling & Gowan being just one of them, a fine testament to the calibre of the work achieved by the practice overall - such that the practice was recognised as a finishing school for future architectural talent.

James Stirling received the RIBA Gold Medal in 1980, and was knighted in 1992. His name lives on in the Stirling Prize awarded by the RIBA to the "building of the year". When Stirling & Gowan left to form their own practice in 1956, Lyons Israel Ellis gave them their first project. Directly or indirectly, Lyons Israel Ellis enabled many of their former employees to get their start in their fledgling practices.

David Gray was one who stayed with the practice, and became a partner in 1970. He died in 2014.

Throughout the period between 1945 and 1983, no more than sixty staff were employed altogether, continuing to reflect the work ethic of the partners. Israel was the practice administrator and would hold the organization and financial well-being totally within his grasp, being able to answer any question from a small notebook always in his pocket, long before the evolution of "modern management techniques".

Discounting aborted projects or unsuccessful competitions, the practice was responsible for some sixty or so completed projects over the same period.

The first school building for the practice was Trescobeas Secondary School in Falmouth, and among some 25 school buildings designed during the post war period are:

Peckham Girls School  
Bridgnorth Boys & Girls School  
Upholland High School, in Lancashire  
David Lister High School, Hull

Other educational buildings include Barnsley Technical College and the National Sea Training College at Gravesend.

Later buildings included the Old Vic Theatre annexe (now the National Theatre Studio), the Engineering and Science building for the Polytechnic of Central London (now University of

Westminster and originally Regent Street Polytechnic), the Post Graduate Medical School at Hammersmith Hospital, and the Wyndham Court housing complex in Southampton .

This latter high-density development of social housing for the City Council is widely thought to be the major achievement of the practice. It was listed Grade II in 1998. Completed in 1969, it has been placed on the same level as the Brunswick Centre in Central London, and the Alexandra Road development in Camden. This latter project was designed by Naeve Brown - another of the high flying assistants from the Lyons Israel Ellis stable. Naeve Brown was to receive the RIBA Gold Medal himself in 2018.

The Wyndham Court Development is featured as the “building of the year” (1970) in *100 Buildings: 100 years: celebrating British Architecture*, published by the Twentieth Century Society in 2014.

Throughout , the practice developed its own design philosophy, leaning towards continental influences, not least Le Corbusier. Buildings were solid, angular, and heavily designed in concrete. This became known as brutalist architecture, though not necessarily at the time of construction

Edward Lyons retired in 1970 (died 1972), and over the last part of the 1970's the work was undertaken almost entirely by the remaining Partners, as the practice wound down and was closed in 1984.

In 1988 the Architectural Association mounted a retrospective exhibition on the work of the practice, curated by David Gray. This was accompanied by a publication which listed and illustrated many of the projects with essays by several former employees.

In an obituary, David Gray remarked that Laurie was surprised by the attention the exhibition created and the respect which was accorded him: he was a man totally modest about his own achievements and his sympathetic approach towards younger less experienced colleagues.

Lyons Israel Ellis was a leading practice in the post war era, seemingly never feted as many of the contemporary practices were: perhaps reflecting the nature of the Partners, and certainly Laurie himself. It was an era when the individuals who made up the practice partnership were both identifiable in their own right, as well as defining the ethos of the collective practice. Most of these practices ceased with the retirement of the named partners.

Throughout, the Partners were hands on architects, participating fully in the detailed design process: skilled draughtsmen in an era long before computer aided design processes evolved.

Changes to the laws relating to partnerships in the 1980's created different opportunities, but probably removed the concept that was inherent in the old style partnerships.

The only practice which eschewed named partners was Building Design Partnership, formed out of the former Grenfell Baines Partnership in 1961 to promote the concept of the integrated practice, offering all services (engineering as well as architectural). BDP still exists today, probably the largest practice in the UK. A successful, commercial practice, but largely with buildings designed by anonymous architects.

Many of the projects designed by the Lyons Israel Ellis Gray partnership received attention in the professional press at the time of their completion.

Subsequently several buildings have been listed Grade II:

Wolverhampton Civic Hall (1992), Upholland High School, Lancashire (1993), Oldbury Wells School, Bridgnorth (1993), Wyndham Court, Southampton (1998) and the National Theatre Studio (2006).

In a publication produced for Historic England in 2015 *Space Hope and Brutalism: English Architecture 1945-1975*, Elaine Harwood remarks that the practice of Lyons Israel Ellis Gray is under recognised for its contribution to post war architecture.

In listing the National Theatre Studio in 2006, English Heritage described Lyons Israel Ellis as one of the most influential post war practices, specializing in education, public housing and health care buildings.

#### **SOURCES OF INFORMATION:**

Most of the information for this article has been gleaned from :

Lyons Israel Ellis Gray: *Building and Projects 1932–1983*, edited by Alan Forsyth and David Gray, published by the Architectural Association, 1988.

There are essays by David Gray and several former employees, then in private practice of their own. There is a chronological list of projects, with illustrations, plans, and list of other consultants.

Contemporary articles on many of the individual buildings may be sourced in the Library at the Royal Institute of British Architects. The library catalogue can be searched on line

The RIBA Library also holds photographic records, also accessible on line.

**Malcolm Green**, February 2021