Along with Derby's much lamented Art Deco bus station (b.1933, demolished 2006), Queen Street Baths was one of several civic buildings designed by the respected Borough architect Charles Aslin. Aslin went on to be elected president of RIBA from 1954-56, coincidentally preceding in office Kenneth Cross, whose father's influence can clearly be seen here, in the gently vaulted roof form and in the amphitheatre seating. In 1949 those seats were filled to capacity when Derby hosted the ASA's National Championships. In winter the pool was boarded over to become the 1500 seater King's Hall. Despite subsequent upgrades, in 1989 the baths closed for three years to undergo a £3.1m refit (by the Gibson Hamilton Partnership). This included converting the Gala Pool to a 25m deck level pool, revamping the former ladies' pool next door and a children's pool added in 1962, and creating a new entrance on Cathedral Road. The building was also renamed the Queen's Leisure Centre; not to retain the Queen Street link but because the Queen herself cut the ribbon, in April 1992.

Opened July 30 1932
Address Cathedral Road, DE1 3PA
Architect C H Aslin
Cost £79,250
Pools 100' x 40' (now 25m) and 100' x 32', plus teaching pool
Owner Derby City Council
Listed unlisted

Once in a while, along comes a building that perfectly captures the spirit of the age. In terms of large span public assembly halls, that building was the Royal Horticultural Society's exhibition hall, opened off Vincent Square, London, in 1928. With its tall, reinforced concrete parabolic arches, supporting a stepped series of flat roofs and glazed clerestories, the RHS Hall had clearly been influenced by the swooping airship hangars built in Orly, France, in the early 1920s. Given the breathtaking internal space that this structural form creates, it was only a matter of time before a public baths followed suit. And the first to do so was in Smethwick, just west of Birmingham, in 1933, where the pool hall (right) was almost a carbon copy of the RHS Hall. A similar design at Poplar (see page 174) was in mid construction at the time. Others would follow, at Seymour Place (Marylebone), Northampton and Lancaster (all detailed in this chapter). But Smethwick was the one. Designed by Chester Button and Borough Engineer Roland Fletcher, here was Britain's first genuinely Moderne baths. The building has enjoyed a varied history. During the war its basement was used as an air raid shelter (as surviving signs and graffiti attest). In the late 1950s it hosted swimming matches against France, Sweden and Germany. Boarded over in winter it was used for dances, hiring and wrestling. In November 1962 a little-known band called the Beatles played there, as did the Kinks, and the Who, and Tommy Cooper. Since then a 5m diving board (framed by the slab proscenium arch) has been removed, and the café overlooking the shallow end has become a gym. But the building otherwise reposes in a wealth of original Art Deco detailing, enhanced in 2008 by a sensitive £1.3m refurbishment. When you visit, as you should, see also on Thimblemill Road an equally arresting library by Button and Fletcher, opened in 1937 and also listed Grade II. Together, they represent 1930s civic architecture at its very best.

Opened March 30 1933
Address Thimblemill Rd, B67 5QT
Architect Chester Button with Borough Engineer Roland Fletcher
Peaks 30m x 9m, plus 20m x 9m learner pool added 1958
Owner Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council
Operator Sandwell Leisure Trust
Listed Grade II (2003)