

# Joining forces

*Squire & Partners merged timber construction and modern technology to create a bright workshop building for St James School in Ashford, Surrey*

WORDS BY Helen Parton

“It was a perfect constellation of factors,” begins Giles Heather, project associate with Squire & Partners, describing the architect’s design technology block scheme for St James School. Among these were the limited amount of funds – the project cost was £360,000 – as well as the time it took to build, with construction restricted to the school holidays. “The structure is fabricated off site so once it’s delivered it’s a case of one week it wasn’t there, the next week it was,” he says.

Before that of course, there was close collaboration with the school, particularly with the design and technology teacher at the time. Whereas previously the design technology block was in “essentially, the back of house” in the school’s original 19th century building in Ashford, Surrey, this is much more future-facing, but with a nod to centuries ago materials-wise.

Inspired by timber-framed buildings of old, the aesthetic provides a “local vernacular from the distant past”. The frame combines traditional pegged mortise-and-tenon joints with steel hex-head fixings, and sheets of off-the-shelf birch-faced ply panels lining the walls. Externally, the 175sq m block is clad in a black vertical weatherboard.

“The block doesn’t have any windows but that’s not something



↑ A pyramidal roof light illuminates the birch-faced interior

you would notice even on an over-cast day,” says Heather. This is because of a large-scale pyramidal roof light. Here vents can be opened for passive ventilation – handy on a warm day in the summer term or if the bandsaw’s going full throttle.

Occupying an area in the school grounds that once housed a collection of sheds and storage units, the block can accommodate 25 pupils at one time, plus two teachers, as well as an office, plant and store room.

The exposed timber and use of traditional construction are intended to give an inspirational lesson to the pupils about what can be achieved in the realms of design and technology. ■



↑ The block is clad in weatherboard