



NEWSLETTER 56  
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# Doncaster Civic Trust

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John Frederick Bentley



Church Lane, French Gate Doncaster.

An ancient narrow alley wound its way mysteriously from French Gate until - at last - it unfolded itself before the great west front of the parish church. An antiquated house with a frontage to French Gate abutted the alley on its southern side. For many years the house was known by the sign of the Barrel; in its later years it was the Old Barrel Cafe, until it was swept away at the hands of the post war 'improvers'.

It was in this house that Doncaster's most famous architect spent his childhood days. John Bentley was born nearly 150 years ago, on January 30, 1839, the son of Charles Bentley and his wife, Ann, who was a daughter of John Backus of the King's Arms, St. Sepulchre Gate. John was one of 17 children, ten of whom survived infancy. Charles Bentley started his business life in a solicitor's office, in 1831 he was a sheriff's officer, and later took the old established wine, spirits and porter vaults in French Gate.

Charles Bentley was a disciplinarian, having entered the Doncaster troop of the 1st West Yorkshire Yeomanry Cavalry in 1832 and attained the rank of sergeant-major. He looked unfavourably on his son's artistic leanings. Fortunately for John his mother was of a loving and sympathetic nature.

John received his early education at home then he went to a local private school. He loved to spend his leisure hours in the carvers' and joiners' workshops about the town and the men took pleasure in initiating the intelligent boy in the mysteries of their crafts.

John was barely 14 years old when the night sky was set aglow with flames bursting from the parish church. Despite the speedy arrival of the town's fire engine nothing could be done to avert the complete destruction of the building. The loss of this familiar landmark had a profound effect upon the young boy.

With the memory of the church still vivid in his mind he set about making a beautiful cardboard model of the entire building, complete in every detail, even to the simulation of the painted glass in the windows. The model was exhibited at a great bazaar organised by the ladies of Doncaster to raise funds for the rebuilding of the church. The model was sold for £4. 4s. 0d. to Mr. G. Morris of Doncaster.

To better display the details of the model it was illuminated inside with a candle and thus unfortunately met the same fate as the original. John made a duplicate model and although it was coveted by the purchaser of the first it remained in the hands of the family until it was finally donated to the town's museum.

The task of rebuilding the church was entrusted to George Gilbert Scott and work on the concrete foundations began in October 1853. The foundation stone was laid on February 28, 1854, the first anniversary of the fire. George Stephen Cleverly, a local mason, was chosen as the clerk of works for the rebuilding. John haunted the site, making himself useful to Mr. Cleverly and explained the architect's working drawings, set out full size details and made templates for the masons. He was even entrusted to measure up the foundations for the great central tower.

His father, realising the futility of keeping him any longer at school allowed him to leave about this time, before his 16th year. It was arranged that he should supervise voluntarily, as a sort of under clerk of works, certain repairs being done to Loversall church by George Gordon Place of Newark and Nottingham towards the end of 1854.

Each morning, at six o'clock, John was on the site to take the workmen's time. He gave to the operations all his natural thoroughness and energy. It is said he once took the tools from an incompetent carver and executed some of the work himself.

John's ambition was to be a painter but his father would not have it. William, the eldest son and 12 years older than John, had been extremely successful as a railway engineer. Early in 1855 John was sent to the engineering works of Messrs. Sharpe, Stewart & Co. of Manchester. It seems that John was very out of place there for he stayed only a brief time.

On June 26, 1855, John was indentured with Messrs Winslow & Holland, building contractors of London. He lodged with a clergyman's family at Camberwell Green from where each morning he used to walk to the office in Duke Street, Bloomsbury. John was given a seat in the drawing office and so impressed Mr. Holland that he arranged for John to spend a trial period in the office of Henry Clutton, an ecclesiastical architect and a convert to the church of Rome. Charles Bentley had died suddenly on November 28, 1856, so that it was John's mother who agreed to his entering the architect's office in March 1857.

John's mother carried on the family business, with his brother Robert Charles, who was 20 years old, as manager. R C Bentley distinguished himself by being chosen as Mayor of Doncaster on five separate occasions. He was elected to the Town council in 1866 and retired in 1920. For the last 30 years of his life he resided at 2 South Parade.

After the six month's trial period was over it was agreed that John should obtain a seat in Henry Clutton's office for the remainder of the apprenticeship term. So John spent nearly three years continuing his architectural training in the school of pronounced French Gothic favoured by his master. He also came under the influence of William Burges who was in Clutton's office for a time after John entered it. Clutton and Burges were restoring and decorating the Chapter House at Salisbury about this time. Burges encouraged the love of rich and glowing colour so strongly emphasised in Bentley's earliest designs and probably impressed him with the attention he bestowed on figure drawing in decorative sculpture.

In August 1860 when the covenanted term of his pupilage expired John's share in the practice was so valuable that Henry Clutton offered him a partnership. John, although he was only 21 years old, refused and decided to begin practice on his own account.

John spent many hours at the old Architectural Museum in Cannon Row formed by Ruskin, Scott, Burges and other mediaevalists about 1852 and removed to Brompton in 1857. In 1862 he took chambers at 14 Southampton Street, Strand.

John had been brought up in the Low Church tradition of a provincial town but he now turned to Roman Catholicism being baptised by Cardinal Wiseman on April 16, 1862. He was the first person to be baptised in the baptistry and font he had himself designed at the church of St. Francis of Assisi, Notting Hill. The church had been designed by Henry Clutton in 1860 and John had worked on it. He took the additional Christian name of Francis.

The chambers at Southampton Street, although of cramped proportions, became the meeting place for J. F. Bentley's circle of artistic friends. These included painters, architects and designers. They were joined in 1863 by Charles Hadfield who was slightly younger than Bentley. He was the son of Matthew Ellison Hadfield of Sheffield, an architect who knew Doncaster well, having lived there during his pupilage with Woodhead & Hurst (see Newsletter 29 for an account of this practice).

John regarded Matthew Ellison Hadfield and his wife much in the light of his own parents. Charles Hadfield had come to London to study architecture and Bentley closely directed his studies. The two remained close friends. Charles wrote that the times were full of stimulus for earnest students of mediaeval design.

Mrs. Cleverly, the widow of the Doncaster clerk of works whom Bentley had assisted as a boy when St. George's was rebuilding, came to London to act as house-keeper to 'Master Johnnie'.

J F Bentley never sought after work and at no time did he employ more than three assistants who worked from 10 am to 6 pm. He survived his early years in practice subsisting mainly on a number of Catholic commissions of small scope and slender pecuniary profit.

He submitted designs in metal and stone for the London Exhibition of 1862 which brought him some notice. In 1866 he undertook for the poet Coventry Patmore the adaptation of an old Sussex farmhouse near Uckfield which was renamed "Heron's Ghyll". His work betrayed from the first conscientious anxiety for perfection in detail and soundness of construction.

In 1867 he made a journey northwards and acted as best man at the wedding of Charles Hadfield at Halifax on January 23. He came to Doncaster where he had been requested to design an altar frontal and tabernacle door at St. Peter's in the Chains which the Hadfields were rebuilding. The frontal was painted by Bentley's friend N H J Westlake for whom Bentley had designed a house at 23 Lancaster Road, North Kensington, in 1863. In 1869 the Hadfields gave Bentley the decorative work to do on the ceilings at the Great Northern Hotel, Leeds.

In July 1868 Bentley moved from his cramped chambers at Southampton Street to rooms in a dignified house built as part of the grand scheme by the Adam brothers at 13 John Street, Adelphi. In May 1868 Bentley had received the commission for one of his major works, the St. Thomas's Seminary, Hammersmith (now the Convent of the Sacred Heart) but building work did not begin until 1875.

In 1874 Bentley surprised his bachelor friends by marrying Margaret, daughter of Henry J Fleuss a painter from Dusseldorf. After a short courtship he proposed to her on Hampstead Heath. It is said that Bentley was married in odd shoes. They had four sons and seven daughters, one son and one daughter dying in infancy.

Bentley's financial affairs were improving at this time. Apart from work starting on St. Thomas's Seminary he was also called to Carlton Towers in Yorkshire in 1875. The Jacobean mansion of modest size was enlarged and in some degree Gothicised for the ninth Lord Beaumont by Edward Welby Pugin. The work was incomplete when Pugin died suddenly from syncope. Bentley completed the structural work and designed the interiors. Work on the internal decorations continued until 1891 by which time a mountain of working drawings, many from Bentley's own hand, had been prepared. The ornate Venetian Saloon is the best of the interiors. Also by Bentley are the five gamekeepers' cottages erected in the village in 1876 at a cost of £1,347, very simple, gabled and satisfying.

Another work of 1876 was the presbytery of St. Peter's in the Chains at Doncaster, again simple but in every detail an abundance of refinement and charm. Of his fee amounting to £95 he gave £80 to the building fund. At the same time Bentley enlarged the altar in the church and designed a reredos in alabaster and Caen stone. Although Bentley altered and extended many churches, including St. Mary of the Angels, Moorhouse Road, Bayswater where he was engaged from 1869 to 1887, he received few commissions for new churches. The reasons were that he never sought work, he refused to enter competitions, and because of his desire for quality he was regarded as an expensive architect.

His first new church commission was St. Mary's, Cadogan Street, Chelsea dating from 1877. This was followed by commissions for Our Lady of Holy Souls, Kensal New Town of 1881; the impressive church of the Holy Rood at Watford of 1883; Corpus Christi at Brixton Hill of 1886 and St. Luke's, Chiddingstone Causeway of 1897. Bentley had abandoned the French Gothic style by the time he received his first church commission and had turned to English Gothic for his inspiration.

Bentley designed a large preparatory school at Beaumont College, Old Windsor, in a French Renaissance style in 1887. In 1890 his brother R C Bentley bought 2 South Parade, Doncaster called "Sandholme" and he made additions to it and thoroughly over hauled and decorated it, adding a pretty arcaded wooden screen across the hall to break the direct view of the staircase from the street entrance.

Bentley made designs for stained glass throughout his career. Work in Yorkshire included designs for St. Peter's in the Chains, Doncaster; St. Marie's, Sheffield; All Hallow's, Harthill; Treeton church; Wath upon Dearne R C church.

Bentley's great opportunity came when he was 55 years old. The search for a site suitable for a Catholic cathedral had been going on for a number of years. In 1884 the Middlesex County Prison, Tothill Fields was bought. The site at one time had been a marshy tract of ground. The raising of the funds for such an undertaking occupied several years. Between autumn 1892 and summer 1894 Cardinal Vaughan constantly obtained opinions and listened to advice from the best qualified for his guidance in the choice of an architect. A dozen architects sought the commission but Bentley made no approach. Vaughan considered holding a competition to settle the matter but Bentley refused to enter. Vaughan then took a consensus of the opinion of the leading architects who gave the palm, with unanimity, to Bentley.

Vaughan decided the cathedral would not be in the Gothic style to avoid a conflict with Westminster Abbey. Bentley preferred Gothic but on consideration thought the Cardinal was right. However he disagreed with the Cardinal and his advisers who wished for a basilica church of Italian type. The Cardinal finally abandoned the idea and accepted Bentley's advice for the choice of Christian Byzantine style.

Unlike previous cathedrals this one had to be built quickly and cheaply. Bentley set out on an exhausting tour of Italy in the worst winter known there for 80 years visiting Milan, Pavia, Florence, Rome, Perugia, Ravenna and Venice where cold and fatigue compelled him to rest before he could study St. Mark's. He was prevented from visiting Constantinople because of an outbreak of cholera.

He returned in March 1895 and the foundation stone was laid on 29 June. In 1894 W R Lethaby, a pupil of Norman Shaw, published 'The Church of Santa Sophia, Constantinople, a Study of Byzantine Building' and it seems that Bentley took this church as his model. The materials Bentley used were brick, stone and concrete; he deliberately eschewed the use of steel. Externally the building is dominated by the brilliant campanile, at 283' the highest church tower in London. The exterior of the cathedral with its red brick striped with bands of white Portland stone owes something to Norman Shaw's New Scotland Yard.

The vast nave consists of three bays, each 60' square, surmounted by a concrete dome. A fourth bay nearest the nominal east end forms the sanctuary and beyond it is an apse. The design is on the largest scale.

Bentley was seized in November 1898 with paralytic symptoms and a second attack in June 1900 affected his speech. As soon as he was sufficiently recovered he made a return to his drawing board knowing that he would not see the cathedral completed but anxious to complete the designs for the decoration of the interior.

He died March 2, 1902, at his residence, "The Sweep", Old Town, Clapham, the day before he was due to be nominated for the RIBA Royal Gold Medal. His third son, Osmond succeeded to the practice with J A Marshall, Bentley's chief assistant.

David Watkin in his book 'The History of Western Architecture' wrote "In its poetry and in its high seriousness, its religious meaning and its emphasis on the almost moral value of craftsmanship, Westminster cathedral expresses many of the deepest concerns of Victorian England".

Bentley was truly described as a great artist and a first rate practical man and his individuality was present in all he did.

Ref. 'Westminster Cathedral and its Architect' by Winefride de l'Hopital, 1919  
Winefride de l'Hopital was Bentley's eldest daughter.