

HENRY ISAAC STEVENS 1807-1873: A DERBY ARCHITECT

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It is to be regretted that an architect of the stature of Stevens did not record his reminiscences or details of his professional life; the office in which he received his training and even his place of birth remain a mystery. It is only from the newspaper announcement of his death that it can be determined that he was born in 1807.¹ There is however, some indication that the early part of his life was spent in the south of the county, the first buildings with which he was associated being at Hartshorne, Coalville, Donisthorpe, Shardlow, Burton upon Trent, Stapenhill and Ashby de la Zouch. Further evidence to justify this opinion is contained in his signed survey of the old rectory house at Hartshorne in 1834 where he states that he is "of Hartshorne"² and also that in 1832 he married Ann Martin at Repton Church.³

Although having such strong connections with South Derbyshire, it is not known whether he had an office in that locality. From 1836 until his death, he practiced from Derby. Until about 1847 he was at 16, Full Street, the following two years in Agard Street and in 1850 moved to rooms over the Post Office at 22, Cornmarket. In 1860 he was to be found at 17, Tennant Street and in 1862 he made his final move to 45, Friar Gate. No doubt some of the changes of office were because the increasing prosperity of his firm necessitated larger accommodation.

Whilst being essentially a local architect, from 1857 until 1863 he also had an office at 22 Sackville Street, Piccadilly, London, but unfortunately nothing is known of his work in the capital.

Likewise, nothing is known of the extent of, or about, his staff, with the notable exception of F.J. Robinson. Robinson joined Stevens as a pupil in 1850, became a partner in 1859, the style of the firm changing to Stevens and Robinson and was later to carry on the practice on Stevens' death. Stevens was elected a Fellow of the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1850 and was a member of the Council of that Institute from 1859 to 1861.⁴ No doubt it was in this latter capacity that he attended the funeral, at Westminster Abbey, of Sir Charles Barry in 1860.⁵

In 1850 Stevens was the secretary to the Derby committee for the exhibition of 1851⁶ and in 1867 was one of several Derby architects to join in a deputation to the mayor concerning the announcement of a resolution of the corporation to allow their surveyor, Mr Thompson, to combine private practice with his public duties. The local architects were furious as "the works in the town are far from being numerous and cannot partially be diverted from the resident profession without serious consequences."⁷

Members of the Royal Institute of British Architects were not allowed to be involved with actual construction work, but Stevens, like the majority of the architectural profession, was involved with work of a non-architectural nature. One such occasion was in 1866 when he acted on behalf of the proprietors of the Derby Town and County Library whose premises in Irongate were to be compulsory taken down by the Local Board for the widening of the street under the Land Clauses Act. Stevens valued the property at £3082 but on the case going to arbitration, the umpire awarded £1962.⁸

Stevens' architecture has been described as unimaginative,⁹ but who can point to an imaginative architect during the period that Stevens was in practice? It was an age of revival and Stevens did no more than conform to the times. True some of his churches were stark, Emmanuel at Swadlincote and St Stephen's at Woodville testify to this.

True that occasionally he appears to have had some difficulty in relating scale of the main body of the church with its tower, as at Holy Trinity, Ashby de la Zouch and his church at Donisthorpe. But who can deny Stevens his successes as at Blackfordby, where the spired tower and the main body of St Margaret's church harmonise on their wooded knoll and St Michael's, Derby, a church of trim compactness. Whilst his architecture may not have been outstanding, the question arises as to why so much work passed through Stevens' office. Certainly whatever the reason may have been, he was recognised as an architect of some standing even at the comparatively early age of 42, when he was one of the architects selected to assess the designs submitted for the Birmingham Workhouse competition.¹⁰

It must be recognised that Stevens, like many of his contemporaries, relied upon a small proportion of his work being obtained in competition by responding to advertisements requesting designs for buildings. The complete re-building of one of the oldest ecclesiastical buildings in Leicestershire, St Margaret's at Blackfordby, was obtained in this manner.¹¹

Should the need or opportunity arise, Stevens was not averse to be sufficiently enterprising to ask for work. On learning that a Church was contemplated to be built at Overseal, he immediately wrote to the Reverend Sir W.N. Gresley saying "Having heard of your intention to erect a new Church at Overseal, I take the liberty of sending you a design for a Church capable of containing nearly 300 adults and 60 children. In doing so I wish it to be distinctly understood that if any previous engagements have been made with an Architect for the making of plans for your Church, I shall not regret the trouble which I have taken but only lament that I was not sooner in my application." In five foolscap pages, he went to some considerable depth in giving a variety of estimates and alternatives based upon the use of differing materials. Stevens was no doubt mortified to learn that shortly after the receipt of his letter, a vestry meeting confirmed the appointment of Thomas Johnson of Lichfield as architect. Possibly Stevens' spelling of 'Griesley' did nothing to endear him to the incumbent.¹²

Undoubtedly, however, it was Stevens' ability relating to the preparation of information to tendering and his practical knowledge that endeared him to clients. His knowledge of materials and construction were such that he may well have started in life as a tradesman before taking up architecture (not an uncommon occurrence at this period) and his reports to his client concerning the use of materials to be used in the building of Ashbourne workhouse confirm his practical knowledge.¹³

Stevens' attention to detail and interest in the builders who tendered for his work is shown at an early stage in his career when, having prepared designs for a new workhouse at Bingham, Nottinghamshire, he visited the Chesterfield Arms Inn in that village for two days, to give any further explanations to builders regarding the construction of the building.¹⁴ Stevens was also the first architect in Derbyshire to make use of a bill of quantities for tendering purposes. The fact that the earliest known use of this document nationally was 1835 and did not come into general use until after 1850, indicates his willingness to discard traditional procedures to assist the builders tendering for his works. The occasion Stevens first used the bill of quantities was in 1839 for the construction of Holy Trinity Church on the Burton Leys, Nottingham.¹⁵ Thereafter, his use of the document was spasmodic and appears to have been restricted to buildings of some size or consequence.

Stevens died at Holly Bank, Normanton, near Derby, on 30th April 1873 and was interred in Repton churchyard, although no stone exists today indicating the location of his grave.

Despite practising for the whole of his career in Derby and being involved essentially with local buildings and local organisations, very little has been traced of any biographical note. Undoubtedly though, his finest legacy lies in the buildings he designed, the majority of which are still standing. (See Appendix)

REFERENCES

- ¹ *Derby Mercury*, 31 April 1873.
- ² Lichfield Joint Record Office, B/A/13III.
- ³ Repton Marriage Register 1832.
- ⁴ RIBA Membership Index, 1834-1886.
- ⁵ *The Builder*, 26 May 1860.
- ⁶ *Derby Mercury*, 26 June 1850.
- ⁷ *The Builder*, 22 June 1867.
- ⁸ *The Builder*, 16 June 1866.
- ⁹ *Derbyshire Advertiser*, 6 October 1972.
- ¹⁰ *The Builder*, 8 September 1849.
- ¹¹ *The Builder*, 22 November 1856.
- ¹² Derbyshire Record Office D77, Gresley Papers, Box 23, Folder 5. Letter dated 10 December 1839.
- ¹³ Derbyshire Record Office D520. Minutes of the Proceedings of the Board of Guardians of the Ashbourne Poor Law Union. Meeting 10 October 1846.
- ¹⁴ *Nottingham Journal*, 17 June 1836.
- ¹⁵ *Derby Mercury*, 2 October 1839 and *Nottingham Journal* 27 September 1839.

APPENDIX

Buildings designed by H I Stevens

As it is impossible to determine which buildings were designed by Stevens and which by his partner, all building designs have been listed which emanated from Stevens' office up to the time of his death.

- 1834 Hartshorne Church
- 35 Hartshorne Rectory
- 36 Bingham workhouse
Church, parsonage and school, Coalville.
- 37 Church at Donisthorpe
St James' Church, Shardlow
Burton upon Trent Workhouse
Alterations to Shardlow Workhouse
Church at Stapenhill
- 38 Holy Trinity, Ashby de la Zouch
- 39 Savings Bank, Friar Gate, Derby
National Schools, Curzon Street, Derby
Holy Trinity, Nottingham
- 40 Houses on London Road, Derby
- 41 Schools at Lenton, Nottingham
Shops and warehouse, Ashby de la Zouch
Diocesan Schools, Friar Gate, Derby
St George's Church, Ticknall
- 42 Rectory, Walton on Trent
Savings Bank, Ashbourne
- 43 St Alkmund's Church, Derby
Congregational Chapel, London Road, Derby
- 44 St Paul's Church, Hyson Green, Nottingham
Christ Church, New Radford, Nottingham
Church at Hazelwood
Church at Coton in the Elms
Church at Clifton near Ashbourne
- 45 Emmanuel Church, Swadlincote
Church at Wooden Box
Church at Osmaston
- 46 Workhouse at Ashbourne
St Stephen's Church, Woodville
Osmaston Manor

- 47 Christ Church, Cotmanhay, Ilkeston
- 48 Callow Hall, Mapleton
Parsonage, Little Eaton
- 49 Church at Clay Cross
Church at Belper
Church at Bulwell
New Wing, Derbyshire Infirmary
Church at Mansfield
- 50 Diocesan Training Schools, Derby
Refreshment Room, Arboretum, Derby
Extension to St Werburgh's Church, Derby
National Schools, Wirksworth
- 53 All Saints, Heath, near Chesterfield
Parsonage at Ashbourne
Temperance Hall, Curzon Street, Derby
- 54 Schools at Clay Cross
Chapels etc for Derby Burial Board
St John's Church, Idridgehay
Design for oak screen, Elvaston Church
Design for arcade, Hazelwood Church
- 55 Church enlargement, Darley Dale
St John's Church, Mansfield
- 56 National Schools, Ripley
Parsonage at Selston
Public Buildings and Market, Ashby de la Zouch
Works at Locko Park
Rebuilding of St Michael's Church, Derby
- 57 Littleover Church alterations
- 58 Mickleover Church alterations
- 59 St Margaret's Church, Blackfordby
Cromford Church restoration
Repton School Chapel
Farms, cottages etc, Spaldington, East Yorkshire
- 60 Church enlargement, Stapenhill
- 62 Alterations to Padley Hall Farm, near Ripley
Church alterations, Kirkby in Ashfield
Residence at Clifford Priory, Hertfordshire
- 63 Restoration of Findern Church
- 64 Baths, Lodging Houses and Institute, Ironville
Alterations, St James' Church, Barton under Needwood
- 67 Nightingale Wing etc, Derbyshire Infirmary
Re-building of St Lawrence's Church, Heanor
- 68 Church restoration, Barrow upon Soar
Steward's residence, Elvaston, for Earl of Harrington
Premises in Irongate, Derby, for Mr Bennett
Headquarters and Drill Hall for Derbyshire Rifle Volunteers
- 69 Church at Ashbourne
- 70 Alterations at Derbyshire Infirmary
- 71 St John the Evangelist, Aldercar
Broomfield House, Derby
St Luke's Church, Derby
Free Church, Ashbourne
- 72 Church at Parwich

Alterations to the Churches at Allestree, Atlow and Mackworth may also have been designed by Stevens.