

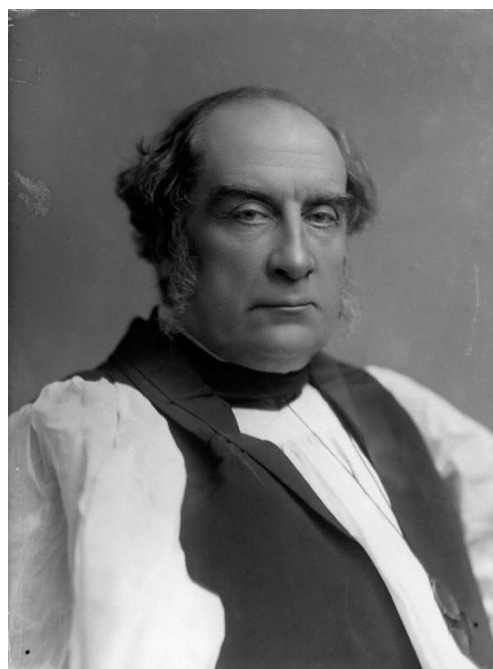
# Scissors Paper Stone

Blog 16:

## Ranmoor's Lost Church (Part One)

*Most of us will rarely, if ever, think of how the elegant St John's Church we see above Fulwood Road is not the original church, the one consecrated in 1879. That church, the first St John's, was destroyed by fire in 1887. In the first of three articles, local historian Val Hewson explores Ranmoor's lost church.*

At 11 am on Thursday 24 April 1879, under a dull sky, the Archbishop of York, William Thomson (1819-1890), came to Sheffield to consecrate Ranmoor's new church. It was a great occasion. 'At the time the service commenced every available seat was occupied' (Sheffield Independent).<sup>\*</sup> Archbishop Thomson seemed to have brought most of his local clergymen with him – the Sheffield Telegraph names 42 and finishes its list with '&c'. Grandees from Oakbrook, Thornbury, Storth Oaks, Riverdale and the other big houses in Ranmoor came to meet the clergy. John Newton Mappin (1800–1883), who had paid for the church, was there, of course, along with his nephews, John Yeomans Cowlshaw and Frederick Thorpe Mappin. The Firths were represented by the great industrialist himself, Mark Firth, and his brother, Charles Henry Firth. There were at least six men - Mark Firth, Frederick Mappin, Abram Brooksbank, John E Bingham, William H Brittain and John B Jackson – who served as Mayor of Sheffield; and three of them – Messrs Firth, Brittain and Bingham – were also elected Master Cutler. The wives, mothers, daughters and sisters of all these men would have been present too, parading in their fashionable best, but of course they didn't rate a mention in the newspapers.



*Archbishop William Thomson by Bassano (public domain)*



*Architect Edward Mitchel Gibbs (1847-1935)  
([Picture Sheffield](#). Ref: y08517)*

The architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner described 'our' St John's as 'opulent outside and inside'. In its [Grade II\\* listing](#), English Heritage notes: the Gothic Revival style; the sculptural work of Frank Tory; the bell tower and spire; the 'ornate ashlar and marble font'; the 'square traceried oak pulpit'; and much more.

Of all this splendour, designed by the architect Edward Mitchel Gibbs, then just 32 years of age, only the bell tower and its spire were part of the first St John's. Everything else comes from Gibbs' 1887 plans for the second church (or alteration and restoration since). What then was Gibbs' original design? Was it as opulent, as elegant, as the church we know?

Our best information comes from the newspaper coverage of 1879. The Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer (Friday 25 April 1879, p. 4) commented: 'Without profuse decoration, the church is one of the prettiest in Sheffield.' There was a hint of criticism – a Leeds

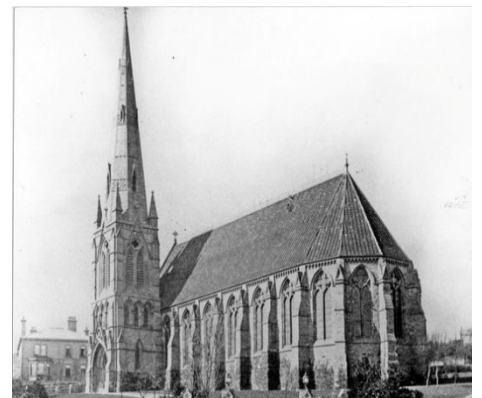
newspaper, after all – in its ‘The building has a sloping roof, and looks narrow from the outside’. But it redeems itself: ‘the interior is very pleasing’. And in fact the *Independent* was worried too:

... The immense height of the spire, and the very sloping roof of the church, at first convey the impression that the church itself is somewhat stunted. This, however, soon passes away ...

On the whole Sheffield’s press was admiring. There is so much detail that you suspect the architect took reporters round and checked their notes afterwards. The *Telegraph*’s man, who carefully noted the overall cost of about £15,000 (almost £1m today), was impressed from the outset:

... on ground some feet higher than the Ranmoor-road, [the church] presents an imposing appearance viewed from all parts of the locality. ... The main entrance is beneath the tower, and forms one of the features of the building. Carriages are able to drive to this door, and can return down Ranmoor Park-road without turning round. The spire is 190 feet high above the church floor, and 220 feet above the footpath in Ranmoor-road, being the highest in Sheffield.

It’s much the same today: our church sits above the road, spire piercing the sky. Cars can drive in one gate and out the other. The grounds, not large, are grassed over. In 1879, they must have been more elaborate, as landscaping ‘was entrusted to Mr. R. Marnock’. Robert Marnock (1800–1889) was a leading garden designer, who worked on Sheffield’s Botanical Gardens and the General Cemetery. St John’s must have been a simple commission, but his involvement indicates how much John Newton Mappin and his neighbours wanted to make a mark for their affluent suburb.



*St John's in 1879 (from The First Hundred Years 1879-1979, © St John's Church)*

The interior of the church was architecturally striking:

The style of architecture is early Gothic. The plan has been so designed that there are no pillars to obstruct the sight, the whole edifice being covered by one roof. The features of the interior are the elaborate open timbered roof, the lofty windows, and the arrangements of the chancel ... The internal dimensions are 130 feet long, 38 feet wide, and 53 feet high. The east end is apsidal ... (*Telegraph*)

The effect of the open roof would have been heightened by the ‘numerous and large’ windows of clear glass (although the *Independent* thought it was ‘tinted’). The hope was, the *Telegraph* said, that ‘they may some day be fitted in with stained glass’.

The *Telegraph* enthused about the rich furnishing by expert craftsmen. (Here is more evidence of Ranmoor pride.)

The decorations of the walls and reredos are only intended to be temporary until the building is properly seasoned. This work has been executed by Mr. Puttrell from the architect’s designs.

James Puttrell was a local master painter and decorator. The church had room for ‘559 adults’, whose ‘pews are covered with Brussels carpets, and footstools to match. The seats are cushioned in crimson’. The pulpit was ‘upholstered in crimson velvet, with velvet pile carpet on the floor and pulpit steps’, while the aisles were ‘covered with Napier matting, with a plain centre and effective border’. The floor tiles were Minton and the roof tiles from the local Broomhall Company. Newton, Chambers, Sheffield-based and one of the biggest firms in the country, supplied the heating and metalwork.

Just as John Newton Mappin paid for the building, and James W Harrison gave the land, so many of the important local families donated treasures to the church.

The pulpit is very elaborate, the work of Mr. Charles Green, from the design of the architect. Wood and bronze are combined in the design, and the effect harmonious, warm, and becomingly appropriate to the appointments. ... Mr. J. Y. Cowlshaw presented the pulpit, at a cost of about £400. The font, the gift of Mr. W. H. Brittain, is of Ancaster stone, with marble columns. Mr. J. B. Jackson has provided the lectern ... The communion plate is of silver, gilt and oxidised, and has been presented by Mr. J. E. Bingham. Mr. Herbert Hutton has given the collecting plates and alms dish; Mrs. J. B. Ellison the communion table cloth, and Mr. Alfred Dearman the clergy service books. (*Telegraph*)



*The interior of the 1879 church (from The First Hundred Years 1879-1979, © St John's Church). Here are the large windows, the timbered roof, the carpeting, the pulpit and the lectern.*

The *Independent* thought the pulpit 'perhaps the most beautiful work of art in the church' and 'altogether unique':

... of Italian walnut, with bronze enrichments and ornaments, the work of Mr. C. Green. Octagonal in form, it is supported by eight, fluted bronze pillars, with decorated caps and bases; and there is quite a wealth of panels, figures, and ornaments in the same metal.

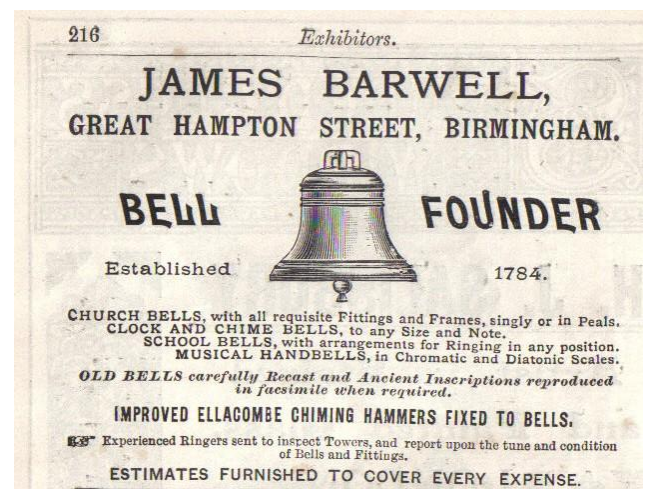
The organ and bells impressed by their scale.

The bells are eight in number, and weigh three tons 10 cwt, the tenor bell being 15 cwt. They were cast by Mr. James Barwell, of Birmingham, and have been fitted up on the most improved principle by Messrs. Shaw and Sons, of Bradford, under the superintendence of Mr. J. R. Cordingley, of that town. The bells are the gift of Mr. W. Smith, of Springfield House, Fulwood. (*Telegraph*)

The bells, the *Independent* said, 'are worked by an ingeniously constructed machine ... by which one man can effectively manage the whole peal'.



*The tenor bell (© St. John's Ranmoor Bellringers)*



*An advertisement for James Barwell from the Illustrated Guide to the Church Congress (1897) (public domain, via Wikimedia Commons)*



The organ, given by Charles Henry Firth, was the work of a local firm, Brindley and Foster. The *Telegraph* included a detailed specification, listing the many stops like 'lieblich gedact', 'flauto traverso', 'vox angelica' and 'quint bass'. The congregation had the chance to enjoy its music, as hymns and canticles were sung 'under the leadership of Mr. T. Tallis Trimnell, Mus. Bac., who presided at the organ' (*Telegraph*). The splendidly-named Thomas Tallis Trimnell was the organist at Sheffield Parish Church and a noted composer.

The consecration itself was a simple and, in a sense, legal ceremony.

The petition for consecration was presented to the Archbishop by Mr. Newton Mappin. His Grace, having received it, ordered it be read ... Mr. Thomas presented the conveyance of the site of the church, the deed of patronage, &c, which were received by the Archbishop, who, sitting in his chair, read the sentence of consecration, which he subsequently signed, and ordered it to be enrolled and preserved amongst the muniments in the registry. (*Telegraph*)

Before his sermon, Archbishop Thomson took time to praise John Newton Mappin:

I know that this is no mere gift of money which could be well spared. Much thought and care and anxiety have gone along with the gift ... [Mr Mappin's] liberal hand, his thinking head, his daily watchful mind, have altogether brought this house to its completeness. (*Telegraph*)

John Newton Mappin's St John's, as we know, was not long complete. But it certainly appears to have been as beautiful and splendid as our St John's.

Val Hewson  
20 January 2025

\* All the quotations above, unless noted otherwise, come from the Sheffield Daily Telegraph (Friday 25 April 1879, p. 3) or the Sheffield Independent (Friday 25 April 1879, p. 3).

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