

Pew Renting: the last shall be first and the first last

Many of you will never have heard of pew renting because quite rightly it is a thing of the past. But until after the Second World War it was often used to raise money to pay for the priest and the church fabric. In medieval times such a system was not necessary because church costs were covered by the tithing of the whole parish. Every resident, devout or not was required to pay a tenth of their worth, whether in goods or money. This was often resented but as a system it sort of worked until the Church of England lost its monopoly on Christian observance. In the seventeenth century onwards, Quakers, Methodists and Catholics rightly objected to supporting a creed they did not believe in. So it seemed fair enough to ask those who actually came to church to pay for its upkeep and staff. Anglican and some dissenting congregations adopted the pew renting model.

But if you look at the pew renting map you will discover the flaw in this new system. How, in heaven's name, did the vicar, the Reverend JG Williams, described as a 'genial' man preach on Christ's words recorded by Matthew, that 'the first shall be last and the last shall be first' when in front of him were four of the richest steel manufacturers in the city and in the furthest corners of the church, their servants? I don't know how long St John's used the pew renting system but most churches had abandoned it by the beginning of the twentieth century. Thank goodness for that but, I am afraid I have to be grateful that thanks to this hierarchical and profoundly unchristian practice we have in front of us just the kind of document that we needed to identify those residents of Ranmoor who, like the stone masons, left few traces of their lives. For though this map has, at its centre, the names of the wealthy, it graphically illustrates the diversity of the congregation and the fact that the majority of the men and women in front of Reverend Williams were not as rich as our early benefactors, Henry Steel, Frederick Thorpe Mappin or Robert Colver.

On the attached map you will find the names of all those who rented a pew in St John's in 1890. The number in brackets indicates the number of 'sittings' they paid for. You'll notice too, that some of our more illustrious predecessors rented two lots of sittings – one for the family and the second for their servants. The north aisle lies largely unrented – this, the colder side of the church, would have been the seating for those who hadn't rented a pew.

Below are the brief profiles of two of our most prolific pew renters, Robert Colver (pews 42 and 20) and Samuel Earnshaw Howell (pews 35 and 7).



Robert Colver (1842-1916)

Robert's father was a builder and contractor and he was educated at Milk St Academy. He chose not to join the family business: he became a farmer & land valuer through his connections to his mother's farming family. He acquired his own farm in Ecclesfield at the age of 21. However, in 1873 he changed direction and went into partnership with Joseph Jonas, steel manufacturer, who had started the Continental Works in Sheffield. The company expanded and eventually manufactured all kinds of steel, from watch springs to heavy projectiles and high class tool steel. He was church warden at St Johns and took an active interest in the rebuilding of the church. He was much involved in the life of the city: a member of the Chamber of Commerce, a J.P. from 1910, a Freemason, committee member of the Sheffield General Hospital & Dispensary, an active supporter of the

Ranmoor Horticultural Society. He joined the Company of Cutlers in 1882 and became Master Cutler in 1890. Two of his sons were killed on the First World War and the remaining son, Robert Colver junior, joined the family firm.

He died at Rockmount in 1916; the funeral service was at St John's, the internment at Fulwood Church. He left £243,530 in his will.

(Sheffield Daily Telegraph, 4th December 1916)



Samuel Earnshaw Howell (1847-1928)

No pew for his servants but they were not forgotten.

Howell and Co., originally a steel and file maker in the Wicker, was founded in 1853. He lived at 14 Gladstone Rd. The Hawley Collection website describes the development of the family firm:

'One of the partners, John Bennett Howell (1818-1904), launched his own business. By 1880, it had two locations: Brook Hill Steel Works, Brook Lane (which dealt in steels and tools); and Sheffield Tube Works, Wincobank (which specialised in tubes for locomotives and steam engines). J. B. Howell's son – Samuel Earnshaw Howell (1847-1928) – joined his father in 1870. Samuel was Master Cutler in 1888, and became a JP, Conservative town councillor, and president of the Sheffield Chamber of Commerce.

The problem of corrosion in steam tubes meant that Samuel became keenly interested in rustless steels. After stainless steel's discovery in 1913, Samuel Howell became 'an early convert to stainless ... [and] ... was one of those who contended that an efficient cutting edge could be obtained with stainless knives' (Sheffield Daily Telegraph, 16 April 1928).

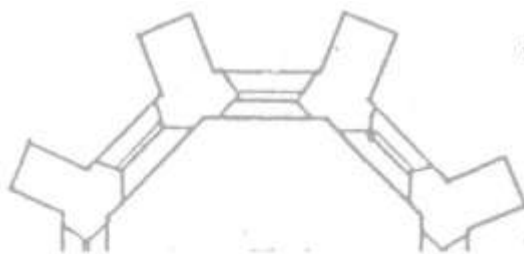
Samuel E. Howell died on 15 April 1928 at Sheffield Royal Hospital, after he was knocked down by a tramcar at Nether Green terminus (Sheffield Independent, 16 April 1928). The funeral service was at Ranmoor, followed by cremation at City Road. He left £86,914.'

Few were more generous to their servants than Samuel Earnshaw Howell.

Mary Grover with map designed by Sarah Beardsmore

14 April 2025

Scissors Paper Stone



The Ranmoor Pew Renters 1890

North Aisle

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Edgar Allen (2) Maples (2) 68
Miss Stephenson (2) Mrs H Colver (1) James Dixon (4) 67
Mrs Chester (7) 66

North Nave Aisle

W Bedford (2) / Mrs EV Birks (5) 65
RW Watson (8) 64
W Hickson (4) / TW Sorby (4) 63
JB Ellison (7) 62
JE Bingham (5) / Miss Kay (1) / Mrs Turner (2) 61
FA Colley (5) / CG Porter (2) / Mrs Terry (2) 60
Mrs M Hall (2) / Miss Keddle (4) / JS Nowell (2) 59
GG Pochin (2) / Henry Steel (6) 58
HW Lawrence (1) / R Roberts (5) 57
Misses Gilmour (4) / GW Hawksley (6) 56
HH Andrew (5) / D Gilmour (3) / CHG Hay (1) 55
Charles Davy (3) / John Newton (8) 54
George Dale (2) / Arthur Davy (5) 53
Dr MJ Cleaver (2) / Mrs M Firth (7) 52
HK Peace (3) / Josh Spencer (3) / Chas W Wheen (5) / Mrs Hibberd (3) 51
Mrs Binney (3) / GF Bush (6) 50
Prof Hicks (3) 49
Mr Strangeway (6) / HC Flory (5) 48
Miss Eyre (3) / WS Laycock (5) 47
H Ashington (3) / Mrs Emily Howlden (2) 46
A Abbott (1) 45
Mrs William Bissett (3) / Mrs Marples (2) / WI Clegg (4) 44

South Nave Aisle

43 W Dransfield (5) / Robert Colver (9)
42 JB Wilkinson (6)
41 JW Harrison (9)
40 G Howson (6) / Mrs Patteson (1)
39 JY Cowlshaw (6) / JCV Stacey (2)
38 S Hayes (5) / RM Johnson (3)
37 Thorpe Mappin (9)
36 Mrs Dearman (4) / EG Reuss (5)
35 SE Howell (7) / Mrs Cave (1)
34 CHURCHWARDEN'S SEAT JR Wright (8)
33 WH Brittain (9)
32 Charles H Firth (9)
31 F Hobson (5) / Miss Hibberd (3) / J Hunt (3)
30 Mrs Price (1)
29 Miss Jackson (2) / Mrs TW Rodgers (4)
28 Thos Carrington (4) / R Roberts (4)
27 WW Harrison (2) / RJ Nicolson (5) / GK Wilson (7) / Dr White (2)
26 Miss Garland (3) / AN Arnold (4) 26a Denys Hague (4)
25 H Bloor (5) / Dr White (2)
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23
22 Montague Brown (5)
21 Mr Howard (5) / R Richardson (5)

South Aisle

20 Robert Colver (*)
19 Charles Favell (2) Thomas Favell (2)
18 Thomas Harrison (5)
17 JC Shaw (5)
16 Mrs Smith (2) John Wright (3)
15 HJ Gregg (2) Geo H Whittaker (2) Mrs Patteson (2)
14 H Hutton (5)
13 JW Shipman (3)
12 Hardy (4)
11 WT Flather (5)
10 I Sharman (5)
9 H Branson Firth (5)
8 John Fowler (3)
7 Mrs Hartley (3) M Townrow (2) SE Howell (7)
6 FThorpe Mappin (5)
5 Mrs M Hadfield (5) Henry Steel (3)
4 H Chalmer (5)
3 Mrs Bower (5)
2 Miss Dixon (3) Maples (2)
1 W Lockwood (6)

*Not available

