

A Special Occasion at St John's

In which a prince, a philanthropist, 40 constables and a large dog go to church...

In October 1879 Royalty came to St John's. Prince Leopold (1853-1884), Queen Victoria's youngest son, was in Sheffield to open Firth College, a forerunner of the University of Sheffield. The Prince stayed at Oakbrook with the industrialist Mark Firth, who was, as its name suggests, the moving force behind the new college. The visit was reported in the press extensively and with due Victorian deference.



Firth College on the corner of West Street and Leopold Street. Copyright © Sheffield City Council. All rights reserved. Ref: Picture Sheffield - c03111.



The street sign on the former Sheffield School Board offices. Copyright © Sheffield City Council. All rights reserved. Ref: Picture Sheffield - c04364.

Leopold is not much remembered today. Leopold Street, in Sheffield's centre, was named for him but most people probably have no idea of this. He was the only one of Victoria's children to suffer from haemophilia (she was a carrier, as were two of her daughters) and he died at the early age of 30 after an accident. He was known in his lifetime as an intellectual and had studied at Christ Church, Oxford. Maybe this was why he was invited to open the new college, which was to offer university-level teaching in the town. The Sheffield Telegraph referred to Leopold as 'England's Royal Scholar' and the Huddersfield Chronicle opined:

... the nation has reason to be proud that one of the Royal scions has stepped aside from the engrossing and fascinating pursuits of politics and war, wherein kingly wisdom and valour have scope for exercise, into the quiet walks of literature and science. Prince Leopold studies, observes, and meditates. The love of learning and the cultured taste which distinguished the late Prince Consort have descended to his youngest son, and we have no doubt that if Prince Leopold be endowed with health and strength he will become one of the greatest ornaments of all that is noblest and most exalting in the national life ... (Wednesday 22 October 1879)



Portrait of Mark Firth by Thomas Jones Barker. Public domain. 1874.



Oakbrook House, the home of Mark Firth. Courtesy of Picture Sheffield. Ref: s05492.

There were large crowds when the Prince arrived in Sheffield. He was met at Victoria Station by his host, Mark Firth, along with the Mayor, the Master Cutler and a crowd of railway officials, aldermen and councillors, generally important citizens and various wives, daughters and sisters, all dressed in their best. The station had been specially decorated, with flowers, flags and a red carpet. Ordinary Sheffielders crowded the streets, as the Prince was driven through the town, up to Broomhill and along to Ranmoor, with an escort of police and the Yeomanry Cavalry.



'England's Royal Scholar' as an Oxford student. By Hills & Saunders (photographer). Public domain. Circa 1872

When it came to church on Sunday, St John's was the natural choice: close to Oakbrook, it was Ranmoor's own, tall and impressive. Getting there was circumscribed by as much ceremonial as everything else in Leopold's visit (and probably in his life). Although the weather was not good, 'rain and wind prevailing during the morning', many people - thousands, according to the London Evening Standard and Manchester Courier (both Monday 20 October 1879) - gathered to see the spectacle.

The crowds, however, were most orderly, and appeared to be abundantly satisfied with the sight of the Prince, as he passed to and from the church. His Royal Highness could hardly have anticipated that at such a distance from the centre of the town there would be so many spectators, for he appeared both surprised and pleased; and though, of course, there was no cheering, he frequently raised his hat in acknowledgment of their silent greeting.' (Sheffield Independent, Monday 20 October 1879)

The police were well prepared.

Inspector Toulson, with one sub-inspector, four sergeants, and 40 constables, was on duty, and distributed the men on the Ranmoor road from Oakbrook to the gates, and they also lined the passage leading from the road to the church. The Chief-constable, Mr. Jackson, was in attendance, seeing that the arrangements were carried out properly.

Many of the people who had met the Prince's train the day before attended the service, including the Mayor and Mayoress, Mr and Mrs Edward Tozer; the Master Cutler, Joseph Burdekin Jackson; local MP Anthony Mundella; John Newton Mappin, 'who generously erected the [church] at his own expense' and his nephews, John Yeomans Cowlshaw and Frederick Thorpe Mappin.

St John's had been consecrated seven months earlier, in April 1879, and must have looked splendid that morning, even in the gloomy weather. The Illustrated Police News (Friday 25 October 1879) called it 'a very elegant edifice'. The grounds had been laid out by the designer Robert Marnock, who was responsible for Sheffield's Botanical Gardens and many of the local estates. The interior decoration was not finished, with the walls and reredos temporarily painted and the large windows with plain, not stained, glass. But in place were the peal of eight bells, the organ, the font of Ancaster stone and marble and the pulpit of wood and bronze, with a crimson velvet carpet leading to it.



St John's as Prince Leopold would have seen it. Courtesy of Picture Sheffield. Ref: s02612.

The Telegraph reported that: 'A few minutes past eleven a murmur of excitement passed through the crowd in the lower road, and immediately afterwards Mr. Mark Firth's carriage, fully opened, entered at the lower gates, and drove rapidly up to the church.' At this point Royal dignity was affronted when: 'The inevitable dog, in the form of a large retriever, of course made his appearance, and ran in front of the carriages a short distance, but then took a turn to the left and bounded over the wall.' Order restored, Mr Cowlshaw, who was a churchwarden, met the carriages and, carrying his 'wand of office', conducted the Royal party to Mark Firth's pew.

The Telegraph called the sermon, preached by the vicar, the Rev Dr Chalmer, 'an able and eloquent address' and, in the fashion of the day, both it and the Sheffield Independent reported it almost verbatim. The text was from Ezekiel xviii: 'Yet ye say, The way of the Lord is not equal. Hear now, O house of Israel: Is not my way equal? Are not your ways unequal?'

After the blessing, the congregation remained in their seats until the Prince and his party processed out, returning by carriage to Oakbrook. 'At half-past one o'clock His Royal Highness, accompanied by his suite and Mr. and Mrs. Firth, drove up Manchester road to Mr. Firth's shooting box on Moscar Moors...'. They returned about six o'clock and a 'private dinner party was afterwards held, at which one or two friends were present.' As it was Sunday, there had perhaps been no shooting but rather a good lunch and a walk in the fresh air across the moors.

Leopold's visit to Ranmoor was remembered by Caroline, the wife of Mark Firth. In her will, signed in May 1893, two years before she died, she left to her second son, Mark, 'the pendant presented to me by His Royal Highness the late Prince Leopold'.

*Val Hewson
21 July 2025*

NB Unless otherwise indicated, the quotations in this blog are from the Sheffield Telegraph of Monday 20 October 1879.