

WILLIAM BUTTERFIELD (1814-1900) AND THE VICTORIAN GOTHIC REVIVAL

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Even in 2019, over a century after his death, William Butterfield's buildings present an aesthetic and ideological challenge to us. We usually prefer something easier on the eye, less uncompromising. In order to understand his achievement we need to try and understand the man and his times, and in order to do this I will focus on a handful of his buildings in the hope that they will throw some light on the church that we are celebrating today.

Butterfield's portrait gives us an insight into his the character: serious, reserved, austere. He grew up in London, the child of a solid, hard-working, Nonconformist middle-class family; his father was a pharmacist in the Strand, his mother the daughter of a leather merchant. Apprenticed to a builder, then to a series of architects, as a young man he 'laboriously visited old buildings'. He set up own practice in 1840, and moved in 1842 to a house in John Adam Street in the Adelphi, just south of the Strand. This was his home and office for the rest of his life. He never married.

His first significant building was a Congregational chapel in Bristol (1843), finished two years after **A.W.N. Pugin** published his *True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture*. For Pugin Gothic architecture was not primarily of antiquarian interest – one among many equally valid styles – but the only style appropriate to a modern Christian country. This was not just because of its religious and historical connotations but also because of its intrinsic qualities of functional truth. Butterfield was inspired by these principles in his first large commission: **St Augustine's College, Canterbury** (1844-8). It was built on the site of St Augustine's Abbey, one of the greatest medieval churches in Britain, almost entirely destroyed, save for its medieval gatehouses, after the Reformation. The aim of the new foundation was to train missionaries, and its buildings embody some of Pugin's precepts: the use of local materials (in this case flint); asymmetrical layout and planning; and a concern for good, 'honest' craftsmanship. To fully understand the building we need to remember two things that helped shape Victorian Britain, The first was the Oxford Movement, which transformed Anglicanism by emphasising the continuity between the Church of England and the Early Church, and which sought successfully to revive sacramental worship; the second was the spread of the British Empire, whose boundaries were set 'wider still and wider' during Butterfield's long lifetime. By 1844 Butterfield had already become an Anglican, and had joined the 'High Church' Cambridge Camden Society; he was probably chosen as architect by Beresford Hope, heir to a large fortune and one of the leading patrons of the Society. In those days 'High Church' implied a concern for maintaining the traditional hierarchy of bishops, priests and deacons, with a resident priest in every parish. It also meant restoring dignified worship according to the Book of Common Prayer, though not necessarily the 'smells and bells' with which it later became associated.

Butterfield's success at Canterbury led to his being asked by George Frederick Boyce (later 6th Earl of Glasgow) to design the miniature cathedral for the Western Isles of Scotland at Millport on the island of **Cumbræ** (1849-51), off the Ayrshire coast; with its 'college' of priests and choral establishment it was an Episcopalian outpost in a Presbyterian country. Here we can notice the tall spire without pinnacles pointing arrow-like to the heavens; the steep-pitched timber roof of the church; and the stone screen demarcating the chancel from the nave: a *sine qua non* for Pugin though not always for Butterfield, who believed that it was important for the congregation to see and hear the liturgy. Butterfield also designed cathedrals at Adelaide and Melbourne in Australia, though neither was carried out precisely as he intended, and, like most Victorian church architects, he was responsible for several church restorations as clergy and patrons tried to reverse long years of neglect. A good early example (1847-58) is at **Dorchester Abbey**, Oxfordshire, where the long-neglected 14th-century chancel was brought back into regular use with a new roof and seating.

By the mid 1840s Butterfield was a leading light in the Camden (Ecclesiological) Society, which advised clergy and people about how to build and restore churches according to approved ('correct') principles. In 1847 he published some of his own designs for church furnishings in his *Instrumenta Ecclesiastica*, and in 1849 he was brought in by Hope to design a 'model church', **All Saints, Margaret Street**, on the site of a chapel just north of Oxford Street in London, already patronized by a 'fraternity' of High Churchmen including Butterfield and Hope (and also the future Prime Minister, William Ewart Gladstone). Here, on a cramped city-centre site, Butterfield designed a building of startling originality. Charles Eastlake said in his *History of the Gothic Revival* (1872) that it liberated English Gothic from 'the trammels of precedent', treating Gothic as a living, changing style capable of 'development', a favourite word among the more radical Gothic Revivalist architects of the time; recent research has shown that in its planning and proportions Butterfield employed the *ad quadratum* system which had governed the design of many medieval churches.

Butterfield shared some of his ideas on decoration with **John Ruskin**, whose *Seven Lamps of Architecture* was published almost simultaneously in 1849, and was followed by his *Stones of Venice*. Ruskin's writings stressed the importance of colour, texture and good craftsmanship in medieval architecture: creativity, he argued, should be emphasised as opposed to the allegedly rigid rules of classical buildings. For Butterfield brick was the material of the age (perhaps like concrete in the 1960s-70s): he declared that 'he had a mission to give dignity to brick', and like Ruskin, he looked abroad for late-medieval precedents as to how to use it. This took him to Italy - e.g. **San Fermo Maggiore, Verona** - and Germany (the **Marienkirche at Lübeck**), but he also looked at English secular architecture (e.g. **Compton Wynyates, Warwickshire**) with its distinctive patterning of blue and red brick. From buildings like these he drew lessons that helped create his distinctive and highly original style: 'constructional polychromy'; the use of brick where there wasn't good building stone; a love of massive awe-inspiring shapes ('sublimity'); and, where appropriate, irregular forms and outline.

These characteristics can all be seen in the exterior of All Saints Margaret Street (1849-59); notably, soaring height and patterned red brickwork (criticized even in his own times as 'streaky bacon'). They made the church, with its adjacent clergy house and choir school, stand out among the mundane surroundings streets of ordinary London stock brick and stucco. The result was highly charged and deeply unconventional, like Gerard Manley Hopkins's poetry. The interior has a relatively conventional layout of nave, aisles and chancel with side chapels and Decorated Gothic ('Middle Pointed') detailing, following the approved Camdenian ideal. But what makes All Saints stand out among most churches of the time – though not Pugin's – is the profusion of colourful detailing. Hope, who fell out with Butterfield, called him 'fanatical in his colour doctrines'. Medieval churches were painted both inside and outside, and their floors, like that of the chancel of Westminster Abbey, were sometimes adorned with geometrical patterns in coloured marble, which may have inspired the circular designs on the spandrels of the nave arches at All Saints. Pre-Raphaelite painters were currently both attracting and repelling the art-loving public with their exuberantly colourful pictures; George Dyce, whose art anticipated that of the Pre-Raphaelites, did the original paintings on the reredos at All Saints (later replaced by Ninian Comper). Butterfield, like his medieval predecessors, believed that a church was an offering to God and a foretaste of Heaven: something that seems to have escaped some later commentators who missed the point of Butterfield's church architecture by emphasizing what they thought was its gratuitous ugliness.

All Saints made Butterfield famous, and he went on to design churches throughout the country, both in rapidly growing towns like Penarth, and in villages, many of which had inadequate churches for a still-expanding population, or none at all apart sometime for a Nonconformist chapel – often a major reason for building an Anglican church. At **Baldersby St James**, in the North Riding of Yorkshire (1855-7) there was a paternalist High-Anglican squire, Viscount Downe; the church is built of stone, with a tall spire and steep roofs and a lych-gate at the entrance to the churchyard. But the interior, with its characteristically uncomfortable pews (designed, like everything in Butterfield's churches, down to the smallest detail), is of patterned brick, like St Augustine's, Penarth. Butterfield also designed the school, the parsonage and houses of various size. These buildings drew on the rural vernacular tradition, celebrated by contemporary artists like George Price Boyce ('Farm buildings at Dorchester, Oxon', c.1860), and they influenced Philip Webb at the **Red House** at Bexleyheath (1859-60) for William Morris, and, through him, the Arts & Crafts tradition.

Butterfield will always be best known for his churches. They should be seen as 'total works of art' in which architecture, sculpture, woodwork and stained glass combine to often overwhelming effect, as at **Beech Hill**, a Berkshire hamlet where there was a Baptist chapel but no church: it was built for £4000 in 1866-73 by the local squire, Henry Hunter, and retains its with rich fittings: font (of marble); windows designed by Butterfield but made by Alexander Gibbs, one of his most frequent collaborators; wooden screen, which doesn't block the view of altar; and brass candelabra. Butterfield

designed few big houses, but an exception is the **Chanter's House** (1880-3) at Ottery St Mary (Devon), was one: the patron here was John Duke Coleridge, a lawyer, collateral descendent of the poet, and supporter of Oxford Movement; his father had brought in Butterfield to restore the superb medieval church in the late 1840s: one of his most important church restorations

I will finish with two educational buildings. The first is **Rugby School**, prototypical Victorian public school, setting of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* and one of the nurseries of 'muscular Christianity'. It was founded in the C16, enlarged in 1809-14 by a local architect, Henry Hakewill, and expanded under two subsequent headmasters, Thomas Arnold and Frederick Temple. Temple brought in Butterfield to design a stripy, brick classroom block (the New Schools) in 1867-72, and in 1872 Butterfield went on to rebuild the Chapel with its extraordinary octagonal tower; later in 1878 he designed the Library (now the Temple Reading Room). Butterfield described his style as 'modern Gothic': a 'living language' having words for rackets-court, operating theatre and latrine'.

The second, **Keble College** (1868-82) was founded at what was then the northern edge of Oxford – its 'bricky skirt' in Hopkins's words. The area to the north of the old walled city was already being built up with middle-class houses on a site opposite Benjamin Woodward's University Museum (1855-9), one of the most important buildings of the Victorian Gothic Revival and the setting in 1860 of the famous Huxley-Wilberforce debate on the *Origin of Species* (published 1859). Keble College was a riposte to contemporary secularism: an assertion of the eternal values of Christianity. Butterfield confounded contemporary pundits who criticized his use of brick (for which the tax was removed 1850), writing: 'I set small store by popularity, and intend ... to take the responsibility of thinking for myself and to use the materials which this locality and this age supply, without caring to ascertain whether any course is to find immediate favour or not ... The older Oxford colleges were built of bad local stone, and there was not brick to be had. Oxford has nowadays brick, but not stone'. The college was intended as a memorial to John Keble, preacher of the Assize Sermon on 'national apostasy' which had launched the Oxford Movement, in 1833 and author of the poems (some still sung as hymns) in *The Christian Year*. He had died in 1868, by which time his ideas and example had inspired countless Anglican clergy such as E.B. Pusey, theologian, Canon of Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford and one of the leading lights in the campaign to found the college. The main intention (as in medieval colleges) was to train an educated clergy So the college was intended to give university training by the high charges made in other collegiate foundations'.

There are two quadrangles, neither of them conventional either in their planning or their architecture. The larger of the two has the Chapel on the north side and the Hall and Library facing it to the south, with the student rooms – arranged unconventionally (for Oxford) along corridors – to the east and west, of polychromatic – Butterfield's word was 'gay' - brickwork on the outer elevations. The **Chapel** (1873-6) was built with a gift of £30,000 from William Gibbs of Tyntesfield, near Bristol, a banker and merchant who had

made a fortune from the export of guano from South America for use as agricultural fertilizer. The interior, far from being a Ruskinian celebration of the creativity of the workmen, was meticulously planned by Butterfield in every detail. The walls are not inert masses but works of sculpture acting as framework for three layers of decoration, inspired by buildings like San Francesco at Assisi: abstract forms below, mosaics above, and stained glass above that; Gibbs, who made the windows to Butterfield's distinctive designs, was also sent to Venice to study mosaic technique. The iconography was very carefully chosen: Old Testament subjects at the west end, and scenes from Christ's life, death and resurrection to the east end, with the Last Judgment over the west doorway, seen as you leave the building. The altar is raised up on steps, and the seats face forward so that everyone can see it (and not each other, as in traditional collegiate planning). Butterfield clashed with Henry Liddon, another Canon of Christ Church, over choice of subject for the reredos: Liddon, he wrote, 'wants to resolve the decoration into a sermon and I into a creed ... We are living in an age most terribly subjective and sensational. It is an age of preaching. ... Creeds and definite principles are out of fashion. Our feelings take their place ... Distortion and disorder for supposed good ends must have no permanent part in a building which is to last for generations. We must endeavour to stamp on it what is divine rather than what is human. To give restfulness. & strength & sense of communion that comes of quiet order, completeness & proportion, must be our aim'. If this was true for Butterfield in 1873, how much more true it is our own troubled times? Butterfield also refused to allow Holman Hunt's 'Light of the World' into the main chapel when it was donated to the College, and it was relegated to a small chapel underneath the organ, where it can still be seen.

The **Library**, divided into bays or study-carrels, is on the upper floor of the block facing the chapel (1876-8), reached by a staircase leading to a landing filled with light from an oriel window. The **Hall**, on the opposite side of the landing, is unusually large for an Oxford college and was designed for all of the students to dine together, quasi-monastic style, as in medieval colleges, rather than separately in their own rooms as had become common in more traditional colleges. South of this block is the **Liddon Quad**, a highly agglomerative and picturesque ensemble of 1876-7 with the Warden's House at far end, seen in one of the working drawings preserved in the College, the work of one of Butterfield's six hard-working office assistants.

Butterfield had only two pupils - one of whom, Henry Woodyer, was one of the post gifted exponents of 'High Victorian' Gothic - and his style died with him. So how should we respond to his buildings now? Beresford Hope called him 'stiff, dogmatic and puritanical', but these words are misleading if applied to his architecture. Writing to Butterfield in 1877, Gerard Manley Hopkins said: 'I hope you will long continue to work out your beautiful and original style. I do not think this generation will ever admire it. They do not understand how to look at Pointed [i.e. Gothic] building as a whole having a single form governing it throughout ... they like it to be a sort of farmyard, a medley of ricks and roofs and dovecots'. But for those who are prepared to be challenged and uplifted by architecture, his buildings are still an inspiration both to the eye and to the spirit, and that is ultimately why we are here today.

Further reading:

Paul Thompson, *William Butterfield* (1971)

P. Howell & A. Saint (eds.), *Butterfield Revisited* (Victorian Society, 2017)

I have quoted correspondence in the Keble College archives.

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