

Scissors Paper Stone

Blog 9:

Our Spire



One of the mysteries of our church is that if you are running past it for the 120 bus or striding towards Attilio's for a mid-day sandwich, it is easy to miss the imposing building altogether. It can seem tucked away from everyday life on a little hillock and surrounded on three sides by trees. Yet, from the hills and valleys on the west of Sheffield, miles or half a mile from the church, it is clearly visible. It rises above the Victorian and Edwardian suburbs and the treelined streets and is, even for those who have nothing to do with the church, a defining component of a landscape which seems unchanging and much-loved.

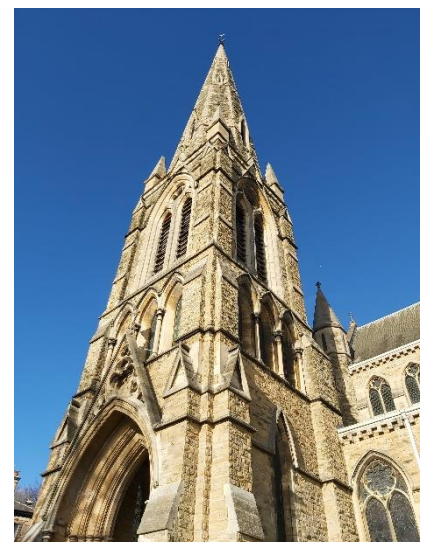
It is the spire that makes its mark on the city of Sheffield, not the rest of the building. Yet, as we now know, it is the spire that is the building's greatest weakness.

The only part of the first church to survive the fire of 1888, its survival seems to suggest the spire's permanence but where fire failed, chemistry succeeded. The fatal combination of limestone and sandstone in the spire meant that over the last 150 years the materials that it is made of have caused it to disintegrate.

Limestone should never be placed above sandstone on the outside of a building. When wet, limestone gradually leaches calcium carbonate. When this seeps into sandstone it gradually crystallises causing the sandstone to burst apart.

So why did our architect, Edward Mitchel Gibbs, use this combination? It is possible he was following the lead of that great founder of Victorian Early Gothic, George Gilbert Scott. Thirty years earlier, in the 1850s, Gilbert Scott designed what is said to have been his favourite creation: All Souls, Haley Hill in Halifax. Gibbs worked in Leeds and Sheffield and Flockton, who took him into his Sheffield architectural practice, had trained under Gilbert Scott. Was it this chain of influence that inspired many of our church's early Gothic features: the slender columns, the relatively simple tracery and, above all, the delight in what is sometimes called structural polychromy. This is the use of different coloured stones to emphasise certain structural features in a building. Our spire looks like a copy of Scott's creation in Halifax which suffered even more disastrously from the mix of limestone and sandstone. The problems faced by the guardians of All Souls were so great that it is no longer a functioning church but preserved, for its beauty, by the Churches Conservation Trust.

Yet, when we look up at our spire we can see why the architects of both All Souls and St John's were seduced by the interlacing of different coloured stone. Limestone is less crumbly than sandstone – more



Cheddar than Lancashire. This means that the shapes cut from it can be sharply defined. Looking up at our spire we can see that the whiter blocks of limestone etch the spire's shape against the sky. In between the network of limestone lies the yellowy infilling of sandstone which lightens the whole effect and gives the construction that sense of lift-off - one of the great thrills of looking upwards at it from close by.

I found a visitor one day, doing just that – standing outside the church, craning his neck to look at the spire beyond the inverted umbrella of scaffolding that now prevents church goers from being struck by lumps of sandstone. He introduced himself as Roderick Hughes. He had himself been a chorister at St John's in the mid twentieth century. He revealed that he had a close family connection with the spire. His great grandfather had put the cockerel and the weathervane at its topmost point. Roderick, both a musician and an engineer, had come from a family of builders. His ancestor had come from Harrogate to seek work in Sheffield just as the building boom on the west side of Sheffield was gathering pace. It was a source of family pride that his nerve and his skills had contributed to this well-known local landmark.



I shared Roderick's family history with a group of children who were waiting patiently while their parents were rehearsing for a concert. The music being sung was in celebration of the man who paid for the spire and first church to be built: John Newton Mappin. While their parents were singing, Sally Booker and I took Sam, Arthur, Iris, Toby and Polly out on to the green in front of church. It was one of the few nearly sunny afternoons this spring. Sally had provided binoculars for us to look at the spire to see if we could find the golden cockerel that should be spinning around in the wind and that Roderick's relative had placed there.

Though there was a light breeze there were no flashes of gold as the cockerel spun round – we hope that in the church's restoration we will be able to restore his plumage. But we could see the weather vane change position and Gibbs' creation of white limestone and golden sandstone shone. Against the fast-moving little clouds the whole spire seemed to spin upwards.

I am grateful to Iris for capturing that afternoon when the spire seemed invincible and to Polly for helping us all to look carefully at patterns of white and gold that define and destroy it.

These first six months of the Scissors Paper Stone project have caused many of us to look more carefully at the building in which we worship. It is my hope that all this looking will help increase our understanding of the way our church was built and can be preserved. The geologist Scott Engering will be talking to us on Saturday July 6th about the nature of the many kinds of stone that Gibbs used to create St John's. Only such understanding will help us save our church from collapse or from being conserved simply as an empty monument to times past.



Mary Grover
6 June 2024