

The Stonemasons who Built St John's

As part of the Scissors Paper Stone project, Val Hewson and Sue Row recently gave a talk on the stonemasons who may have built St John's church. It was inspired by the masons' marks discovered in the triforium by Mark Gregory, one of the church wardens. Here Sue gives a summary of it.

Tracking down the individuals who made these marks was not easy; very often we had only the initials, sometimes with a date. The census records were an obvious source of information but were not always as helpful as we had hoped. Not only was the information scarce, it was often unreliable.

One mark was W. Thornton, not too difficult, one would have thought. I discovered a Watson Thornton in the 1861 census. He was born in 1842 so was the right age for working on the church in the 1880s. According to the transcript of the census, Watson, his father and brother were all stone masons, but unfortunately, when I checked the original census document, all three were recorded as *steel melters!*

There was one mark, WBP, which was more promising, having three initials to work with.



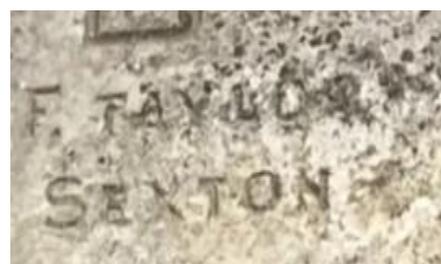
We are confident he was William Baildon Palmer, a stone mason who is recorded as living in Brightside in the 1891 census. Though a long journey with his tools, he could have found temporary lodgings nearer his work as many itinerant masons did. We discovered quite a lot about Palmer. He was born in Nottingham in around 1862. His father was a coachman at Knowle Manor, a Grade II* listed manor house in the West Midlands. He died in Brightside on 3 July 1904 of phthisis at the age of 42. According to the Operative Stonemasons Union, his family was entitled to £12 in benefit.

We don't know for certain who FT was. My personal favourite is Farewell Taylor who was from Dore, which was a long walk from St John's. At some stage he was made sexton of Dore church and there is evidence of his work as a monumental mason in the church yard.



He died in 1932 and is buried in Dore church yard in the same grave as Sarah Keeton who died in 1927. This was a mystery as I knew he had never married. However, after further investigation the problem was solved: a widow, she was his housekeeper.

One possibility for IW is Isaac Wardley. He lived in Woodseats which seems a fair distance from St John's but workers often walked what seem to us long distances to and from work. Also, by the 1890s there were horse drawn trams so he could have used them. His son, Isaac, was also a mason. The mark was made in chalk, not incised, so could well have been done by the younger Isaac who was only 14 in 1892.





We also investigated the stone masons who lived near to the church who, though not indicated by the marks, may well have worked there. One such family was the Hancocks. Samuel Hancock senior, born in 1835, lived in Fulwood and was a sexton at Fulwood Church. Samuel Hancock junior, born 1860, was also a mason and became a builder and monumental mason.

IW 1892

In 1901 Pendeen Rd at Nethergreen was a hotbed of masons: 7 in total including Samuel Hancock, builder and marble mason, at number one, his brother Arthur, also a mason and master builder, at number two.

Newspapers were another valuable source of information. Master builders and monumental masons took out advertisements and court cases were reported. According to a report in the Evening Telegraph of February 1895, Samuel Hancock junior was sued by Frank Cuthbert for £6.10s when his pony was killed falling into the quarry off Armthorpe Road worked by Hancock.

Although the information with which we were working was fragmentary and not as conclusive as we had hoped, it was fascinating to try to recover the stories of the masons who may have worked on the church, the type of working men who rarely make it into the history books.

Susan Roe

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