

Ranmoor's Lost Church (Part Two): 'Today its place knows it no more'

Val Hewson wrote in January (Blog 16) about the first St John's, given by John Newton Mappin to Ranmoor in 1879. It was once described as 'the Church of the wealthy'. Its furnishings were elegant: a pulpit of bronze and wood, a font of Ancaster stone and marble, Brussels and velvet pile carpeting, Minton floor tiles and more. But just seven years after the consecration all this was lost.*

The Church of St. John the Evangelist ... was wreathed in flames from the chancel to the western gable, from the organ chamber to the southern porch ... as the fierce heat burnt away the timber, the loosened tiles dropped into the interior, and through the roof protruded tongues of fire ... The interior was one seething mass, which outlined the architectural features of the building ... very soon the great volumes of black smoke, lit here and there by lurid gleams from the nave, told to Ranmoor that its church was doomed.**

The alarm was given by the caretaker Thomas Leighton around 9.30 on Sunday morning. It was 2 January, the first Sunday of 1887, and there was a severe frost, making roads and paths treacherous. In the big houses around the church, servants would have been serving breakfast, and masters and mistresses eating eggs,



St John's before the fire (Picture Sheffield, Ref: s02612)

bacon, kidneys, kedgerree, toast and marmalade. Poorer people would not have eaten so well but were probably looking forward to their Sunday rest. Some would already have been getting ready for church and others feeling a little sorry for themselves after New Year celebrations.

Leighton, 'anxious that the church should be warm',* had kept a fire burning in the furnace all night. This was the custom in winter. The caretaker, about whom we know only that he was living in Upper Ranmoor Road, had started work at about 5am, to get everything ready for Sunday services. Down in the cellar he "'fired up," got the furnace at a good heat, and at eight o'clock left everything apparently safe'.** He spent half an hour setting out the communion service in the church and went home for breakfast around 8.30am. When he came back almost an hour later, it was to the smell of burning wood and smoke 'creeping through the roof of the organ chamber'.** He hurried through the vestry into the church.

The flames were bursting out all about the top of the organ pipes, creeping inch by inch lower, whilst forks of fire shot up against the arching, and curled upwards into the roof of the church.**

Leighton kept his head. He ran down to the Ranmoor Inn from where a messenger rode off at a gallop to the police station in Spooner Road, Broomhill. Here at 9.50am a call was made to the 'Fire Office' in Rockingham Street. The horse-drawn fire engine raced the two miles uphill to the church, arriving at 10.10am. Inevitably some spectators complained of a slow response, but the Telegraph dismissed this: '... certainly not justifiable, for Superintendent Pound was present twenty minutes after receiving the call, which is capital time on a frosty

road from the fire engine station'.** The small 'hose cart' kept by the Broomhill police had arrived just before and started drawing water from a nearby hydrant.

Meanwhile Thomas Leighton had run up Ranmoor Park Road, to the vicarage, shouting 'Mr Tweedie, the church is on fire.'** The churchwardens, Hamer Chalmer and Robert Colver, came hurrying along. The industrialist John Bingham and his son Albert, who lived across from the church at West Lea – now the parish centre – came out too. The vicar



City of Sheffield Fire Brigade at their Rockingham St station ([Picture Sheffield](#), Ref: u11211)

succeeded in getting into the vestry, and peeped through into the church. The east end was then almost in total darkness. There was such a dense volume of smoke ... Looking towards the west Mr. Tweedie could make out the familiar objects of his church, but only dimly. To enter the church and save any of its contents was out of the question; all Mr Tweedie, Mr Bingham and the other gentlemen who gathered round the doors could do was to carry off some of the furniture of the vestry, together with the books and registers from the safe, the alms dishes, and the portion of the communion service not set out on the altar.**

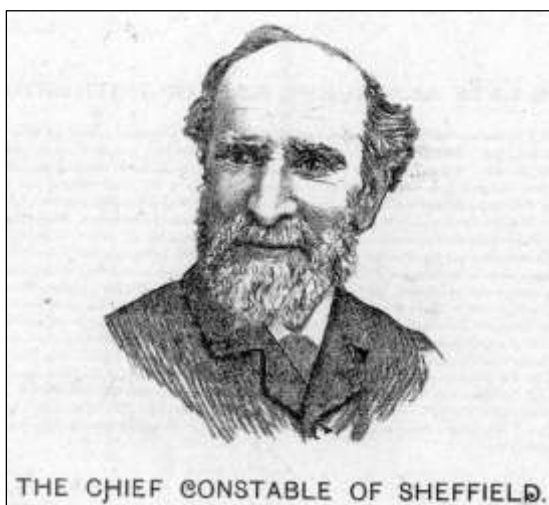
Meanwhile, Thomas Leighton bravely made his way to the gas meter to 'turn the tap off. He was nearly choked by the smoke', but was successful and 'locked the gas chamber behind him'.**

As the men watched,

One by one the windows were blown out with a sound like small artillery, the memorial windows going in the common ruin. Then the roof began to fall as the smaller beams burnt out. The large west window fell outwards with a great crash, and behind it came a great volume of smoke ...**

While there were reports of parishioners arriving for the service, unaware of the disaster, word seemed to have spread quickly. Given the church's location, this is no surprise:

Soon the roof fell in, and the nave was a vast furnace, the flames and smoke from which were seen from the hills of Ecclesall, Sharrow and Crookes, and the village of Fulwood.*



Chief Constable John Jackson ([Picture Sheffield](#), Ref: s08336)

People were gathering, including 'a great number of influential citizens and inhabitants of the district'.** The Chief Constable, John Jackson, on his way to St Mark's Church, came instead to Ranmoor, and Inspector William Toulson of Broomhill had to manage not only the hose cart but also crowds. Everyone was affected by the 'sorrowful scene'** but none more so perhaps than Edward Mitchel Gibbs, who had designed the church, and John Yeomans Cowlshaw and Frederick Thorpe Mappin, the nephews of John Newton Mappin.

As soon as he arrived, Superintendent Pound realised that the nave and the chancel were beyond saving. There was a chance, he felt, for the tower and spire, which were slightly apart from the church, and so he directed water there. To the bystanders it must all have been terrifying, and Frederick Mappin 'felt it his duty to caution the firemen to be careful in their work'.**

The entrance porch looking towards the Ranmoor Inn was played upon until it was cool enough to be entered, after which the belfry door was broken open, and the steps, being luckily of stone, ascent was possible into the belfry. Superintendent Pound went aloft [and ordered up] a length of hose ... from this vantage ground water was poured around, and with the outside stream proved sufficient to stay the fury of the flames in this direction.**

Pound's actions worked. The tower and the peal of eight bells were saved.

The church was all but destroyed within a couple of hours. There remained 'a few charred rafters', fragments of stained glass, 'huge timbers' from the roof crushing the pews, scraps of paper from prayer books and sheet music, bits of leather from book bindings. 'Here and there a figure in bronze was picked out of the pile' and 'from the walls hung gas pipes twisted and torn into all shapes'.**



Superintendent John Pound ([Picture Sheffield](#), Ref: s08453)

Around 4pm, when it must have been getting dark, there was an inspection. Mr Tweedie the vicar, Mr Chalmer and Mr Colver the church wardens, Mr Gibbs the architect, Mr Chambers the builder, and Mr Pound the fireman met up. They examined the organ chamber and vestry, under which was the furnace room. It was fairly obvious – Mr Pound, an experienced fireman, was certain – that the fire had started there but they could not agree how. The flue for the furnace ran up the wall between the vestry and the organ chamber. On the organ side there were nine-inch fire bricks, which should have been enough to prevent fire crossing. Forty feet above the ground, they found a hole in the bricks 'at a point where it is easy to conjecture that the beam supporting the organ roof would rest'.** Mr Pound climbed up and declared: 'The timber runs into the flue. It has burnt right through.'** Mr Chambers rejected this and Mr Gibbs, who also climbed up, agreed, judging that there was 'at least three inches of space between the flue and the end of the beam'.** He felt that the furnace must have been unusually hot to cause the fire.

John Newton Mappin, who died in 1883, did not see the destruction of 'his' church. He would surely have been heartened by two things. There was the courage shown by the men fighting the fire - professionals and Ranmoor residents alike. And there was the immediate intention to rebuild. The Telegraph said:

Weeping over the ruins will not build up the walls. ... It has gone, and to-day its place knows it no more.**



The interior of the church, looking to the west end (from The First Hundred Years)

The church was insured for £9,400 and the full amount was paid out on 8 January. The Vicar and the church wardens wrote an open letter of thanks to Mr Ross of Alliance Insurance on 8 January:

Dear sir,—Will you convey to your directors our warm appreciation of the prompt manner in which they have investigated and discharged our claim in connection with the recent fire at Ranmoor Church. We wish also to express our thanks to you and Mr Selfe for the kind and courteous manner in which you have met us in this matter.****

On 15 January, just two weeks after the fire, the architects Flockton and Gibbs were instructed to design Ranmoor's new church.



Ranmoor's lost church (from The First Hundred Years)

The story will continue shortly.

Val Hewson

17 February 2025

Sources:

* *The First Hundred Years (St John the Evangelist, 1979)*

** *Sheffield Daily Telegraph, Monday 3 January 1887, p.3*

*** *Sheffield Daily Telegraph, Monday 3 January 1887, p.2*

**** *Sheffield Daily Telegraph - Thursday 13 January 1887, p.3*