

Ranmoor's Lost Church (Part Three): 'An Ornament to the Neighbourhood'

Here Val Hewson looks at what happened after fire destroyed the beautiful church John Newton Mappin had given to Ranmoor.

When the church of St John the Evangelist was consecrated in April 1879, the weather had been dull, and it was icy when fire swept through the church in January 1887. On 28 July, just seven months after the disaster, the weather was 'thoroughly summer-like' for the ceremony to lay the foundation stone of a new church. On that Thursday afternoon, 'an imposing gathering' of parishioners, clergymen and guests came out to watch Mrs Charles Henry Firth lay the stone. Ranmoor was still a fairly new suburb in the late 1880s, and the grand church donated by John Newton Mappin was a focus for the community. The fire had been a shock, and people wanted to see the new St John's. How would it compare? Would it be as beautiful, as richly decorated, as worthy of Ranmoor as the first church had been?



The first church

The foundation stone, all two tons of it, is set into the church's southern wall, well above the ground, at the point where the chancel meets the nave. A 'spacious platform plentifully bedecked with bunting' was erected, with room for the dozen or so people involved in the ceremony. There must have been steps up, since Marianne Firth, presumably tightly corseted in the tailored costume and bustle of the day, would hardly have scaled a ladder. The clergymen, in cassocks and surplices, might also have been grateful for steps. The choir stood before the platform, and the guests clustered all around.

As the ceremony started, the vicar's son, three-year-old James Tweedie, 'presented Mrs Firth with a handsome bouquet'. The choir, 'with hearty assistance from the spectators', sang a specially composed hymn. The Gospel was read and then Rev Tweedie spoke about the new church. He explained, to a round of applause, that it would be bigger than the old, to accommodate Ranmoor's expanding population, but there would be

as much as possible in the new building to remind them of the old, and to show that it was still the Church of St. John the Evangelist which they owed to the liberality of the late Mr. John Newton Mappin.

The architect Thomas Flockton then announced that, as was the tradition, various documents had been sealed in a bottle and placed beneath the foundation stone. There were copies of the day's Sheffield newspapers, a history of the church written by Rev Tweedie and a record of the ceremony. This last read:

The stone above this, being the corner stone of the Church of St. John the Evangelist, was laid by Mrs. Charles Henry Firth, of Riverdale, on Thursday, July 28, 1887. Archibald George Tweedie, MA, vicar; Robert Colver and Hamer Chalmer, wardens. Architects, Flockton and Gibbs; builders, William Bissett and Sons. The church which was built upon this site in the year 1878 was so far destroyed by fire on Sunday. January 2, 1887, as to necessitate the complete rebuilding of all parts except the tower and spire.

John Yeomans Cowlshaw presented a 'beautiful silver trowel, ivory handled' to Mrs Firth. It was fitting that he, a nephew of John Newton Mappin, should play a role. He said that he could not help but think of his uncle, who had died in 1883. The inscription on the trowel read:

Presented to Mrs C H Firth on the occasion of her laying the foundation stone of the Church of St. John the Evangelist, Ranmoor July 28th, 1887.

Marianne Firth, who performed her task 'in a very graceful manner', announced: 'I lay this foundation stone in the name of the Great Jehovah, the Holy, Holy, Holy, undivided Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, Three Persons but One God, Blessed for Evermore.' She then looked to see if the stone was plumb and added, 'I pronounce this stone to be well and truly laid.' The spectators applauded again and the churchwardens, Robert Colver and Hamer Chalmer, proposed a 'hearty vote of thanks'. 'The National Anthem was sung [and] the bells in the tower rang out a merry peal.'



The foundation stone.

Why was Marianne Firth chosen for the honour of laying the stone? Her husband explained that his wife 'took very great interest in the church and the parish generally' when he – not she! – acknowledged the vote of thanks. No doubt this was so. Charles Henry and Marianne worshipped regularly at St John's, and he had presented the organ for the first church in 1879. But there was probably more to it. In terms of business, wealth and philanthropy, the Firths were after all Ranmoor royalty. On this occasion, Charles Henry and Marianne were joined by the Edward Firths and the Branson Firths, Charles Henry's brother and eldest son respectively.

The next day's Sheffield Telegraph elaborated on Mr Tweedie's description of the new church:

The next day's Sheffield Telegraph elaborated on Mr Tweedie's description of the new church:



The new church - from a print hanging in the entrance of the Parish Centre

... nave, north and south aisles, ante church or corridor at the west end with baptistry, chancel with chapel on the south side and organ chamber on the north, and vestries. The tower, with spire, which was uninjured by the fire, will form the principal entrance as before, and there will be two other doors for exit, one near the west end and the other near the east end. The style of the building will be geometrical English of a severe and bold type ... The chancel will be semi-octagonal in form at its eastern end. The interior of the church will not be open to the roof as has been lately been the fashion in churches, but will be ceiled over at about the level of the eaves, thus leaving a space in the roof ... which will contribute materially to the warmth ... a series of open arches forming a triforium, which will add very much to the internal effect. Behind these arches ... will be hot water pipes ... so avoiding the draughts which are frequently caused ... The number of sittings is 759, being an increase of 240 over those formerly provided.

The new church was designed by Edward Mitchel Gibbs, in partnership with Thomas Flockton, and was being built by William Bissett and Sons. Both were then among Sheffield's most sought-after contractors, and so their involvement in a prestigious project like St John's was to be expected. In fact, they all had in a sense a

personal interest. Edward Gibbs had been the architect for the first church, which he had watched burn down. William Bissett and his wife lived near St John's, at Rock Mount on Fulwood Road. Flockton, Gibbs and William Bissett's sons, William junior and Lawrence, were all at the ceremony, no doubt to make sure everything went to plan. On that sunny afternoon in 1887, they must all have felt confident in the future. Was not St John's going well? Had their celebrated Mappin Art Gallery not been officially opened just the day before? Flockton and Gibbs did of course win further renown, but it was different for the Bissetts. After William senior died in 1889, the business went bankrupt (with its losses apparently including £1,800 on St John's). Lawrence and William absconded with company funds, never to be seen again in Sheffield, and their brother John, who knew nothing of their peculation, was left to cope alone.

But back to St John's. The first service in the new church was held on Sunday 9 September 1888 – apparently later than had been hoped but there had been delays due to bad weather. There was of course a large congregation that Sunday morning, probably including most of the people who had watched Marianne Firth lay the foundation stone fifteen months earlier. 'The beauty of the church and its noble proportions were greatly admired; and Messrs Flockton and Gibbs, its architects, who were at the morning service, were warmly congratulated by many.'

It remained only for the finances to be finalised. Archdeacon Blakeney, who preached the sermon, said, with some humour but hinting at earlier dissension:

... an ornament to the neighbourhood, and which will be in harmony with the palatial residences which surround it. I know that some people felt that a less pretentious and less expensive structure would do. Well, it might have done, but then you would not have felt the same interest in it, or taken the same delight ... Everything about the church is good, is substantial, is handsome ... I feel satisfied that there is not a person connected with the church who would now wish to see the work that has been accomplished done in a less costly manner.

According to the churchwardens, the new church cost £13,700. They had £9,400 insurance money for the old church. It is difficult to follow the trail 140 years later, but it seems that, thanks to the efforts of the churchwardens and vicar, the remaining £4,000 or so was raised through donations from parishioners and others. The newspapers reported, for example, that at the first service the collection was around £300. By the early months of 1889, the debt was all cleared, and the congregation could, in Archdeacon Blakeney's words, 'really call the church [their] own'. St John's was, the vicar claimed, 'the handsomest modern church in the West Riding of Yorkshire'.



The plaque in the church porch, thanking Mr Tweedie, Mr Chalmer and Mr Colver.

Val Hewson

7 April 2025

Note: The many quotations above come from various Sheffield newspapers from July 1888 to April 1889. I've not included exact references as I think they break up the text, but if anyone is interested, please email val383@btinternet.com. The vicar's history of the church, although not long, is too much to include above, but again do email if you would like to see it.