

Ecclesiology in Wharfedale: two incumbents and their churches

by

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'To restore is to recover the original appearance which has been lost by decay, accident or ill-judged alteration.' (*The Ecclesiologist*, 1842)

'Restoration... means the most total destruction which a building can suffer: ...a destruction accompanied with false description of the thing destroyed.'
(J. Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, 1849)

The subject of this paper is the impact at a grassroots level of the development of architectural taste in the nineteenth-century church. It is the story of Victorian church building and church restoration in the small villages of one relatively remote upland area, that of upper Wharfedale in the Yorkshire Dales, to be told by focusing primarily on the activities and attitudes of two clergymen of different generations. The story is one which does not feature any work of real architectural quality, but it may be worth telling for two reasons in particular: it illustrates the sheer ubiquity of what may be broadly termed Ecclesiological values during the period – there was not a single church in the area which was not affected by them in one way or another – and in these two cases especially the evidence of the buildings themselves can be complemented by written testimony, on occasion quite trenchantly expressed, of the specific motives of the individuals concerned and the contemporary local reaction to them.

The two clergymen who form the principal focus of the discussion are the Reverend William Boyd (1809-93), vicar of Arncliffe for fifty-eight years, from 1835 until his death, and the Reverend William Stavert (1858-1932), rector of Burnsall from 1888 to his retirement in 1929;¹ but before considering events and figures of the Victorian era it will be appropriate as a preliminary to mention the previous phase of church rebuilding in the area, which took place at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. In 1796 the church at Arncliffe was rebuilt apart from its sixteenth-century west tower; in 1820 that at Rylstone was similarly transformed and that at Kettlewell was completely rebuilt to the design of a local architect, Thomas Anderton of Gargrave; and at about the same time the Norman chapel at Conistone was extensively remodelled.² All of this work was in what the

Victorians called ‘Churchwarden Gothic’, the style which above all others was execrated by the Ecclesiologists – and subsequently, with the sole exception of the tower at Kettlewell, every vestige of it was duly done away with. In 1878 the Kettlewell church was characteristically described as ‘in the worst style of even that period, and ... utterly uninteresting’;³ but more noteworthy is the appearance of similar criticism at a much earlier date, contemporary with this phase itself. This occurs in the most substantial work of antiquarian scholarship covering the locality, the Reverend Thomas Dunham Whitaker’s magisterial *History and Antiquities of the Deanery of Craven*, first published in 1805 with a second edition of 1812. Writing of Arncliffe church, he describes it as ‘rebuilt with all the attention to economy and all the neglect both of modern elegance and ancient form, which characterises the religious edifices of the present day’, and then continues:

If the disposition of our ancient churches cannot be adhered to, if modern art can no longer imitate the solemn effect produced by clustered columns and pointed arches, by the dignified separation of family chantries, the long perspective of a choir, and the rich tracery of its ramified window; surely the genius of an establishment calls for something in its most frugal erections more imposing than bare walls and unbroken surfaces, something at least which may inform a stranger at his entrance that he is not putting his head into a conventicle. Even the rubric requires that chancels shall remain as they have done in times past.⁴

Both the language and the actions of the 1840s are foreshadowed by these emphatic sentiments.



Fig. 1
St. Oswald, Arncliffe

So to the Reverend William Boyd and the church at Arncliffe (Fig. 1), the main village in the tributary valley of Littondale. The son of a well-known banker of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Boyd was appointed to the living by his *alma mater*, University College, Oxford, where he was then a young junior fellow;⁵ and in 1841 at his instigation the body of the church was again reconstructed, the tower again being retained.⁶ The architect this time was Anthony Salvin, a choice which presumably reflected both parties' common Northumbrian background. Shortly after his death his memoir, *Fifty Years in Arncliffe*, was published;⁷ and from this and other testimony a picture emerges of a man who was both a scholar-clergyman of a traditional sort – with a wide range of interests and acquaintance, who 'kept in touch with modern thought and feeling by frequent tours on the Continent'⁸ – and a conscientious and popular pastor to his flock, a 'practical' Christian generous – with his wealth in the support of worthy causes. In 1860 he was made an honorary canon of Ripon Cathedral and in 1880 archdeacon of Craven.⁹

In Boyd's own account of the reconstruction two particular perceptions on his part are apparent: a sense of the pioneering nature of the project, and a sense of a revival of religion and a revival of architecture being fused together as one. Regarding Arncliffe generally he emphasises the remoteness of the spot, relating that when he presented himself to the Archbishop of York for institution to the living that dignitary at first denied the existence of such a parish in his diocese.¹⁰ Of the work itself he wrote:

...a bold and venturesome attempt... was made to recover for the church somewhat of a more ecclesiastical and religious character. At that date the knowledge of church architecture was just beginning to feel the pulses of that fresh life and spirit which has since quickened everything in the worship and doctrine of the Church.

But the difficulties were very great, as was the ignorance of nearly everybody concerned. Parker's most useful *Glossary* was just published (1840); the *Ecclesiologist* not till 1843. In so remote a place it was not easy to find either masons or joiners who knew what an ogee arch was, or to carry out the plans or suggestions of an architect.¹¹

There was indeed only one other recent case of Anglican church-building in the locality – its first of the Victorian period – the provision of a chapel-of-ease at Hebden (Fig. 2) in 1840-1;¹² and while the authorship of this is of interest here – it was built 'from the rough designs' of the 'energetic and much beloved' curate, the Reverend John Pearson Fearon – the building itself is in a simple lancet style of entirely pre-Ecclesiological character.

Boyd also records the initial local reaction to his initiative, which was, as might be expected, one of opposition. The rebuilding was 'in the face of all the feelings and ideas of the neighbourhood': the attitude was that the existing church was 'dry and warm and comfortable' and nothing more could be required, and 'The old-fashioned vicar of the next parish could never be persuaded to say more of... the work, than that it was a great "alteration"; he would never say "improvement"'.¹³ The whole episode was later summed up by Boyd's successor at Arncliffe, the Reverend William Shuffrey, in his *Churches of the Deanery of North Craven* of 1914:

His [Boyd's] efforts at that time were severely criticised, and did not at first meet with the approval of the inhabitants and landowners... But the vicar had artistic tastes, and could not be satisfied with a church which had oblong windows with wooden sashes, high pews, and a flat whitewashed ceiling running without a break from west to east.¹⁴

Regarding the work itself, Shuffrey's observation about the form of the ceiling is very much to the point, for its most notable feature was the provision of a proper full-length chancel. This, it was claimed, was built on the foundations of the medieval chancel, and it was arrived at by demolishing the eastern third of the 1796 building, the rest of which was remodelled as the nave.¹⁵ Such a feature was of course shortly to become the very touchstone of Camdenian orthodoxy¹⁶ but was still rare in 1841;



Fig. 2
St. Peter, Hebden

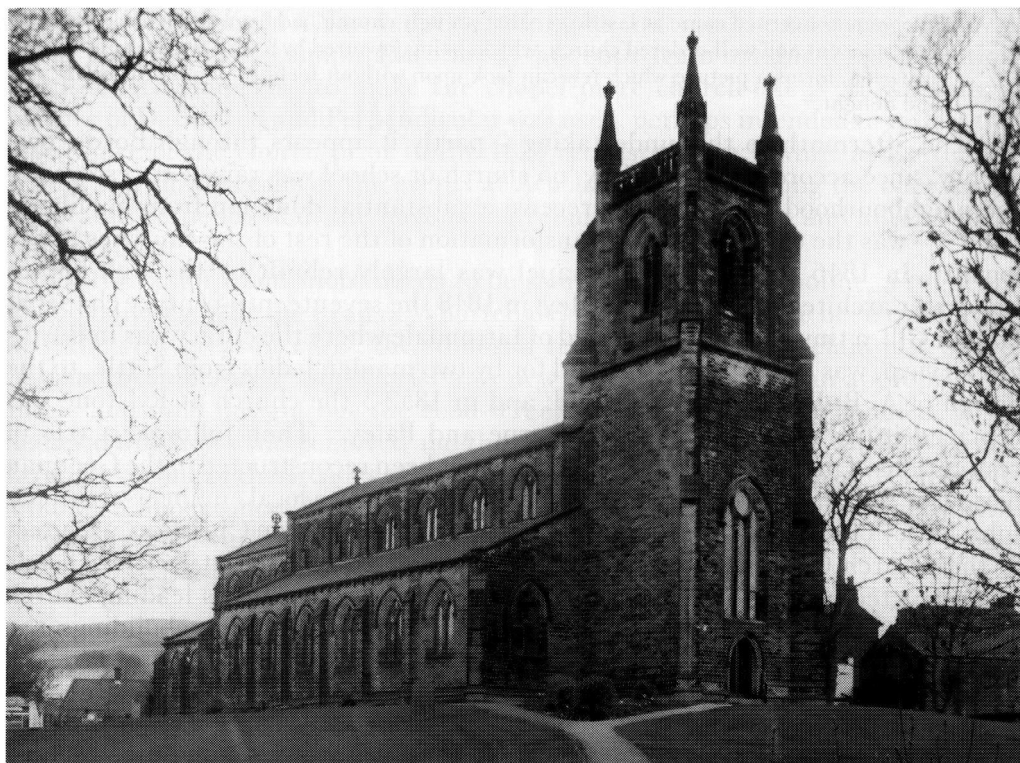


Fig. 3
Christ Church, Skipton

but there were two particular precedents which Boyd may have known. One was the rebuilt Leeds parish church, of 1837-41, the achievement of the famous Tractarian vicar of Leeds, the Reverend Walter Farquhar Hook,¹⁷ with whom Boyd appears to have been acquainted.¹⁸ The other, perhaps more relevant, was Christ Church at the local market town of Skipton (Fig. 3), a new church of 1837-9 by the same architect as Hook's, R. D. Chantrell:¹⁹ a thoroughly Tractarian project where the priest-in-charge was alleged to have been a 'genuine Puseyite', its novel arrangements, with a chancel a third of the total length of the building and raised by four steps above the level of the nave, were the subject of hostile comment in the low-church *Leeds Mercury* in 1840.²⁰ Other features at Arncliffe however – the low pitched roofs, the Perpendicular style chosen for the detail – would have been less acceptable to the Ecclesiologists;²¹ while the interior of the nave, with Salvin's rather flimsy Gothic roof-trusses, retained a somewhat bald, barn-like appearance wholly at odds with Victorian taste. Writing from the viewpoint of the 1890s, Boyd concluded that 'though not so well as it could be done at this time, [it was] still perhaps as much and as well as could reasonably be expected under the circumstances';²² and a satisfactory eventual resolution is suggested by Shuffrey:

Everyone concerned came at last to see that an ugly church had been transformed into a decent and well-ordered church, which, being favoured by a very picturesque situation, forms a picture which few can look upon without feelings of admiration and delight.²³

The aftermath to this undertaking – partly it appears through Boyd's own agency, since according to Shuffrey 'no church or school was raised or restored in the neighbourhood which did not receive a substantial donation from his liberal hand'²⁴ – was the comprehensive transformation of the rest of the churches in the locality. In 1846 the Conistone chapel was largely rebuilt by the well-known Lancaster architects Sharpe and Paley; in 1848 the seventeenth-century chapel at Halton Gill, a tiny hamlet at the head of Littondale where the curacy was in Boyd's gift as vicar, was rebuilt likewise, paid for by two maiden ladies from Settle, to the design of A. B. Higham of Wakefield; and in 1852-3 the church at Rylstone was replaced in its entirety, again by Sharpe and Paley.²⁵ Then followed a trio of restorations of medieval churches which had not been reconstructed in the Georgian period: at Burnsall in 1858-9 and Linton in 1861, both by a local engineer-architect, John Varley of Skipton,²⁶ and at Hubberholme in 1863 by Ewan Christian, architect to the Church Commissioners.²⁷ Finally, in 1883-5 the church at Kettlewell was reconstructed apart from its tower, a minor work of the county's leading church architects of the period, the brothers T. H. and F. Healey.²⁸ Of the rebuildings, the

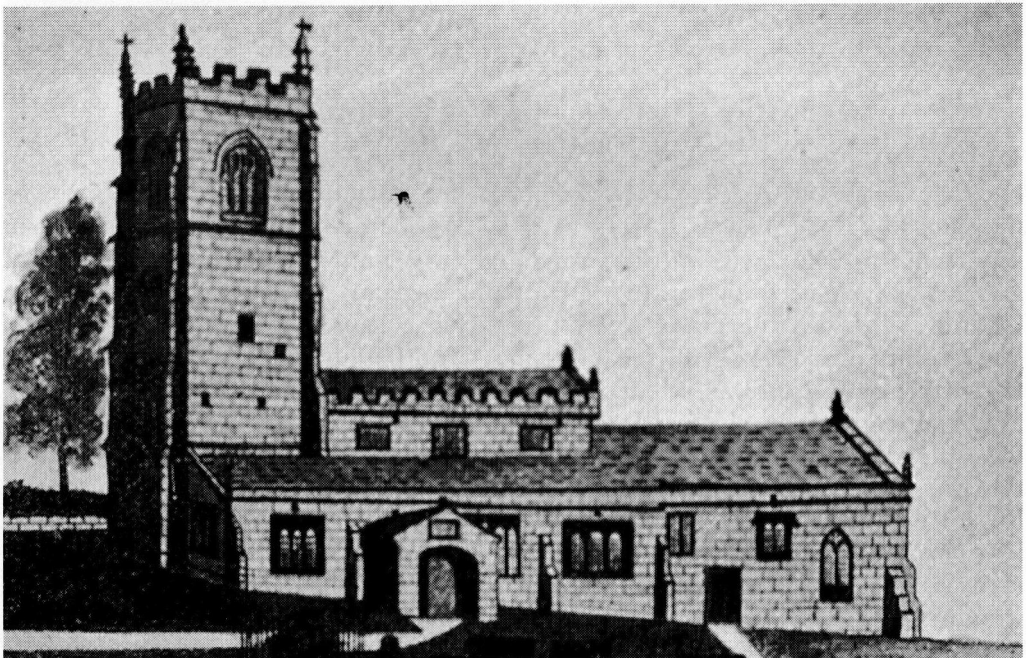


Fig. 4

St. Wilfrid, Burnsall in 1839 (Speight, H., *Upper Wharfedale*)

first two – Conistone in a Norman style, taking its cue from the surviving medieval fabric, Halton Gill in a simple Decorated – are both again notable for the addition of full-length chancels, ‘to make the chapel more church-like’;²⁹ at Rylstone a mixture of Decorated and Perpendicular was used, perhaps intended to reflect the appearance of the church prior to the 1820 reconstruction;³⁰ while at Kettlewell there was a curious echo of the events at Arncliffe, the style being the once-again acceptable Perpendicular, the nave being rebuilt from sill level and another new chancel added.

Of the restorations more needs to be said. That at Hubberholme, a ruggedly upland building near the head of Wharfedale, was alleged to have been conducted ‘with the very greatest care’, the stones of rebuilt walls ‘being relaid just where they had been before’,³¹ and Christian’s new roof-trusses are of an appropriately simple and solid design; but the rood-screen was rather roughly handled, post-medieval woodwork was removed and the plaster stripped from the walls³² – giving the arches of one of the arcades, which lack any dressed stonework, a quite bizarrely outlandish appearance. All this however is a model of sensitivity compared with the work of John Varley, whose coarse and destructive interventions are very much

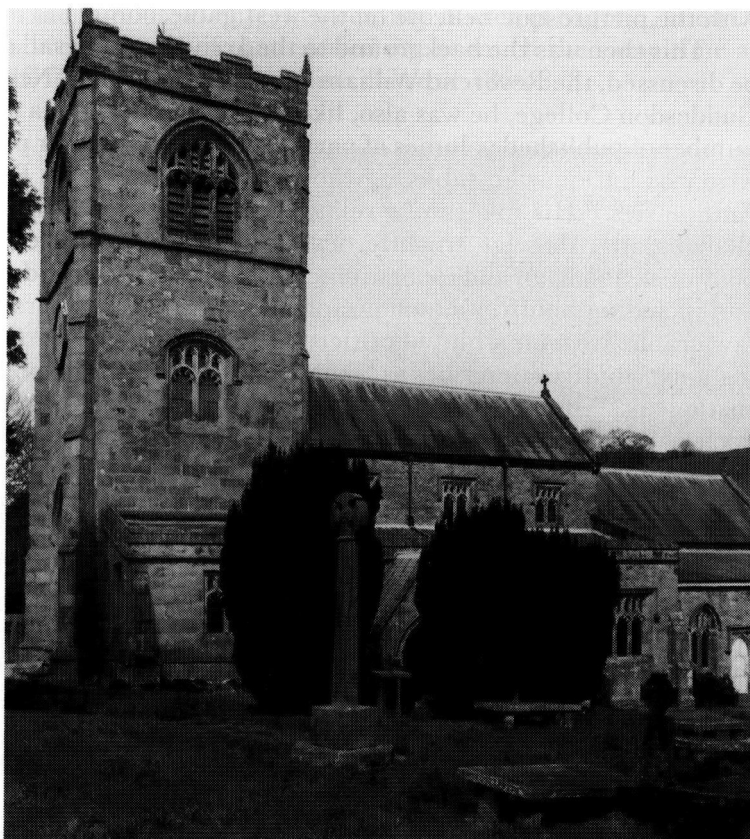


Fig. 5
St. Wilfrid, Burnsall

the low point of the story and cast him in the role of its archetypal villain. At Burnsall (Figs. 4 & 5), a church largely of the early sixteenth century which had been 'repaired and butified'³³ in the early seventeenth, Ruskin's dictum seems apposite enough. The most immediately obvious changes³⁴ were the heightening and re-windowing of the nave clerestory and the replacement of the nave and chancel roofs – the latter of which had been particularly admired by Whitaker³⁵ – by new ones of steeper pitch, alien to period and place alike; while inside, in addition to the predictable removal of pews and galleries, the chancel arch was replaced, the Jacobean screens in the chancel were either removed or extensively altered, the curious arrangement of paired pulpits and reading desks was replaced by new fittings in a more conventional arrangement, and the Norman font set on an outside octagonal base. Other elements included much further re-windowing, a new chancel doorway and the replacement of the porch. At Linton his work was marginally less damaging but so similar in its components – down to the use of discarded medieval window-heads to form benches in the porch, a trick first employed in the area by Sharpe and Paley at Rylstone – as to suggest that Varley was operating to a rote-learned formula. On this occasion the clerestory was not heightened and the pitch of the roofs was left as it was, presumably because further alterations would have interfered with the picturesque bellcote on the west gable.

This then was the background to the arrival at Burnsall of the second figure to be discussed, the Reverend William Stavert. Educated at New College, Oxford and Cuddesdon College, he was also, like Boyd, something of a scholar, the editor of a number of published volumes of parish registers and other parochial records and a writer on antiquarian subjects, who in 1900 was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries.³⁶ His role can be related to the question of the local reaction to the changes, after those at Arncliffe, described above; for on the basis of the substantial body of antiquarian and topographical writing on the area during this period, up to and including Shuffrey's monograph of 1914,³⁷ this appears to have been entirely favourable, without a hint of criticism. The plaster stripping at Hubberholme, for instance, Shuffrey describes as 'giving back to the sacred building its present pretty rustic look':³⁸ it is as if the protests of William Morris and the foundation of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings³⁹ had never happened. Stavert's position is that he represents the exception to that rule. In 1913 he published a pamphlet entitled *Notes on the Parish Church of Saint Wilfrid at Burnsall*, which contains a detailed denunciation of what he termed 'The "restoration" so-called' of 1858-9.⁴⁰ He draws attention to a previous proposal of 1852, once again from Sharpe and Paley, which was of much more limited scope, essentially a repair only, and regrets that this scheme, which he defined as 'a conservative restoration, and such as would appeal to the sentiment of the present time' was not carried out instead; but he continues:

The time was an evil one, and not so long before the secretary of one of our principal archaeological societies had professed his willingness that the cathedral at Durham should be pulled down if only it might be built in a "purer style."⁴¹

Of Varley – having suggested, rather strangely, that there may have been financial

reasons for his scheme being preferred – he observes ‘... in what follows it is in no way wished to reflect upon his proceedings, or to suggest that had the task been assigned to anybody else at the time the result might have been better’; but that consideration does not temper his criticism. Varley’s chancel arch he describes as ‘what an eminent Yorkshire architect considers the worst arch which is to be found in England’,⁴² and of the stained and patterned glass which Varley had installed he comments that ‘The windows ... cry out for the services of a discriminating earthquake.’⁴³

It is also illuminating to note what Stavert did not criticise – the removal of the ‘very ugly pews and an organ gallery’,⁴⁴ which had also been proposed by Sharpe and Paley, was still not a matter of regret; but more significant is the fact that he had already put into practical effect, in two instances, what he was now preaching. The first was that during the 1890s he had attempted to undo some of Varley’s excesses at Burnsall, re-setting the font on a simple square base such as had supported it previously, restoring and reinstating the Jacobean pulpit in place of Varley’s, and partly re-restoring the screens in the chancel – as well as adding a Jacobean-style chancel screen of his own, the details of which were copied partly from the screen at the seventeenth-century High Hall in nearby Appletreewick and partly from that in the famous seventeenth-century church of St John, Leeds.⁴⁵ The work forms a minor rural echo of that carried out at much the same time at the Leeds church itself, following the restoration there of 1866-8.⁴⁶



Fig. 6
St. John, Appletreewick



Fig. 7
Bramhope Chapel

The other, more substantial, case was that of the chapel-of-ease at Appletreewick (Fig. 6), which was built at Stavert's instigation in 1898 and for which Stavert himself – like the Reverend John Pearson Fearon before him – turned architect.⁴⁷ This is a building which is entirely unlike any of the others which have been discussed, an unpretentious rectangle – with no separate chancel – not in any species of Gothic but in the traditional seventeenth-century domestic style of the Yorkshire Dales – and built out of the stone, including the mullioned windows, of two ruined cottages which had previously occupied the site. So the supposedly universal prescriptions of Ecclesiological teaching were here superseded by an Arts-and-Crafts-like sensitivity to local materials and mores; and perhaps more importantly, if there was any specifically ecclesiastical model for the chapel it would be found not in any of the types of buildings conventionally associated with the established church but in a structure like the remarkable mid seventeenth-century Puritan chapel at Bramhope (Fig. 7)⁴⁸ on the way to Leeds – a low, unassuming essay in the local vernacular manner. At Appletreewick then, the visitor could indeed think he was ‘putting his head into a conventicle’⁴⁹ – and the writer of the account of the dedication of the chapel in the local newspaper was evidently at some pains to convince himself that ‘the internal arrangements are such as will conduce to reverent worship’.⁵⁰ To suggest that history had turned a full circle would be to ascribe to events a degree of geometrical precision that could hardly be justified; but the old high churchman Thomas Dunham Whitaker might well have been turning in his grave.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

Abbreviations

- Boyd & Shuffrey Boyd, W. & Shuffrey, W. A., *Littondale Past and Present*, (Leeds, 1893).
 Shuffrey, *Worthies* Shuffrey, W. A., *Some Craven Worthies*, (Leeds and London, 1903).
 Shuffrey, *Churches* Shuffrey, W. A., *The Churches of the Deanery of North Craven*, (Leeds, 1914).
 Whitaker Whitaker, T. D., *The History and Antiquities of the Deanery of Craven*, (3rd edn., Leeds and London, 1878). Quotations and citations from Whitaker's text of 1812 are marked (W), whose from editorial interpolations of 1878 are marked (E).

1. For Boyd see Obituary in *The Craven Herald*, (28th July 1893), and Shuffrey, *Worthies*, 247-85. For Stavert see Shuffrey, *Churches*, 82, and Obituary in *The Craven Herald*, (4th March 1932).
2. Shuffrey, *Churches*, 2, 41-2, 92-3, 102.
3. Whitaker, 566 (E).
4. Whitaker, 580 (W).
5. Obituary in *The Craven Herald*, (28th July 1893); Shuffrey, *Worthies*, 247-51.
6. Shuffrey, *Churches*, 2-3; Allibone, J., *Anthony Salvin*, (Cambridge, 1988), 165.
7. As Part 1 of Boyd & Shuffrey.
8. *The Craven Herald*, (28th July 1893).
9. *ibid.*; Shuffrey, *Worthies*, 263, 272-3.
10. Boyd & Shuffrey, 1-5.
11. *ibid.*, 34-5.
12. Harker, B. J., *Rambles in Upper Wharfedale*, (Skipton, 1869), 160-1.
13. Boyd & Shuffrey, 34, 36; see also Shuffrey, *Worthies*, 257-8.
14. Shuffrey, *Churches*, 2.
15. Boyd & Shuffrey, 35; Shuffrey, *Churches*, 2-3.
16. White, J. F., *The Cambridge Movement*, (Cambridge, 1962), 93-5.
17. *ibid.*, 95-6; Linstrum, D., *West Yorkshire Architects and Architecture*, (London, 1978), 213-7.
18. *The Craven Herald*, (28th July 1893).
19. See Webster, C., 'R. D. Chantrell, architect: his life and work in Leeds 1818-47', *Publications of the Thoresby Society*, (2nd series, II, 1992), 102, where the significance of this building is discussed.
20. 'Consecration of Christ Church, Skipton', *Leeds Mercury*, (18th January 1840). I am indebted to Mr Christopher Webster for this reference.
21. White, *op. cit.*, 86-91, 102-3.
22. Boyd & Shuffrey, 35.
23. Shuffrey, *Churches*, 3.
24. *The Craven Herald*, (28th July 1893).
25. Whitaker, 534, 585 (E); Shuffrey, *Churches*, 21, 92-3, 103.
26. Harker, *op. cit.*, 147-8; Whitaker, 504, 543 (E); Stavert. W., *Notes on the Parish Church of Saint Wilfrid at Burnsall*, (Skipton, 1913), 8-11; Shuffrey, *Churches*, 50, 68-70. For Varley see also Dawson, W. H., *History of Skipton*, (London and Skipton, 1882), 366, 370, and Felstead, A., Franklin, J. & Pinfield, L., *Directory of British Architects 1834-1900*, (London, 1993), 940.
27. Whitaker, 587 (E); Shuffrey, *Churches*, 27-8; Felstead *et al.*, *op. cit.*, 170-1.
28. Shuffrey, *Churches*, 43.
29. Boyd & Shuffrey, 110.
30. Shuffrey, *Churches*, illustration facing 91.
31. Quoted in Shuffrey, *Churches*, 27-8.
32. Shuffrey, *Churches*, 28 and illustration facing 26; North Yorkshire County Record Office 1705/0145, sketch of interior of Hubberholme church, 1853.
33. Inscription in the church.
34. Stavert, *op. cit.*, 10-11, quoted in Shuffrey, *Churches*, 69-70.
35. Whitaker, 504 (W).
36. Stavert, *op. cit.*, 2; Shuffrey, *Churches*, 82; Obituary in *The Craven Herald*, (4th March 1932).
37. eg. Harker, *op. cit.*; Whitaker; Speight, H., *Upper Wharfedale*, (London, 1900); Shuffrey, *Churches*.

38. Shuffrey, *Churches*, 28.
39. See eg. Fawcett, J., ed., *The Future of the Past*, (London, 1976), 50-3.
40. Stavert, *op. cit.*, 10-11, 22.
41. *ibid.*, 8-10.
42. *ibid.*, 10-11.
43. *ibid.*, 15.
44. *ibid.*, 8.
45. *ibid.*, 21-2; Shuffrey, *Churches*, 72.
46. Douglas, J., & Powell, K., *St. John's Church Leeds, a History*, (London, nd), 15-18.
47. Shuffrey, *Churches*, 90.
48. See Linstrum, *op. cit.*, 194.
49. Whitaker, 580 (W).
50. 'Dedication of St John Baptist's Chapel', *The Craven Herald*, (6th May 1898).