

Review Article: Powerhouses

by

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Brandwood, Geoff, *The Architecture of Sharpe, Paley and Austin*, Swindon: English Heritage (2012), xii + 282pp., 304 ills, £50. ISBN 978-1-84802-049-8.

Whittingham, Sarah, *Sir George Oatley: Architect of Bristol*, Bristol: Redcliffe Press (2011), 440pp., many illustrations, £49.75. ISBN 978-1-904537-92-2.

When the Victorian Society published *Powerhouses of Provincial Architecture 1837-1914* in 2009,¹ this Society's *Newsletter* described it as 'a very important book'. While there had been studies of particular areas, such as Bristol, Manchester or West Yorkshire, that slim collection of essays was perhaps the first time that the idea of treating the architectural profession outside London in a collective way had been attempted. Two of the biographical sketches are now followed by major monographs which add enormously to our knowledge. The study of architects outside London is greatly enriched and the study of metropolitan practice must be influenced by the realization that not all good buildings came from a London drawing board.

Although these two books both treat provincial practice, they are very different in their scope and approach. Brandwood takes us through the history of the Lancaster practice set up by Edmund Sharpe in 1835, via the changes as Sharpe and Paley, then several variations on the Paley and Austin names, until the practice folded at the end of the Second World War. Whittingham, by contrast, concentrates on a single man, Sir George Oatley, and skates quickly through the work of the man whose Bristol practice he joined, Henry Crisp (formerly partner of E. W. Godwin), and barely mentions the successor practice in whose hands, it turned out, a substantial archive remained. And that is a second major difference between the books. Whereas Oatley's career can be minutely detailed from both office records and significant family correspondence, the Sharpe, Paley and Austin practice records were almost entirely destroyed and there is less family material. So Brandwood has had to assemble his material from more random and scattered sources, a task in which he acknowledges the help of Tim Austin, a family member, John Hughes, indefatigable researcher on Edmund Sharpe, and James Price who has plotted the depth and extent to which the practice spread over the north west. In this respect Whittingham has been lucky, for Oatley had a hatred of publicity and without the archive the book would have been much thinner. A third major difference is that

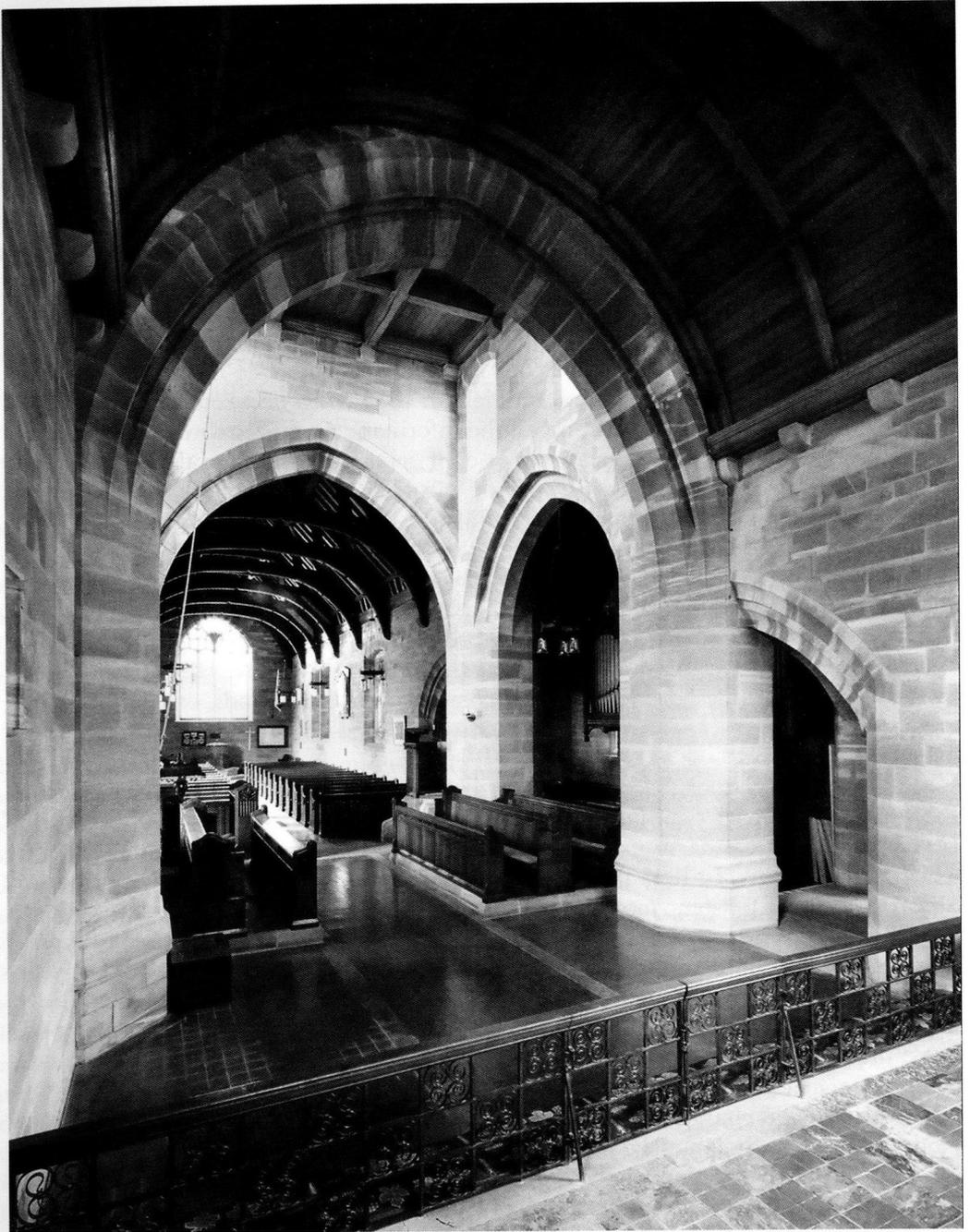
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while both Bristol and Lancaster practices had the mixed workload which characterized most provincial architects, Sharpe, Paley and Austin were best known for their churches while Oatley is best known for his secular buildings for Bristol University.

Brandwood shows how Edmund Sharpe (1809-77) chose Lancaster to start his practice because of family connections, and the families of Sharpe, Paley and Austin remained inter-related throughout the 19th century. An extensive family tree illustrates this. Perhaps the most significant figure was the Revd John William Whittaker, himself an amateur architect and, as vicar of Blackburn for thirty years, well placed later to provide introductions across the north west. Born in 1809 and educated at Cambridge, Sharpe came under the influence of the polymath, William Whewell, and through him met Rickman, a debt to whom Sharpe acknowledged in accepting the RIBA's Royal Gold Medal in 1875. Travel in Germany and France reinforced this early enthusiasm, especially for medieval architecture, but it would seem that he did not decide that architecture would be his profession until late in 1835 when he wrote to Whewell that he was 'busily employed in collecting all the information connected with the practical part of it'. Without any formal training or experience in an architect's office, Sharpe rapidly built up a successful practice, at first using a Romanesque style which showed the influence of his time in Germany (as at St. Mark, Witton) and then on to Gothic with major churches at Holy Trinity, Blackburn, and St Mary, Knowsley, the latter for the earl of Derby. By 1842 he could write to Whewell that he was working on his thirty-first church. This spate of church-building climaxed with Sharpe's famous 'pot churches', a pioneering use of terracotta made by his brother-in-law. Every visitor to St. Stephen and All Martyrs, Lever Bridge (Greater Manchester), recently repaired, is overwhelmed by the carefully detailed terracotta interior - altar, font, bench-ends, organ-case; it is a great tragedy that the open-work terracotta spire, based on Freiburg-im-Breisgau, has been taken down.

In 1838 Sharpe took the young Edward Graham Paley (1823-95) into his practice. Paley came from a clerical family, grandson of Archdeacon Paley whose *Evidences of Christianity* was a standard text. It seems to be the connections with the Whittakers which made the link. In 1845 Paley became a partner and, although the firm remained Sharpe and Paley for some more years, Sharpe increasingly withdrew from practice to concentrate on writing - *Architectural Parallels* (in parts, 1845-47) and *The Seven Periods of English Architecture* (1851); on sanitary reform in Lancaster; on education (in his last years Sharpe led tours for the Architectural Association); and on business, especially railways at home and abroad. This last enterprise is relegated to an appendix in Brandwood's book, illustrated by pictures of the Galgate viaduct on the west coast main line and a tram in Geneva on the tracks laid out by Sharpe.

With Paley in charge the practice expanded; some of the churches funded by new industrial wealth - St. James, Poolstock, or St. Peter, Bolton - are handsome and dignified. Despite its strong background in the Church of England, the practice was wide-ranging in its clientele and the most splendid church of Paley's time as sole practitioner was built for the Roman Catholic community in Lancaster, St. Peter's, an ambitious essay in Middle Pointed, with a 240-foot spire, raised to cathedral status when Liverpool archdiocese was divided in 1924. Paley's skills as architect derived initially from what he learned from



Field Broughton Church (Cumbria), interior looking west; Paley & Austin, 1892-94.
Photograph, Mark Watson, courtesy of Geoff Brandwood

Sharpe, supplemented in later years by travel. These churches show that he was more than competent. The conventional view, which Brandwood reinforces, is that when Paley took Hubert James Austin (1841-1915) into the practice in 1867, they moved from great competence to designs which Pevsner described as 'of the highest European standard of their years': Austin, said Pevsner, had genius.²

Austin had a more conventional architectural background than Sharpe or Paley. In 1860 he was articled to his half-brother, Tom Austin, in Newcastle, in 1864 he took the RIBA's voluntary examinations and then went to work for Gilbert Scott, helping with work at St. Pancras. In 1866 he won the first Pugin studentship and travelled, and drawings of Sussex churches appeared in the Scott office *Spring Gardens Sketch Book*. With this background Austin perhaps might have chosen to try his luck in London but the family connections brought him to Lancaster. The series of large town churches continued with major works in Leigh, Bolton, Atherton, Barrow-in-Furness and other industrial towns, and seaside resorts such as St. Anne's and Morecambe; there was even some penetration into Liverpool and Manchester suburbs at Mossley Hill, Waterloo and Cheetham. After winning the Bishop of Carlisle's 'mountain churches' competition, this was supplemented by some memorable village churches - St. Peter, Finsthwaite, St Bartholomew, Barbon (both Cumbria), or The Good Shepherd, Tatham Fell (Lancs.). All these churches have wide variety in planning and architectural expression, and an extraordinary range of inventive detail. Paley and Austin had been unsuccessful in the first Liverpool Cathedral competition in 1884, making it to the final twelve but not the final four; the second attempt to build the cathedral in 1902 saw Austin's design in the final shortlist of five but losing out to Giles Gilbert Scott. Austin's later years did see one church of cathedral-like proportions, St. George's, Stockport (1892-97). After Austin's death two of his sons, though architects, did not maintain the family connection with the practice which was kept going by Paley's son, Harry Paley. Much of the work was additions and alterations to earlier works by the firm and new churches continued the well-established Paley and Austin formula, conservative by the 1930s. The practice did not survive the 1939-45 war; Harry Paley sold the long established office in 1945 and died the following year.

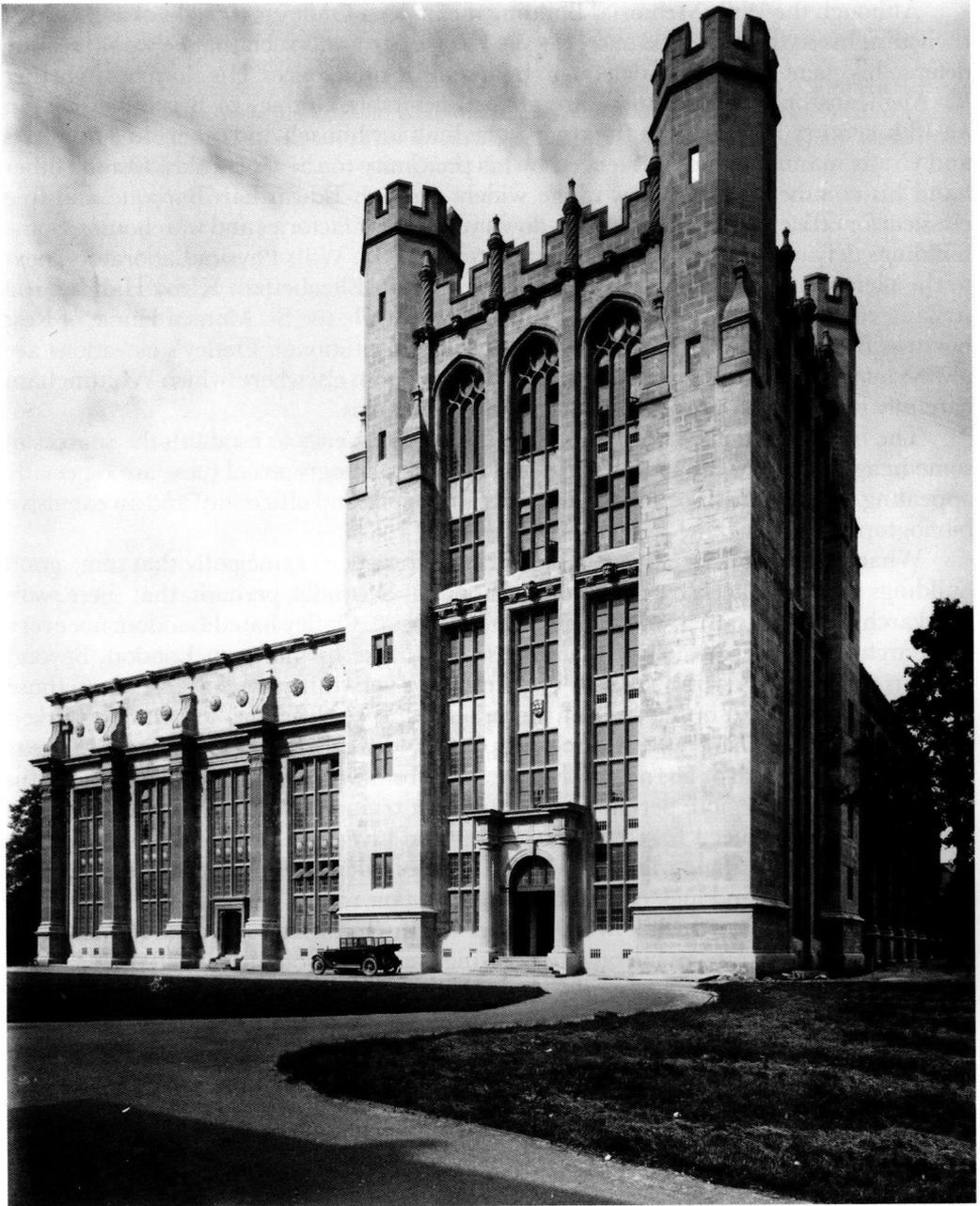
Brandwood's achievement in bringing the works of this remarkable practice into a manageable compass is a notable one. He has been helped by photography of the highest quality by Mark Watson and chapter sub-headings which make finding one's way about the book relatively easy. In addition to the appendix on Sharpe's non-architectural activities, there are others listing known pupils and assistants, associated contractors and craftsmen, and a documented catalogue of works numbering over 500 items. There is a useful appendix singling out 'distant commissions', those away from Paley and Austin's heartland, and explaining how these were achieved, an interesting exercise in explaining how architects got their work. It is intriguing to think how the appearance of one of their most typical north-western churches in the middle of Hertford may be explained by an affection for Christ's Hospital, London, which E. G. Paley attended and which had a feeder school at Hertford which his brother had attended. The book is a huge mine of information on many buildings beyond the churches noted above. What makes the story comprehensible is Brandwood's deep familiarity with 19th-century church building,

which sets the whole story into its wider context. Especially notable is the discussion of Sharpe's work as it developed in the early years of ecclesiology, and the important contribution which Paley and Austin made to the evolution of the 'Perpendicular revival' in the last third of the century.

Sir George Oatley (1863-1950) emerges from Sarah Whittingham's book as a deeply religious man whose career was fostered by his contacts within the nonconformist community. His knighthood in 1925 followed the opening by George V of his most important building, the Wills Memorial Building for Bristol University, the last great secular Gothic building in Britain and a notable landmark in Bristol. Both Oatley and the Wills family were Congregationalists. They were his greatest patrons out of a fortune derived from the tobacco trade and it seems an odd paradox that Oatley forbade smoking by the workmen on his building sites. However, if his name has been associated in the past with a small number of major public buildings, Whittingham's work shows the wide extent of a prolific practice, with some 400 buildings now safely attributed to him.

Oatley had an extraordinarily difficult life marked by financial hardship and family tragedies. Orphaned at the age of nine (with four younger siblings), he was dependent on the charity of relations and at the age of thirteen felt that he should support his family. A phrenologist interpreted the bumps on his head as indicating a talent for drawing and he was given free articles in Ryde, Isle of Wight. By 1879 he was back in Bristol, his native city, and working for Henry Crisp, to whom he became partner in 1888. After Crisp's death in 1896 Oatley took George Churchus Lawrence as partner in 1902; this uneasy partnership lasted for over thirty years. Oatley was at first pleased to have someone who would deal with business, leaving him to concentrate on design. However, fundamental differences in temperament – Oatley was self-effacing while Lawrence was aggressive – meant that they rarely saw eye-to-eye. The partnership ended in 1936 with what Oatley described as 'a treacherous stab in the back', and when Lawrence died two years later he referred to his great deliverance and the end of 'violent and virulent propaganda against me'. How different from the amicable and familial relationships which characterized the Sharpe, Paley and Austin practice. Oatley continued as sole partner until shortly before his death; in 1948 he took into partnership Ralph Brentnall (1901-80), who had been in the office since 1916, had returned from war service and was seen by Oatley's principal client, the University of Bristol, as the means of securing continuity. Oatley described him as 'brilliant'.

Oatley died almost in poverty and for most of his life, despite his extensive practice, he lived on the breadline. This may have been in part because he was not a good businessman, but much more because he was extraordinarily generous to good causes, especially those linked to his membership of the Congregational Church. Whittingham's book is full of extensive quotations from his correspondence which makes it clear that his religion was the most important part of his life. At first it seems almost priggish but eventually a palpable sincerity wins through, an innocent faith in what he described as a 'power entirely above & beyond anything of my own'. The extent of this documentation (which Whittingham has spent what must seem a lifetime ploughing through) means that the book is divided into two parts, with an extensive biographical narrative preceding a more analytical account of the buildings.



H. H. Wills Physics Laboratory, Bristol University; Sir George Oatley, 1922-27.
Photograph 1927, courtesy of Sarah Whittingham

Although the Wills Memorial Building means that Oatley is thought of as a Gothic revivalist, his style was varied and eclectic. His modesty was such that he would readily defer to his client rather than defend his own stylistic preferences. His churches, whether for Anglicans or nonconformists, are almost inevitably Gothic. In Bristol he lived in an 18th-century house, but in the country he built for himself and others in a free Arts and Crafts manner, much influenced by his proximity to the Cotswolds. On the other hand his commercial buildings range widely through Edwardian Baroque and free classical for offices, and more stripped-down versions for factories and warehouses. Some buildings defy easy classification; the university's H. H. Wills Physics Laboratory, next to the Georgian Royal Fort, has motifs derived from Elizabethan Kirby Hall but is a striking composition very clearly of its 1920s date, while the St. Monica Home of Rest borrows freely from Jacobean ideas but is clearly institutional. Oatley's elevations are always interesting, putting together features derived from elsewhere (which Whittingham carefully traces) into original and inventive relationships.

The book is well illustrated, though it is not always easy to establish the sources of some images. Oatley was a master of detail and the photographs of these are especially appealing. There is an appendix giving details of pupils and office staff and an extensive bibliography.

What do these books tell us about provincial practice? Principally that some good buildings were produced by offices out of London. Secondly, perhaps, that there were good architects who were content to remain provincial. Oatley hated London: not every local architect wished to follow Waterhouse and make his name in London. Beyond that it is difficult to generalize. Oatley was clearly a very different character from those based in Lancaster. The natures of the practices were different, for Oatley worked from a city where there were competitors and a local society of architects, whereas Lancaster was a more or less a one-practice town from which Sharpe, Paley and Austin dominated a wide region, perhaps consciously not trying too hard to trespass into the territory where architects based in Manchester and Liverpool would expect to take the lead. There was no single route by which a man of talent could become an architect; family connections and luck could have an important role. These books do show that there is still a lot of worthwhile work to be done. In *Powerhouses of Provincial Architecture*, Geoff Brandwood wrote an introduction setting out ideas about provincial practice and he compiled a bibliography of works about these architects. Now there are these two substantial additions and there are others, perhaps the most important being *Building a Great Victorian City*, edited by Christopher Webster, essentially a biographical dictionary of Leeds architects, and *Birmingham's Victorian and Edwardian Architects*, edited by Phillada Ballard.³ As we know more about the personalities who designed much of the face of Britain we understand it better. By showing the hopes and intentions of clients as well as the artistic qualities of designers, we appreciate more about the history of places which mean much to us; and by this understanding we may value and conserve the distinctive character of our provincial centres.

NOTES

- 1 K. Ferry ed., *Powerhouses of Provincial Architecture 1837-1914*, Victorian Society (London 2009).
- 2 N. Pevsner, *South Lancashire*, Buildings of England (Harmondsworth 1969), 45.
- 3 C. Webster ed., *Building a Great Victorian City: Leeds Architects and Architecture 1790-1914*, Northern Heritage Publications in association with the West Yorkshire Group of the Victorian Society (Huddersfield 2011); P. Ballard ed., *Birmingham's Victorian and Edwardian Architects*, Oblong, for Birmingham and West Midlands Group of Victorian Society (Wetherby 2009).