

GEORGE EDMUND STREET

(1824—1881)

ARCHTECT

Some notes by Peter Fussell

“No one can become a good architect who does not earnestly study what men have done before, who has not enthusiasm for his art to make him long and resolve to do nothing but what is good in its practice, and who is not ready to show that he has enthusiasm by the industry which surely attends it and without which no study, no lectures and no schools can be of any real service”.

These sincere words, spoken by George Street in a lecture to students at the Royal Academy in the Spring of 1881 epitomise his attitude to his profession and life's work.

Street was born in Woodford, Essex on 20th June 1824 into a Britain basking in a period of unprecedented prosperity. The Napoleonic Wars were over, the Industrial Revolution was well under way and a side effect of the new wealth and freedom of travel was the great opportunity for the study of past architectural styles around the world. Many availed themselves of this new opportunity and absorbed the styles and masterpieces of earlier years. As a result, three hundred years of the Renaissance style in Britain were now to give way to a century of architectural rivalry between revivals of the Classic and Gothic forms, each with its great exponents and each with its great successes. In the early 1800's Sir Charles Barry brought the Greek Classical style to its perfection but by the middle of the century the Gothic Revival had spread into every architectural field, surpassing all other styles, with Sir George Gilbert Scott as its foremost champion.

Street was the third son of Thomas Street, solicitor. He went to school at Mitcham and later to the Camberwell collegiate school, which he left in 1839. For a few months he worked in his father's business in Philpot Lane, but on his father's death he went to live with his mother and sister in Exeter. There his thoughts turned to architecture, and in 1841 his mother obtained a place for him as pupil in the office of Mr Owen Carter in Winchester architect as an articulated pupil and there gained a thorough grounding of and some experience in ecclesiastical architecture. On completion of his apprenticeship he took up a post in Gilbert Scott's office and had, as his first commission, the design of Biscovey Church in Cornwall. Street stayed with Scott for five years, absorbing the latter's enthusiasm and passion for the Gothic style, but left in 1849 to set up in his own private practice. In the following year he was appointed Architect to the Diocese of Oxford and in 1851 was recommended for his church furniture designs at the Great Exhibition.

He married in 1852 at Bray Church and moved to Montague Place at Bloomsbury in 1855 to better manage his ever-expanding practice. The list of his commissions at this time reads like a travel brochure: Bristol Cathedral, the Crimean Memorial Church at Constantinople, the English Church in Genoa, Cuddesdon College in Oxford, the Anglican Church at Lausanne, the American Church in Paris, Mürren Church, the Royal Military Chapel at Wellington Barracks, St Patrick's Cathedral in Dublin, The American Church in Rome — and so the list continues. He is best known, however, for his great design for the Law Courts in the Strand. Street was appointed architect for these Royal Courts of Justice in 1876, in open competition with all the noted British architects of the day, his proposals being deemed by the Judging Committee as the most suitable for the new seat of British Justice. Although work was started promptly on site, prolonged arguments on details of requirement together with lack of finance protracted completion of the Courts beyond Street's death; thus the Law Courts were not only the last notable public building to be erected in England in the Gothic style but also were the last major contribution by Street to British architecture.

George Street spent his last years in Surrey, moving to Holmbury in 1876, and virtually the last of his smaller commissions was our Church of St Mary at Long Ditton. The foundation stone was laid in 1878 and the dedication of the finished building was in 1880.

In what was to be the final year of his life, Street was made President of the Royal Institute of British Architects in recognition of his great services to the profession. He died on 18th December 1881 and was buried in Westminster Abbey adjacent to the graves of Charles Barry and Gilbert Scott.

A memorial was placed in the Central Hall of the Royal Courts of Justice and, at the unveiling of the memorial, the Lord Chancellor in his speech said "As long as there exists in this country a taste for the beautiful so long will the work of Mr Street in various parts of the country be regarded with admiration and delight". We in Long Ditton may well echo these words as we give thanks for the building of our church of St Mary and for its architect, George Edmund Street.

THE TIMES SATURDAY DECEMBER 19 1992

ON THIS DAY December 19 1881

After competing against some of the most famous architects of his day, it was George Edmund Street who was chosen to design the new Royal Courts of Justice in London.

OBITUARY

It is with much regret that we announce this morning the death of Mr George Edmund Street, RA, the distinguished architect, at the comparatively early age of 57. He was suddenly seized with paralysis on Thursday, and expired last night at a quarter-past 10 at his house, 14 Cavendish Place. Mr Street was born at Woodford, Essex, in 1824, and educated at the Collegiate School, Camberwell. His architectural studies were begun under Mr Owen Carter at Winchester, and completed under the late Sir George Gilbert Scott, with whom he remained five years. Like his master, Mr Street adopted the Gothic style in the buildings he erected, and the numerous essays and lectures which he has written upon architecture have all been directed to illustrate the history and principles and promote the progress of that style.

His principal literary efforts are "The Brick and Marble Architecture of North Italy in the Middle Ages," 1855; and "Some Account of Gothic Architecture in Spain," 1865. Mr Street has for many years been largely engaged in the work of erecting and restoring churches and other ecclesiastical buildings all over the country. To mention only the most prominent among his erections, he was the architect of the Cuddesden Theological College, of the chapel and schoolrooms of Uppingham College, and of new churches at Bournemouth, Garden Street, Westminster; St Philip and St James, Oxford; St John, Torquay. All Saints', Clifton; St Saviour, Eastbourne; St Margaret, Liverpool; and St Mary Magdalen, Paddington. Among his restorations may be noticed the churches of Eccleshall, Wantage, Uffington, in Berks, and Stone, in Kent, and Jesus College Chapel, Oxford. Perhaps his most considerable work in church building was the erection of the nave of Bristol Cathedral in the Early English style. He was also engaged upon the restoration of the nave and building of a new choir in Christ Church Cathedral, Dublin, and on building a new synod-house in connexion with the Cathedral for the Irish Church. But in London Mr Street's reputation will mainly rest upon the Royal Courts of Justice in the Strand, now approaching completion. He was appointed architect for this gigantic undertaking in 1868, after a competition in which the most famous architects of the day took part. The outer shell is fairly complete and the public are able to judge of the imposing effect which the Royal Courts will present.