The Chamberlain Highbury Trust

JOHN RUSKIN & J.H.CHAMBERLAIN

Craftsmanship

One of Ruskin's main concerns was with the nature of work in the 19th century. The industrialisation of production was rapidly taking place, in the building trades as elsewhere, with the workman's creativity and independence increasingly reduced. Ruskin contrasted this with the production of architecture in mediaeval England. He described a situation in which skilled masons, carvers, carpenters and glass-makers all contributed freely to a collective work of art. His description was probably somewhat mythologised and over-romantic, but to readers sympathetic with his cause, it was in inspiring opposition to the contemporary growing mechanisation of work in Britain's cities, not least in Birmingham.

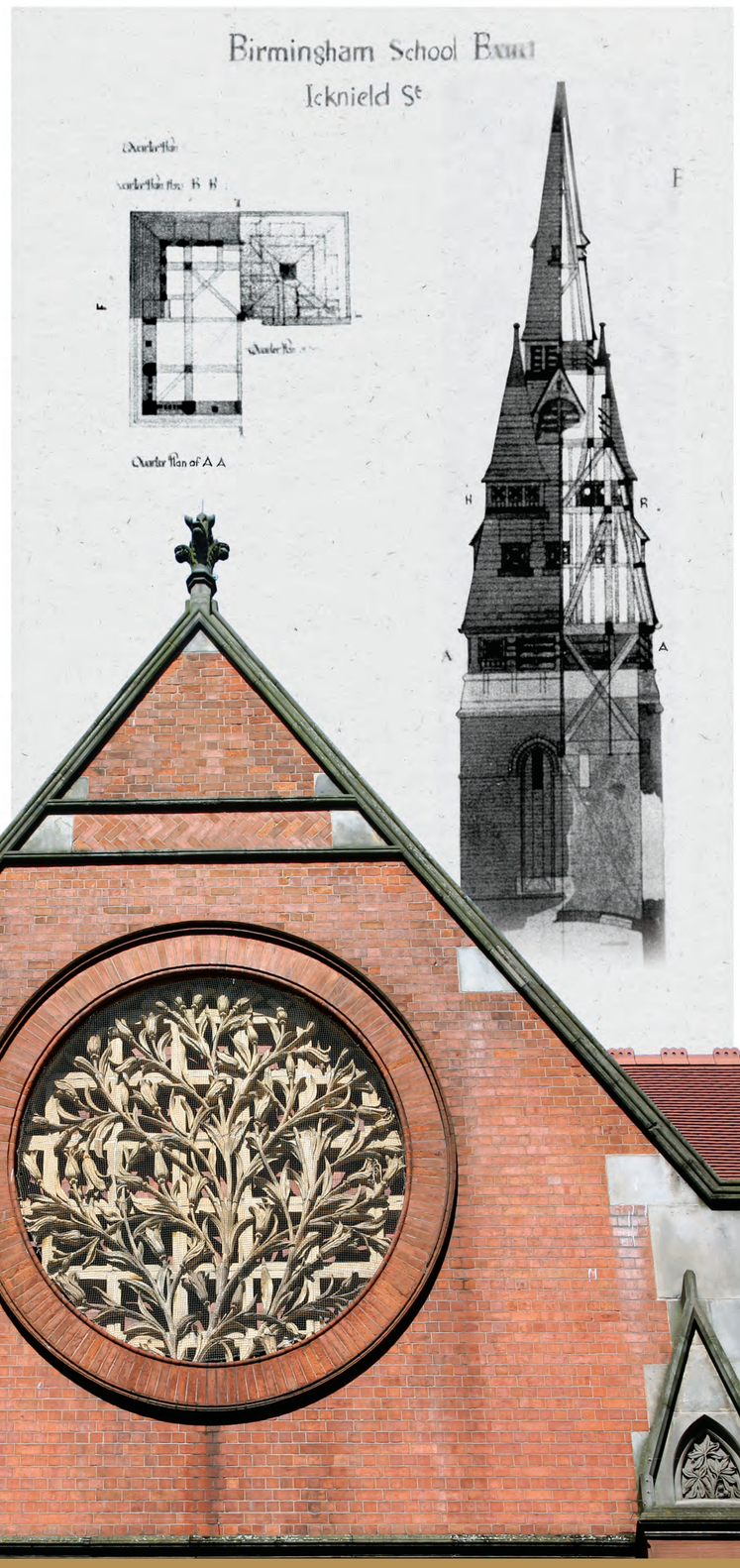
Above: The memorial to Joseph Chamberlain, 1880, with carving by Samuel Barfield

Right: The terra cotta roundel at Birmingham School of Art, 1885, carved by Samuel Barfield

To Ruskin, work was a moral issue – the quality of an element of building could not be separated from the fulfilment which the workman gained from doing it. In *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* he wrote "I believe that the right question to ask, respecting all ornament, is simply this: Was it done with enjoyment – was the carver happy while he was about it?"

This is a hard criterion to maintain, and Chamberlain, like all other architects, found it difficult to reconcile the independence of the workman with contractual realities, and with the professional responsibilities of the architect. Chamberlain ascribed great importance to quality of craftsmanship, and employed highly skilled and artistic craftsmen working in stone, wood, terra cotta, encaustic tile, iron and glass. But he did not fulfil Ruskin's precept of the autonomy of the craftsman. Chamberlain's collaborators produced work designed by Chamberlain, with perhaps a degree of interpretation. Consistency of architectural style was more important than individual creativity.

From contractual documentation and from published descriptions, we know who were the many subcontractors and suppliers of terra cotta, tiles, and stained glass in Chamberlain's buildings. But we have few individual names to identify Chamberlain's many collaborators. One of the prominent exceptions is the sculptor Samuel Barfield. He worked with Chamberlain on several jobs, two of which are the Chamberlain Memorial (to Joseph Chamberlain, that is) and the School of Art. At the School of Art, Barfield carved the big proto-Art Nouveau roundel of lilies and trellis, from which the terra cotta panels were cast. At the Memorial, he carved the elaborate limestone ornamentation, and Thomas Woolner carved the relief portrait of Chamberlain.

Above: Joinery detail from the Shakespeare Memorial Library, Birmingham Reference Library, 1881

Below: Drawing of the ventilation tower of Icknield Street School