The Chamberlain Highbury Trust

# JOHN RUSKIN & J.H.CHAMBERLAIN

## Introduction

The architect of Highbury, John Henry Chamberlain (1831-1883), was a disciple of the radical critic of art, architecture and society John Ruskin (1819-1900). Like many other 19th century Gothic Revival architects, Chamberlain's imagination was fired by reading Ruskin's 1853 book *The Stones of Venice*. He travelled to Italy to see the sites of Ruskin's inspiration for himself, and soon after returning he moved to practise in Birmingham.

In *The Stones of Venice*, and in particular the chapter called *The Nature of Gothic*, Ruskin set out the principles that he believed architects should follow in their work. These principles were drawn from his study of buildings hundreds of years old, and many of them were in opposition to the realities of Britain in the 19th century. For instance, Ruskin believed in the centrality of the craftsman and craftsmanship, and deplored the mechanisation of the building process; meanwhile, industrialisation was transforming the country.

Clockwise:

The plaque with Chamberlain's portrait in the entrance hall of Birmingham School of Art

Detail from the Birmingham School of Art, 1885

Window in the Ca' Foscari, Venice. Drawing by John Ruskin, 1845, King's College Cambridge

Portrait of John Ruskin, 1875, National Portrait Gallery

Below: Dudley Road School, 1878

Nevertheless, Ruskin's ethical teaching inspired many architects to follow his radical principles. He was responsible for much of the look of the Gothic Revival in Britain in the second half of the 19th century, and together with the later writings and designs of William Morris, he shaped the Arts and Crafts movement that succeeded it.

In 1871 Ruskin founded the Guild of St George, an educational charity devoted to putting his proposed reformation of society into practice. He selected Chamberlain as one of the Guild's trustees. As far as we know, the two only met once, on Ruskin's visit to Birmingham in 1877, when he stayed at Bellefield, the house of the Lord Mayor George Baker, who was to become Master of the Guild in succession to Ruskin.

Opposite Bellefield, one of 29 schools which Chamberlain designed for the Birmingham School Board was being built on Dudley Road, and we know that Ruskin enjoyed visiting the building under construction. However, despite inspiring Chamberlain and many other architects to create what we call today 'Ruskinian Gothic', Ruskin rarely had anything good to say about their work, which he considered mostly failed to match his high ideals.

In these panels, we select a few of Ruskin's architectural principles, and demonstrate how J.H.Chamberlain interpreted them in his buildings in Birmingham.

Sponsored by Glenn Howells Architects

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