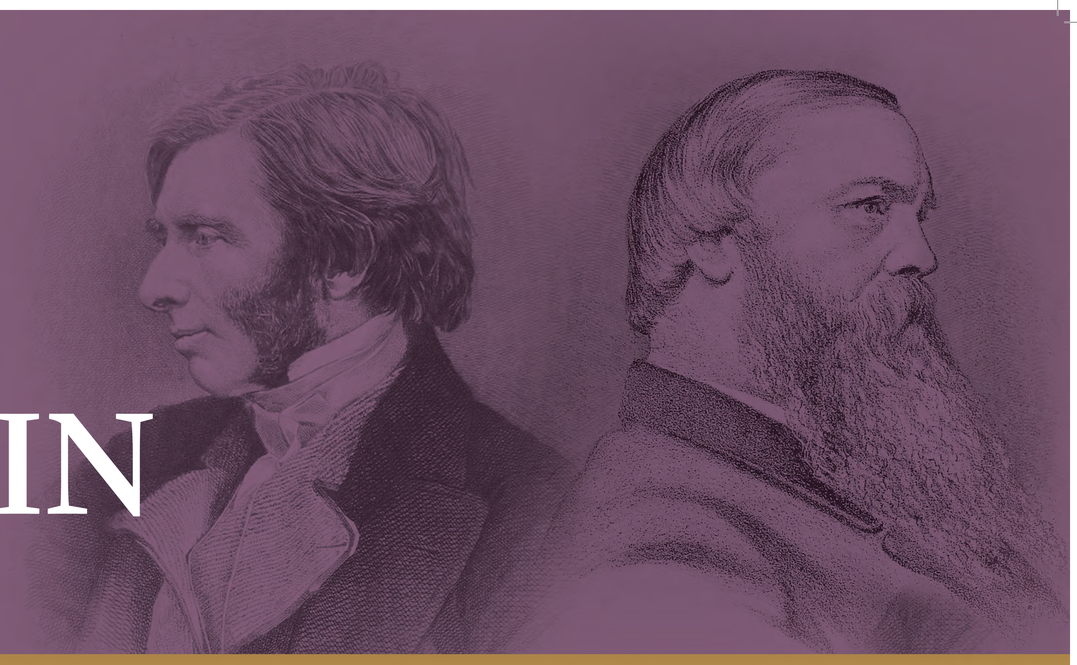
The Chamberlain Highbury Trust

JOHN RUSKIN & J.H.CHAMBERLAIN



Naturalism

Ruskin was a devout believer in the existence of God, and in the idea that God created the vast variety of Nature; thousands of diverse species of creatures and plants, and the huge complex of minerals. His reverence for nature led him to advocate that natural forms were the only appropriate subjects for architectural ornament.

In *The Nature of Gothic*, he defines Naturalism as one of the six "characteristic or moral elements of Gothic". It is closely connected to another of the six elements which he calls Changefulness; the idea that nature never repeats itself, but instead consists of an infinite and delightful number of variations upon types. It followed that, conversely, the machine-made production of identical architectural elements was anathema to Ruskin. Railway stations of iron and glass, which most of us revere today as great products of the Victorian age, to Ruskin represented the antithesis of architecture. "Better bury gold in the embankments, than put it in ornaments in the stations" he wrote in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*.

J.H.Chamberlain was faithful to Ruskin's prescription of Naturalism, up to a point. Particularly in Highbury and the School of Art, in his ornament we can see leaves, flowers and birds, motifs never repeated but endlessly varied. But in the School of Art and in his board schools, he also uses cast-iron arches; they have naturalistic ornament, but it is industrialised and repetitive in a way of which Ruskin would have not approved.

Top: Detail of cast iron arch in the painting studio, Birmingham School of Art

Above: Carved capitals in the entrance hall of Birmingham School of Art

Below: Arcading above the fireplace in the hall at Highbury

Bottom: Gilded relief plasterwork in the hall at Highbury

Chamberlain developed an original variation on Ruskin's principle of Naturalism, which he called Compensation; he described it in his 1858 introductory lecture as Professor of Architecture at Queen's College in Birmingham. Every building necessarily destroys part of the loveliness of the natural world, and architecture has a duty to replace it with beauty of its own. "Compensation is the first duty required of Architecture in its character of a fine art. So much of the beautiful has been taken away, and its restoration must be effected". It is a distant parallel with today's concerns for an eco-architecture, though expressed more in aesthetic and spiritual terms than ecological.