
Middleton and St David's College, Lampeter

by Brian Torode (copyright Cheltenham Local History Society)



The Canterbury Building at St David's College, Lampeter

'Middleton and St David's College, Lampeter'

by Brian Torode (2002)

From 'A bold imagining – University of Wales Lampeter – glimpses of an unfolding vision 1827-2002', edited by Keith Robbins and John Morgan-Guy with Wyn Thomas

Written to mark the College's 175th Anniversary

Please note: 'Copyright reserved by the individual contributors, editors and publishers'

‘Middleton and St David’s College, Lampeter’
by Brian Torode (2002)

Due to the increasing number of students, the Council of St David’s College, Lampeter, decided in 1884 that more accommodation was needed. In November of that year, an application was made to the Charity Commission for assistance in meeting the anticipated cost of new buildings and facilities. An immediate reply acknowledged receipt of the request but asked to be provided with plans and estimates of the costs involved. The *Cambrian News* of October 23rd 1885, reported the laying of the foundation stone of “a new and handsome block of buildings that are to be erected in the College grounds south of the college and on the spot where a few years ago, the Jubilee of the Institution was celebrated. The new block of buildings which Messrs Middleton, Prothero and Phillot of Cheltenham have designed ... will contain two spacious lecture rooms, a physical laboratory, twenty one double sets of dwelling rooms with offices and will cost without fittings, about £6,000.”

The foundation stone was laid by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Reverend and Right Honourable Edward Benson, hence the name Canterbury Building. The work appears to have been started before the official approval of grant aid had been received. The Charity Commission had received the plans, specifications and estimated costs on 23rd May 1886 and was surprised to hear that a contract had been made already and work had started. However, two weeks later, authorisation was given to proceed, and in January the following year the terms of the agreement were sent to the Trustees.

The new buildings did not take long to complete. The opening took place on 24th June 1887 and the ceremony was performed by the College Visitor, the Right Reverend Basil Jones, the Bishop of St David’s. Part of the Bishop’s speech made reference to “Professor Middleton and those who worked with him on the completion of the building.” And later, the Bishop congratulated “my friend the architect, Mr Middleton”. During the ceremony, Professor Middleton received the highest honour that the College could award. He was presented to the College Principal with the usual Latin formula, which admitted him an Incorporated Member of the College. The Professor replied by saying how much he had enjoyed the time he had spent at the College and would be extremely sorry if the completion of the building should mark the end of his association with St David’s College.

Canterbury Building’s external appearance did not excite great praise – “the exterior impresses one more with an idea of utility than ornamentation, – stated the *Cambrian News*, and this may well have been due to the fact that more than one hand was involved in the final plans, although Professor Middleton was credited with being the principal architect responsible. Who then, was Professor Middleton and how did he become involved with St David’s? To answer this question, we must first of all look at his family background and the career of his father.

John Middleton senior was also an architect and trained in York with the prolific and respected northern architect, James Pigott Pritchett. In 1844 he married Pritchett's daughter, Maria, and their only child John Henry was born in York in 1846. Middleton senior opened his own practice in Darlington and designed many small railway stations for the Stockton and Darlington Railway and its subsidiary companies. He designed schools, public buildings, churches, parsonages, inns and hotels. He was responsible for the Quaker School at Ayton and a large house in the town for Thomas Richardson, the banker and financier. Restoration of medieval churches was also part of his portfolio. Two of his most talented students were R.L. Johnson and F.R.N. Haswell, both of whom were later to establish thriving, successful practices in the north east.

By 1859 John Middleton and his family had settled in Cheltenham after a period of travelling in this country and abroad. Within six months of their arrival in Cheltenham, John Middleton had been commissioned to design the first of the five Victorian Gothic churches which are today part of his legacy to the town. Between 1860 and 1885 he also designed the new Junior Department for Cheltenham College, the original buildings for the Cheltenham Ladies' College, houses, schools, hospitals, and mansions in Gloucestershire and beyond. His work in Wales between 1867 and the time of his death in 1885 included the building, rebuilding or restoration of many churches in the diocese of St David's and also the building or conversion of several large houses for the gentry. He had many Welsh connections and was a close friend of the Bishop, the Right Reverend Basil Jones.

It was against this background that young John Henry Middleton grew up. He was an intelligent boy, a competent linguist and a quick learner. When he entered Cheltenham College as a day boy in 1861, aged 14, he could speak fluent Italian. He remained at the College for three years leaving in December 1864 to continue his education at Exeter College, Oxford. However, due to an attack of deep depression caused by the sudden death of a close friend and fellow student, his time at Oxford lasted just over a year. He returned to his parents' home without completing his degree. And spent four years in private study almost living the life of a recluse. John Henry was a sickly looking youth and his nervousness and periods of melancholy remained with him for the rest of his life. Nevertheless, these years of semi solitude prepared him for his subsequent interest in and sound knowledge of art and archaeology. In 1872 his reputation as an antiquarian was enhanced through the work which he did with his father on the restoration and conservation of the medieval frescoes which they had revealed while working on the restoration of Kempey Church in Gloucestershire. Several learned papers followed and he soon became a popular and respected lecturer and leader of expeditions to sites of historic interest and importance and was often consulted about the repair and maintenance of ancient buildings.

Travel was always an attraction and in 1873 he set off to explore Iceland. On the voyage he met and developed a close friendship with William Morris. Many happy weekends were to be spent at Morris's home in Oxfordshire, and it was through this friendship that John Henry met his future wife. On his return from Iceland, John Henry began work in his father's office and

at one point his father paid £1,000 for him to study in the office of (Sir) George Gilbert Scott where he was immediately engaged on church work. He was elected A.R.I.B.A. in March 1875, his proposers being Scott, F.P. Cockerell, and his uncle J.P. Pritchett junior.

In 1879 John Henry was elected Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries and became associated with many affiliated societies in Gloucestershire. In the time he had spent in Scott's London office, he had developed a taste for non architectural design and this was allowed to flourish in later years when he designed ecclesiastical furnishings, domestic fireplaces, mantelpieces and library furnishings as well as a fine desk and chair for the Bishop of St David's.

From about 1876, Middleton and Son appeared on most of the firm's plans and specifications but this did not constitute a formal partnership. However, John Henry did manage a London office for his father from 4. Storey's Gate, Westminster. From 1883 John Middleton senior took into partnership Henry Allen Prothero and George Henry Phillot and branch offices were maintained at Newport, Monmouthshire, from where Prothero originated, and at Westminster.

Middleton senior died in February 1885 while working on the mansion, Cilgwyn near Newcastle Emlyn, and his son John Henry became senior partner in the firm. But his heart was not in architectural design. In 1886 he was elected Slade Professor of Fine Art at Cambridge and until 1889 maintained a Middleton, Prothero and Phillot office in that city having closed the Westminster office. In 1889 he was appointed Director of the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge and it is from that time that the firm became simply known as Prothero and Phillot.

John Henry married Bella Stillman in Rome in 1892 and they had one daughter born two years later. Bella's father was an active member of the pre-Raphaelite circle in his younger days and her stepmother was a pupil of Ford Maddox Brown and Rossetti. It was through William Morris that John Henry met his future mother in law and subsequently his future wife. His mother in law became famous for her work as the pre-Raphaelite painter, Marie Spartali.

John Henry's friends had always been concerned about his health and since the death of his father his deep depressions had become more frequent and more intense. He believed he was seriously ill and it was a real surprise to his close friends that he accepted the appointment as Director of Art at the South Kensington Museum in 1893.

The challenge was too much for him and he relied more and more on morphia which he had taken for many years to relieve pain and depression. On 10th June 1896, he was found dead in his home in Kensington, the result of an accidental overdose.

In the College archives there are several letters which suggest that the original plans for the Canterbury Building were prepared by John Middleton senior before his death. He was familiar with the town having undertaken minor repairs to Lampeter Church in 1872 and in 1884 he drew up plans for additional rooms for the Lampeter Schools, which were completed just after his death in 1885. He also tendered for the reordering and redecoration of the College Chapel in 1884, and it was at this time that his plans for a new wing for the College

were drawn. However, on his death a year later, the project which had obviously been accepted by the College Council, passed to Middleton's partner, Henry Prothero. He addressed certain reservations which the Council had raised, such as the lack of bathroom provision. He enclosed simplified sketches of the proposed building which showed a three storey, Elizabethan-style building with a central tower, and three storey, bay-windowed lecture rooms at either end. He remarked on the fact that he had omitted the two niches and bay windows to the tower and placed them in the lecture room wings instead, which may well give us some clue as to Middleton senior's original plans.

These revised plans were obviously not to the liking of the Council and within two weeks, Prothero had been asked to remodel and reduce the plans. He was not happy with the suggested proposals to render the building, but would agree provided that freestone dressings in the windows were retained. He also agreed to the suggestion of a long unbroken roof line "like St John's, Oxford, which has a charm of its own", and a lantern to light the passage way.

Sketch plans showed that the three storey building was to be retained, but the central tower and the projecting end wings of the lecture rooms had been removed as had the bay windows. The roof comprised two parallel steep pitched lines, broken by chimneys and a central ornate lantern topped with a weather vane. This must have been deemed too costly, for five months later John Henry Middleton, writing from the firm's Cheltenham Office, expressed his annoyance at the suggestion that the outer wall might be faced with cement, and although this could be done by the firm, it would be done unwillingly. He gave several reasons for using stone facing – Llandewi stone – at a cost of a mere £155. It would appear that Middleton at this point took over the correspondence and supervision of the contract, probably out of sheer frustration at the delays that continued to arise and out of concern for the reputation of the firm. In September 1885, a compromise seemed to have been reached, with an agreement that the long side of the building on the SE would be cemented, but Middleton continued to press for stone at both ends – each costing an extra £16.10.0 and to use stone for the long sides would cost an extra £61.0.0. each ... "This is what I would like," and all further correspondence is signed J Hen. Middleton. The resulting Canterbury Building bears only a slight resemblance to Prothero's first sketch drawing and John Henry Middleton would appear to have redrawn the plans completely and to have achieved what he wished for – a stone building with Llandewi stone facings.