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Charles Edmund Giles, an architect's life, presidential address given on 7 December 2019

Julian Orbach

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CHARLES EDMUND GILES, AN ARCHITECT'S LIFE
PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS GIVEN BY JULIAN ORBACH
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The working life of a Victorian architect is only rarely revealed, like the working lives of most middling Victorian professional men. We have notably the Personal and Professional Recollections of Sir George Gilbert Scott, and lives of Augustus Pugin and Sir Charles Barry, in the one case by his pupil, Benjamin Ferrey, in the other by his son, in which the controversies over their respective roles in the design of the Houses of Parliament are rehearsed, but these are exceptional, and of course lives of men at the top of their profession. The survival of a manuscript autobiography of one in the broad middle of the profession is exceptional, and fortunately the life of Charles Edmund Giles, architect of Taunton and London is no dry list of works but one that illuminates the personal as much as the professional, seamed as it is with the bitterness of a life of unfulfilled promise.

Giles wrote the autobiography in 1877 having been forced to abandon his practice because of failing health, an unnamed illness striking at what should have been the peak of his career in 1865 when he was only 43, and forcing his retirement by 1873. The last years of his life were spent abroad. He died in Rome in 1881 aged 59. His work deserves publication for what it reveals about him as a man as much as about architecture in the mid-Victorian era.

He was born in Frome in 1822, the ninth of 16 children born between 1810 and 1832 to William Giles (1783-1853) and his wife Sophia Allen. The family had been yeoman farmers at Southwick near Mark, but in 1817 William Giles set himself up as a carrier in Frome, leasing the ancient Rectory House there. Charles's elder brother Allen, the Rev John Allen Giles (1808-84), luckily was also a diarist, his memoir edited by David Bromwich, was published by the Somerset Record Society in 2000, so we have sometimes another, more genial, story to balance that of Charles.

Frome was recovering from the slump after the Napoleonic wars, and William Giles' business prospered initially. Charles is moved to lyricism describing the country of his childhood:

a narrow winding vale, a river flowing through fertile green pastures thickly set with deep hedgerows and dabbled with clumps of lofty elms, the whole buried amid rounded hills, the soft beginnings of Mendip, that most mountain-like in form of all hill ranges in south-western England...

Charles was schooled, first in Frome by a 'vicious

Welshman' called Williams and then in Bridgwater at a school being run, incompetently, by his oldest brother, Allen. Charles is never sparing in his criticism of those nearest to him, or who failed him, or disappointed him. This is what makes the autobiography so readable. But in fairness, his brother Allen remained lifelong friend of the 'vicious Welshman', who had also taught him. He was the Rev William Morris Holt Williams (1795-1870), graduate of Trinity College, Dublin, master of the Grammar School at Frome, and later rector of Lullington, near Frome. Mr Williams, Allen says, 'brought with him skill to teach, and great energy in teaching'. Of the deficiencies of his own teaching at Bridgwater, Allen is silent, but he progressed from there to headmasterships at Camberwell and then the City of London School.

In 1836 Charles was sent, aged 14, to London to be a pupil of Henry Shaw (1800-73), not really an architect, but responsible for wonderful illustrations of medieval detail and ornament. Giles says of him, crushingly: 'he knew himself to be no architect in any sense excepting the desire to be one'. The reason he was with Shaw was that Allen Giles, elevated to the new City of London School in 1836, had commissioned a Tudor-Gothic house for himself in Windlesham, Surrey, from Shaw. Charles comments sourly that his apprenticeship was thus 'the result, as most blunders are, of ignorance and some crime'. The point illuminated here is that training was a private paying arrangement between parents and architect or builder, and the amount of real training given could vary hugely. Giles passed on, somehow, to a man called Alexander, also in London, a move which he describes as 'as bad as the previous error', Alexander being 'a man absolutely without talent for art of any kind' with a 'devilish temper' to whom 'no clients came a second time'. One hopes it was not the George Alexander who designed the handsome Savings Bank in Charlotte Street, Bath, in 1841-2.

Aged just 20, Charles returned to Frome to find his father's business in a mess. But there was still enough money to buy him a twenty-year partnership with an architect for £500, a huge sum in those days and an indication of how things worked in the early 19th century. The contemporary diaries of the Rev John Skinner of Camerton illuminate the terrible trouble a parent might go to trying to buy an unsuitable son into the army or the law, and it is evident that architecture was no different. The architect Giles found was Richard Carver, the County Surveyor of Somerset, based in Taunton. Carver, the

son of a builder in Bridgwater, had, 30 years before Giles, found training in London, but very unusually with one of the leading architects, Jeffrey Wyatt. He had even exhibited designs at the Royal Academy in 1811-12 before returning to Somerset in 1813 aged 21. He was appointed County Surveyor in 1830.

Giles, with hindsight, is more than usually sour about Carver, vituperative even. Saying that Carver 'had, in the days of ignorance of all art matters in England, done a large business through the opportunity afforded him by his office of contact with the squires of the county' is jaundiced, but no architect has ever been able to prosper without contacts. Giles also says that through these contacts most of the country houses west of Taunton had been 'dealt with in some way, more or less to their injury'. Of course Carver was not an incompetent, he had designed medium-sized country houses in Regency styles, classical as at Willett House at Elworthy, c. 1816, or Tudor as at Chapel Cleeve House at Old Cleeve, 1818-23, and by the 1830s was remodelling St Audries for Sir Peregrine Fuller-Palmer-Acland and designing town halls for Chard and Wells.

Carver's architecture was rooted in the early 19th century and Giles somehow had already picked up the new ideas especially of what the Gothic should be and could be, that is a national style. It is fair to say that most architects of Carver's generation found themselves at sea as the picturesque Gothic of their training came to be condemned as ignorant and unscholarly by Pugin and the radical Anglicans of Oxford and Cambridge in the early 1840s. Carver got both £500 and a younger partner who might navigate these waters. Churches like Carver's Wiveliscombe of the 1820s would no longer do, and even Carver's expensive Holy Trinity, Taunton, of 1839-42 is still a Late Georgian preaching box inside. Giles for his part got unhappiness and frustration. Like the radical young Goths of the university, he hated the idea that architecture was no more than a variable set of costumes, applied according to the client's whim. The 'greatest difficulties' he says 'lay with my partner himself who could not at all understand Art to be otherwise than a fashion of the times changing with Caprice'. And the atmosphere in the office became poisonous as the younger gentry came to Giles rather than Carver, the poison circulated, Giles alleges, by Carver's second wife who was jealous, especially on account of her son. Family adds its special poisons into Giles' story as in 1848 he married Carver's daughter Jane, the youngest of the first marriage 'with whom', he says unromantically, 'came about £1000 of money and soon after the death of the second sister of consumption another £400', which surely repaid the £500. It should be said that Jane remained with

Giles to the end, and, with their daughter Eleanor, was at his deathbed in 1881. A letter she writes to Allen Giles in November 1881 begins – 'In looking over dear Charles' papers...'

The couple went on a honeymoon tour of Europe in the year of revolutions. For the first time Giles could see the medieval architecture of the continent, even if only in the Low Countries and Germany, as France was in turmoil. They saw violence in the streets of Berlin all the same. On returning the couple moved into No 14 The Crescent, Taunton. Although Giles claims that, egged on by the second wife, Carver 'did all that he might to achieve my ruin', he adds that 'soon after this his son died and the enmity collapsed and my friendship was now sought'. So deaths in the Carver family allowed fortune to smile on Giles. He mentions sourly another death in 1857 when his wife's uncle died leaving money to his nieces 'but tied up in entail so that a more weak and foolish will could not have been made, meanwhile his wife was to (be having) a life interest, in the strength of which she at once married her old lover and survived some twenty-one years'. Giles is rarely generous.

A glance at Nether Stowey church, built under their joint names in 1849-51 shows what Giles had brought to the partnership. It is altogether a more medieval-looking church than Carver's Holy Trinity, Taunton, of a decade earlier, fitting well with the medieval tower. As that church was being built Giles left the partnership, without, he points out, getting any of his money back. Now Giles needed to build up his own practice. The family was growing; Eleanor, Edward and Edgar were born between 1850 and 1853, when they moved out to Stoke St Mary. Here he took on live-in pupils, Edward Stephens a 'slow heavy youth' from Maidstone, who later set up in Kent with Giles' 'clever assistant' Frederick Peck, and 'succeeded pretty well', Giles acknowledges. Peck and Stephens actually did very well, winning, for example, the competition for the Cambridge Guildhall in 1859. There was also a boy called Levins, who got 'crazy religion' and left to become 'a rather dull executive kind of parson', as Giles recalls. And there was Richard Gane from Trowbridge, who comes back into the story years later as Giles' partner.

Having condemned his father-in-law for using his contacts as county surveyor to get jobs, Giles is happy to say that his joining the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society at its foundation in 1849 put him in touch with the leading clerics and landowners of the county, contacts to set against the 'jealousy of my partner and his destruction of my hopes'. In the 1850s the jobs began to come in. It must be said that Giles was a good architect especially in the Gothic. His first notable church was



Fig. 1 Kingweston church (1851-5)

at Kingweston for Francis Dickinson, a squire who had caught religion at university and moved in High Church circles (Fig. 1). Its remarkable spire was based on that at Lostwithiel, Cornwall, suggested to Dickinson as a model by the leading Ecclesiologist, Alexander Beresford Hope (a suggestion not mentioned in Giles' autobiography). He does criticise the client, Dickinson, though, saying that it was 'the most costly of all my works in proportion to its size, a result arising from the eccentric and peculiar way in which the work was done as well as the costly mode of using materials without any regard to economy from some fancied sleight to religion and truthfulness being associated with economy in the use of wrought stone etc in the mind of the donor'. He also says that the finished church had 'a want of harmony in the several parts, from each part being designed at different periods and the style of the church being made more ornate and important as the works proceeded' but admitted that the tower and spire were 'not far behind the best works of its class'. Of course contacts were important, a relation, Archdeacon Giles, got him church work in Lincolnshire, and Carver's wife was related to the Rev J. Thomas, vicar of Haverfordwest in Pembrokeshire, to whom the Gileses sent their son Edmund for schooling. From him, Giles had work on



Fig. 2 Cannsfield House Park St, Taunton (1857)

two churches in Haverfordwest.

Giles was always nervous about the future and in 1856 decided to move his practice to London, although most of his jobs were still around Taunton. He lived in the Westbourne Grove area until 1866, then in Brentwood, Essex, still managing projects in Somerset. What is remarkable is how wide ranging Giles' projects were. In the 1850s he designed new churches at Bathealton, Long Load and Isle Brewers, the school at Charlton Mackrell with its extraordinary tiled interior, and banks for Stuckey's at Taunton and Wells, one Italianate, the other Gothic, many houses, mostly parsonages, but also Cannsfield House (now Corner House Hotel), Taunton, 1857, with its minutely detailed carving by Henry Davis, Giles' favourite mason (Fig. 2). Isle Brewers (Fig. 3) was for that extraordinarily improbable parson, Joseph Wolff, son of a German rabbi, converted to Catholicism in Germany and trained for the priesthood in Rome until expelled for contesting papal infallibility. He came to England, and became an Anglican. Obsessed with finding the Lost Tribes of Israel he visited Armenia, Turkestan, Afghanistan, Arabia and Ethiopia in the 1820s and 1830s before being ordained in 1838. His mission to Bokhara in 1843 to rescue two British officers already dead when he arrived is one of the



Fig. 3 Isle Brewers church (1859-61)

unforgettable stories of Victorian travel. Vicar of remote damp Isle Brewers from 1845 until he died in 1862, his vicarage was probably by Giles when he was with Carver, then came the school, and finally in 1859-61 the church, in which optimists have seen a hint of Armenia. The American Civil War lost Giles two of his largest potential commissions, from the South Carolina plantation-owner, Plowden Weston (1819-64), for a cathedral at Charleston and a mansion 'to include the best of the middle ages' at Georgetown.

By the 1860s the practice was looking outward, the new church of Holy Trinity at Ventnor, Isle of Wight, was a major work, and like Isle Brewers shows a confident originality, here a High Victorian muscularity (Fig. 4). The punchy High Victorian manner of Ventnor appears in two saddleback-roofed Somerset towers, at Luxborough and Monkton Combe. The latter Giles called 'one of my best efforts', though Pevsner called it 'rather a terrible piece of architecture'. Churches in Lincolnshire and in the Fens on the Cambridgeshire-Norfolk border date from the mid 1860s. This was the decade of his thoroughgoing rebuilding of his home church, St John, Frome, 1862-5, for the notorious High Church vicar, William Bennett, there from 1852-88. In 1877 Allen Giles attended the incense-filled funeral of their sister Mary, an Anglican nun, in 'the beautiful church which my brother Charles nominally has restored, but in many of its details may be said to have rebuilt'. Charles writes of this at length and is careful to say 'I am not responsible for the seats and external porticos of the chancel and S chapel... and not to be blamed for the bad Pieta in the Lady Chapel'. It is fairly certain that he was responsible for the extraordinarily Roman Catholic 'Via Crucis' up to the N door, large stone Stations of the Cross carved by James Forsyth (Fig. 5).



Fig. 4 Holy Trinity, Ventnor (1860-2)

In 1867 he won the competition for the new Taunton College School, a seriously Gothic college with a distinctive tall pavilion roof on the tower. Most of the school was luckily built well before the enterprise failed in 1874, to be restarted in 1880 as King's College, Taunton, under the Anglican Woodard Schools (Fig. 6). 1865 was however the peak of Giles career, the year when the illness struck. That year he earned £600, the most he ever earned. He says he generally earned £450 and in the bad years of the American Civil War this fell to £200, which puts into perspective the £500 he paid Carver and the £1,000 expected from the death of the consumptive sister-in-law. In 1865 he says 'sudden illness swept away all the results of my success and cast me back into necessity and petty ways of life for ever'.

It is not entirely true, for the King's College commission was still to come and the firm continued with partners taking increasing roles. First his assistant, Walter Robinson, paid 'only £100' Giles grumbled, for a share of the practice in 1865. But in 1869 Giles was obliged to buy him out for the same £100 because Robinson had 'a habit of wine-drinking to excess' and the practice was failing. Robinson was succeeded by Giles' old pupil from Trowbridge, Richard Gane, about whom Giles is in the end rude, but it was Gane who designed the one universally acclaimed work of the practice, the Abbey Mill in



Fig. 5 St John, Frome, 'Via Crucis'

Bradford on Avon, Wiltshire, in 1874, published as a work of Giles and Gane.

Giles himself says 'I ended my upward career at 43' in 1865, and was then an invalid. By 1873 he says his income had ceased entirely apart from income from a farm at Woolavington from a widow of his wife's uncle, Mr Morse, 'supposed to bring in £165 but more like £140-150'. Giles however names as his last work the church of St Luke by the Victoria Docks in East London, built only in 1873-5, of which he is proud enough to call 'on the whole my best work I think'. He sold the practice to Gane and began to travel for his health, Zurich in 1874-5, Lausanne and Vevey 1876-9, then Florence 1879. He died on a visit to Rome in 1882. As for Richard Gane, Giles has the last bleak laugh, saying that while he was partner the practice worked well enough, but then he had to operate on his own: 'In this he signally failed not



Fig. 6 King's College, Taunton (1867-74)

having head for responsibility he became a drunkard and going to Australia died there at Sydney of drink and despair'. Giles concludes typically that Gane 'left debt unpaid to me of £310'.

The story of Charles Edmund Giles might seem to be one of failure, seen through his own eyes, but he himself says that he built 21 new churches, rebuilt 17, repaired 42, built 27 schools, 16 parsonages, and some 25 other houses and buildings, which add up to a total of some 150 buildings, most of them in Somerset, which gives him some claim to be the most significant Victorian architect in the county.

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