'Quite a Gem': an Account of the Former Mortuary Chapel at Mill Road Cemetery, Cambridge

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Introduction

The surviving minutes of the Cambridge Parish Burial Ground Committee (PBGC) and its sub-committee (SC) give a detailed account of the efforts of university and townspeople to provide a mortuary chapel for the extension to the parish burial grounds at Mill Road, Cambridge during the mid nineteenth century. Good plans and drawings of both the proposed original and 'reduced' designs for the chapel are deposited with the minutes, but surprisingly little material is available in local or national archives to record the exact form, appearance and fittings of the chapel as built in 1858 and which was used for almost a century.

In the early years of the nineteenth century the rapid rise in the population of Cambridge put great pressure on the town's parish churchyards, most of which could not be extended because of contiguous development. In 1832 the Cambridge Chronicle (17 February) had warned of the dangers to public health resulting from the lack of adequate space for new burials, but nothing was done until 1843 when the Cambridge Cemetery Company, a private profit-making body, opened its 3 1/4 acre site in Histon Road for persons of all Religious persuasions, without distinction as to sect or denomination. The established church took action in the following year when the Archdeacon of Ely responded to a memorial presented to him 'by a large body of the Parochial Clergy' by convening a meeting to set the PBGC in train. In addition to re-stating the dangers to public health, a report prepared by the provisional committee for a public meeting on 6 November 1844 also drew attention to the undesirable effects of 're-opening the same ground, at comparatively short intervals of time [which] produces frequently unseemly and distressing scenes'.

From its inception the sub-committee of the PBGC worked assiduously to raise funds by voluntary contributions for the purchase of suitable sites for new burial grounds, it being acknowledged from the outset that more than one location would be necessary in order to 'obviate the necessity of conducting funerals long distances, and through crowded thorough-fares; which must occur, if there be but one ground, where ever situated'. Several unsuccessful attempts were made to acquire suitable plots of ground in various parts of the town, including a portion of the site of the new botanic gardens in Hill's Road. Eventually a site of over nine acres in open ground situated off Mill Road was purchased for £2146 from the estate of the Rev. Dr Geldard. The ground was conveyed to the Church Building Commissioners for the use of the parishes of All Saints, St Andrew the Great, St Andrew the Less, St Benedict, St Botolph, St Clement, St Edward, St Mary the Great, St Mary the Less, St Michael, St Paul (then still a district chapel), Holy Sepulchre and Holy Trinity. Each parish was allocated sufficient ground to meet its anticipated needs, the boundaries being marked by small stones, many of which were still in situ in 1995. A circular area in the centre of the ground was set aside for the future chapel, to be built as soon as funds would allow.

Following the drainage of the land, laying out of gravel drives, construction of boundary walls, provision of railings, gates and a lodge for the newly appointed 'porter', the grounds were consecrated with due ceremony by the Bishop of Ely on Tuesday, 7 November 1848, an event reported in detail by the Cambridge Chronicle.
the following day. Ever short of funds, the sub-committee was grateful to record on 24 November that the bishop had declined to charge for the issue of a licence ‘under which the Burial Service is performed in an apartment in the lodge’, an arrangement that was to last for much longer than anticipated.

Original and ‘Reduced’ Designs for the Chapel

The PBGC meeting of 4 December 1848 expressed the hope that the ‘ulterior objects yet remaining... will at no distant time be carried into complete effect’ and approved the appointment of Dr William French to the chairmanship of the sub-committee. It has been acknowledged that Dr French’s ‘great achievement’ as Master of Jesus College was the restoration of the college chapel but any hopes that his authority and experience might be brought to bear on the project to build the cemetery chapel were dashed when he died the following year.

Two years after the opening of the cemetery a report of 27 November 1850 noted that over 700 interments had taken place and that ‘a very general and increasing desire prevails that the erection of a chapel should no longer be deferred’. The cost was estimated to be ‘about £1000’, although no information is given to suggest how this figure was determined. However, the chapel fund was only £389 6s. 0d., so it was agreed to launch an appeal in the hope of raising £500. It was also agreed to fill the vacancies that had arisen on the committee and sub-committee. Among the gentlemen requested to allow their names to be added to the committee was that of the Rev. Professor Whewell, Master of Trinity College. After just over a year the response to the appeal had increased the chapel fund to £915; evidently close enough to the target to give confidence that resources were sufficient to employ ‘some architect of high standing’. The sub-committee of 10 February 1851 decided to approach George Gilbert Scott, although which member made the suggestion is not recorded. Perhaps the most likely explanation for the approach was that Scott had been employed on the 1849-50 restoration of St Michael’s church, where Prof. Scholefield, Chairman of the PBGC, was the incumbent. In addition, references to correspondence with Scott about specifications for this work appear in the Bursar’s accounts of Trinity College and it is possible that when Dr Whewell joined the general committee of the PBGC in November 1850, he was pleased to recommend the architect with whom his college already had dealings.

Whatever the reason, the decision was endorsed by the PBGC on 17 February 1851 and on 3 March the architect attended a sub-committee, having previously made a visit to the site of the chapel. Subsequently, in a letter accompanying the plans dated 22 April 1851 Scott apologised for the delay in submitting a design, his first attempts having ‘proved fruitless’. He explained his use of very narrow lancet windows in the nave as a degree of sombreness is consistent with the objects, but in the chancel I have made somewhat larger windows. Indeed, I do not consider the building to be in the Early English style, the lancet windows are used for the greater part of it. The internal effect I wish to be quiet and solemn, I fear the cost will be more than was thought. I doubt if with the spare it would be less than £1100.

Despite this obvious attempt to raise the expectations of his clients, he added in more realistic vein ‘the same general idea could be carried out in a simple manner... by the omission of the arcading of the side, the reduction of heights, etc’.

Clearly in a state of some alarm about the estimated cost, the sub-committee of 1 May 1851 authorised the chairman (H.W. Cookson, Master of Peterhouse) and the secretary (George Maddison, Vicar of All Saints’) to seek ‘an early interview’ with Scott, having previously taken advice from Robert Willis, professor of Natural Experimental Philosophy, and Whewell. Scott was reported to have ‘readily fallen in’ with the suggested economies and returned the plans suitably amended together with a note to the effect that by excluding the steeple from the roof upwards, together with other savings, the cost could be reduced to about £1000. The chapel fund having reached £965, Scott’s amendments were approved subject to the sanction of the Bishop and Archdeacon of Ely. Several local builders were invited to tender by 5 July, two days after which the sub-committee met to consider the outcome.

Their disappointment must have been considerable; the lowest bid (Peck and Son) being for £1450 plus £250 for the spire. It was resolved that Scott be asked to examine ways in which further reductions in cost could be made and Peck and Son were informed that the committee was not in a position to enter into a contract, a situation made worse soon afterwards when the builder admitted to having made ‘a mistake of a large amount’ and asked to be released from his tender. In a letter dated 11 July 1851 Scott was contemptuous.

I do not wonder at the tenders coming in high by such a mode of competition...
He offered to find 'a builder of the first experience' to which proposal the sub-committee of 13 October agreed, noting that the funds were limited to £3983. However, in a subsequent letter (5 January 1852) Scott had to admit that the builder he had in mind (Myres) was no less expensive. Conceding that his design was 'on too architectural a scale to be ruled by ordinary precedents of its own dimensions' he proposed to 'commence again on a humbler scale', omitting the spire altogether and substituting 'a little lead turret as one so often sees on the little village chapels abroad'. On 3 February 1852 he wrote again to make it clear that his offer to make a fresh set of drawings would not incur any charge, but the committee felt unable to accept his 'liberal offer'. Faced with a situation of great 'delicacy and difficulty' the sub-committee declined to make any recommendation when the FBGC met on 12 February 1852, outlining instead three possible courses of action: i) to raise additional funds to build the original design, now estimated at £2000 with fittings but excluding the spire, which would be an additional £491; ii) to postpone building until sufficient funds became available; iii) to take up the architect's offer of a design for a chapel of a less ambitious character. That the first option was agreed upon despite the obvious difficulties of raising yet more money shows how strong was the commitment of some members of the committee to build Scott's design. Perhaps it is significant that the resolution to 'issue immediately an earnest appeal ... with lithographed sketch' (Fig. 1) was proposed by Whewell. Subsequently 850 copies of the appeal were printed and circulated, listing the subscriptions already promised and asking for further support.

This enthusiasm was not matched by that of the town and university at large, defeat having to be admitted at the FBGC of 4 June 1852. The appeal had boosted the chapel fund to £1334 14s. 7d., still far short of the hoped-for £2000 or £2500 with the spire. At the same meeting it was decided to take up Scott's offer of a less ambitious design, although the sub-committee was anxious to emphasise that the overall size of the building should not be reduced; 'in that case, strangers would frequently be debarred from joining in the service, and space would not be allowed for the decent conduct of funerals with a numerous attendance'. Scott's 'reduced' design (Figs. 2 & 6) was seen by the sub-committee on 27 October 1852. It provided 90 sittings at a cost estimated to be 'about £1400'. By this time the fund had crept up to £1351 8s. 7d., but it was felt necessary to offer back those subscriptions made in the hope that the original design might be realised. On 28 December it was reported that the bishop had sanctioned the new design and that tenders were to be invited from several local builders together with 'such other builders as Mr Scott may select'. The tenders were opened on 18 February 1853, all giving separate prices for the turret. Bell was lowest at £1658, with an additional £153 for the turret. None could be accepted. Scott put the blame partly on the 'unprecedented rise in materials' and sent his chief clerk, Bullock, to discuss with Bell how the cost could be reduced. They agreed to omit the vestry chimney and all connected with it; to omit also the brick arch under the vestry floor and the hoop iron for binding the flintwork. These measures, together with a reduction in the thickness of both side walls and west wall; modifications to cornice and guttering and the substituting of Casterton stone for Ketton, could be expected to bring the total cost down to £1700. 'From this might be subtracted a portion of the turret, say £100' giving a final price of £1600.14

Despite these measures, only £1364 9s. 8d. was available, so yet another appeal was necessary, complete with lithod view of the reduced chapel, expressing the hope that 'many who held back their support for the former building on the grounds of its too costly style will lend their aid to the erection of the present, in which economy has been studied as far as is consistent with stability, the accommodation required and an ecclesiastical character'. With the appeal was circulated an Address signed by twelve of the parochial clergy, eager to refute a prevalent opinion that the chapel was larger than necessary and pointing out that at least 70–80 sittings were required for the decent conduct of well attended funerals, 'especially those of Members of the university and Members of benefit societies' and drawing attention to the inconvenience of 'the room where the Service has been performed now for more than four years'. The result was reported to the sub-committee on 24 November 1853. No subscriptions had been reclaimed, but no additional donations had been received either. Clergy were asked to appeal to their parishioners, but four months later only £130 19s. 11d. had been raised by this means, bringing the fund to £1585 0s. 5d., tantalisingly close to the £1700 needed. However, inflation had intervened and at the sub-committee of 30 March 1854 it was revealed that Bell and Son
had asked for their tender to be raised by 8% because of 'the advance upon materials and labour'. Estimating that the architect's fee would be in the region of £100, the sub-committee was confronted by an unbridgeable shortfall of £251 and it was decided upon 'taking no further steps at present', a situation that lasted for nearly two years. It was not until 21 December 1855 that a terse entry records that the deficiency of about £250 still stood but 'there is reason to expect that this sum would be forthcoming' and it was agreed 'to take the necessary steps for commencing the work as soon as possible'.

PROPOSED CHAPEL
FOR THE NEW PARISH BURIAL GROUNDS
IN CAMBRIDGE.

Architect, George Gilbert Scott.

Walls and Turret, Grey Flint with Stone Dressings.
Spires, Stone.—Pinnacles, Oak.
Number of Sittings, 100.
Total estimated Cost, £2500.

Figure 1. The original design for the chapel depicted on the cover of the appeal leaflet March 1852. (Cambridge Parish Burial Grounds Committee.)
The Building of the Chapel

The resumption of the chapel project was due to the beneficence of Professor Whewell, then vice-chancellor for the second time in his distinguished career. On 18 December 1855 his wife Cordelia had died, her loss causing him great anguish which he expressed in various writings subsequently published in a biography. A letter written 23 December 1855 from Trinity Lodge to a close relative gives a touchingly personal account of the state of affairs at the Mill Road cemetery and of his hopes for the completion of the chapel.

We lay her in the cemetery tomorrow . . . there is as yet no chapel . . . only a gatehouse where the service is commonly read; but we hope soon to remedy this want . . . I told her that I had in my will directed that I should be buried there and then we should have a church like St. John's in Keswick . . . not exactly . . . for it will not be a parish church, but I hope it will rise higher and sooner on account of her lying near it.

From the outset Whewell had given strong support to the establishment of the cemetery

Figure 2. The 'reduced' design as depicted on the appeal leaflet May 1853. (Cambridge Parish Burial Grounds Committee.)
and had been a most generous contributor to the various appeals for both the purchase of the land and for the building of the chapel. On the day before the sub-committee meeting of 21 December 1855 he had repeated his verbal offer to the secretary that he was ready to make a further gift of the £250 needed for work to begin. Rev. Madidison wrote to Scott on 27 December to tell him that the committee was ready to proceed with the chapel and asked for advice about costs and organisation of the contract. Burlison sorted out the details and agreed that the builder’s proposed increase of 8% was fair. Contracts were signed on 18 January 1856 and work on digging the foundations began soon afterwards, only to be suddenly suspended at Scott’s request, because, as afterwards reported at the sub-committee of 1 April 1856, of Whewell ‘having expressed his desire that the small bell turret should give place to a tower and a spire, which should be a prominent member of the building . . . and having offered to defray the expense of such a change in the design’. A letter from Whewell (30 March 1856) stated that Bell had estimated building the tower and spire ‘designed for the cemetery chapel of Mr Scott’ for £822 and that he was ready to sign a contract ‘separate from the contract for the rest of the building’. The offer was enthusiastically accepted by the PBGC on 3 April, although there is no mention of whether the bishop’s approval was either considered necessary or that it was sought.

No further meetings of either sub-committee of PBGC took place until almost a year later, so it is fortunate that the Rev. Joseph Romilly, the University Registrar, took regular walks through the cemetery grounds during this period and that his diary records the chapel’s progress. On 4 May 1856 he noted ‘They are beginning the chapel’ but a week later observed ‘the chapel scarcely got on at all’. On 25 May ‘The chapel is now rising above the foundations. I stepped it out and found the length about 24 yards. By 15 June it had risen to the window sills and by 6 July ‘the chapel is advancing rapidly:- the W door is very pretty’. On 17 August he observed ‘the chapel is getting on now: 4 massey columns are in the inside; I think there are to be more:- the chapel will be quite a gem.’ On 31 August he could see no progress and on 14 September ‘they are getting on with the East window’. By 30 November the spire was beginning to show; by 11 January 1857 it was ‘getting on’ and by 15 February ‘very nearly

Figure 3. The addition of the tower and spire in place of the turret seen in Figure 2 required an extra buttress and gable on the south side. A north gable was specified, presumably above the vestry. (Cambridge Daily News.)

Figure 4. The chapel at a later stage of demolition. The lean to roof of the vestry can be seen on the north (left) side. (Cambridgeshire Collection.)
completed’, when he also added ‘I think it very handsome’.

Much remained to be done inside. The sub-committee noted on 31 March 1857 ‘As regards the fittings, no steps should be taken at present to raise a sum for this object’ which seems to indicate either an uncharacteristic lack of caution or that they were hopeful of further assistance from the Master of Trinity. Scott drew up plans for the flooring which were shown to the sub-committee on 15 June 1857, when it was also noted that the contractor had already ‘done some additional work in connection with the flooring’ (not specified) at an additional cost of £42. The secretary wrote to Whewell ‘to inform him of the alteration proposed by Mr Scott’ and to ask him if the committee might be allowed to appropriate ‘a portion of the sum… so liberally offered’. Although Whewell had no objection to defraying the cost of the encaustic tiles, a sense of anxiety may be detected in the sub-committee minutes 2 July 1857 as doubts were raised about the sufficiency of funds to meet the additional expense of the flooring. Statements of the contractor’s ‘entire account’ were called for and Scott was asked to add his charges. Also at this meeting a letter was read from Rev. Maddison, who had become Vicar of Grantham, Lincolnshire in the previous year, requesting permission to install a stained glass memorial window (designed by Scott) in the tower, immediately behind the reading desk ‘if I find the undertaking within my means’. The request was willingly agreed to. The PDBG of 7 May 1858 records that the window was subsequently installed, although no information is given about the design or the identity of the person commemorated.

Among the ‘additional works’ listed in the accounts presented to the sub-committee on 5 January 1858 was the substitution of Ancaster stone for Casterton at an extra cost of £23, to be charged to Whewell, together with the cost of a lightning conductor, iron ridge and north and south gables needed to accommodate the additional tower and spire into the body of the chapel. Clearly Scott was taking advantage of Whewell’s intervention to reinstate at least some of the cuts agreed between Burlison and Bell in February 1853. The deficit stood at £181 9s. 0d. and it was agreed to report to the main committee — and to Whewell, who was advised that this would be increased to £230 if the charge for the encaustic tiles was to be included. Meanwhile, the works would be ‘at a standstill’. Whewell’s response (18 January 1858) shows that his patience was wearing thin; because of the delays he might consider himself ‘liberated from my offer to contribute £250… but as I believe there are things essential to the completing of the chapel for which no provision is yet made, for instance, seats, I wish to know before making any further payments, what assurance the Committee can give that the chapel will be completed’. Estimates for seats and communion table were hurriedly sent for ‘as designed by Mr Scott’ in either oak or pine and two days later on 23 January 1858 the sub-committee also asked Bell to quote for boarding the space under the seats ‘according to the original plan’. The chairman placated Whewell by assuring him of the committee’s intention to press ahead as quickly as possible.
Figure 6. Four drawings of the 'reduced' design: A) north elevation; B) longitudinal section; C) south elevation; D) ground plan. (Cambridge Parish Burial Grounds Committee.)
although how this could have happened without Whewell’s continued support is not made clear. Despite these assurances, the fact remained that whatever combination of materials was to be used, the sums needed to complete the work exceeded the funds available by amounts varying from £236 to £268. Diplomatically asked for his ‘suggestions’, Whewell declined to give any, but with characteristic generosity promised an additional £250 provided that the building was completed by Easter of 1858. The fittings, a floor of plain tiles and a communion table of oak were gratefully sanctioned, a precarious balance of ‘about £22’ remaining when the work was reported to be complete on 22 April 1858. Approval was also given to Whewell’s request to be allowed to place a hatchment in the chapel. His gift of the stained glass in the east window of the chapel was also acknowledged by the sub-committee of 7 May 1858, but no information is given about the subject or the designer.

Although the bishop had decided that there was no need to consecrate the new chapel (I find that there is no form (of service) for the consecration of a Mortuary Chapel, apart from that of the ground on which it is built) a service to mark the opening was conducted by his Lorëship on 29 May, 1858, nearly 10 years after the cemetery was consecrated. No mention of the event appears in the minutes, but on the following day the Cambridge Chronicle gave an account of the order of service, which Whewell attended, accompanied by the college choir.

Final Years

After 1858 the minutes make only occasional references to the chapel at Mill Road, apart from the need for occasional maintenance. In 1881 storm damage to the lodge and chapel was so extensive that it was necessary to launch an appeal and there are also references to further roof repairs in 1882, 1885, 1886 and 1889. In 1894 it was proposed that an appeal be made for funds ‘to furnish the apse by laying down a carpet, putting up simple hangings on the walls and removing the present Table and putting up a prayer desk in its place’. The scheme was approved, except for the provision of the prayer desk, but the result is not recorded.

Loose papers filed with the minutes give a glimpse of the chapel in the latter years of its existence. Between 1922–27 there are invoices from local builders for minor repairs, and in 1928 tenders were received from four firms for cleaning and re-decorating. An undated appeal notice states that ‘the chapel stands in need of painting and some simple mural decoration... so that its general appearance may be rendered more fitting for its purpose’. The appeal seems to have met with some success because in 1931 ‘great improvements’ (un-specified) were recorded, but by 1938 the first suggestion was made that the chapel should be closed in preference to the expenditure needed for renovations. So far it has not been possible to determine the date on which the last service was held and since the chapel was never consecrated (see above), there is no record of de-consecration by which its decline might be charted. The chapel was considered to be unsafe and was demolished in 1954, having survived just long enough to receive a very brief description in Persner. The RCHME for the City of Cambridge notes that the chapel had been demolished, but gives no description. No records have so far been found in national archives.

The Cambridgeshire Collection has three photographs of the chapel, two of which record the early stages of demolition. Figure 3 appeared in the local newspaper when work had just begun. Despite poor print quality, it gives the best impression so far discovered of the general layout of the chapel in its completed form, with the tower and spire inserted into the hurriedly lengthened body of the ‘reduced’ design. Unfortunately the camera angle does not show whether the apse was three-sided, as depicted in Scott’s drawings and plans of the chapel (Figs. 2 & 6) or five-sided as described in the review of the chapel in the Ecclesiologist of April 1858. Referring to the placing of the tower and spire the reviewer stated ‘The credit of the invention, we believe, belongs to the Master, while Mr Scott carried out the details of the execution.’ Eight years later, the writer of Whewell’s obituary notice in the Cambridge Chronicle (10 March 1866) ascribed the design and tower entirely to Whewell. However, the photograph of the chapel reproduced as Figure 4 provides good evidence that the added tower and spire resemble Scott’s original designs closely enough (cf. Fig. 1) to cast doubt on this assumption. The exact extent of Whewell’s influence on the design of the tower, spire and apse has yet to be determined. An incidental view of the chapel in its setting is seen in a photograph of the tennis courts of the former County Girls School, c. 1910, into which the spire intrudes as a compelling focal point, rising serenely above the maturing trees of the cemetery (Fig. 5). The view emphasises the success with which Scott was able to fulfil the hopes and aspirations of those who had worked with such commitment to ‘give this ground distinctly the character of a CHURCHYARD’.
Endnotes

1 Cambridge Chronicle, 15 October 1842.
2 PBGC Statement, 8 October 1841. Despite this intention the Huntingdon Road site for the use of the parishes of St Giles and St Peter was not opened until February 1869, causing increasingly strong protests by the parish clergy. A report by the Assistant Overseer in February 1862 complained that in hot weather ‘noxious effusion is generated and spread among a thickly inhabited neighbourhood’. An Order in Council prohibiting further interments in these graveyards should have come into force on 1 March 1856, but seems to have been ignored.

3 SC, 1 Dec 1845.
4 Appeal Statement appended to PBGC minutes, 23 November 1847.
5 PBGC Amended Plan, 7 October 1846.
7 M&SS, 4 June and 21 August 1850. The extent to which the appointment of Scott may be due to the far-reaching influence of the Cambridge Camden Society is an issue beyond the scope of this paper. However, the decisions of the PBGC in 1851 need to be seen against the background of the controversies surrounding the building and restoration of churches in Cambridge during the previous decade. See J. F. White, The Cambridge Movement (Cambridge 1962).

8 PBGC, 15 May 1851.
9 SC, 13 October 1851.
10 SC, 6 February 1852.
11 Scott’s letter, 19 February 1853.
12 SC, 15 March 1853.
13 PBGC, 15 April 1853.
14 Mrs Stair Douglas, Life of Dr Whewell (London 1881: 440).
15 SC, 15 Feb 1856.
16 The author is grateful to Dr J. D. Pickles and to Mrs M. F. Bury for providing the extracts quoted from the unpublished part of the Bournby diaries.
17 During the incumbency of Rev. Maddison at Grantham Scott undertook a drastic restoration of the parish church.
18 As soon as it was decided to begin work on the chapel Scott had suggested in a letter dated 31 December 1855 ‘I suppose you could not afford to restore what Mr Burlison proposed to take off from the work?’
19 SC, 2 February 1858.
20 Letter, 29 January 1858.
21 Four weeks later, on 1 July 1858, Dr Whewell married Everina Frances Ellis, Lady Aitken. When he died in 1866 he was buried in the college chapel.
22 PBGC (Burial Board), 14 May 1894.
25 The National Monuments Record, RIBA and the Architectural Association have no records of the chapel.
26 Cambridge Daily News, 2 June 1954 Cambridgeshire Collection M. Mil K54 12962 (The original negative is lost).
27 The minutes give no explanation for this change in design, but D. Cole, The Work of Sir Gilbert Scott (London 1980: 60–61) points out Scott’s frequent use of this feature at this time.
28 Cambridgeshire Collection M. Mil K54 28161.
29 Cambridgeshire Collection M. Mil. K1 28963.
30 PBGC appeal circular March 1852.