



Book Review

Robert Owen and the Architect Joseph Hansom: An Unlikely Form of Co-operation

By Penelope Harris

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Penelope Harris based her doctoral thesis on the architect Joseph Hansom and the changing face of architecture between 1820 and 1860. She is to be warmly thanked therefore for taking time out of her work on a full biography of Hansom to produce this short history of the relationship between Hansom and Robert Owen.

As a West Midlander, I was aware of Joseph Aloysius Hansom because he was the architect of Brum's (Birmingham's) remarkable Town Hall and of Sherlock Holmes's favourite mode of travel — the Hansom Cab. It was on a Heritage Open Day visit to the remarkable St Walburge's Church in Preston that I realised that the scale and range of Hansom's contribution to mid-Victorian architecture was more than one town's hall. He produced not just the tallest church spire in England at St Walburge's, but some 200 other buildings.

I imagine readers of this Journal will be less aware of Hansom than Owen. Harris describes Hansom as an architect with a social conscience. Hansom was born to a Roman Catholic family in York in 1803. His father was a builder and a Freeman of the City of York. He was apprenticed to his father, who realised his talent and released him for architectural training. Hansom was placed in the office of Matthew Phillips. In 1828, he formed his own practice with John and Edward Welch. Triumph led to disaster as they won the competition for the design of Birmingham Town Hall in 1831, but as they stood surety for the builders, they ended up going bankrupt.

There are three main characters in this story. Alongside Owen and Hansom, the third is Birmingham, which was a very exciting town in the 1830s (it did not become a city until 1889). The population had boomed with industrialisation in the eighteenth century, driven by the development of the industrial steam engine by James Watt and Matthew Boulton. This rapid expansion led to demand for political representation and Birmingham rose to national political prominence in the nineteenth century campaign for political reform, with Thomas Attwood and the Birmingham Political Union bringing the country to the brink of civil war during the Days of May that preceded the passing of the Great Reform Act in 1832. The Union's meetings on Newhall Hill, in 1831 and 1832, were the largest political assemblies Britain had ever seen.

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This was the wider context of the town that commissioned Hansom's new Town Hall and to which Owen was drawn. The link between them was William Pare (1805–1873). He had a tobacconist's shop in New Street and had been converted to Owenism by reading the works of William Thompson. Pare was one of the founders of the Birmingham Co-operative Society in 1828 and he was keen to combine the theoretical and practical sides of Owenite political economy. In his inaugural address to the Birmingham Co-operative Society, Pare outlined the Society's objectives and regulations. The objects of this Society were "the mutual protection of the members against Poverty, the attainment of a greater share of the Comforts of Life, and the attainment of Independence by means of a common capital" (Pare, 1828/2020, p. 204). They went on to form the basis of a circular which was later approved by the first Co-operative Congress in May 1831. In so doing, Pare developed the methodology and the ambition of the Owenite movement.

The big year for Owen and Hansom was 1833. By the middle of 1833, Robert Owen had become established as the recognised leader of the trade union movement. In July 1833, Owen's National Labour Exchange passed under new management, as a branch opened in Birmingham. It was taken over from Owen by the United Trades Association, a federation of a considerable number of trade unions in London. Owen's plan for a Grand National Guild of Builders had been previously circulated to the lodges, printed in full in the *Pioneer*, and expounded by Owen at a number of meetings. The Builders' Parliament, under Owen's guidance, spent a week in reorganising the Union on lines of 'universal government', by which the various crafts were bound more firmly together into a single united body. For Owen and his friends, the whole affair of the Builders' Union was only a side-show, or at any rate only a small part of a wider movement of general regeneration.

Harris points out that whilst the records of the town commissioners and the Birmingham Political Union have been lost, Hansom produced a 15-page pamphlet making his case for the building, two pages of which were Hansom's political thoughts. Harris argues that Hansom's involvement with Owen was intense. For example, in Birmingham, he combined with Owen to produce a notice announcing a grand meeting to unite working builders. Even when strikes broke out in Derby, Hansom was prepared to leave Birmingham to go and assist with the problems. Hansom and Welch became almost the front men for Owen's ideas, as they drew up a manifesto for the formation of a Grand National Guild of Builders. The ambition of the Union was immense, not just safeguarding jobs and pay, but also offering education for adults and children alike.

Meanwhile, having won the contest to build the Town Hall, the first brick being laid coincided with Attwood's famous New Hill Meetings, leading up to the passing of the Great Reform Bill. Progress on its building was remarkably slow. Hansom had won with a design based on the Greek temple of Castor and Pollux. Having gone in at a low estimated price, the architects and builders were obliged to stand as financial guarantors. Hansom and Welch were often away on Operative Builders' Union business and the building work was fraught with difficulties. Two workers, Heap and Badger, were killed when a hook on a pulley block gave way. There is a memorial to them in the grounds of St Philip's Cathedral. Ironically, Hansom and Welch suffered from strikes at the Town Hall and were criticised by the very people Hansom was trying to make improvements for. Some men complained they were not getting a far wage. Hansom justified his rates of pay in Birmingham by pointing out he was paying a flat rate. This may have been less than the going rate in Birmingham, but it was higher than the rate in other areas. You can imagine how this was received in Brum.

1833 was the crunch year for Hansom. Early in the year, he was involved in supporting workers in Derby where a major strike had led to a lock out. Hansom and Owen lent their support to the strikers. This did not help Hansom, however, when it came to the building of Birmingham Town Hall. Hansom had admitted that he had used manpower instead of machinery, increasing his costs, and in April 1833, he went bankrupt. The building was finished by well-known Birmingham architect Charles Edge.

Harris (2020) doesn't have much time for Owen, thinking of him as a sort of romantic rascal. "Owen's Birmingham phase was a short, sharp, self-contained period of his life, and though he returned many times it had little relevance to his future. He seemed oblivious as to the consequences of his actions on others" (p. 124). Hansom was not beaten however and in December 1834 he registered the design of the 'Patent Safety Cab', which became known as the Hansom Cab. Later, in 1843, he produced the architectural journal *The Builder*, renamed *Building* in 1966 and still published today.

This is a somewhat messy book, which interchanges very quickly between the protagonists, but is fun to read nonetheless. Harris is clearly a great fan of Hansom and when you see his complete legacy of wonderful buildings, it is not difficult to see why.

The Reviewer

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