ARTHUR BROWN 1851-1935: The Forgotten Man

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'*To give a list of the works he has carried out would be to write the latter-day history of the city*.' Very few public officials could expect to receive such an accolade as was given to Arthur Brown, Nottingham's Borough Surveyor and Engineer for 41 years, in a newspaper report on his retirement in 1921. In fact both this article, in the Nottingham Evening Post (25 August 1921), and his obituary in the Nottingham Daily Guardian (15 April 1935) had the bold headline 'The Maker of Modern Nottingham.'

Arthur Brown was born in Nottingham on 21 November 1851. He was educated at Nottingham High School, leaving at the age of 16 years. As this would be 1867, Arthur would have been one of the last group of pupils to attend the (Free) Grammar School on Stoney Street, which in 1868, with a change of name, moved into new buildings on Waverley Mount, Forest Road. On leaving school, Brown was articled to Marriott Ogle Tarbotton, the Borough Engineer. In 1874, at the age of 23, he was promoted to become Tarbotton's deputy following their work together on the new Trent Bridge and the bridge at Gunthorpe.

After the Nottingham Waterworks Company was purchased in 1880 by the Nottingham Corporation, its Water Committee recommended that Tarbotton should cease to be Borough Engineer, and should become Engineer to the Gas, Water and Sewage undertakings at an increased salary of £1500 (from £1080.) It was added '*that he shall have no other occupation whatever.*' Tarbotton's resignation was received on 6 September 1880 and a committee appointed to consider his successor. Within a month, at the Council meeting held on 4 October, Arthur Brown, assistant to M O Tarbotton, was appointed Borough Surveyor and Engineer at £400 per annum – at the age of 29. Thereafter, for the next 40 years, the many improvements to Nottingham's infrastructure were carried out directly or indirectly by Arthur Brown. His obituary carried the emphatic statement '*It is not too much to say he changed the face of Nottingham.*'

Streets are the most obvious signs of urban improvement: street widening frequently leads to rebuilding. When Brown became Borough Engineer there were only three roads, Derby Road, Mansfield Road and London Road that could be considered wide. '*He [Brown] transformed what were little more than lanes and alleys into capacious thoroughfares.*' They were widened for modern needs and often repaved, while a number of entirely new streets were set out.

Brown's greatest achievement - a fitting memorial, some said - came in mid-career. This was the setting out along Nottingham's river frontage of the Victoria Embankment and promenade. A report to Council on 10 September 1900 noted '*Trent Embankment...is rapidly approaching completion.*' In its early stages this project picked up the tag of 'Brown's Folly', but if the Borough Engineer had not acted the Council might well have sold the land for building purposes, as happened on the opposite bank. In fact the scheme was relatively inexpensive as the Council owned most of the land. The rest Brown acquired by a land swap with the Great Central Railway and a low cost purchase of land from Colonel Hervey Bruce of Clifton Hall – '*practically a gift*', it was reported.

In Tarbotton's final years as Borough Surveyor the Nottingham Borough Extension Act of 1877 was passed. The main districts now brought within the town were Basford, Bulwell, Radford, Lenton, Sneinton, and Wilford north of the Trent. Not long after the passing of the Act the Council was negotiating with Trustees of the Gregory Estate in order to set out a new road 60 feet wide linking Mansfield Road with Alfreton Road. Work started not long after, and a progress report on '*the new road...at present known as the Gregory Boulevard*' was presented to Council on 22 March 1880. On 5 July it was referred to as '*the new road recently made across the Forest*.' Thus the setting out of Nottingham's boulevards started with Tarbotton, but it was left to Brown

to carry on with planning Radford and Lenton and Castle Boulevards, which with Gregory Boulevard formed three sides of a rectangle and covered some four miles in total. Besides the boulevards, from 1880 street works were carried out, supervised by Brown, which related directly to the Council's policy of ensuring that the outlying districts, now within the borough boundary, would be given easy access to the centre of the town. In the old town the most impressive new streets set out had their origin in 1881.

In May of that year the Council announced a competition to redevelop the unhealthy area between Upper Parliament Street and Long Row Central, which was known as the Rookeries. The award-winning scheme, by local architects Evans & Jolley, gave direct access from the Market Place to Parliament Street with one main street 45 feet wide and two parallel side streets each 36 feet wide. Brown, acting for a cash conscious Council, estimated the net cost at £35,500. However the Council did not consider it had to implement the scheme and it was rejected. The whole area was subsequently cleared but left undeveloped. Eventually, after appreciable delay, the preparation of an alternative scheme was passed to Brown. In 1889 he proposed the now familiar Y layout of King Street and Queen Street both 50 feet wide, (60 feet where they came together), and with a triangular block of buildings between.

All over the enlarged town Brown was involved in a steady stream of work, widening existing roads and setting out new ones. Radford Road, Vernon Road and Highbury Road opened up a route to Bulwell. Wheeler Gate, Albert Street, Barker Gate, Hucknall Road and roads in Basford and Old Radford were among important streets widened. Noel Street was completed. The improvement of Carrington Street, its Canal Bridge and Arkwright Street, together with other street works noted, created relatively easy access from the northern suburbs to Trent Bridge.

In 1882 and 1883 the Council received requests from 74 firms and from Railway Carriers to widen streets in the Lace Market. It was only possible to improve Stoney Street and St Mary's Gate after the Council had purchased portions of St Mary's churchyard. In similar fashion, St Peter's Gate was widened by acquiring a portion of St Peter's churchyard. Later, in September 1900, a report to Council stated '*The work of widening and improving the streets abutting on Holy Trinity Churchyard has been completed*.'

Brown had meetings with the Midland Railway over the stopping up of level crossings. In 1885 he prepared modifications to the proposed Bill to establish the Nottingham Suburban Railway. In 1897 he compiled for the Council a full report on the Railway Bills of the Midland, Great Northern, and Manchester, Sheffield and Lincolnshire Railways (later the Great Central) concerning the approaches to and across Nottingham to the intended new station, later named Nottingham Victoria.

University College Nottingham was formally opened on 30 June 1881. Within three years it had developed structural faults. Brown was detailed to investigate and reported to Council on 3 March 1883. He found defective corbels, the walls of the Library and Museum thrusting outwards and unsafe beams supporting the floors. The architects W & R Mawson disagreed with the findings but offered to submit to arbitration. Alfred Waterhouse, the arbitrator, prepared the cost of alterations and proposed the cost of arbitration be shared equally between the architects and the Corporation.

In 1885 Brown submitted plans for a new Cattle Market, to be located on five acres of the East Croft at a cost of £27,500 and £29,500. This would avoid the herding of cattle through the town. The Council's Eastcroft Depot of 1878-9 was possibly planned by Tarbotton and seen to completion by Brown, who certainly was responsible for later additions. It is interesting to consider Brown as architect. He was responsible for rebuilding Radford and Sneinton Baths; the latter he found in 1892 to be *'so dilapidated in places as to be dangerous*.' His rebuilding, called the Victoria Baths, would have enhanced the CV of any eminent architect. He designed the Bagthorpe Isolation Hospital, probably the Lambley Almshouses on Woodborough Road, and the extensions to the Sewage Farm at Stoke Bardolph, which involved laying 150 miles of drains. Removing raw sewage and effluent from the River Leen and controlling storm waters needed

Brown's strict attention. In the latter case his construction of the immense Beck Valley storm water culvert freed the inhabitants of St Ann's from the terrors of flooding.

From the early 1880s Brown was repeatedly asked to advise on ways of improving the Bath Street cricket and recreation ground. After the construction of the Beck Culvert was completed in July 1885, Brown was again asked to prepare a scheme to transform the ground. As time passed, various alterations were requested and put forward. In October 1891, a full Council meeting gave approval to make Bath Street Recreation Ground better available for the purpose of recreation. In February 1892 the Council considered four schemes; that submitted by Brown was favoured by the Public Parks Committee and went ahead at a cost of £3,000. It finally opened on 8 May 1894, when it acquired the name Victoria Park.

Brown was responsible for bringing Nottingham's electric tramway system into operation. The Council's Tramways Committee had been set up on 9 November 1897, the existing tramways having been formally taken over by the Council on 18 October 1897. At their meeting on 4 April 1898 the Committee reported on the need to reconstruct the existing tramlines and any extensions needed with heavier rails. A system using electric overhead traction was suggested. Details of the intended extensions were included in the report. A month later it was resolved that powers be obtained to commence the work, and alterations to routes were approved focusing on the Market Place as the tram centre. Subsequently the Borough Engineer was dispatched to the USA to examine working tramways.

On 11 September 1899 Brown, as City Engineer, and Herbert Talbot, the Electrical Engineer, reported to the Council on their recent tour of the United States to inspect tramway systems to find out the best system for Nottingham. Although they preferred the underground conduit system the storm water problems in Nottingham and the need to cross bridges compelled them to recommend the overhead trolley system. In support they pointed out that after heavy showers water some 12 inches deep collected on Mansfield Road near the Grosvenor Hotel and that water spread from kerb to kerb on St Ann's Well Road; they added that other roads suffered flooding. Their report was accepted.

The annual report of the Tramways Committee presented to Council on 10 September 1900 stated *'The Undertaking is in a transition state, owing to the decision of the Council to substitute electric motive power for the present system of horse traction.'* The setting out of heavier duty tramlines and overhead cables and their supporting poles prior to the new electric trams' inaugural trials needed extensive street works. The most impressive was the improvement to the tight corner where Upper Parliament Street turned into Derby Road. To bring this about, St George's Hall, a music hall designed (1854) by T C Hine was purchased for £9000 and demolished. Brown designed all of the tramway system's structures, which included the power stations needed on Talbot Street and St Ann's Well Road.

There was very little Council activity between 1900 and 1912. In January 1902 Brown was instructed to prepare a report '*On Street Improvements required for Opening up the Sneinton District.*' This he prepared in a little over two months. The scheme was put on hold and not carried out until many years later. The only major construction project carried out in those years followed the Council's decision in 1903 to build a suspension bridge to carry water mains over the River Trent to an intended new reservoir at Wilford, which would also provide a pedestrian footway. It was designed by Brown and opened in 1906.

To mark Brown's completion of 40 years of service, his staff gave him a silver rose bowl; the presentation was presided over by T Wallis Gordon, his eventual successor. Then in 1917, when he attained his '*official jubilee'* of service to Nottingham, his staff presented him with an address and a silver inkstand. He resigned at the age of 70 in August 1921, his health '*not as robust as formerly*.' However he was retained on a much lower salary as a Consulting Engineer. (Rather quaintly in 1895 Brown's salary had been increased from £800 to £1000 '*so that he will not accept an appointment in a colonial city*.') After a trial period of six months T Wallis Gordon was appointed City Engineer on 30 October 1922.

A family man, Arthur Brown had two sons and two daughters. Both sons survived the First World War. One daughter served as a VAD nurse in France, while the other, acting as a nurse, was lost when the ship on which she was serving was torpedoed in the Mediterranean. He died on 13 April 1935 at his home Glenthorne, Lucknow Road, Mapperley Park, in his 84th year. The last words come from T Wallis Gordon: '*He loved his work to an extent I have never seen exceeded by any man*.'