

## ALBERT NELSON BROMLEY (1850 - 1934)

*The original version of this account by Ken Brand of Bromley's life and work first appeared in two parts in successive editions of the Civic Society Newsletter: Nos. 78 (September 1988) and 79 (January 1989). Revisions to the text were made in 2017 and 2018 before its inclusion in this archive. Illustrations will be added to the archive in due course:*

Much attention has been paid, in the Civic Society's Newsletter and elsewhere, to Nottingham's Victorian architects, most notably Thomas Chambers Hine, Watson Fothergill and Richard Charles Sutton. Rather less has appeared in print on those architects whose work starts in the Victorian period and stretches well into the twentieth century. William Beedham Starr, particularly with respect to his work in Mapperley Park, is an exception. One major architect so far only fleetingly mentioned is Albert Nelson Bromley. Whilst the fruits of a very long and active professional life have yet to be fully recorded, some account of the range of his work is long overdue.

Bromley was born in Stafford on 15 July 1850. He was very young when his father, a doctor, died, and his mother moved with her children to Nottingham, where his uncle, Frederick Bakewell, was an architect and a founder member (in 1862) of the Nottingham Architectural Association. Albert was educated at Goodacre's Academy in Nottingham and later at Mr Shipley's boarding school in Lincoln; in due course he joined his uncle as an articled pupil in his Pelham Street office. This was not the only debt he owed Bakewell; according to his obituarist in the Nottingham Evening Post of 18 August 1934, Bromley 'acknowledged that he owed more to his uncle than anyone for his deep interest in fishing', which was for him a life-long passion.

It seems that Bromley had become a Fellow of RIBA by 1872.<sup>1</sup> In order to gain further and varied experience he took a short appointment as an architectural assistant in Lincoln. When he was about to move on to the office of a Manchester architect, he was advised to spend some time sketching on the continent. He found this idea very appealing and consulted two first-class (unnamed) artists of architectural subjects for their advice. When he put the proposition before the family trustees they finally allocated him a very generous allowance.

Financially secure, Bromley spent some 14 months in 1872-73 on an extended architectural sketching tour of Europe. Most of the obligatory sites and locations were visited: in all, 90 towns in nine countries. Bruges, Chartres, Heidelberg, Prague, Venice, Siena, Athens and Constantinople were all on the itinerary. Bromley was always widely respected as being (in the

words of his obituarist) ‘gifted in the use of pencil, pen and brush.’ When in the summer of 1933 an exhibition of his watercolours and sketches was held in the gallery of Smart and Brown (Furnishers) of Bridlesmith Gate, many of the pictures were from this remarkable European tour of the early 1870s, some 60 years earlier.

On his return to England he rejoined his uncle, and soon building applications were being made by Frederick Bakewell and Albert Nelson Bromley of Victoria Street. The first recorded assignment by Bakewell and Bromley was a new three-storey warehouse for Mr Bingham (Confectioner) of Long Row, dated 11 December 1874. Only two other local building applications were submitted for approval by the partnership. On 18 December 1874, the plans for the Huntingdon Street Board School and its adjoining caretaker’s house were put forward on behalf of the Nottingham School Board. The other plan, dated 29 October and 12 November 1875, was for a wholesale confectionery establishment on Market Street, again for R F Bingham. This was a comprehensive commission, for the building had a dining room, a clubhouse with billiards, a kitchen and one bedroom on the top floor.

Outside the normal planning routine, one significant undertaking must be noted. In February 1875 the Nottingham Corporation appointed a committee to consider ‘the desirability of the Council erecting dwellings for the work people in its employment’ and to ‘ascertain what Corporation sites are available for industrial dwellings.’ The proposition was duly considered desirable and a suitable site found in Bath Street. Marriott Ogle Tarbotton, the Corporation Surveyor, was detailed to prepare instructions for architects wishing to enter a competition for which prizes would be offered. The competition was arranged and advertised locally and in *The Builder* and *The Building News*.



*Figure 1: Victoria Buildings*

Soon after the closing date the Industrial Dwellings Committee met and after considerable deliberation selected two designs to put before the full Council. The design chosen, and the winner of the £50 first prize, had been submitted under the pseudonym of ‘Economy’, which turned out to be Messrs Bakewell and Bromley. They were engaged as architects ‘subject to such modifications of the plans as the Council may agree.’ The full story of

what was Nottingham’s first venture into council housing has been told elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Sufficient here to say the project, named Victoria Buildings (Fig 1) in November 1876, was beset with a

number of problems from the outset and in some ways soured the closing of the practice of Bakewell and Bromley.

At the moment nothing is known of the end of the partnership. In Morris's 1877 Directory, Frederick Bakewell is living at Elm House, High Road, Beeston. He is still there in 1879, his last entry in a Directory (Wright's). In neither instance does he have a business address. He died in 1881. But by the end of 1876 Bromley had established his own practice at No. 3½ Weekday Cross. So the Victoria Buildings, completed in 1877, and the Church of St John the Evangelist, Nottingham Road, Hucknall, (1876-77) were the last two major assignments of the partnership.

Bromley's first solo commission was a two-storey mill and a dwelling house for Thomas Elliott in Island Street, 21 December 1876. His next submission, a pair of semi-detached villas in Park Street, Lenton, was almost a year later, on 30 November 1877. However, as he became established, a steady flow of work came into Bromley's office. Some of this work reflected the continuing expansion of the town's facilities. He became the principal architect to the Nottingham School Board and he undertook several projects for the Nottingham and District Tramway Company. On 4 April 1879, the plans and sections of his first new street, Isandula Road, Basford, for Messrs Cox and Son, were approved. As the Seventies became the Eighties, further work included 18 dwelling houses in Cremorne Street, 59 dwelling houses in Seymour Street, Sneinton, and 46 cottages in Storer Street, also in Sneinton.

As the 1880s progressed, Bromley's practice continued to receive a wide range of commissions, including his first for a bank, the Nottingham Joint Stock Bank on Alfreton Road (December 1884), a new dye works on Chaucer Street for W J and T Lambert (December 1884), and 27 houses in Gilead Street, Bulwell. There were numerous assignments for the Nottingham School Board, one new school of note being the Clarendon Street Board School (February 1889). Outside Nottingham, the Hucknall Public Library was erected to Bromley's designs in 1885-6.

A little later, in 1891, he came first in an open competition to design the Municipal Buildings in Bury. His work for the Nottingham School Board was acknowledged farther afield when in 1889 he was one of the judges appointed for the competition for the York Board School. In the early days of his practice, Bromley lived in Regent Street and then in Sherwood Rise. Around 1888 he appears to have designed and built the family home at 24 Pelham Terrace, The Park Estate. However, because of renumbering and renaming roads in The Park, the house became 15 Newcastle Drive in 1894-5.

In the 1890s the close association with the Nottingham School Board was maintained, the most significant building being the new premises for High Pavement School on Stanley Road, Forest Fields, (later Forest Fields School, then the Berridge Centre, New College Nottingham) in December 1893. On 3 May 1895, the first work directly undertaken for the now thriving



*Figure 2: Argos Store, Parliament Street*

local firm Boots Ltd was successfully submitted: ‘Alterations and Additions to Works, Island Street.’ This was the start of a long and rewarding involvement with the Boots Company, which extended into the late 1920s, virtually until the main portion of the manufacturing side of the company moved from Station Street to Beeston in 1928. In addition, several small, and not so small, neat classical buildings date from this time. Bromley designed a warehouse for his friend W F M Webb of Holland and Webb, Middle Pavement and Weekday Cross (January 1897) (demolished when Fletcher Gate was widened); offices for Wells and Hind, Fletcher Gate (incorporated in the 2005 development housing the Ibis Hotel, its entrance door showing the date 1899); offices and exchange for the National Telephone Company Ltd, George Street (April 1898, later enlarged and converted to apartments); a warehouse for J B Walker, St Mary’s Gate (July 1900); and wholesale fruit stores for Buckoll, King and Company on Parliament Street, Newcastle Street and Clare Street (August 1900, now an Argos Store (Fig 2)). Deep red terracotta facings are a feature on most of these buildings. A candlestick telephone motif provides unusual decoration on the George Street exchange. Three regular suburban clients were R Carey and Sons, Engineers of Forest Road, Bulwell, the nearby Bulwell Finishing Company and the basket makers Morris, Wilkinson & Company of Radford Road.

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In 1900 his expertise was again in demand, for he was invited to judge three open competitions: the Oldham Board School, the Blackburn Police Court and Fire Station, and the Giltbrook Almshouses.

Local work in the first years of the new century was relatively light. The association with the Nottingham School Board remained; additional work was carried out for Buckoll King; a factory for the manufacture of cardboard was built in Basford for Goldschmitt, Hayes and Smith, and a branch office for the Nottingham Joint Stock Bank was erected in Arkwright Street. The gem of this period was the flagship store designed for Boots (Fig 2), through Webster’s Trustees, in the Art Nouveau style for a prime site on High Street and Pelham Street, Nottingham (Fig 3). This splendid building, faced in a glazed light terracotta, was meticulously restored by the Architects Design Group in 1974. Boots are long gone; the store was split into



Figure 3: Boots Store

three units in the early 1980 but later most of the building reverted to a single store. In 2000-1 CPMG Architects carried out comprehensive structural refurbishment, which included realigning much of that highly ornate glazed terracotta.

In 1903 T Cecil Howitt joined as a pupil in Bromley's office, now located in the Prudential Buildings, Queen Street. It is interesting to speculate whether young Cecil visited this important Boots building ('Boots Store No. 1') while it was under construction, and gazed out at the old Exchange opposite. Twenty years later, he would design its long overdue replacement, the present Council House. From Bromley, Howitt would certainly have learnt the rudiments and the importance of the classical detailing he later employed himself. Bromley had developed a series of classical drawings, inspired no doubt by his European sketchbooks of 1872-3. This set he used as standard details on his important assignments, especially on his designs for banks.

As the Edwardian period progressed, although local work was not exactly abundant, a number of interesting buildings were erected. The plans of the well-known Boots 'sale shop and café' ('Boots Store No. 2') were approved in 1906; this is now the Embankment public house. In the same year the Assembly Rooms, Low Pavement, were converted into offices for Martin and Sons. Banks were designed for the Nottingham Joint Stock (Bulwell 1904), National Provincial (High Street and Smithy Row 1910) and Lloyds (Alfreton Road and Boden Street 1913). The chapel at the Mechanics' Institute was converted into a public hall and a shop and offices were added later (1912-13). J B Lewis and Sons Ltd commissioned a factory, with associated buildings, for a site on Haydn Road.

Alterations and additions were made to the sale shop of Griffin and Spalding on Long Row and Market Street (1910). Work was also carried out for old customers Morris, Wilkinson & Company, the National Telephone Company and especially the Boots Pure Drug Company.

The full extent of Bromley's work outside Nottingham during the Edwardian decade is not known; even the records of his work for Jesse Boot have been lost or destroyed. However, the practice must have been very busy, for around 1907, Harry Garnham Watkins became a partner and henceforth, until the middle of 1929, the firm became Bromley and Watkins. Certainly a London office was established, as Cecil Howitt noted in his curriculum vitae: '1908 Manager, Messrs Bromley and Watkins London Office.' Howitt further recorded: '1909-1913 Architectural Assistant, Messrs Bromley and Watkins Nottingham office. Principal work -

Business Premises and Banks (England). Telephone Exchanges (England, including one in London, Spain and Turkey). Domestic Work (Local).'

Mention must be made of Bromley's unusual commissions for the expanding Boots Company. After Jesse Boot had been persuaded by local interests to restore a Jacobean building in St Albans that he had bought for its site value, he became enthusiastic about the commercial possibilities of using historic buildings for his branch shops. As the availability of genuinely old buildings in the right location was extremely limited, Bromley, as the Company's principal architect, was given the challenging brief to design branch shops around the country in the manner of the local vernacular tradition. The list of branches, by no means complete, included the Boots shops in Beeston, Derby, Exeter, Gloucester, Kingston-on-Thames, Lichfield, Shrewsbury, Winchester and York. Often the interior detailing - stained glass, heraldry and statuary reflecting local history - was by the architect Morley Horder, later responsible for the new buildings for University College Nottingham at Highfields, endowed by Jesse Boot.

Just before the start of the First World War, Bromley went to the United States. He visited New York, where his guide was the architect Cass Gilbert; Boston, where he studied the workings of Lockwood and Green's office; and Washington. He found the sky-scraper 'a most wonderful piece of engineering and daring.' He felt their number should be controlled lest New York assumed 'the appearance of a fretful porcupine. We might in England, with certain reservations, build higher than we do with advantage and convenience.'

During the war years 1914-18, the amount of building work nationally and locally was severely curtailed. Most of the local work undertaken by Bromley and Watkins was for the Boots Pure Drug Company. J B Lewis and Sons Ltd, Haydn Road, and H Ashwell and Co Ltd of Radford Road, (Bleach Works) were the only other major customers.

In October 1918 the Nottingham and Derby Architectural Society, concerned about the obvious shortage of adequate working-class housing, requested a meeting with the Nottingham City Housing Committee. They wished to discuss the general principles which should form a basis for housing schemes in the future.

Bromley, twice a past president of the earlier Nottingham Architectural Society, was a member of the deputation, led by his partner H G Watkins, then the vice-president, which met the Housing Committee on 1 November 1918. Bromley, the senior member, who felt so strongly about the need for well designed buildings, informed the committee he had offered a prize of £50 in a competition organized by his Society for the best design of four typical working-class houses. He hoped the authorities would not only accept the winning designs but also find it

possible to entrust the winning competitor with the erection of the four houses for experimental purposes. He also used the occasion to put in a plea for the modification of the existing building bylaws. The Chairman of the Housing Committee thanked the Society for its concern and Bromley in particular for his generosity and public spirit. He said the Council's officers would help in the framing of the regulations for the guidance of competitors. However, the Council could not formally associate themselves with the competition, which must be regarded as a private competition for members of the Society. Further, he could not bind the present or any future Housing Committee to guarantee the building of the successful design.

Although Bromley later increased the prize money to 100 guineas and exchanged several letters with the Town Clerk, the Housing Committee adhered to the original decision. Somewhat ironically, within the year the Committee enlisted the help of the RIBA in formulating their own open competition for 'the layout of the land and designs for houses to be erected on the Sherwood and Stockhill Estates.'

In the immediate post-war years the relationships with the Boots Pure Drug Company, J B



*Figure 4: Griffin and Spalding Store*

Lewis and Sons and H Ashwell and Co continued. These were expanding companies needing enlarged premises and additional facilities. The other principal assignments undertaken were a factory for the Barlock Typewriter Co Ltd, Arnold Road and Barlock Road; additions to factory for P Mathieson and Sons Ltd, Radford Road and Egypt Road; and a major rebuilding of Griffin and Spalding's Department Store, Long

Row and Market Street (Fig 4). In the latter project much of T C Hine's frontage of the 1870s and 1880s was replaced.

In 1923, out of several domestic commissions, one for additions to Lenton Abbey, Derby Road, for Bromley's long time friend F M Weston-Webb is worth recording. On a large scale in that year were a showroom for W Lawrence & Co Ltd, Station Street, new banking premises for Lloyds Bank Ltd, Beastmarket Hill and St James Street, additions to a warehouse for I and R Morley, Fletcher Gate (since demolished), and a petrol service station and offices for the Anglo American Oil Co Ltd, Carrington Street and Canal Street.

Over the next few years work for J B Lewis and for H Ashwell came in a steady stream. In the Twenties the control of Boots passed for a time to American owners. Bromley and Watkins's work for Boots ceased with the cabinet works on Castle Boulevard (June 1924) until the

extension of the printing department on Station Street (January 1928). This proved to be the last assignment for the Boots Company. Just prior to Watkins's retirement, designs were prepared for a major rebuilding programme on the Boots Station Street site. They were not accepted. A new generation was in charge at Boots, a large new site at Beeston was available and new solutions were sought from a new architect-engineer Sir E Owen Williams. Bromley was now well into his seventies yet the office of Bromley and Watkins still attracted important assignments, a tribute, no doubt, to the strength in depth of the younger members of the practice. Additions were designed for the Eye Infirmary on The Ropewalk, a factory built for W Bignall & Co Ltd, Lindsay Street and Adams Street, and alterations carried out for Smart and Brown Ltd, Bridlesmith Gate and Bottle Lane. New banks were erected for the National Provincial Bank Ltd at Radford Road and Bentinck Road and on High Street and Smithy Row. The existing bank on High Street, designed by Bromley in 1910, was demolished; a temporary bank put up as a holding operation and then the new bank was slotted in to the north-east corner of the new Council House building. This was a nice, if unplanned, touch; a building by the ageing master Bromley fitting in with the tour de force of his former pupil Cecil Howitt.

Before the old practice was dissolved, minor work was carried out for Smart and Brown Ltd, additions for J B Lewis, and H Ashwell; further rebuilding, particularly internally, for Griffin and Spalding, and the very important project of a Women's Hospital on Peel Street.

The new practice was designated Bromley, Cartwright and Waumsley. T N Cartwright was Bromley's grandson; T H Waumsley is a rather elusive figure. The new partnership moved from Bromley and Watkins's long established office in Prudential Buildings, Queen Street, to 6 Clarendon Street by 1932. The first plans they had approved were for J B Lewis and Sons Ltd, Haydn Road: Additions to Factory, 30 November 1928.

J B Lewis, Smart and Brown, the Trustees of the Women's Hospital, and Griffin and Spalding provided the bulk of the work for the new partnership. How active Bromley was, is a matter of conjecture; he celebrated his eightieth birthday in July 1930. A little domestic work came into the office; The Hand Public House in Wollaton Street was altered; King John's Chambers were altered and enlarged; a printing works for T N Storer, Sons & Co was erected on Nottingham Road. The premises of A Pyatt & Co Ltd, Canal Street, were altered. These are the signs really of what was essentially a new architectural practice waiting for the big break.

Albert Nelson Bromley died on 16 August 1934, at the family home, 15 Newcastle Drive, which he had built some 50 years earlier. He had married in 1878 and celebrated his golden wedding in 1928. He had one daughter. In his old age he kept his 'agile mind and step.' His arguments, particularly on environmental matters, remained 'lucid.' He was a keen and modestly successful sportsman, particularly loving golf. He had been a captain of the Notts Club. In his later life he took up bowls. He was a fine fisherman with 'an enviable reputation',

having started fishing at the age of six, attended by a nurse. In the course of his long life he fished a large number of the principal waters in the British Isles and also in Belgium, France and Switzerland. He deplored river pollution and the reckless killing of fish mostly unfit for the table.

During that 1933 exhibition of his watercolours and sketches , there was a special showing for the Nottingham and Derby Society of Architects. The speech introducing the artist and the architect was given by Cecil Howitt, his former pupil.

Albert Nelson Bromley gave the City of Nottingham a number of fine buildings. There has been an unfortunate neglect of those which were neither distinctly Victorian nor blatantly modern(e). In Bromley's buildings there is a certain neatness and simplicity of design coupled with a feeling for proportion. His classical detailing is unobtrusive - except perhaps on the Boots flagship on High Street, where it forms a celebration. When next you pass one of the buildings mentioned here think a little of its architect, of whom the obituarist in the Evening Post wrote so approvingly:

'It is no exaggeration to say that Mr Bromley was as keenly concerned about the preservation of the amenities of town and country as he was about his personal affairs. He strove in season and out to arouse the public mind to the loss of beauty caused by such blots as ribbon buildings (sic), hideous advertisements, ugly or inharmonious buildings, and the demolition of historic places.'

He would have been a superb campaigner for any Civic Society!

#### Author's notes

(1) In 1934 Bromley published a condensed version of his Continental Diary: Architectural Travels 1872-3 under the title Work and Sport. It was not, he stressed, 'the story of my life.' He reproduced a number of his drawings to illustrate the book, expressing the hope that 'Architectural Students may derive assistance, and others interest.' A drawing of The Parthenon is inscribed 'Measured and Drawn by A. Nelson Bromley, F.R.I.B.A. 1872.' (2) Notes by F Tagg, NRO, DD 714; The Sneinton Magazine No.13, Summer 1984.

#### *Editor's notes*

*(1) Referring to Bromley's non-professional life, Ken Brand quotes from the NEP obituary and from Bromley's own memoir (to which of course the obituarist also had access.) Entitled A Fly Fisher's Recollections 1860-1930, this was a work which, according to the latter, 'brought delight to many an angler'.*

*(2) The Boots No. 2 sale shop and café at the junction of Arkwright St and Turney St was later the seat of a social club for Boots employees (the Boots Club and Institute). It is now the Embankment public house and was listed Grade 2 after representations made to Historic England by the Civic Society, and restoration and refurbishment by Castle Rock Brewery.*

*(3) An article was published in Newsletter No. 158 (September 2015) describing Bromley's headquarters building for the National Telephone Co in Temple Avenue EC4, on the edge of the City of London, 'confidently Shavian free Baroque' of circa 1900. This article will be added to this archive in due course. Another Telephone House by Bromley, in the Strand in the neighbouring City of Westminster, is a buff terracotta work of 1902.*

*All pictures by kind permission of: <http://www.picturethepast.co.uk>*

#### **A N BROMLEY IN AMERICA:**

*This article, here appended to the main biographical piece, appeared in a more recent Newsletter under the title 'Seen, Impressed, but not Copied.' Ken Brand's surmise as to the date of Bromley's visit, based on the absence of any mention of the Woolworth Building, is printed as published. However, passenger lists of the time (accessible via [findmypast.com](http://findmypast.com)) show that Mr Albert Nelson Bromley Architect was on board the White Star liner RMS Baltic leaving Liverpool for New York on 1st May 1913. Thus the lack of any reference to the Woolworth Building, inaugurated in 1913, is even more puzzling.*

Just before the Great War the distinguished Nottingham architect Albert Nelson Bromley (1850-1934) visited the United States, staying in New York, Boston and Washington. Writing much later he reflected on his first impressions of New York.

'The approach to New York is most impressive and whatever may be said of the beauty or otherwise of the sky-scraper it is certainly a most wonderful piece of engineering and daring.

'It must be a subject of great regret that their number has not been controlled by better state supervision, as New York must have today somewhat the appearance of a fretful porcupine. When I was in the States the important ones were then few and in the sunlight of a fine

morning they were very attractive. We might in England, with certain reservations, build higher than we do with advantage and convenience.’

As a Fellow of RIBA Bromley had many introductions to American architects but he appears to have spent most time with Cass Gilbert, who had suddenly shot to prominence with his proposals for the US Custom House in New York (1907). Features in his detailing had some similarity with Bromley’s more modest bank works in Nottingham. Bromley noted the ‘beautiful design... (the) fine composition...the beautiful detail of this fine piece of work.’ It has been described elsewhere as ‘an eloquent Beaux-Arts statement.’

Bromley was shown the Metropolitan Life Insurance Building (1909), which was modelled on the San Marco Campanile in Venice. (This was then under reconstruction, having suddenly collapsed in 1902. Bromley had made a watercolour drawing of the Doge’s palace from its top in 1872). Bromley considered the insurance building ‘charming in simplicity of design, and its great height (700ft) and size is somewhat awe-inspiring to a European.’ It was the tallest building in the world in the years 1909-1913.

Bromley made no mention of the Woolworth Building, which was the next major, and no doubt the finest, achievement of his friend Cass Gilbert. At 752 ft this replaced the Metropolitan Life Building as the world’s tallest on its completion in 1913 , a title held until taken by the Chrysler Building in 1930. Presumably Gilbert, at the time of Bromley’s visit, had not received the Woolworth commission of c.1912. Thus Bromley’s visit was probably 1910 or 1911.

Back in Nottingham Bromley continued in his careful low-rise manner. On 24 November 1911 he received approval for Printing Works and Dining Hall on Station Street\* for an old client, the Boots Pure Drug Co. Thereafter until the outbreak of war in 1914 his output was largely confined to a warehouse for the Boots Company, two commissions from the Mechanics Institute, a branch office for Lloyds Bank on Alfreton Road; and a large factory and other work for J B Lewis & Sons Ltd on Haydn Road.

When Boots finally embarked on an extensive expansion programme in the late 1920s on their new Beeston site, D10, the Wet Goods factory came not from the ageing Bromley’s practice but from Sir E Owen Williams (1890-1968). With modern ideas and materials Owen Williams, a virtuoso in constructional concrete, built large but still not tall. D10, completed in 1932 was 550 feet long with almost 218,000 sq ft of glass but was only four storeys high.

\*Some of Bromley’s buildings for Boots on Station Street were destroyed during the Nottingham blitz of May 1941.