

Philip Webb's Master

Ray Watkinson

John Billing was a member of the Camden, but not of the *Cambridge* Camden Society. The Camden Society proper began its publication of historic texts, state papers, letters and ancient poetry in 1838-9, with documents on the Restoration of King Edward V, Bishop Bale's account of King John, the Deposition of Richard II. None of its publications was of specific architectural interest though in some were detailed accounts of work done by, payments made to, masons, carpenters, painters, embroiderers; and nearly all were of the mediaeval period.

His membership of the Camden Society indicates that Billing was a man of wide antiquarian and historic, perhaps also literary interests. It is evident from the testimonial he wrote for Webb, who took up articles with him early in 1849, that he was a Goth rather than a classicist, since in it (dated 7th May 1852) he says that Webb has mastered the various forms of Gothic but makes no other such reference.

He had an address, if not an actual office, in London, as well as the office in Reading where Webb served his time: the testimonial is dated from 38, Parliament Street Westminster: thirteen doors along that street was the office of John Bowyer Nichols, who printed the Camden Society's papers, as Billing could hardly fail to know, though this tells nothing of whether the two men knew each other or not.

At the end of the *Chronicle of Calais*, last of the Society's publications for 1846, a full list of members and officers was published. In it Billing's name appears. All the Society's Council members are Fellows of the Royal Society of Arts; most, alumni of Oxford or Cambridge: the Society's bias is literary-historical: there is a large institutional membership, chiefly of Libraries. Three or four Royal Academicians appear: architecture seems to be represented only by the Smirkes, Decimus Burton, and Edward Blore, and among ordinary members, only Billing and his near-namesake Robert Billings, though there may be other architects whose names are not so qualified, as printed.

Reading, of course, is not far from Oxford, which had its own flourishing Society for the Promotion of the Study of Gothic Architecture, whose membership was by no means confined to Oxford. In 1846 it had as might be expected, many architect members among them Blore, Ferrey, Salvin, Allom, Owen Carter of Winchester under whom not long before George Street had worked, and now worked for Scott; Scott's name also appears, though Street's does not yet, nor Billing's. Later, Street did join: so too, working in his office, did Webb and Morris.

Street, who superseded Scott as the leading Goth, has had a lot of attention, both in his lifetime and since, in his own right and as Webb's master, Morris's master though so briefly. Webb, when he came to Street in 1853 after his sad sojourn in Wolverhampton, had already worked under a liberal-minded and cultured master from whom he had learned more than a trade.

APPENDIX (from W.R. Lethaby, *Philip Webb and His Work* ed. G. Rubens (Raven Oak Press, 1979), pp. 10-11)

Billing's testimonial for Webb: 7 May 1852.

This is to certify that Mr. Phillippe S. Webb completed his term of articles as an architectural pupil in my office entirely to my satisfaction – during which time his general studies were pursued with assiduity and perseverance, and much proficiency has been obtained. In the best class of drawing and designing, Mr. Webb has been very successful, particularly in the several Gothic styles. I may add that his character and manners are unexceptional, and that my retaining him as a salaried assistant, subsequent to the expiration of his term as a pupil, is the best proof of my sense of his recommendations; and it will always afford me much pleasure to be instrumental in advancing his interest and welfare.

Jno. Billing, Architect, 38, Parliament Street,
Westminster, and Reading.