

John Colson: the Southampton works of a Winchester architect, 1850-78
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John Colson, a prolific architect pre-eminently of churches, parsonages and church schools, is intimately connected with Winchester, where he lived between the early 1830s and his death in 1895. His Hampshire works are catalogued and described by Brenda Poole in *John Colson: a Victorian architect of the Hampshire age*, 2000 (Hampshire Papers no.20). In this essay I shall concentrate on six of his commissions in present-day Southampton, three of which have come to light subsequent to the Hampshire paper. Our subject was originally a Southampton man, baptised John Passingcomb at Holy Rood Church on 15 August 1820, the eldest son of a Southampton solicitor, also John Passingcomb, and his wife Lucy, daughter of a Winchester draper. The father was one of twin sons born out of wedlock in 1798 to Elizabeth Passingcomb and John Colson, a Southampton corn merchant. Hence the Passingcomb surname, relinquished in favour of Colson on the grandfather's death in 1830. To complicate the genealogy, grandfather John married a Sarah Colson, probably a cousin, in Holy Rood Church on 8 May 1817.



Figure 1: Proposed new church at Chamberlayne Town.
Lithograph by J K Colling [1850]

The first, abortive commission is tantalising. An undated lithograph by James Kellaway Colling is titled 'The proposed new church at Chamberlayne-Town, Southampton', with the byline 'John Colson Archt. Winchester' (figure 1). It is probably a design for a church commissioned by the Reverend Frederick Russell for the fast-expanding district of Newtown in the parish of St Mary. The church was to be built near the southern end of the Avenue. It lies chronologically between a design by William Hinves and Alfred Bedborough for a church in 1850 in Alfred Street and the church of St Luke's ultimately built by John Elliott on Lower Cranbury Place in 1852, building tenders for which were

advertised in August 1851. Whatever its precise date, it is an early ecclesiastical design by Colson. His only previous churches, both consecrated in June 1850, were a chapel of ease at Newtown near Soberton and St Mary Magdalene at Widley near Portsmouth.

The next two commissions were for the Reverend Joseph Cotton Wigram, rector of St Mary's and archdeacon of Southampton. St Mary's National Schools in Grove Street had been opened in 1841 to designs - in the Elizabethan style - by William Hinves, and enlarged in 1845. In 1856, Colson designed a new classroom, with gallery, along the

Grove Street frontage, with additional classrooms in 1858/9 (figure 2). Crabniton Industrial National Schools were a larger project. They were opened, with designs by Colson, in 1856 with basic school provision - boys' and girls' schools (for 57 and 48



pupils respectively), a gallery for 40 pupils, class room and master's residence (figure 3). The following year a printing room, laundry, wash-house, kitchen and open carpenters' shed were added. The printing room and carpenters' shed were enlarged in 1858. Both additions were to Colson's designs. Industrial schools, designed to rescue the most destitute and disorderly children from a life of crime, were a particular project of Archdeacon Wigram. He raised over £1,200 for the Crabniton schools, situated in what he called "the dirtiest part of the town" and out of sight of wealthy people. An inspection in October 1858, before the industrial department was in full operation, found the premises and general arrangement to be "very good" (Reverend R E Hughes in *Tabulated reports on schools inspected in the counties of Berks, Hants, and Wilts, 1858-9*). Plans of the school in Southampton Archives (D/ME 5) intriguingly show the glebe lands immediately to the west designated

Figure 2: St Mary's (Grove Street) National Schools.
Plans for additional classrooms. December 1858

'intended site for a church and parsonage'. Never built, the putative church was probably an unfulfilled episode in the ongoing break-up of St Mary's parish orchestrated by Archdeacon Wigram.

The fourth local commission by John Colson was St Mary's Church, Sholing. The foundation stone was laid on 21 July 1865. The church was consecrated on 1 November 1866, the fourth Colson-designed church in Hampshire to be consecrated that year. It was a by-product of the rapid development of Sholing following the opening of Netley Hospital. It appears to have been a straightforward work. Described by contemporaries as a simple structure, the church was in the early English style. The only unusual features noted by Brenda Poole are a single extremely large transept to the north and a quirky bell turret, in the manner of G E Street, at the south west corner. It accommodated about 400 people; two-thirds of the seats were free. A local builder - William Williams of Inkerman Road, Bitterne - was employed. The whole was completed for a little over £2,000. The

church opened not only free from debt but with a balance in the hands of the trustees. The land (just over 2 acres) was given by Thomas Chamberlayne. The first incumbent, the



Figure 3: Crabniton Industrial National Schools: east elevation, 1856

Reverend Francis Davidson, transferred from the Church of Holy Saviour, Bitterne, where he had been assistant curate. His son, born in Sholing in 1875, was the Reverend Harold Francis Davidson, later to find infamy as the rector of Stiffkey. A history of the church (*St Mary's Church Sholing* by Beryl Varilone) was published in 2009.

The final local commissions, in 1869 and 1877/8, were far from straightforward. They involved Colson in an architectural dilemma which many thought intractable. Christ Church, Portswood (later known as Highfield Church) was an unusual church from the beginning. It was the maiden church of two Anglo-Jewish architects, Raphael and Joshua Brandon, aged 29 and 25 years respectively when the church was begun in September 1846. Although inexperienced in church building, the brothers were highly influential as authors of three books which were to form the raw material of the Gothic Revival. The first two - *Parish churches: being perspective views of English ecclesiastical structures* (1846-7, with the first part issued in March 1846) and *Analysis of Gothic architecture, with remarks on the details of an ecclesiastical edifice* (1847) - were published whilst Christ Church was in process of building. The third - *The open timber roofs of the Middle Ages, illustrated by perspective and working drawings of some of the best varieties of church roofs* - appeared in 1849, after the death of the younger brother in December 1847, but much of the research predated Christ Church (consecrated in September 1847). These became pattern books for a generation of church architects. There was a significant metropolitan influence in the building of Christ Church. This may account for the relatively high cost - just over £3,500 - of a small, rural church. The architects had offices in the Strand. The builders - Messrs Burton - were of Lambeth. The stained glass was by Ward and Nixon of Soho. The organ was by Joseph William Walker of Tottenham Court

Road. The two church bells were cast at the Whitechapel Foundry. A church with this provenance attracted considerable attention as the embodiment, to quote Philip Brannon in 1849, of "a beautiful and correct design in the transition from the Early to the Decorated styles". Or, as the editor of *The Ecclesiologist* expressed it in February 1849, the Middle-Pointed style.

Within a decade enlargement became urgent in order to accommodate the needs of an ever-growing hinterland. In 1851/2 the Southampton architect John Elliott (in partnership with Thomas Mason) provided an extra 303 seats by adding a north aisle. This was out of all proportion to the original building, and had the effect of doubling the nave whilst leaving the small and narrow (16 feet wide) chancel unchanged. As the then incumbent, the Reverend Frederic Edward Wigram, reminisced twenty years later: "Let them imagine a church, divided into three parts, and wider than it was long, and connected with a small chancel by a very narrow arch." Such structural defects interfered with worship. " He [Wigram] had stood in the pulpit and heard the north aisle congregation singing a simple hymn tune, quite half a line behind the rest of the congregation, and the north aisle congregation could not hear anything going on in the chancel." To make matters worse, by no means all of the congregation could see the pulpit.

This was anathema to an evangelical like Frederic Wigram, perpetual curate since 1864 and nephew of the Reverend Joseph Wigram. He brought in the diocesan architect, John Colson. In 1869 he was contracted to improve the fabric of the church following an anonymous offer of financial aid. Specifically he was to make the roof weather and air tight, ventilate the building, mitigate the draught and promote the general convenience of the congregation and ministers. It is a list that questions the quality of the original build. The roof indeed had leaked almost from the beginning. As early as February 1849 - 17 months after consecration - the first incumbent the Reverend Philip Paulin Robin had written a heartfelt letter to *The Ecclesiologist* seeking advice to render the aisle roof weather-proof, listing the several unsuccessful attempts so far made. An embarrassment no doubt to Raphael Brandon, author of the seminal work on open timber roofs. The 1869 improvements were considerable: relaying the tiles on the roof of the nave chancel and north aisle, with an underlay of asphalted felt; lowering the north aisle roof; enlarging the vestry; removing the gallery in the north aisle; lowering and moving the pulpit; moving the prayer desk and organ; fitting a new lectern; installing new gas fittings; and blocking up several small windows. The church was reopened on 28 August 1869. The cost of restoration was £700.

It was not until 1876/8 that a concerted effort was made to address the fundamental organisational problems of the church. The original architect Raphael Brandon was approached by Wigram in 1876. He refused to move in the matter unless the north aisle was pulled down. (Brandon committed suicide the following year). It took a gifted amateur to come up with the answer. The Reverend Hilton Bothamley, rector of Peper Harow near Godalming in Surrey, was a close friend of Frederic Wigram: a contemporary (3 years his junior) at Harrow and Trinity College, Cambridge; a visitor at the Wigrams' house in Trumpington Street, Cambridge at the time of the 1861 census (Frederic, now married, was then assistant curate at the strongly evangelical St Paul's Church in the town); and both active in the Church Missionary Society. His solution was

to build a chancel and two chancel aisles across the whole width of the existing nave and north aisle. This would throw open the whole church to the chancel, converting the north aisle into the north nave and the existing nave into the south nave, each communicating with the chancel by an arch spanning half the width of the chancel. Bothamley's rough designs were translated into workable plans by John Colson. Being urged by some that he was about to do something rash, Wigram invited the late president of the Royal Institute of British Architects, Sir Gilbert Scott, to visit the site and inspect the plans. This led to a recommendation that the plan be implemented, Sir Gilbert describing "the arrangement, as carried out in detail by Mr Colson, a very ingenious and practical one" (Southampton Archives PR12/8/4: letter of 8 March 1877).

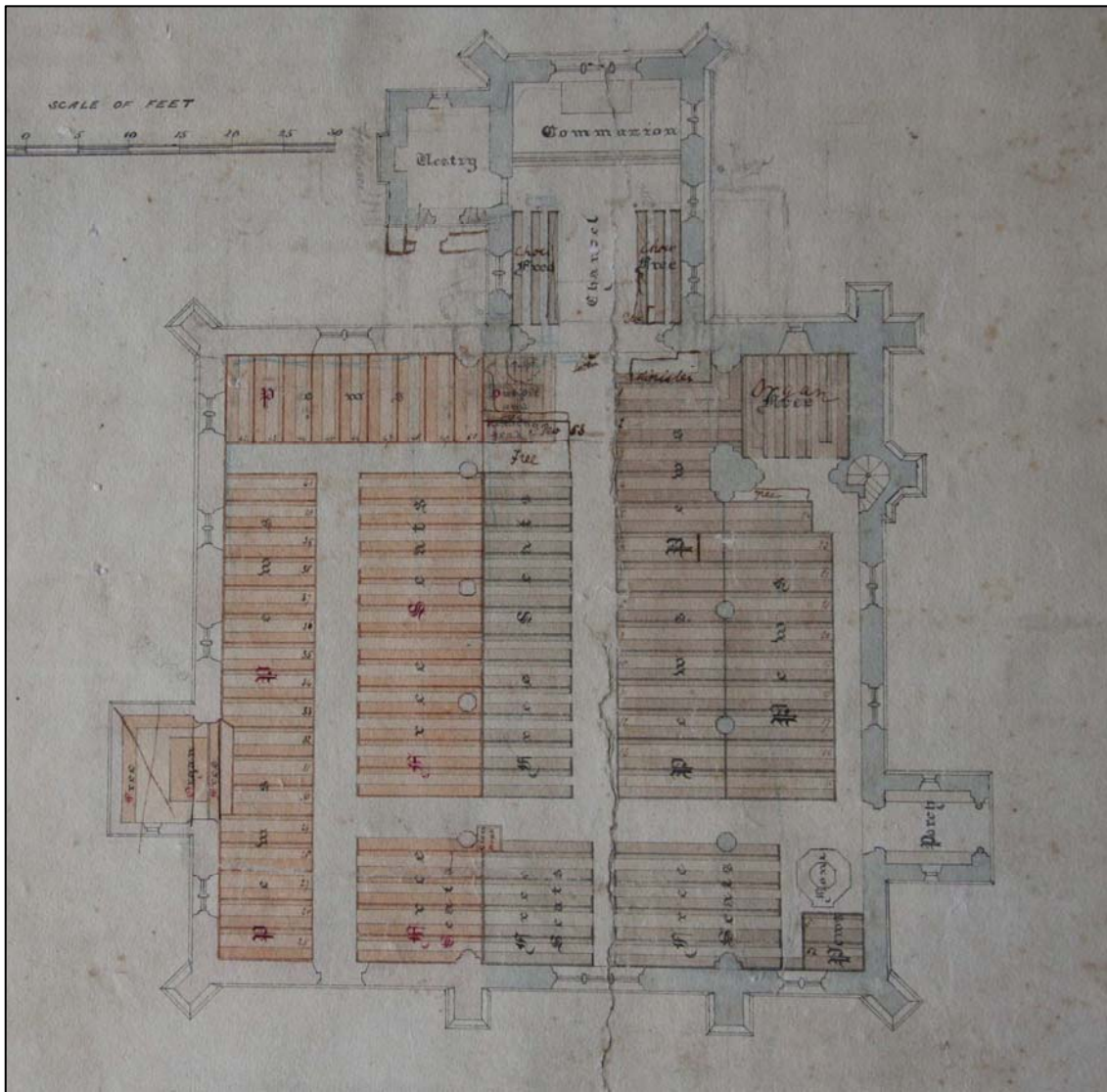


Figure 4. Christ Church, Portwood: ground plan [1878]

Matters now moved quickly. Invitations to tender were issued on 2 April and the foundation stone was laid on 8 May 1877. The work involved not only a new chancel but a new vestry, relocation of the organ to the north aisle of the new chancel (to be nearer the choir) and of the pulpit to the end of the centre aisle (visible to almost all the

congregation), and covering the spire with oak shingle, envisaged in the Brandons' original design but abandoned for lack of funds. This raised the spire about 2 feet 4 inches. The estimate was £2,783. This went out of the window once the contractors began work. (The builder was W H Chapman of Oak Road, Woolston). As Wigram sourly noted, "Directly they began to touch the old building it was really marvellous to find how their wants grew." The biggest unforeseen cost was the need to re-seat the whole church, replacing the original "incommodious seats" by pews and benches of solid pitch pine. Other incidental work raised the final cost to close upon £4,000. This far exceeded the total cost of St Mary's, Sholing. The extra cash was found by Wigram himself, it being thought impolitic to approach existing subscribers whilst there was still a deficit (around £500) on the original appeal. The work took seven months to complete.



Figure 5. Christ Church, Portswood. Photograph c.1905

The restored church was consecrated on 25 October 1878. Figures 4 and 5 reproduce a contemporary ground plan of the completed church and a photograph of c.1905 showing the classic view from Highfield Lane taken before the alterations of 1915 by John Oldrid Scott (son of the 1877 arbiter). The new arrangement of the chancel - variously described as unique, ingenious, extraordinary, singular and bold - was met with general amazement. To the reporter on the *Hampshire Advertiser*, it was "on a plan quite different from anything we have met with in all our architectural experience." The Bishop of Winchester, the Right Reverend Edward Harold Browne, told those at the consecration of his surprise at the success of the work. "He had wondered what the church was like, for it had seemed to him to be the most impracticable one he had ever seen to make an addition to." John Colson and Hilton Bothamley were in the audience to soak up the praise, the latter preaching at the evening service. Better acoustics and improved sight-lines were a recipe for services to be "more hearty than before". The evangelical mission of the Reverend Wigram could continue with new vigour.

Sources of illustrations:

- Figure 1. Portcities Southampton 820
- Figure 2. Southampton Archives D/ME 6/2
- Figure 3. Southampton Archives D/ME 5/5
- Figure 4. Southampton Archives PR 12/7/1
- Figure 5. Portcities Southampton 3758

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