

Thomas Stedman Whitwell

In 1826 an architect in America came up with an unusual, but perfectly sensible suggestion. He was confused and irritated by the fact that the country was full of places with the same name, chock-full of Franklins and Springfields and Bristols. There were, for example, 25 Washingtons and no less than 49 Greenvilles.

We need a more rational nomenclature, announced Thomas Whitwell, and devised a system to provide one. Whitwell set down a cypher grid. Take the latitude and longitude of a town, and convert the numbers – via a special key – into a set of letters instead.

The result would be a place-name that was unique, with the added advantage that its location could be found by converting the name back into its coordinates. Thus New York, under Whitwell's scheme, became Otke Notive, and Washington DC was Feili Neilul. Shimples.

You don't need me to tell you that Whitwell's idea crashed and burned, just like one or two of his buildings did.

This wasn't Thomas Whitwell's only flight of fancy; his life was full of them. The important thing to stress here was that Whitwell was not an American at all. He hailed from the West Midlands of England.

Thomas Stedman Whitwell was born in Coventry in 1784. He spent his early years as an architect in London, principally employed in the architects' office of the London Docks. Once his architectural teeth were fully cut, Whitwell returned to the West Midlands, spending the next dozen or so years designing signature buildings in Birmingham, Coventry and Warwickshire.

Regrettably, you have to head for the archives to see any of these buildings today. Perhaps the last to go was the Carrs Lane Chapel of 1820, which was demolished in 1970. At about the same times as he was working on Carrs Lane, Whitwell designed the New Library on Temple Row and the marvellously named Pantechnetheca – a showcase for the Birmingham manufactories - on New Street.

All of Whitwell's Birmingham buildings were classical in composition; he would probably call them "rational". The Pantechnetheca, for example, had one floor of Doric columns below and another of Ionic above, and a row of classical statues beckoning customers inside.

It was towards the end of the 1820s that Thomas Whitwell found himself attracted to Utopianism, a belief in an ideal community of equals, free from the kind of social inequalities all too prevalent in 19th-century Britain. Such a community needed a like-minded architect to embrace its vision, and Whitwell went so far as to draw up the plans for one such settlement – Southville – in Leamington Spa, a plan that was exhibited at the Royal Academy. The settlement was to include a church, closely modelled on the Athenian Parthenon. Sadly for Leamington, it never saw the light of day.

Such interests inevitably drew Whitwell towards the one man who had successfully established a utopian community in the UK. Robert Owen's mill town of New Lanark, south of Glasgow, had pioneered a new model of industrial enterprise, in which the workers were paid fair wages, offered a free education, and were generally integrated into the running of the town.

Building on the success of New Lanark, Owen then conceived an even greater ambition to establish a utopian community in the United States, and he purchased land in Indiana from a separatist religious group – the Harmonists - already settled there. Owen's town would be called New Harmony, a beacon for socialism across the world, and Thomas Whitwell was hired to design it.

Whitwell's impression of "a community of 2,000 persons, founded upon a principle commended by Plato, Lord Bacon and Sir Thomas More" was printed in Birmingham by a local printer – William Finley – in 1824, and a copy of it still hangs in the museum at New Lanark. When Owen and Whitwell sailed for America in 1825 to see the scheme to fruition, the architect took a scale-model of the design with him.

Whitwell envisaged an enclosed quadrangle of some 22 acres, complete with gymnasias, children's dormitories, schools and adult chambers. In the vast central square were to be refectories, baths, kitchens and a botanic garden. It looked less like a town than a monastery, albeit a monastery without religion.

The US President, John Quincy Adams, gave permission for the model to be on display at the White House, while Whitwell himself (along with Owen's son, William) took up temporary residence at Harmony, awaiting the day when his plan was turned into bricks and mortar.

From the very beginning, however, cracks began to appear in Utopia. Not all who came to settle there were willing to work, or to work for the public good at any rate, making Owen's dream of self-sufficiency a very distant prospect. Others, at the same time, favoured a separatist and individualist ideology, far from the Owenite vision of shared ambition.

Even by 1827 New Harmony was breaking apart, and this before any new building had begun. Robert Owen dissolved the community in 1829, and Whitwell returned, disillusioned, to England.

Little appears to be known about Thomas Whitwell's remaining years back in England. He continued to publish his ideas, including radical new designs for heating and ventilating houses, though there is no evidence that he went back to his architectural work. He died in 1840.

And whereas Robert Owen remains a controversial figure even today, inspiring and dividing in equal measure, his architect has largely vanished from history, along with all of his buildings.