

## John Henry Chamberlain

They often say that last words carry a special weight, both legally and morally. They can represent a summation of a lifetime's experience, or the honesty of an utterance made on the path to St Peter's Gate.

John Henry Chamberlain's lecture at the Birmingham & Midland Institute, then, made on the night of October 22 1883, probably ought to be seen in that light. Later on that same evening John Henry called in at the home of Dr Lawson Tait, the eminent Birmingham surgeon, in Edgbaston.

So quietly did Chamberlain slip away from this mortal life that, for a little while, no one noticed he had gone from their midst. But departed he had, and that final lecture at the institution he had served as honorary secretary for many years, was his final contribution. He was 52 years old.

Born in Leicester in 1831, Chamberlain had moved to Birmingham in 1853 and (after a slow start during which he had even considered emigrating to New Zealand) had found fame as one of the town's leading architects. The contract to design Birmingham's first board schools, which ran to more than 40, unofficially christened Chamberlain and his partner, William Martin, as "architects to the civic gospel".

You could call the latter part of the 19th Century a time of "urban enlightenment", Joseph Chamberlain at the helm (no relation, by the way) and a municipality committed to make Birmingham politically and culturally a beacon to the empire. Chamberlain and Martin's buildings served to broadcast and embody that pioneering spirit, their distinctive towers bristling across the urban landscape. But in their form and design they were rooted in the world of medieval revival and Arts and Crafts.

"Rootedness" was close to John Henry's heart. Architecture was, in his eyes, to be grounded in the natural world and in native soil, and his buildings are full of birds and foliage, of craftsmanship and old English values. The Second City of the Empire looked backwards as much as it looked forwards.

At the heart of Chamberlain's thinking in all of this was John Ruskin, the art critic whose works directed a whole generation of English artists back to nature and to English art.

The natural world even found its way onto John Henry Chamberlain's gravestone too, which used to stand in Key Hill cemetery in the Jewellery Quarter. The leaves and flowers on the stone, as well as the wording, are based on the motif Chamberlain designed for the last Christmas cards he sent six months earlier. The card's motto bears four prescient words in Latin: *Resurrectio, Vita, Mors, Fructus*. That is, re-birth, life, death and fruit, the four stages in the life of a plant.

I say "used to stand", for the stone itself has since been flattened by over-zealous health and safety policy. For 120 years it had stood next to the grave of JHC's erstwhile patron and namesake, Joseph Chamberlain. Now they both lie low, and the carefully planned tribute to John Henry's architectural message lies face down amid

Key Hill's own leaves.

John Henry was the architect behind Joseph's house at Highbury, but arguably the greatest of Chamberlain's creations was still on the drawing-board at the time of his demise. As an institution the School of Art in Margaret Street showcased the high calibre of Birmingham craft, and demonstrated that art education did not require an endorsement from the Royal Academy. Architecturally too the School turned its back on the dry classicism of the Academy.

What, then, of John Henry's final pronouncement to the world? The full text of the lecture has recently been reprinted in the BMI's excellent magazine, *Insight*, and I'm grateful to the administrator, Philip Fisher, for drawing my attention to it. The cover of the magazine, should you wish to seek out a copy, displays the design for that final Christmas card.

Lectures were not short in those days. The text of Chamberlain's lecture on "Exotic Art" runs to no less than 13 pages or 39 columns. On my reckoning this would take around an hour and a quarter to deliver, give or take the odd pregnant pause.

By "exotic art" Chamberlain had an altogether more wide-reaching definition than we would apply today. By exotic he meant any art or architecture, painting or sculpture, which was not "home-grown". Not unexpectedly he uses a horticultural analogy to prove his point, poking fun at those who attempted to raise tropical plants in their gardens, only to see them fail at the first English frost.

So, with a great sweep of his architectural arm, John Henry dismisses from sight the British Museum - "an ill-harmonized *pot pourri* of Greek motives" - and St Paul's cathedral - "a squat parody on St Peter's" - and the rest of London's classicizing tendencies. No doubt Chamberlain also had one eye on Birmingham's own Town Hall, but he reserved his fire for the capital.

For Chamberlain the five centuries between 1050 and 1550 represented the high-point of native style, after which the rot set in. English artists and architects turned from the Gothic towards Greece and Rome, and so the exotic made its unfortunate way in. "We have imported, duty free," he writes, "large consignments of the Italian Renaissance", and been all the worse for the experience. Art became copying, and lost its creativity.

And so, with a final flourish - lines taken from Tennyson's "Amphion" - John Henry Chamberlain closed his book, and strode or rode (I know not which) to Edgbaston, and to death in the home of a doctor.