

FRANCIS SKIDMORE (1816-1896), A POSTSCRIPT.¹

The very best life of Francis Alfred Skidmore will continue to be the one by Linda Moffatt in her book on the Black Country Skidmores.² Two recent articles are of some interest. The first, by Antony Hopker, a columnist for the *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, appeared on 8 February 2000 where it was noticed by Mrs Moffatt. The second is posted on a website belonging to *The Herbert*. My first acquaintanceship with Francis happened at Bath Abbey church where a part of my Westerleigh Skidmores were buried.³ The late John Hunt had arranged a get together of all the members of the family which he knew to be interested in family history at the Abbey church. The Skidmore chandeliers there had recently been restored and converted from gas to electricity. A rather chilly group included descendants from the 17th century families from Rickmansworth, Huntsham, Chalfont St. Peter, Westerleigh, Holme Lacy, and perhaps another place or two that I have forgotten. Ordinarily we probably would have adjourned to a pub, but Hazel Skidmore (wife of Peter Hastings Emmott Skidmore) and her daughter had put together a very nice luncheon at their home at St. Catherine's Close in Bathwick Hill. It would be nice to have a large coffee table book of Skidmore's work, but this is unlikely as the decorative religious arts (and the Anglican faith itself) simply do not command the interest they once did. (WS)

Tribute to city metal master.

By ANTONY HOPKER

A VICTORIAN master craftsman will be remembered in Coventry next week when a plaque is unveiled on the site of his former factory.

Francis Skidmore was one of the best metalworkers in the country in the 19th century, but

¹A supplement to the article on the man on the Scudamore/Skidmore CD-ROM.

²Linda Moffatt, *Skidmore, Families of the Black Country and Birmingham 1600-1900* (Barton Stacey, Hampshire, 2004) 330-3. Recently the Coventry City Council has published *Francis Skidmore - a Coventry craftsman*, in paper for £2.99 (which has not been seen).

³Alas the cemetery attached to the church (in a very busy urban area) was paved over many years ago, and the only record we have of burials is the parish register.

died in poverty.

He worked in wrought iron, copper and bronze from his factory in Alma Street, Hillfields, on a site now owned by Coventry University.

The plaque will be unveiled by his great granddaughter Rita Kenderline on Wednesday.

Skidmore was born in Birmingham in 1816 and moved to Coventry as a child.

After starting work in his father's jewelry business, he developed a skill for using non-precious metals.

His reputation grew at the Great Exhibition and he started up his own factory as commissions poured in from around the globe.

One of his most striking projects was the decorative metalwork he made for the Albert Memorial in London.

The stunning tribute erected by Queen Victoria was restored to its former glory in 1998 and Skidmore's work can clearly be seen on the statue overlooking Kensington Gardens.

Examples of his work in Coventry can still be seen in Holy Trinity Church and St. Mary's Guildhall.

The project closest to his heart, the pulpit in St. Michael's Church – the old Cathedral – was destroyed in the Blitz in November 1940.

Skidmore also made decorative metalwork for several Oxbridge colleges and government buildings, as well as the choir screen at Hereford Cathedral, which is now in storage at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.

His skill was also his undoing, as his quest for perfection led him to throw away thousands of pounds of work he considered sub-standard. He died in poverty in Eagle Street, Hillfields, age 73.

Peter Walters, of Coventry and Warwickshire Promotions, which has put up six other plaques to great figures in the city, said: "Francis Skidmore is one of Coventry's forgotten craftsmen.

He was chosen to work on one of the most prestigious memorials in Victorian England yet he died in poverty in Coventry in 1896."

Francis Skidmore (1817-1896) – A Coventry Craftsman⁴

This section celebrates the work of the Coventry craftsman, Francis Skidmore. During his lifetime Skidmore was known as one of the best metalworkers in the country. His innovative iron, brass and silverwork won him great acclaim and prestigious commissions like the Albert Memorial, the Hereford Cathedral Screen and the Oxford University Museum roof.

Francis Skidmore was born in 1817 in Birmingham, the son of a jeweler. The family moved to Coventry shortly afterwards and Skidmore was apprenticed to his father, learning the skills of metalworking and jewel setting. In 1845 Skidmore registered as a silversmith and by about 1850, based in West Orchard, he was also producing large-scale work in iron and brass.

One of his first Coventry commissions was to light St. Michael's Church, Coventry, in 1851. He later made an eagle lectern and a colorful metalwork pulpit for the same church. At Holy Trinity in

⁴From the website maintained by The Herbert Museum and Art Gallery in Coventry.

Coventry, Skidmore's brass light-stands, altar rail, ironwork and carved wooden pews can still be seen.

Skidmore's Art Manufacturing Company, Alma Street

In 1859 Skidmore moved to larger premises in Alma Street, Hillfields, setting up "Skidmore's Art Manufacturers" in 1861. By 1865, the Alma Street premises boasted an extensive showroom, 2 drawing offices, pattern shops, a 14-horse power engine, a boiler room, a large workshop equipped with lathes and a steam hammer, as well as separate rooms for enamelling, stamping and electrotyping.

In 1851 the Great Exhibition was held at the Crystal Palace in London. This was intended to show the world the strength, skill and inventiveness of British industries and gave rise to many more exhibitions over the following decades. At the Great Exhibition, Skidmore exhibited silver plate based on medieval designs. His work was well received and the prestige of the exhibition must have helped launch his career.

At the International Exhibition of 1862, Skidmore won a medal for "progress, elegance of design and excellent workmanship" for his exhibits, which included the Hereford Screen.

In 1867, Coventry had its own International Exhibition featuring a whole section devoted to Skidmore's firm.

The Hereford Cathedral Choir Screen

The Hereford Screen, designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott, was made by Skidmore in 1862. Before installation at Hereford Cathedral the screen was shown at the International Exhibition of 1862 where it was hailed as a "masterpiece."

In 1967 the screen was dismantled and removed from Hereford Cathedral. The Herbert Art Gallery and Museum bought this magnificent monument, saving it from possible destruction. The Herbert had neither the space or the funds to restore the screen so it was eventually transferred to the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Skidmore and the Gothic Revival

The mid-18th Century saw such a rise of interest in medieval architecture that many modern designs were based on medieval forms. This movement became known as the Gothic Revival and linked to religious reform, led to both building and restoration of many churches. Skidmore's work in the medieval style and his interest in the lighting and heating of churches meant that he received many commissions from the movement's leading architects and designers.

Skidmore's most productive working partnership was with the architect Sir George Gilbert Scott and Skidmore shared interests in medieval designs, ironwork and the use of colour in architecture. Skidmore provided monuments and accessories for many of Scott's buildings, the most famous

collaborators being the Albert Memorial and the metalwork choir screens for Hereford, Lichfield and Salisbury Cathedrals.

Later years

Despite his success, Skidmore's perfectionism lost him money. Employees described how he destroyed work or materials which didn't meet his exacting standards. In 1872 he had to sell the Art Manufacturing company, setting up a smaller business in Meriden. His work still in demand, Skidmore continued until 1883 when he merged with Winfield's of Birmingham.

Disabled by a carriage accident, and having neglected the commercial side of his business Skidmore was relatively poor by the time he returned to Coventry in 1893. To help make his last years more comfortable, local dignitaries raised a special pension for him. Skidmore died at the his house in Eagle Street in 1896 and was buried at London Road Cemetery.

The Herbert has several examples of Skidmore's decorative metalwork in its collections. Additionally, the Hereford Screen can be seen at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.