

The Architecture of the Building

Architecture And History Of The Chapel (Including An Earlier Chapel On The Same Site)

The following account includes quotations passages derived from material held in Liverpool Central Library and from the Pevsner Architectural Guide to Liverpool.

The first Chapel on the site (1811) was built specially for the celebrated young preacher, Thomas Spencer, then only 20 years old. His sermons could attract a congregation of upwards of 2,000, a figure which it was impossible to accommodate in the original chapel (in Renshaw Street) where hundreds were turned away from almost every service.



The foundation stone of this first Great George Street Chapel was laid by the Rev. Thomas Spencer in April 1811, but he was not permitted to see its completion. His death occurred four months after that event and the building was not opened for worship until 27 May 1812. Its cost was about £13,000, and the seating accommodation was for nearly 2,000 persons. The first minister was the Rev. Thomas Raffles, M.A.

The destruction of this first Great George Street Chapel by fire took place on 19 February 1840. The sad event, due probably to the recent introduction of stoves for heating the building, occurred whilst Dr Raffles was at Manchester attending a meeting of the College Building Committee. "The destruction", writes one, "which was greatly facilitated by the gas, which had not been turned off from the main, was the work of only about forty minutes, in which time one of the largest and most commodious of our chapels in the kingdom was brought to ruins".

The building was insured for £4,000, not more than "half of the cost of its erection again", and singularly enough this insurance had only been effected the day previous to the outbreak of the fire. The agent who sent up to London by the same post the notice of acceptance of the insurance and the destruction of the chapel, said to Dr Raffles : "Pretty fellows you are to insure your chapel one day and burn it down the next".

The resolution to rebuild was "most earnest and unanimous" ; the sum of £5,000 was speedily subscribed. The plans and designs for the new church were "furnished gratuitously" by Joseph Franklin, the City Architect. The foundation stone was laid on 7 July 1840 and the new chapel opened on 21 October 1841 for public worship. The chapel cost £13,992 to build and seated almost 2,000.



The building dominates the locality in which it stands with a tall dome and a frontage of massive pillars which are the highest monoliths in the country. The interior of the church is focused on a magnificent, carved, wooden pulpit. In addition to the large assembly area and Balcony (seating 2,000), there is a lecture theatre, and large restaurant / Sunday school area ; various smaller rooms ; an extensive forecourt ; and an associated 3-storey house, with semi-basement and cellar.



It is the finest building belonging to the Liverpool body of Independents, and is exceedingly well situated for effect. The principal elevation consists of a semi-circular portico, having ten fluted Corinthian columns, after the Temple of Jupiter Stator, the shafts of each consisting of one stone. The columns are surmounted by an entablature enriched with curved modillions and dentiles. The entire front base is approached by a flight of eight steps. A richly decorated dome is on a circular Stylobate, above the portico. The vestibule and staircase leading to the galleries are lighted by glazed panels. The sides are ornamented with pilasters, terminating with an attic, and have eighteen semi-circular-headed windows. The interior of the building is well arranged, for the seats rise above each other as they retreat from the pulpit, and all the occupants face the minister.

The organ, by Hill, is of much power and grandeur. The pulpit and staircase are elaborately executed in Dantzic oak.



The ceiling is divided into panels, double sunk, moulded and enriched. A beautiful chandelier, nine feet in diameter, containing a hundred lights is suspended from the centre. The seat room is for 1,750 persons, besides galleries for children. School rooms and lecture rooms are beneath the chapel. The vestry forms a wing ; at the rear handsome iron palisades partly surround the building.

No wonder it became known as the City's "Third Cathedral".

(from the Pevsner Architectural Guide to Liverpool) Beside the arch (Chinese Arch), and impressively closing the view along Berry Street, is the former Great George Street Congregational Church, 1840-1, an outstandingly good building by Joseph Franklin, replacing a chapel of 1811-12 which burned down. Oblong in plan, it turns the sharp corner of Nelson Street and Great George Street with a semicircular

portico of fluted Corinthian columns enclosing a round inset tower - comparable to Nash's All Souls, Langham Place, in London but more massive and imposing. The columns are monoliths, said to have come from a quarry in Park Road, Toxteth. The tower has a band of guilloche incorporating little wheel windows, and a shallow dome, now missing its finial. The sides have giant unfluted Corinthian pilasters and two tiers of windows, round-arched above, square-headed below. Minister's house attached at the back on the Great George Street side. Good classical cast-iron railings.



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