

## 1. Introduction

York's Clifford Street Fire Station opened in 1938 in the much-adapted premises of the Trinity Methodist Chapel. Although the new fire station was a simple, neat functional design, clearly of its period, it retained the Peckitt Street façade of the chapel, which is a striking polychromatic brick essay in the Romanesque manner. This survival was highlighted by John Hutchinson in the 1980 *Bartholomew City Guide to York*, where he referred to the fire station's 'Byzantine side ... by J.B. and W. Atkinson, originally Trinity Chapel, preferable to the utilitarian front.' This survival is also pointed out in the Pevsner *Buildings of England* volume on York and the East Riding. In reality much more of the chapel and its Sunday school remains than first meets the eye. It seems fairly obvious therefore that any proposals for the redevelopment of the Fire Station should first consider the historical and architectural merits of the various elements of the existing building and whether these warrant its partial retention; this judgement might also be informed by considering the motives underlying its earlier reconstruction in the nineteen-thirties.

To facilitate this, we'll explore the outline history of the building and also that of the prominent and distinctive house which stands at the Peckitt Street/riverside corner of the site.

## 2. Trinity Chapel (Methodist New Connection)

The vibrancy of Methodism in the nineteenth century meant that energetic people with strongly-held opinions sometimes fell out with one another and split off to form new congregations. A serious rupture occurred in 1850 and five years later a majority of those who had split off in York united themselves with the Methodist 'New Connexion'. Established in 1797, the New Connexion had maintained a branch in York which fizzled out around 1804 but, rejuvenated by the events of 1855, they sought a city-centre site for a new chapel and Sunday school. Peckitt Street fitted the bill admirably. It was a new street, formed in 1851, and, while the south-east side had been rapidly built up with new houses, land was available on the opposite side, where the new chapel was speedily built. Foundation stones for the chapel and school were formally laid by the Sheriff of York on 19 September 1855, with the chapel opening on 27 June 1856, the school having already done so.

The cost of the new building was estimated at £1,720, with a further £400 having been paid for the site, but the national committee of the New Connexion was very pleased to be re-establishing its presence in York and contributed £500, while its chairman, Joseph Love, gave a further hundred on his own account. Methodists were prominent among York's business and trades people, so the new congregation had little difficulty raising the balance. They and the national committee wanted a handsome, conspicuous building but not a particularly large one. The major York Methodist building: Centenary Chapel, opened in 1840, could seat 1,500 people; Trinity was designed for just 820. In townscape terms this was an asset: the new chapel would not be out of scale with the three-storey houses on the opposite side of Peckitt Street, but the congregation did want to draw attention to themselves, hence the employment of a polychromatic façade which was an unusual departure for York at that time.

The architects for Trinity Chapel were the brothers John Bownas and William Atkinson, whose grandfather had succeeded to the practice of John Carr. Theirs was one of the busiest practices in

nineteenth-century York and their successors continue today under the name Brierley Groom. Religious buildings were not a major part of their work but they remodelled a number of York's medieval churches and, shortly before embarking on Trinity Chapel, had completed the new Anglican church of St. Paul in Holgate Road (1851). This is a free-standing building in a rather undistinguished Gothic treatment, made interesting by the employment of slender cast-iron columns within. Trinity Chapel could hardly be more different.

In considering the building one must note that Clifford Street did not exist in 1855. Instead, the main southern outlet from the city centre was by Castlegate, with a right-angled bend into Tower Street and a further sharp curve opposite Peckitt Street. Two prominent Georgian houses stood on the site now occupied by the entry into Clifford Street, with gardens sweeping down from one of these, *Clifford House*, towards the river. The new chapel was built on the Clifford House gardens and the side elevation adjacent to that house was never intended to be seen.

The scheme provided for the school to be completed in advance of the chapel, but we shall consider the latter first. Its basic form was a gabled building, end on to the street, with triplets of round-arched windows in the upper side walls providing clerestorey lighting. Lower, two-storey blocks flanked the main hall giving the impression of a classic basilican 'nave and aisles' layout appropriate to the Byzantine style. In customary Methodist fashion, twin entrances were provided from Peckitt Street, one into each of the flanking ranges. Clearly, a Methodist chapel was not actually going to adopt a basilican plan but there is an unfortunate lack of detail regarding the interior other than its inclusion of a 'bracket gallery'. It may be that the flanking ranges included some ancillary rooms with a gallery above.

The carcase was built of common brick but the façade displayed a richly-red brick with contrasting features in yellow/buff brick and a sparing use of sandstone. The 'nave' was given a two-tier elevation with a line of narrow round-arched windows at the lower level and, probably, some form of circular (e.g. wheel) window above; the latter was replaced by rather domestic windows in the nineteen-thirties reconstruction. The flanking 'aisles' each had a boldly-framed entrance with a pair of round-arched window above; the right-hand aisle frontage was removed in the 1930s.

Despite their relative inexperience in this style, the Atkinson brothers pulled off a quite convincing essay, which must have made a strong visual impact in York at the time. Shallow horizontal bands of buff brick punctuate the facade while the arches, framed by slender stone drip-mouldings, employ alternating bands of buff and red brick in their voussoirs. The string of nave windows is punctuated by stone columns, with mildly Byzantine capitals, sitting on a stone string course emphasised by a panel of ornamental tiles below. The flanking entrances received shallow porches with stilted segmental arches borne on stone columns with prominent cushion abaci. The crowning gable was given a heavyweight parapet, vigorously corbelled-out from the wall face.

Adjoining the chapel as one heads towards the river is a substantial hip-roofed building which housed the Sunday school. This naturally adopts the basic style of the chapel but utilises windows with shallow, segmental arched heads which would provide more light than the round-arched chapel openings. The main upstairs schoolroom was signalled by a string of six windows with a continuous stone cill and tile band below, echoing the treatment already seen at the chapel. The ground floor has a central doorway flanked by windows – the left-hand one being a late 20<sup>th</sup> century reconstruction carried out in strict accordance with the original style. The schools are crowned by a

less assertive and more convincingly Romanesque cornice than that of the chapel. The school was planned to accommodate 400 pupils and included two further classrooms and a vestry on the ground floor.

The large-scale Ordnance Survey of 1891 shows all these premises in their final form. By then, the long-awaited direct route from the city centre to the south had been achieved, with the creation of Clifford Street. Work on the new street began in 1880 and entailed the demolition of Clifford House and the adjoining mansion. This did not encroach on the Chapel property but did expose to view the right-hand flank of the building, which was never intended for public show. This was highly unfortunate, in that Clifford Street was intended to achieve a grand civic display through the creation of showy new buildings. The most effective of these is Huon Matear's Magistrates' Court, completed in 1892. This was the chapel's immediate neighbour and a subsequent photograph shows it looming up behind a chapel wall adorned by advertisement hoardings and fronted by a war-weary strip of grass enclosed by iron railings.

The first half of the twentieth century brought healing to some of the divisions within Methodism as well as a flight of population from the city centre to the suburbs. Fewer churches and chapels were needed in the centre of York, and the Trinity congregation allied themselves with the folk at the 1903 Monkgate chapel, now known as Trinity Methodist church. After eight decades in service, the old Trinity Chapel was closed in 1935.

### 3. Chapel to Fire Station

In the nineteen-thirties, the more far-sighted members of York City Council, such as J.B. Morrell, were examining the needs of the civic administration in an era where it was taking on an expanding role, particularly in areas such as health and housing. One outcome was the purchase of York Castle, when it fell out of use as a prison, and the demolition of most of its 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings to provide a site for new municipal offices. Trinity Chapel, with the Magistrates' Courts just next door, formed an obvious addition to the footprint of the civic enclave. In those days, it was thought essential that a city fire station should be located in the city centre – as witness, for example, the spaciouly-grand 1933 premises in Newcastle upon Tyne, which also incorporated new courts and the central police station. In fact, York's fire station already lay just round the corner in Friargate (the building survives to this day in other use) but its three docks were already too limited in size and number. So the chapel site, with the courts and police already nearby, seemed eminently suitable.

Despite outward appearances, much of the chapel building was evidently retained along with the whole of the Sunday school block. As well as the chapel's Peckitt Street façade, the gable at the opposite end was retained while the roof between them conforms externally to the original form, though it may have been reframed internally. The main external changes were the demolition of the right-hand 'aisle' of the chapel and the remainder of the wall on that Clifford Street side along with the raising of the left-hand 'aisle' by one floor. This corresponded to massive internal changes to provide a home for the fire engines on the ground floor with a mess room for the firemen above. These were expressed externally by the new Clifford Street frontage, with six engine bays on the ground floor and a thoughtfully articulated sequence of rather nondescript windows above. To provide adequate lighting three such windows replaced the original upper feature within the gable of the Peckitt Street façade.

What is striking, however, is the care taken to avoid needless damage to the original Peckitt Street design. Thus the new upper windows in the gable sit beneath an unaltered parapet, while the raised left-hand 'aisle' incorporates a new window at the new upper level but retains below all the original façade save for its crowning balustrade. The school block, though altered internally, seems to have retained most of its original fabric, while its Peckitt Street façade survives in its entirety. Alterations to its side elevation (originally facing over gardens towards the river) were carried out in conformity with the original.

So the chapel came out of its reconstruction surprisingly well. From Clifford Street you saw a well-laid-out modern building; turn the corner and you had a Victorian frontage of some gusto. What lay behind this treatment? Obviously York had limited resources and the main requirement was to get an efficient modern building at minimal cost; that the new fire station subsequently functioned for three-quarters of a century suggests that this aim was fully met. Given that the chapel was in essence a big hall, its partial reconstruction was a very cost-effective way of achieving this. The issue then was – would there be any merit in cosmetic changes to the Peckitt Street frontage in order to match it to Clifford Street's new image? At a time when Victorian buildings were regarded with distaste by most connoisseurs, this would have been very tempting but would have involved needless work and expense. Yet why treat the remains with such care? - because that is how architects of that period had been trained to behave. While 'conservation' as a general concept lay well in the future, you were not expected to needlessly butcher the details of a building, whether you liked them or not.

### 3. The House

At the bottom of Peckitt Street, on the right-hand side, is a house which forms a punctuation mark in the view along the Ouse. We read it nowadays as part of the fire station and courts complex but it was there long before they arrived. A York Corporation plan of about 1879 shows the house accompanied by a substantial garden, at the end of which was another building, possibly a coach house and stable, built onto the side of the Sunday school; the plot boundary, however, clearly separates this building from the school. On the first large-scale Ordnance Survey (1851) the plot had been a walled garden, lying between the Clifford House garden and the river.

It is in essence a two-storey hip-roofed villa with a gable breaking out on the river frontage and a stumpy saddle-backed tower on the Peckitt Street side; both provide visual incidents and the latter gives the villa some standing against the taller group of houses in Friar's Terrace (c1855).