# Hans Fowler Price

## An Introduction to his work in Weston-super-Mare


Weston-super-Mare Civic Society

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The Local Heritage Initiative has grant-aided this booklet which results from a project entitled 'The Story of Local Stone' and concentrates on buildings in the 'stone town' of Weston-super-Mare.

Three leaflets are also available, price 90p, illustrated with water colours by Rosie Smith and dealing with sites which lie on the periphery of the stone town:

**Town Quarry** – A Site in Limestone Country;

**Kewstoke & Sand Bay** – A Corner of Limestone Country;

**Worle** – A Village in Limestone Country.

Hans Fowler Price is generally regarded as Weston's foremost Victorian architect and is credited with the design of most of the town's mid- and late-Victorian public buildings. Less well documented is the part he played in the planning and designing, and influencing the design, of a major part of the town, including its residential areas.

Weston is essentially a 19th century town and its formative period of growth coincided with a particular crisis in the development of architecture. Before Victorian times it was comparatively rare for an architect to be asked to design a public building in a town. A few palaces and, of course, churches would have made up the bulk of commissions apart from the grander sort of private house.

But in the 19th century, even in a small provincial town like Weston, there would increasingly be scope for municipal buildings, galleries, libraries, schools and hospitals: buildings not for worship or luxury but for the benefit and daily use of the people, as represented by various groups of citizens responding to a perception of the needs of the community. The charitable work of philanthropists would be superseded later in the century, as a result of a series of Acts of Parliament, by increasingly influential local authorities and statutory boards.

As part of this process a new social function of architecture appeared, representing a new view of society and its needs. Work

had to be done to evolve plan forms for these new uses. A library in the 18th century or earlier, back as far as the Renaissance, would have been a hall of two or three bays. A hospital would have been almost identical in plan. Both of these came without essential modification from the monastic buildings of the Middle Ages. Now the library, a *public* library, had to have special sections and store rooms; the hospital would have different wings for different diseases, a school would have an entrance for boys on one side, girls and infants on the other, a hall in the middle; an art gallery would need particularly effective natural lighting. The plan would have to take account of these new functional demands.

*Hans Price's Weston Library in the Boulevard, opened 1900.*

At the same time there was a growing preoccupation with design features that would reflect the tastes of the client. In earlier centuries, ever since the Renaissance, significant urban buildings had followed rules of gentlemanly good taste and proportion, just like country houses. Throughout the 18th century in Britain a relatively unadorned building was the norm. We all know what Georgian buildings look like, major ones and quite humble ones, and we feel that they express a decency and a reserve that we regard as quintessentially British.

On the continent, the Rococo had reintroduced alien styles, with lots of decoration. Some of this is evident in Britain, but less markedly than elsewhere in Europe. The Romantic movement had

endowed these styles with sentimental associations, revelling in nostalgic fantasies of the distant in time and space. On the whole, the 19th century lost the Rococo's lightness of touch and the Romantics' emotional fervour, but stuck to the principle of variety of style rather than a single, clearly identifiable style, modern at the time of use and only evolving slowly.

It seems odd that the Victorians, so adventurous and positive in other ways, in commerce, industry and engineering, did not produce a confident unified architectural style for the age. Nikolaus Pevsner maintained that this failure, as he saw it, was because architects and their clients saw so much beauty destroyed all around them by the sudden and immense growth of industrial towns that they despaired of their century and turned for relief and inspiration to the past, and sometimes also to some other culture, seen as untainted.

There was, of course, the Gothic. One of the great architectural theorists of the early Victorian years was Augustus Welby Pugin who argued that architecture can be true or false, morally good or bad and that buildings should reveal their structure and function, making use of natural materials. Gothic architecture, he argued, was a principle rather than just a style. Because of the equation of mediæval architecture and the predominance of Christianity, he considered that to build in the forms of the Middle Ages was a moral duty. His ideal was

*Bristol Road Baptist Church, 1871*

the pure and unworldly Gothic of the 14th century, but this never really caught on in Britain and although the Gothic was, on the whole, preferred for ecclesiastical buildings, in the hands of Victorian architects it rarely attained anything that could be called purity and was chiefly prized for its decorative potential. Even John Ruskin, in his influential writings on architecture, emphasised ornament, surface texture, colour and light.

The clients – industrialists or local authorities – were self-made men of no particular education who did not feel bound to abide by a generally accepted canon of taste as had the gentlemen who had commissioned most of the work done in the previous century. The new masters, flushed with commercial success, or pushing through social reforms, felt entitled to choose any building style that appealed to them, and by this time there were plenty to choose from.

Association, rather than tradition, was now the rule of architectural style. A building could be made to resemble in its details whatever in the architect's or the client's experience struck an appropriate chord: a battlemented tower for some bastion of privilege; a carved panel of people looking learned for a library, Gothic for the church...

Aesthetic theory became less important in architecture than historical research and the 19th century is characterised by a general sharpening of the tools of historical knowledge. Careful drawings were made of the architecture of various periods and countries and, as the century wore on, an enormous stock of pattern books became available, from which styles and details could be selected. This could and did give rise to some arbitrary and unedifying buildings and some pretty dull ones, but in the hands of an architect who knew how to use his material the result could be vigorous and memorable. The best buildings show a sense of adventure and provided townspeople with a rare experience of the exotic in their daily lives.

Hans Price knew how to mix and match styles. He could do association – making the building strike a chord: a stranger to Weston, shown a set of Price buildings, ought to make a reasonable stab at working out what they were originally intended to be, perhaps without quite knowing why; he could do picturesque; he could do rugged and foursquare; he could do lavish and exuberant; he used local materials as a matter of course and made them do things that nobody else could ever quite manage. It is a hallmark of his buildings that whatever styles he adopted and however rich the decorative elements might be, the overall design is strong and controlled.

*85 Upper Church Road: Carboniferous Limestone, Bath stone and Moorish details.*

Far more than many of his contemporaries, he observed Pugin's principles of honest, legible architecture. He used local materials: in Weston this starts with Carboniferous limestone quarried in the town itself; he usually had it laid as roughly squared blocks, avoided obscuring it with render, and generally employed dressed stone only for quoins and surrounds rather than as ashlar. Structural openings have visible relieving arches. Decorative features are carried right round a building, not skimped at the back. The dressed stone or freestone (so called because it could be relatively easily sawn and carved) is an oolitic limestone, locally known as Bath stone for obvious reasons, but usually brought from more convenient quarries at Dundry, south of Bristol.

Hans Fowler Price was born at nearby Langford in 1835, but went to be articled to a Liverpool architect, Thomas Denville Barry, who designed a range of Gothic style churches and cemetery chapels in the north west of England in a style described by Pevsner as 'quirky'. Barry worked in the tradition of Romantic Gothic design and the young Price would certainly have been exposed to that influence.

*Wadham Street Baptist Church, 162, now the Blakehay Arts & Community Centre.*

Returning to Somerset, Price came to Weston in his twenties and set up his practice, eventually, in Waterloo Street. In the 1861 Kelly's Directory he is described as 'architect and surveyor'. He was then 26. He spent the rest of his life in the town and never retired – over 50 years of practice. In the early days he worked in Bristol and, mostly, in Clevedon but had very few commissions here in Weston except for alterations to the Wadham Street Baptist Church, for the original design of the Bristol Road Baptist Church and for the first buildings of the hospital in Alfred Street. At Wadham Street he re-used parts of the original building, so it is difficult to see any clear indication of his stylistic preferences, apart from the rubble stone which he used throughout his career, but the other church is as unashamedly Gothic as anything that his mentor Thomas Barry would have designed.

In 1862 he married Jane Baker, daughter of Samuel Baker of Burrington who was solicitor and agent to the Smyth Pigotts, Lords

of the Manor and the major local landowners. Not surprisingly, Price became consulting architect and surveyor to the Smyth Pigott Estates and a close associate of Robert Landemann Jones, the Estates' managing Trustee who was masterminding the development of the Smyth Pigott lands on the hillside. This development provided a constant supply of work for Price's firm and allowed him to become one of a small group of influential local figures who were effectively creating the town. Power was gradually passing from the Lord of the Manor to the Town Commissioners, forerunners of the town council, and characteristically, Price, with a foot in both camps, duly got himself elected for a spell as a Town Commissioner.

His work for the Smyth Pigott Estates began with detached villas and pairs of villas on the hillside. By the end of 1870 he had completed a terrace of twelve on the north side of the new Pigott Boulevard and early the following year 67 cottages in the New Town. On his own or in partnership with various others he completed 861 projects and after 1871 virtually all of these were in Weston.

*A villa in Grove Park Road.*

Price represented in person the close relationship between a perception of social needs and the provision of buildings to accommodate them. He would often remain in touch with one of his buildings by joining the governing body. He did this with Weston's first hospital, in Alfred Street, with the Sanatorium, with several schools and with the School of Science and Art.

Price was born just before Victoria came to the throne and worked until just before the outbreak of the First World War – a period of

unprecedented prosperity and growth: the population of Weston increased fourfold – and during that time he was involved in the design of most of the newly-required public buildings and a very high proportion of the speculative building.

Being a man of some substance, Price could afford to take foreign holidays and did so armed with his notebooks, taking sketches of buildings and details in several European countries. Some of these buildings had a mediæval flavour – his contemporaries found it convenient to refer to them as 'Burgundian', but in general he was more interested in what could loosely be called Renaissance detailing. It is interesting when comparing Victorian secular buildings in Weston with those in Clevedon, for example, and parts of Bristol, how little Gothic vocabulary gets used. This fact must owe a good deal to Price's taste as worked out in the major buildings of the town.

It is given to few men to plan an entire town from scratch, but Price seems to have known exactly what was required, both socially and æsthetically. His public commissions are exuberant, rising above the two- and three-storey streetscapes of dwelling houses. In private mode he knew that Weston's middle classes sought sedate style and respectability. Price used readily available and manufactured materials to generate houses at once solid and attractive – uniform when seen from a distance but each revealing individual decorative features. Victorian towns were rigidly stratified by social class, professional and social standing, and Price's work for the Smyth-Pigott Estates created precisely graded enclaves of houses, each designed to meet a specified budget, where the occupier's lifestyle could be accurately reflected by external and internal decoration; type, number and layout of rooms; size and landscaping of gardens; location on the prestigious hillside or the humbler flatlands.

An active local politician, Evangelical and teetotaller, Price sought through his membership of numerous boards and committees to

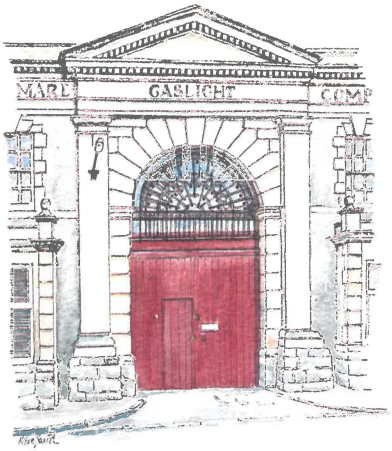
regulate the lives of his fellow townspeople as he had prescribed their housing. As architect to the newly-formed Somerset County Council Board of Education, he was able to carry this influence beyond the confines of the town. His great private enthusiasm was chess, and it is tempting to imagine his vision of developing Weston as a vast chessboard, easily visible from his own hillside home, with Price himself re-arranging the pieces to telling effect.


*The Board School, 1897, in Walliscote Road*

After 100 years or more these buildings still make an enormous contribution to defining the Weston-ness of Weston. Many of them are in fine fettle and doing the job they were built for: others are actually or potentially the victims of changes in social provision.

Over the years a number of Price's buildings have been threatened, with disuse and decay, like the Royal Hospital, closed some years ago, or with maintenance-saving truncations, like the top of the Constitutional Club. We are now entering an era in Weston, for the first time since the last war, when there is the possibility of hope that institutional buildings which have lost their original use can be sympathetically recycled. The old General Hospital is the shining example: earlier plans envisaged having the entire thing pulled down, thoughtfully keeping Price's name for one of the barrack blocks proposed as a replacement! The completed scheme includes Price's original Dispensary building as well as the 1920s hospital. A subsequent plan for the Royal Hospital, at the end of the Beach Lawns, has involved retaining the Victorian buildings and adding new in a sympathetic style. The imposing warehouse in Alfred Street is apparently by Price's office, if not actually by the master,

and its conversion into flats has been carried out in the spirit of the original. The Locking Road school was under threat of demolition for housing, but its intrinsic qualities and its important contribution to that part of the stone town have been conserved in an imaginative restoration and conversion into flats.




*The entrance to the Weston Gaslight Company Workshops and Stores, now the North Somerset Museum.*

There is absolutely no excuse for losing any of Price's buildings. If their original use is no longer appropriate they are strong enough and flexible enough to be converted to a new use. Self-evidently they are Victorian and urban, so, with the exception of some of the schools, they are to be found in the heart of the stone town. There are a lot of them and they make a major contribution to the unique character of the place. Stone buildings, in general, give the town a unity of character: Price's buildings provide the most distinctive and memorable streetscapes.

An increasing interest in Price's contribution to the fabric of Weston and a growing understanding of his unifying influence strengthen the case for drawing up conservation policies for the whole of the stone town, not just the parts currently designated as Conservation Areas and the additional sections proposed from time to time. We understand, better now than at any time in the past, how much we owe to those who planned the Victorian town and how much of value the modern town contains because of those who were active a hundred and more years ago. We owe it, not to their memory, but to our own sense of place and character and worth, to maintain the heritage and nurture it and hand it on to the future.

# Selected of examples of Hans Price's work

With the aid of a street plan, for those unfamiliar with the town, these buildings can be inspected as part of a long trail, which can be split up as required. The list includes some of Price's best local work, but it is by no means exhaustive.

**Wadham Street Baptist Church**, now The Blakehay Arts & Community Centre. An early commission, 1862, not Gothic, but he re-used the pillars and windows of an earlier building. Limestone rubble, local in spite of being pink. Illustration on page 6.

**The School of Science and Art** – 1892, Lower Church Road. Science downstairs, Art upstairs with big windows to accommodate the needs of the art students. Tile panels. Handsomely restored in 1997.

*School of Science and Art*

**Somerset House** – 1897-9, High Street. This long elevation once incorporated the Market Hall, replaced by the Playhouse Theatre.

**Bristol Road Baptist Church.** Early, Gothic, 1866, using pink limestone again. Illustration on page 3.

**85 Upper Church Road** – 1892. Moorish inspiration. Beautiful tile panels. Illustration on page 5.

**Grove Park Road.** A fine range of Price buildings. Free use of the Tudor as opposed to earlier Gothic style. No. 2 of 1891. The most elaborate, No. 7, 1895: Tudor, Corinthian capitals, the usual two sorts of stone. The words sound a hotch-potch but the result is solid grandeur. One of the houses is illustrated on page 7.

*The Chalet, South Road*

**The Chalet, South Road.** His partner's house, designed by Price for William Henry Wooler who was German and liked to remember it in spite of changing his name, so a Bavarian chalet.

**Cecil Road.** Many big villas on the hillside exploiting local materials. He enjoyed curved pediments and splayed bases to windows, like drapery or curtains.

**Constitutional Club,** The Boulevard. Built 1881 as the Masonic Lodge of St. Kew. A bastion of privilege requires battlements. The original top has now gone.

**Mercury group.** Price's own office (1874), newspaper office (1885), Church Institute (1881) (Gothic because ecclesiastical). The Mercury office is recognised by some as reminiscent of Spanish Baroque.

**Town Hall** – 1897, The Centre. Price's enlargement of the original building. A major public building – local materials, exuberant detailing.

*Mercury office*

**Walliscote Grove Road**. Another composition. Full range of materials: Rubble, Bath stone, red brick, structural woodwork. Price was the landowner. Recent heavy-handed refurbishment.

**Walliscote Road School** – 1897. Schools to suit the Education Acts: pavilions for Boys, Girls, Infants. The two types of stones and pottery tiles, all local. Illustrated on the cover and page 9.

**Museum** – 1912, Burlington Street. Probably the last major project Price completed before his death. Built as the Weston-super-Mare Gaslight Company Workshops and Stores: Price was Chairman of the Gas Company's Board of Directors. Illustrated on page 10.

**Dispensary**, Alfred Street. The original hospital building, an early work dated 1865, rescued and turned into flats in 1995.

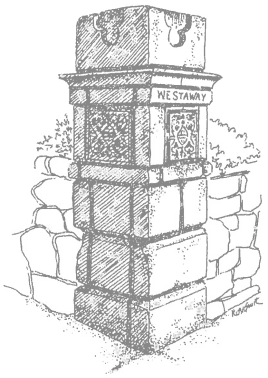
*The Alfred Street Dispensary*

**Public Library**, The Boulevard. Begun in 1899. Red brick with carvings of the Muses. Illustrated on page 2.

**Wooler Road.** Behind the Library. Relatively humble housing, but ashlar to make up for it and designed as an effective composition.

**Locking Road Schools**. Now restored and turned into flats.

The views of Nikolaus Pevsner on Victorian architecture, referred to in the text, are to be found in his *An Outline of European Architecture,* first published by Penguin Books in 1943.




*Gate pillar at 83 Upper Church Road*

In the rather brief section on Weston-super-Mare in the local volume of Pevsner's hugely influential *Buildings of England* series, Hans Price does not rate a mention, though in 1955, when *North Somerset and Bristol* was published by Penguin Books, we read that Weston's legacy of mid-Victorian buildings 'ought by now to be looked at with some preserver's sympathy'. Amen to that! In the half century that has elapsed since Pevsner wrote, there has been a significant growth in appreciation of Victorian architecture and planning and of the work of those who influenced its development.

Published by Weston-super-Mare Civic Society 2004

Weston Civic Society,
The Heritage Centre,
3-6 Wadham Street
Weston-super-Mare,
Somerset BS23 1JY



This booklet has been produced by Weston Civic Society with the aid of a grant from the Local Heritage Initiative. LHI is a partnership between the Heritage Lottery Fund, Nationwide Building Society and the Countryside Agency.

Local Heritage *initiative*

Heritage Lottery Fund

Nationwide

The Countryside Agency

£2.70 pence