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LETTERS OF A BAPTIST ARCHITECT

Charles Gray Searle (1816-81) was by profession an architect and surveyor, who had trained under Thomas Cubitt and set up his own business about 1846. Charles and his wife, Kate Odell Searle, transferred their church membership to Bloomsbury Chapel from the King's Weigh House in 1857, when they were living at 4 Bloomsbury Place; they were active members until they moved away in 1870. Two extant manuscript Letter Books, containing copies of his letters, which Searle's great-great-grandson, Adrian Dence, kindly let me peruse in 1985, give a revealing glimpse of the nonconformist business world of the time. Volume I covers 22 June 1859 to 25 September 1860; Volume II 26 September 1860 to 18 January 1862. Clearly these are not all the letters relating to the business; they are probably just the ones he wrote personally to people he knew well, many of them being fellow Baptists. The Bloomsbury church's own archives provide further information about the family and some of his correspondents. There are notes on two further letter books, covering the period to 1865, a quotation from the 'Reminiscences' of Thomas Dence, a nephew of Charles Gray Searle, and a brief, manuscript history of the firm by Norman Odell Searle, the grandson, in files held in the Library of the Royal Institution of British Architects, 66 Portland Place, London.

Charles Gray Searle was the fourth child of John Searle, a stone merchant who owned a quarry on Portland and a wharf at Wapping. Thomas Cubitt bought stone from John Searle and subsequently accepted his son as a pupil.¹ The family home at 74 Wapping Wall was a five-storey building overlooking the wharf. After John Searle's death in 1839, his eldest son Tom inherited the house and business but wasted much of his time and money on unsuccessful inventions.

Charles Searle provided his own *curriculum vitae* in a letter to the Corporation of the Orphan Working School, Haverstock Hill, 5 December 1861:

Gentlemen, In reply to your advertisement I beg respectfully to offer myself as a Candidate for the Surveyorship of the above.

I have been connected with building operations for about 30 years - fifteen of which I have been engaged in the employment of others and the remaining fifteen years on my own account as Architect and Surveyor.

I was articled to the late Mr T^hos. Cubitt of Pimlico and served two years in the Masons Shop and two in the Carpenters Shop and the remainder of the time in the drawing Office and on the works.

I was also Clerk of the Works at the rebuilding of the new Coping of St Thomas's Hospital and my experience has always been of a practical character so that I trust should you do me the honour of appointing me your Surveyor I shall by [?]² zeal and integrity merit your confidence and approbation.

My present age is 45 ...

After completing his apprenticeship with Cubitt, Searle worked for the New River Company for some years before setting up his own business as Architect and Surveyor at the age of twenty-five.

The detailed records of his work, with drawings, were lost when the firm's premises, then in Paternoster Row, were bombed and burned out on 29 December 1940, as was the 'large coloured Perspective' of the founder's 'celebrated first Garden Town'. This picture drew together his principal architectural achievements. According to Norman Searle, writing in January 1941, the picture hung in his office, as the then Senior Partner, and 'always created interest to newcomers because the Town consisted of some 40 tastefully arranged Chapels, Churches and Meeting Halls, with only one short street of 5 or 6 Houses intermingled with a few business offices and warehouses'. The offices included the Sunday School Union's in Old Bailey, of which Norman Searle observed, 'This Building still looks younger than the date of 1856 and bears at its base the simple inscription of C.G. Searle, Architect'.

His nephew, Thomas Dence, remembered him as 'the Designer of many chapels and churches in London and the provinces and an active welfare worker in the training of young men'. At Bloomsbury the Searles, who themselves had seven sons, focused their main efforts on Bible Classes for young people. Searle led a Young Men's Bible Class which by 1863 comprised 'as large a number as the Vestry can possibly accommodate' - they managed to squeeze about forty-five into the North Vestry - which measures some twenty by twelve feet.³ Sixteen class members joined the church during 1864, and these young men, who would have been young to mid teenagers for they mostly started work at thirteen, were soon caught up in the multifarious activities of the church agencies. That year Searle reported eight had left to teach in the Sunday schools, two to visit the poor, and twelve of those remaining took turns to go out distributing tracts on Sundays. The class also met on Friday evenings for prayer and mutual instruction, and they had a class library with 100 books. In June 1865 they moved to 5 Red Lion Square, to allow for further growth, rising to 128 in 1866, of whom 60 were already church members, while thirty more had recently left to engage in other Christian work. Meanwhile Mrs Searle was running a class for young women in her home. Charles Searle also served on the Baptist Building Fund committee, and as voluntary organist at Bloomsbury from April 1869 to June 1870.

Searle clearly had plenty of local work in the Covent Garden and Drury Lane area, often making good dilapidations to warehouses and schools. He also worked on various local premises for the Duke of Bedford, who owned the Bloomsbury estates. He evidently altered the premises of Messrs Harris & Co, 125 Holborn, in 1859 (this was probably the firm of S. Harris who lived in Holborn and joined Bloomsbury in 1855, serving as a deacon 1868-72). The alterations, made necessary by the Post Office building, were paid for by HM [Office of] Works. Another client from the church was Robert Offord, to whom on 21 May 1860 Searle sent plans for

the proposed new Coach Factory at 233 Oxford Street. The Offords lived at 53 Wigmore Street, but after Mrs Offord's death the widower and his daughter, Marian, moved to Bayswater, where in 1861-2 Offord had Palace Gardens Chapel built, with Searle as the architect. A number of letters relate to this. Norman Searle observes that it is clear that Charles Gray Searle 'took out his own quantities', and that the letter books generally show that 'a very considerable Architect's practice was being carried on'. The later books evidently included 'considerable correspondence for the building of houses at Harrow and bricks delivered by canal boats from Uxbridge'.

Letters to Dr Angus show Searle advising on problems at the recently acquired premises of Regent's Park College. On 22 August 1859 he wrote after inspecting carpets eaten by insects in a former hay loft that the floor had been planed smooth but not boarded anew. He had also been looking into ways of letting more air into the floors of the damp lower studies. Searle supervised work on the old college site at Stepney, where houses were being built as an investment for the college trust. On 26 March Searle reported that he found the work of the 'speculating builder' slow but quite good. Alas, the builder went out of business the following year, leaving the houses only half built, and Searle had much correspondence about this with Dr Angus and S.R. Pattison, Baptist Union solicitor and fellow Bloomsbury member.

Searle also undertook private houses and business premises. Examples mentioned include new bedrooms and business rooms for Hitchcocks of St Paul's - the firm closely associated with the origins of the YMCA⁴ - in 1859, and 'three good shops' on an 'angular piece of ground' in Coleford for John Thomas. He evidently had strong connections with Coleford, building a house for Isaiah Trotter and paying a family visit to his home there. He designed the extension and new frontage of the Coleford Baptist Chapel (the present author filed photographs of this because it reminded her of Bloomsbury long before she knew of this connection). His interest in the church there went beyond the bricks and mortar, for on 3 April 1860 he wrote to Thomas Batten of Lydney, for whom he was designing a cottage, commending his own minister's son as a possible pastor:

My dear Sir, I write just to say as you have a Church Meeting on Wednesday that I saw Mr Brock at the Prayer Meeting last night and was asking him about his son - he says that he has not settled at present to go to any place - they want him at one or two - he asked about Coleford and seemed to speak favorably of it - so it just seems to me that Mr W^m Brock might be induced to come for a month if you feel inclined at *once* to ask him before he settles elsewhere. I think that you would all like him - he is very earnest and anxious to do good and I think it would work well - the only thing he is rather young but not more so than Mr Penny was when he first came. I think he is quite worth your hearing and that you will be pleased with him generally - if you and all the Deacons think so and will let me know I will try to arrange it for you.

William Brock junior eventually settled at Hampstead Baptist Church, for whose Heath Street Chapel the Bloomsbury deacon, James Harvey, was largely responsible, with C.G. Searle as architect. Several letters relate to this. As so often with chapel building, the clients evidently enquired about ways to cut the initial costs. Searle wrote to Harvey on 27 April 1860:

My dear Sir, Please receive with this the drawings for Hampstead Chapel. I hope that you and the Friends together will be able to carry it out very much without alteration and then I think for the size it will be the best anywhere about London - it will be a great pity to omit the galleries as the[y] cannot be erected afterwards for less than £200 more - the vestries might be left out for the present erecting the staircase and the other side into the vestries - also the plastering in the Basement or schoolrooms etc. so as to reduce it some £400 or £500. Beyond this I think we must damage the appearance of the building and we shall get a Chapel not suitable in a commercial point of view for Hampstead - if there is any question about the ground work being too much, this can be arranged with the building. There will be no difficulty if anyone up there will do it for £100.

Subsequently, on 11 June, he told Harvey that he would prepare working drawings and superintend the work at the 'usual 5% of the total outlay', but intended to give £100 to the building fund. Sending a £50 bill relating to Hampstead Chapel on 25 January 1861, Searle also referred to payment for a drain Harvey had had 'put in' at Camden Road Chapel, where Searle had made various improvements. By 18 April he was writing about a lightning conductor for Hampstead Chapel as the 'tower will be up within a week', and on 2 October he wrote again about payments to the builder, Mr Hills, then 'on verge of completion'. The *Freeman*, 31 July 1861, saw the Heath Street Chapel as 'a neat, light and elegant structure presenting the same architectural ensemble as Bloomsbury Chapel', with a schoolroom below. Its frontage was, however, more ornamented than Bloomsbury's. According to C.W. Ikin, *A Revised Guide to Heath Street Chapel*, 1997,⁵

An early print of the proposed chapel shows buttresses but in its method of construction it was more modern, cast iron being used not only for the pillars and probably for the whole interior framework, but also for the gallery fronts and the mouldings of the pew-ends. The strength of the building is based upon this framework formed by the cast-iron pillars in church and hall below and their linking beams. The brick walls cling to the framework and have tiebars linking the hammer beam roof. Although Hampstead Town is built on a hill of sand, the only signs of movement are at the East End which was altered for the new organ in 1901.

Searle was responsible for Oaklands Congregational Chapel in Uxbridge Road, Hammersmith, in 1857. Plans for Haywards Heath Chapel, drawn up in 1859, were revised the next year, providing less seating but reducing building costs. Other chapels he mentioned working on at this time included Trinity, Lewisham, and

Twickenham. He provided estimates for Park Chapel, Camden Town. He wrote in November 1859 about gratings for ventilation at Kingsgate Chapel: several letters relating to various chapels mention the concern for underfloor ventilation. The questions he asked when tendering unsuccessfully for an unnamed chapel, addressed to the Revd William Tyler on 13 September 1859, are interesting. Would Tyler prefer a 'Classic building or anything Gothic or Norman?' What size vestry was needed for week evening services? 'Do you require space in the Chapel for children or do you have a separate service?' 'Do you have an organ and at which end of the Chapel would you prefer it?' He sent plans on 29 September with a letter ending, 'and now, dear Sir, leaving it in your hands and in the hands of Him who is able and willing to guide us both, I remain ...' Norman Searle comments wryly that 'for such a quick set of drawings it was probably wise to invoke the assistance of the Almighty'!

Several letters suggest he was alert to seize any opportunity to speak to visiting ministers at Bloomsbury who might be thinking of building chapels around the country. He wrote on 3 December 1861 to the Revd J.P. Chown, of Bradford:

Dear Sir, Having heard that you are thinking of building a new Chapel may I be allowed to say that should you not be provided with an Architect, I should be very pleased to be your Architect for it. On the other side a list of some of the buildings erected from my designs some of which I dare say you know. I have built many Baptist Chapels and am well known to most of the Friends in London. A line from yourself in reply shall have my best attention. I am dear Sir, Yours faithfully

Much of the second book is taken up with Searle's vigorous but unsuccessful bid for the Orphan Working School at Haverstock Hill. To S. Morton Peto Esq Bart on 28 March 1861 he wrote:

Sir Morton, I am very much obliged by the kind testimonial you sent me for the Orphan Working School. I find it is likely to be rather a close contest between myself and a Mr Harrison whose Father I believe was formerly Master in the School and some of the older Members of the Committee have a bias towards him. I am Sir Morton, Yours obliged

Nevertheless, he tried hard. He sought his pastor's aid, writing to the Revd William Brock on 5 December 1861:

My dear Sir, I am a Candidate for the Surveyorship of the Orphan Working School. Sir Morton has kindly given me a testimonial with some others and I have seen most of the Gentlemen on the Comttee yand many are very favorable to my application.

There is a Mr Newson of 3 Albert Road, Regent's Park, whose voice is important on the Committee. I have seen him and he told me that he was one of your Thursday Morning hearers - and you had thanked him for a book he had written - could you venture to say a word to him on my behalf or if not

at Chapel this morning drop him a line requesting his consideration of my circular and testimonials - I think that you would have some weight.

I am my dear Sir, Yours very truly

As well as sending the 'CV' letter quoted earlier, he wrote to the Estate Committee of the Orphan Working School on 5 December 1861:

I beg to submit a list of some of the buildings erected from my designs and carried out under my superintendence and to which I may refer also I beg to enclose testimonials from the following Gentlemen, viz -

Sir Morton Peto Bart M.P.

The Sunday School Union

The British and Foreign Sailors Society

Messrs Hitchcock & Company, St Paul's Church Yard

Messrs Cornell Lyell & Webster ditto

Mr James Harvey of the firm of Bartrum & Harvey

[The list of buildings was not given in his copy book, though it says 'see over' presumably referring to the letter actually sent].

His efforts were unavailing, and Searle was clearly disappointed. He wrote with uncharacteristic tartness to Joshua Moreland on 12 December 1861:

Dear Sir, I am very sorry to find that you were not at the board of the Orphan School yesterday so that Mr Bartlett was left quite alone in the matter consequently I have lost the election - which of course I much regret after expending so much time upon it and I cannot help feeling that it would have been otherwise had all my *Friends* made an effort to attend as they promised ...

His care naturally included his own church. On 9 July 1860 he wrote to John Francis and his sons, 'Gentlemen, Mr [Frederick] Ransome has called to ask when we can meet him at Bloomsbury Chapel to examine and report on the stone work and says will Thursday the 19th inst suit you at 12 o/c ...'. Other letters relate to these arrangements. The Caen stone was already deteriorating, though it lasted another decade. On 20 May 1861 he wrote to Mr George Hatton who was setting up a new branch of the Bloomsbury mission, regretting that a committee meeting in Hackney prevented him from attending a meeting at Bloomsbury that evening to discuss arrangements for hiring a small hall to work from. Searle believed that James Harvey would meet half the expenses of this enterprise, leaving a manageable sum for the Young Men's Society to find. He recommended a monthly hiring arrangement, a limited commitment in case the work did not succeed, but suggested Hatton should talk to Harvey after the midweek service that evening.

Several letters were to fathers of prospective pupils. He explained that they did not live in but attended for office hours, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. They would remain as pupils for four to five years, without pay, and the usual premium was 100 guineas. A 'taste for drawing' was important. Another letter agreed to release a pupil from

the firm as the family were emigrating - with regret since the firm was very busy and the youth 'a very good draughtsman'. He had to tell Charles Turner's father that his son had been suspended because 'so insubordinate'. Another time he thanked a friend for helping one of his own sons to get a place.

A few letters relate to his own family concerns. The Searles' eldest son, Charles Henry, followed in the business, becoming a partner in 1862, when he was aged twenty-two. He was baptized at Bloomsbury in 1858 and subsequently his wife Annie transferred from Camden Road; the couple were dismissed to Tollington Park in 1872. The next son, Thomas John, went to work for Messrs Hitchcocks of St Paul's Church Yard. On 4 November 1859, Searle wrote to Mr C.W. Smith, expressing appreciation to him personally and to Hitchcocks for having his son work for them, but explaining he had just been offered a place with the United Kingdom Life Assurance Office, which was likely to suit his studious and mathematical nature and could lead to him becoming an Actuary. Two other sons, Henry and Francis Howard, were baptized in March 1866, but sadly Henry died that August. He wrote to the Revd C.W. Williams MA of the North London Collegiate School on 14 May 1860 about sending his ten-year-old son and his elder brother there; but the following April he moved both to the City of London School - evidently they did not like the long walk four times a day through the streets of London in their 'objectionable' collegiate caps! The later books included an application made on 19 March 1867 to the Governors of Harrow School for admission of his youngest son Septimus, then thirteen; by then the family resided at 3 Byron Road, Harrow. On 15 February 1860 Searle wrote to the Principal Librarian of the British Museum for permission to use the reading room, with a reference from Mr W.H. Hoard, and the next year recommended his own son Thomas as a reader, quoting his own number 1565.

Among the letters in the second book, there is a draft of at least part of his Will, bequeathing 'all right and interest in my business or profession as Architect and Surveyor together with the Office furniture and fittings but not my book debts' to his eldest son, Charles Henry, provided he took into his office 'as a pupil at the age of 15 one or other of my Sons either Francis Howard Searle or Septimus Cecil Searle as the case may be - provided that either one of them is willing to learn the said business or profession of an Architect and Surveyor until they attain the age of 21 years'. Then whichever brother had been trained should be taken into partnership and receive one fourth share of the business. The father did not want to coerce his sons: if they found they did not wish to work together, then the younger brother should forgo rights to the business but receive £300. Charles Henry, described in one Deed as 'Quantity Surveyor', only stayed in the firm a few years although he evidently continued in similar work, joining the Society of Architects in 1884. He lived until 1917. Meanwhile the youngest brother, Septimus Cecil, had already joined the firm. Septimus (1853-1922) was the first of the family to become, in 1879, an Associate of the Royal Institution of British Architects. Father and son

moved their business from 4 Bloomsbury Place to 66 Ludgate Hill in 1876, with Edward Hayes as a third partner for a few years.

Charles Gray Searle died in 1881 at 35 Macaulay Road, Clapham Common, where his wife died in 1897, aged 84. In 1906 Searle & Searle moved to 34 Paternoster Row: the partners were then Septimus and his son, Norman Odell Searle ARIBA, who became a partner at age twenty-five; he in turn was joined by the fourth generation, Cecil Johnstone Searle ARIBA, in 1938. Norman Searle saw his account of the firm's history, written in 1943, as being primarily for Cecil and for David O. Searle, when he returned from the war, but his hopes were evidently dashed and Cecil J. Searle was the last partner from the line, but evidently a worthy one, winning RIBA's Tite Prize in 1931. The interest in church architecture continued and Cecil, 'a gentle retiring man', was Hon. Director of Visits for the Ecclesiological Society, 1970-74. He died in June 1983, the last of the line; his obituary in the Society's newsletter⁶ noted that his itineraries and detailed notes remained, 'set out in his splendidly neat handwriting'.

A few miscellaneous letters in Charles Gray Searle's books give further glimpses of the man. He wrote to the solicitor, S.R. Pattison, about probate on the will of James Felgate, concerned for the widow who was evidently a close friend, to whom Searle signed himself 'Yours affectionately'. He entreated Pattison to deal with her business as inexpensively as possible, since the estate's debts were greater than the assets. One letter is about buying a book on homoeopathy, and there are quarterly orders for two kilderkins⁷ of beer, and for six bottles of red Lisbon wine. The later books apparently included a number of private letters to his difficult elder brother, Tom.

Until the firm's premises were burned in the war, Charles Gray Searle's 'old beechwood chairs and safe and stationery cabinet were in daily use. The Founder's Deed of Apprenticeship to the Mr Cubitt of his time had been preserved, together with the Ornate Stonelaying Trowel which the Architect of those days held ready for his Clients' use'. Also preserved was the testimonial Mr Cubitt wrote on his behalf to the New River Company. All these souvenirs of the founder were reduced to dust and ashes in December 1940.

Norman Searle made some general observations on the family firm:

Looking back over the records of 100 years of a London Architect's premises one notices in our firm that all the partnerships have been termed 'Architect and Surveyor' and also that usually one partner has been a capable Quantity Surveyor or good at Steelwork and Construction. The writer considers that these features have been remunerative in that a more thorough knowledge of building construction has thereby been obtained and practised with benefit to the Client. One also notices in the Books of the Firm the same names of Clients generation after generation and this is naturally of the utmost importance to our Partnership.

After they were bombed out in 1940, the partners took temporary accommodation at 6 Old Bailey, whence they enjoyed a view of the founder's Sunday School Union headquarters, until this too was destroyed in May 1941. In a note of 21 January 1943, Norman Searle was impressed with his grandfather's work as they watched the ruins 'pulled down with the other buildings and during this operation the 3rd and 4th generation were able to observe 1856 constructional work when wrot [*sic*] iron rivetted compound girders of very good design and quality were exposed to view. Reinforced brickwork (hoop iron bond) was considerably used in those days. There was no lack of projection to stone cornices which were skilfully tailed down'.

The sources are meagre, yet from these two Letter Books, which span less than three years, and Norman Searle's brief record of the firm, a picture emerges of a caring father and a Baptist architect, friendly and considerate, eager for work yet aware of the penny-saving requirements of chapel folk. From the church year books comes a picture of an inspired youth leader who could literally pack the boys in for Bible Study. Such was Charles Gray Searle.

NOTES

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|---|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | Hermione Hobhouse, <i>Thomas Cubitt: Master Builder</i> , 1971, p.273. | 5 | See Clyde Binfield, <i>George Williams and the YMCA</i> , 1973. |
| 2 | Adjective illegible to the present writer. | 6 | <i>Ecclesiastical Society Newsletter</i> No.11, January 1984; copy in RIBA Library file on C.J. Searle. |
| 3 | Information about this class is drawn from the reports in <i>Bloomsbury Chapel Year Books</i> , 1863-66. | 7 | A kilderkin or kinderkin was a quarter of a tun, about 16 gallons. |
| 4 | I am grateful to Basil Amey for showing me a | | |

FAITH BOWERS *Sub-editor, Baptist Quarterly*

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NOTES

The Revd Ian Randall, Tutor at Spurgeon's College and BHS committee member, received the PhD degree of the University of Wales in March 1997. His doctoral dissertation was on 'Movements of evangelical spirituality in inter-war England'.

Russian Baptist History: Vladimir A. Popov recently published two biographies of pioneers. They are *Stopy blagovestnika: zhizn' i trudy V.G. Pavlova* (Footsteps of an evangelist: the life and works of V.G. Pavlov), Moskva: Blagovestnik, 1996. - 272 s. - ISBN 5-7454-0040-4; and *I.S. Prokhanov: stranitsy zhizni* (I.S. Prochanov: pages from a life), Sankt-Petersburg: Bibliya dlya vseh, 1996 - 201 s. - ISBN 5-7454-0091-9.