

## Chapter 05

# BINGLEY EXHIBITION HALL PROJECT

In an entirely different sphere from arts and manufactures, that of cattle and poultry breeding and exhibiting, a new society was formed in Birmingham earlier in that same year of 1849, the Birmingham & Midland Counties Agricultural Association. They organised a four-day show in a temporary wooden shed in the Lower Hurst Street area in December that year, the very first of its kind to be held in the Midlands. (1) Success on that occasion encouraged them to plan for a similar event but on an even larger scale in 1850. By this time Bingley had finally been demolished, the site cleared and the railway tunnel constructed. (2) The new society, possibly with the enormously successful Exposition in mind, decided to hold their 1850 show on this vacant site.

When they asked local contractors Branson & Gwyther to design yet another temporary wooden building for this purpose, the firm responded with a design for a permanent building. This would be more cost-effective, they argued, since the outlay could eventually be recouped by renting out the accommodation between cattle shows. Indoor facilities for spacious exhibitions, large public meetings and popular entertainments like circuses were non-existent in the town at that time, so this was clearly a reasonable suggestion.

(3) The proposal was also very much in the interests of Branson & Gwyther. They were in the process of taking on a 99-year lease of 6,026 square yards of Bingies land at an annual rent of £300. The lease would require £3,000 to be spent on building work. (4) Obviously, for their commitment to be viable they needed long-term sub-tenants. Who could be better for this purpose than the owners of a permanent exhibition hall, a building that would occupy the whole of the land they were leasing from the Free School?

Whilst seeing the logic of this proposal, the society, only recently formed, was very hesitant. The estimated cost, £5,000 – at least £500,000 today – would have been seen by them as a considerable gamble, even if they felt able to raise the money. It is, therefore, quite understandable that they took a long time to reach a decision. But, after considerable delay, it was decided to instruct the builders to go ahead. To finance the scheme the Bingley Exhibition Hall Company Limited was formed, members of the Agricultural Association generously subscribing £100 each to launch the venture. (5)

By the time that Branson & Gwyther were finally awarded the contract it was already midsummer. The date for the next cattle show, mid-December, was looming large on the horizon. Not only had that but a circus troupe had already booked to open on the site in October for a couple of months' run. Faced with this deadline the contractors pulled out all the stops. Although based in Birmingham they were in fact one of the largest construction companies in the country, heavily

involved in one of the boom industries of the day, building railway stations. (Railway mania was in full swing!) They instructed a young man named Chatwin – he was barely twenty – the employee who had drawn up the plan submitted to their clients, that

*“ all materials destined for any of their works could be brought into the design and, if required, were to be directed to the site ”.* In view of Branson & Gwyther’s ample resources the materials thus placed at Chatwin’s disposal were more than adequate. (6)

Julius A. Chatwin, 1830-1907, played a key rôle in the Bingley Hall project, so it is perhaps not out of place at this stage of the narrative to give some account both of his early life and subsequent career. By far the best source, unsurprisingly, is a biography written by his son, Philip. (7)

*He left school (King Edward’s School, New Street, Birmingham) when he was sixteen and on 26th June 1846 went to Branson & Gwyther, of Birmingham, then one of the biggest contractors in the country, Mr Gwyther being a friend of John Chatwin, J.A.’s father . . . He made such good use of his opportunities that within two years Branson & Gwyther were employing him as a manager to superintend the foremen of the various works in different parts of the town . . . His principals recognised that he had great ability and, knowing his desire to become an architect, did all in their powers to place work in his way after he had completed four years in their office.*

In due course Chatwin became articulated to that eminent Victorian architect Charles Barry (later Sir Charles) working with him on the construction of the new Houses of Parliament. Completing articles in 1853, he went on to enjoy a long and distinguished career, specialising in church architecture. Other major projects of his in the Midlands include King Edward's Grammar School, Aston, and Wolverhampton's splendid art gallery. Several bank buildings for which he was responsible are still in use today, notably the one in Temple Row, Birmingham. Built originally as headquarters of the Birmingham Joint Stock Bank, it later became a branch office of Lloyds TSB. It has now been converted into a public house, "The Old Joint Stock", a name that must puzzle most of the customers but which is a praiseworthy link with the building's original purpose.

According to his son, Chatwin "*did not superintend the carrying out of the plans, that was placed by the committee in the hands of Mr Hemming, a Birmingham architect*", but Branson & Gwyther, Philip added, "*always considered my father the architect of the building*". In the Commonplace Book which he kept at the time, young Chatwin noted, on 2 September 1850, that "*the quantity of land taken by the Building Committee for the erection of the Exhibition Hall, Broad Street, for Cattle Shows &c is 1 acre ¼*". (8) He followed this entry with a detailed description of the new building and the materials used.

*Bingley Hall is erected on the site of Bingley House, Birmingham. It is in the*

*Roman Doric style, the external walls being built of blue and red bricks, the former being employed in the plinth, pilasters, cornices and copings and the latter in other parts of the work. When we say Doric this is merely an approximation inasmuch as the building having been constructed with ordinary bricks, it has been impossible to observe any strictly pure style. The external length of the front is 224 ft and the depth 212 feet. Altogether the Hall covers an area of 1¼ acre enclosed and roofed in . . . it required 11,700 supl [superficial] ft of 21oz sheet glass in squares 40" long by 10" broad, being at the rate of 1 foot of glass to every 4 foot of floor. No less than 50,000 duchess slates have been used; 6,000 cubic foot of timber; 650,000 bricks; 100 tons of cast and wrought iron; 15 tons of lead. It has cost £5,000 . . . It was erected in 2 months (9 weeks). (9)*

From his father's papers Philip also discovered that "*most of the bricks were those originally intended for Oxford Street viaduct, Birmingham, (which is the reason for the use of blue bricks) . . . and the ironwork of the roof and columns had been intended for railway stations*". (10) Other sources are even more specific and claim that this ironwork had been ordered from a Black Country firm for Euston Station – another of Branson & Gwyther's contracts – but became available due to a change of plans in London. Whatever the case, Bingley Hall, unsurprisingly,

came to look rather like a railway station – “*like a goods yard*” wrote one harsh critic! – and was difficult to disguise. “*Bingley Hall does not naturally lend itself to the decorator’s art – in fact, not to put too fine a point on it, it is one of the ugliest places one can possibly conceive*”, grumbled one particularly unhappy exhibitor. (11)

However, severe criticisms like this were made only much later in the century. Back in 1850 there seems to have been just one objection of any consequence: “*The gutters were too long and in a heavy rainstorm . . . the water from the roofs could not possibly get away.*” But Chatwin had foreseen this problem. His design provided plentiful outlets in each gutter, the water being allowed to drain down the centres of the many hollow columns. (12) Joseph Paxton had pioneered this method at Chatsworth a few years earlier. Perhaps Bingley Hall’s young designer had heard of this and, very sensibly, adopted the clever innovation. (13)

Returning to Chatwin’s carefully detailed account of the materials used in the construction of the hall, there can be little doubt that it was prepared and issued as a press release. Contemporary newspapers carried his narrative almost word for word, although, typically, some of them managed to reverse the measurements of the frontage and the depth, an error parroted again and again by others over the years. Despite Mr Hemming’s senior rôle, Chatwin’s script reads remarkably like that of someone very much in the forefront of the project throughout the nine weeks. It has to be acknowledged that the rapid construction of the hall, achieved without the aid of

the sophisticated equipment available today, was a remarkable performance. The workmanship too, although speedily carried out, would stand the test of time admirably.

Handed over to the proud new owners on Saturday, 13 October 1850, absolutely on time, the building was brought into service the very next day. A troupe from a renowned circus family, the Cookes, set up their show-ring on the Sunday. Their opening performance on Monday, 15 October, of which more later, was followed by a very successful run. (14)

Branson & Gwyther's first lease covered about half the area that had been leased by the Farmers and the Lloyds. Later on, the other half of the Bingley site – and, indeed, the whole of the original Binges territory – would be built up. (In 1854 Branson & Gwyther leased a further 1,392 square yards, next to the original site, in order to extend the premises.) (15) However, only Bingley Hall's title continued to echo the ancient Binges name. This places the other buildings on the site outside the scope of these pages. In any case, the most interesting of them, the late lamented Prince of Wales Theatre, built in 1856, but terminally damaged during a German bombing raid in 1941, has been adequately dealt with by others.