

Bligh Bond - A Colourful Architect

by Kate Pollard

Shirehampton Public Hall and Public Library are celebrating their first centenary. The Public Hall is now managed by local volunteers and hosts a wide spectrum of community activities and leisure pastimes. The Library, once the Carnegie Free Library, became Shirehampton Public Library. One plan is to publish and exhibit the Hall's history and memorabilia; we decided to start with its Grade Two listing – with surprising results!

When Shire Parish Council wanted a public meeting place, it approached the landowner, Squire Miles, at Kingsweston House, and in 1902 he donated a site and £100 towards building costs. (In early Edwardian currency, the labourers' pay averaged just over one old pound a week, and eventual building costs would amount to £2,000). They commissioned Frederick Bligh Bond as designer.



Frederick Bligh Bond

Bond was a notable Bristol architect living between 1864 – 1945. From 1888 his many designs were in evidence all over Bristol – Barton Hill, Easton and Southville Board Schools; the University's Medical and Engineering Schools; Clifton College Music School; Greenbank Elementary and St Georges' Schools - were all his work. In 1900-02 he added 30-39 Davis Street, in neighbouring Avonmouth and The Wylands in Shire and at some time, 19-29 Station Road.

Bond's grand new Hall was ceremonially opened in 1904. Built from local Penpole Quarry limestone, it was dressed with Bath stone, and finished with a Cumberland slate roof. It boasted a turret with clock tower and weather vane, and two cupolas. It was ornately decorated in Arts and Crafts style. Church architecture enthusiast that he was, Bond gave its main internal hall a barrel ceiling, giving the space an excellent acoustic. This may have been at the request of Squire Miles, who was a musician and composer. *Lark Ascending* was premiered in the Hall to coincide with a visit of its composer, his friend Vaughan Williams', to Kingsweston House.

Arts and Crafts, an English revival of decorative art, began in 1875 and then became tinged with the Victorian mission to 'Elevate the Common Man'. Arts and Crafts ornamentation was designed to bring art to the man in the street – though the Hall's ornamentation has been described as 'freer and friendlier!').

The Parish Hall became the Public Hall and 'Carnegie' became 'Public' Library as Shire soon became part of Bristol.

Bristol, an Architectural History describes Bond as 'an architect of real, though erratic talent, a colourful figure and an archaeologist of some repute'. Since childhood, Bond had been fascinated by the Life and Death Question and Universal Memory.

We next find him working in Glastonbury - a place somehow destined to attract colourful figures. Three years after the Hall's opening, Glastonbury Abbey ruins were auctioned. Badly damaged during the Dissolution of the Monasteries, by 1907 not much was left above ground except the collapsing tower, crumbling Lady Chapel, and rubble. As often happened, the missing stone had been robbed for other new buildings.

The ruins were bought for the Church and later vested into the Bath and Wells Diocesan Trust. The Trust immediately carried out repairs and agreed to the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society's proposal to excavate the site. The Society commissioned Frederick Bligh Bond as Director – an archaeologist who knew a lot about church architecture.



The Glastonbury Gardens Well Covering designed by Bligh Bond

Bond directed several seasons of digging at the Abbey, proving its original dimensions and the existence of its lost Edgar Chapel. Apart from St Paul's Cathedral, the Abbey was now established as the longest church in England. Everyone was happy up to this point. But some of Bond's other off-beat interests surfaced, and he did two unwise things, (as it turned out) in respect of his archaeological status.

Firstly, he delivered a 1916 lecture suggesting that the Glastonbury mediaeval church builders had used occult 'gematria' – an ancient science of sacred geometry, he believed, using embedded mathematical formulae contained in the Old Testament Book of Numbers. This seriously upset the listening Dr Robinson, Dean of Wells.

Second, Bond followed his 1909 orthodox treatise on church roodscreens and roodlofts with a distinctly unorthodox 1919 publication which rocked both the Church and the Archaeological establishments - '*The Gate of Remembrance*'. This disclosed that his Glastonbury excavations had been guided by occult means – 'automatic writing' messages received from the Abbey's departed mediaeval monks. Bond had long been a member of the Psychical Research Society and had experimented through a fellow member who was developing for himself this form of Spiritualism. Bond regarded this as a legitimate and successful scientific experiment - it had revealed the Abbey's layout, its sacred geometry and details of the daily lives of its former monks.

Early archaeology was less science-based than today's, as Time Team's techno-malarkeys show, but Bond's excavation had been otherwise impeccable. Dr Raleigh Radford, the archaeologist excavating at the Abbey in 1962, remarked that Bond's archaeological methodology was 'as advanced as any at the time'. The plan of the Abbey's architecture may well have been extremely significantly geometric. Huge church buildings would require knowledgeable building geometry. They were built by mediaeval Masons, members of a craft guild like any other, who passed down

a thing or two, (esoteric knowledge or not), about putting up top-heavy church buildings. Possibly Bond was a Mason himself.

When Bond published the news that his excavations had been guided by occult means, unsurprisingly the excavation funding dried up. In 1922 Bond was relieved of his archaeological post. His 'establishment' cover blown, Bond lectured in America, edited the *Psychical Research Journal* and developed his occult interests 'in his own time'. Another next-world script described a 'ganglia of spiritual forces, following the solar windings' of the landscape. Bond linked that in with the geometry and siting of ancient buildings – and the Glastonbury area - predating the 1927 publication of Watkins' *The Old Straight Track*, which theorised that prehistoric standing stones, mounds etc were markers for travellers of the time to traverse the landscape. Together these early 'Ley-Line' men provided theories for 1970s hippies to develop further into landscape zodiacs and centres of spiritual power, to incorporate into a kind of 'Lost Golden Age' thesis.

Back at Shirehampton Public Hall, history gathering continues. If anyone in Shire – especially living those Bond houses in Station Road! - has any further Shire local history information, do please get in touch with Jeanette Cossey on bookings@shirepubhall.org.uk or please ring her on 9829963. The Hall would love to hear from you.

This article is included on this site by kind permission of Bristol United Press and Bristol Evening Post. It first appeared in the Evening Post on 2 December 2003.

Contact the author at katepollard@onetel.net.uk