

VAUGHAN, EDWIN MONTGOMERY BRUCE (1856-1919), architect

Name: Edwin Montgomery Bruce Vaughan
Date of birth: 1856
Date of death: 1919
Gender: Male
Occupation: architect
Area of activity: Art and Architecture
Author: Alun Roberts

Bruce Vaughan was born 6 March 1856 at Frederick Street, Cardiff, the youngest of the four children of Thomas Vaughan, sailor and tailor, and his wife Jane Agnes Gribble (née Davies). Educated at a private school in Charles Street, Cardiff, Bruce Vaughan became articled to W D Blessley, a prominent local architect, and attended the Cardiff Science and Arts Schools, winning the medal of the Architectural Association in 1880.

In the following year he was elected an Associate of the Royal Institute of British Architects, becoming a Fellow in 1891. Between 1895 and 1897 he served on the Council of the Institute. He started in independent practice in 1881 and during the course of a long career established himself as the most prolific church architect in south Wales up until the First World War. In Glamorgan alone he was the architect for some forty-five churches, most designed in the cheap and simple Early English Gothic style which characterised his first creation, St Mary Magdalene's church, Cwmbach dating from 1881/2. Few were regarded at the time, or since, as architectural gems, being primarily intended as workmanlike buildings to serve the mining communities of south Wales with limited funds at their disposal. However, some improved funding did ensure that several of Bruce Vaughan's churches erected during the early years of the twentieth century were somewhat superior to the norm hitherto, an example being All Saints church, Barry. He was also responsible for carrying out extensions and renovations to some twenty other churches. It is generally agreed that his greatest achievement as a church builder was the church of St James the Great, Roath, in a fashionable part of Cardiff, near to his home and built between 1891 and 1894 at a cost of £10,000, several times more than the average (£1,500). His commissions were not however confined to churches. Among his other creations were board schools and public libraries in the Cardiff suburbs of Canton and Grangetown, an elegant Working Men's Institute in Llanbradach, near Caerphilly and Tyn-to-Maen, a handsome country house in St Mellons, on the outskirts of Cardiff, erected 1885-9 in a style reminiscent of William Burges, and later to become the William Nicholls Convalescent Home.

Despite his heavy professional commitments Bruce Vaughan, who never married, became actively engaged in the Volunteer movement during the 1880s and 1890s, rising by stages to the honorary rank of Lieutenant-Colonel in the 3rd Volunteer Battalion, the Welch Regiment in 1900. However, though involved in the work of the Volunteer movement until his death, from the turn of the century Bruce Vaughan, already the architect of hospitals in Aberystwyth and Llanelli, began to interest himself in the wellbeing of his local hospital, then known as the Cardiff Infirmary (to be renamed the King Edward VII Hospital in 1911).

At that time the hospital, originally established in 1837, was failing to keep up with the demands of a rapidly growing community, despite its relocation to a new site nearby in the early 1880s. Appointed as chairman of the Infirmary's House Committee in 1903 Bruce Vaughan embarked on a mission to ameliorate the situation by the upgrading of the facilities, the expansion in the number of beds and the securing of sufficient funds on an ongoing basis to enable the hospital to live, and flourish, within its means. Under his stewardship the hospital increased its bed complement, from 188 at the beginning of the century to 260 by the end of the decade. During the same period modern new facilities were erected, notably an outpatients' department and x-ray suite (quaintly known as the 'electrical pavilion') and a department of pathology officially opened in 1908 and 1912 respectively. Much of this development came from donations secured from wealthy local businessmen such as John Cory, the shipowner, and from a substantial increase in the annual contributions of working men. What was undeniable was that the driving-force was Bruce Vaughan, a superb fund-raiser who revelled in the title 'the prince of beggars'. It was estimated at the time of his death that he had succeeded in raising, from public and private sources, a sum approaching £500,000 to support the work of the hospital.

Arguably Bruce Vaughan's greatest contribution to Welsh public life was as the driving force in seeing his beloved hospital enhance its standing by associating itself with plans to convert the Cardiff Medical School, a preclinical institution, into a school which provided clinical training. He pledged that the hospital's new pathology department would provide facilities for a professor when appointed. Moreover he was determined that the whole medical school should continue to be located near the hospital rather than see the preclinical departments relocated to Cathays Park as part of W. D. Caroe's grand plan for University College, Cardiff. To that end he persuaded south Wales's greatest philanthropist, Sir William James Thomas, to fund a state-of-the-art Institute of Physiology for the school on condition that it was built on Newport Road. Though the outbreak of war briefly held up the commencement of the project, much to the annoyance of Bruce Vaughan who to the surprise of nobody had been commissioned to design the building, he left the official stone-laying ceremony in August 1915 with the praise of all present ringing in his ears. The central feature of the building, ready for use in 1919, was a handsome Gothic tower, built as the entrance to the Institute and generally regarded as Bruce Vaughan's finest architectural achievement.

By no means all the clinical staff had shared Bruce Vaughan's enthusiasm for the transformation of the hospital from being a traditional voluntary hospital into a modern teaching hospital. However, supported in particular by John Lynn Thomas, the senior surgeon, he dismissed those of his clinical colleagues who seemed reluctant to embrace progress as motivated by 'selfish self-interest', and actively collaborated with academic staff from the medical school in preparing a memorandum, 'Proposed completion of the Medical School', for meetings with representatives of the University of Wales and the Treasury led by David Lloyd George, chancellor of the exchequer, in the spring of 1914. At one of these meetings Bruce Vaughan revealed the intention of Sir William James Thomas to increase his beneficence to the school to a total sum of £90,000 (equivalent to some £5m today) by funding an Institute of Preventive Medicine on the Newport Road site, to the annoyance of the principal of University College, Cardiff who felt that Bruce Vaughan was, once again, compromising the College's wider development priorities. Writing to David Davies MP he grumbled, rather uncharitably: 'We are in the hands of one whose interests are confined to the Medical School and the Hospital and who, as in a sense the self-appointed architect, naturally thinks chiefly of a great pile of buildings which will redound to his credit'. It is true that one of Bruce Vaughan's preoccupations during the First World War was to badger the Treasury to allow building work on the Institutes of Physiology and Preventive Medicine to proceed despite wartime restrictions, with some success. Another preoccupation was to ensure that the King Edward VII Hospital enjoyed adequate representation on the governing body of what was, by now, being called the Welsh National School of Medicine. After all 'the hospital is practically the School of Medicine'.

Sadly, Bruce Vaughan did not live to see the Welsh National School of Medicine open as a clinical institution in partnership with the King Edward VII Hospital in 1921. He fell ill in April 1919 and died two months later on 13 June 1919, much to the regret of the *Western Mail*: 'Seldom has the public life of any community been impoverished by the decease of one man as the public life of Cardiff is impoverished by the death of Colonel E. M. Bruce Vaughan'. Many of the leading figures of Welsh public life attended his funeral at St John's church, Cardiff and among those who accompanied him to his last resting-place in the Old Cemetery, Adamsdown were a large throng of bareheaded medical students. The cemetery was closed in 1948 and his memorial stone, for some years resting against a perimeter wall and daubed with red paint, has disappeared. Fortunately many other memorials to this dedicated man remain, not least the Institute of Physiology, now Cardiff University's School of Engineering.

Author

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Further Reading

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