

High Victorian Gothic: Thomas Worthington's Venetian Hall in the Heart of Manchester

Thomas Worthington (1826–1909) was born in Salford to a Unitarian cotton merchant, left school to be articled to the Manchester-based architect Henry Bowman (1814–83), and today is known for a number of high Victorian Gothic buildings in and around Manchester, as well as in Liverpool and Oxford. A number of subsequent blog posts will cover a selection of Worthington's most important and interesting architectural projects in and around Manchester, assess the scope and nature of Victorian Gothic design, and demonstrate the legacy of his style.

The first building to be considered in this run of posts on Worthington is The Memorial Hall, Nos 1 and 3 Southmill Street, which borders the south-west corner of Albert Square at the heart of Manchester (**Fig.1**). The Hall's importance was recognized by English Heritage in February 1972 when it was listed Grade II* (1254637)¹—the grade awarded to particularly important buildings that are of very special interest. It was erected to commemorate the 2,000 nonconformist clergy who seceded from the Church of England in 1662 as a result of the Act of Uniformity.

Whilst a modest Gothic addition to the square, which is dominated by the Town Hall designed by Alfred Waterhouse between 1863 and 1877, Worthington's Memorial Hall nevertheless demonstrates a number of stand-out features that define and differentiate his particular variety of Gothic.

Firstly, one of the major themes of Worthington's architecture is the use of different materials on the exterior façades. In this instance red brick contrasts with yellow sandstone. These materials are used in a specific way to create alternating bands of colour—polychrome—including horizontal bands throughout each of the floors, and also in the arch heads of the windows. Demonstrating the potential of such polychrome schemes is Keble College, Oxford, designed by William Butterfield and erected from 1868, including its monumental Chapel (**Fig.2**). Like Butterfield's geometric use of polychrome detail, Worthington's Memorial Hall is ultimately based upon the recommendation of John Ruskin (1819–1900), one of the great Victorian writers on art and design. Ruskin had published his *Seven Lamps of Architecture* in 1849, and in it he celebrated the artistic freedom that Gothic architecture offered, and he recommended architects follow the style of Gothic that he discovered and explored in Venice—Venetian Gothic. Another of his recommendations was the use of polychromed façades. Writing in *Seven Lamps* he advised that

All arrangements of colour, for its own sake, in graceful forms, are barbarous; and that, to paint a colour pattern with the lovely lines of a Greek leaf moulding, is an utterly savage procedure. I cannot find anything in natural colour like this: it is not in the bond. I find it in all natural form—never in natural colour. If, then, our architectural colour is to be beautiful as its form was, be being imitative, we are limited to these conditions—to simple masses of it, to zones, as in the rainbow and the zebra; cloudings and flamings, as in marble shells and plumage, or spots of various shapes and dimensions. [...] The zone may become a delicate line, and arrange itself in chequers

¹ <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1254637>.

*and zig-zags. [...] The most exquisite harmonies may be composed of these simple elements: some soft and full, of flushed and melting spaces of colour; others piquant and sparking, or deep and rich, formed of close groups of the fiery fragments.*²

This accords with the use of colour on the façades of both Worthington's Memorial Hall, and Butterfield's Keble College.

Also following Ruskin's recommendation, Memorial Hall's top floor adopts a particular form of Gothic tracery and window design that is quite distinct from English medieval examples. It is, instead, entirely consistent with Venetian Gothic as exhibited by some of the most famous Venetian buildings, including the Doge's Palace (**Fig.3**), Ca' d'Oro (Palazzo Santa Sofia), and Ca' Foscari (**Fig.4**), all of which are on the Grand Canal. Plate VIII from *Seven Lamps* (**Fig.5**) illustrated this peculiar type of repeating window form with cusped ogee arch lancets crowned by encircled quatrefoils. Worthington applied this Venetian Gothic form repeatedly along the top register of the Memorial Hall, consequently making it an example of High Ruskinian Gothic in central Manchester. Whilst following the form of Gothic approved of by Ruskin, the building is also undoubtedly influenced by what Worthington saw on his second Italian tour, from which returned to Britain in 1858.

The following posts explore other buildings by Worthington, demonstrate other leitmotifs of his style, and also how the definition of Gothic could stray in the Victorian period away from what we consider to be the defining feature of the medieval style—the pointed arch.

Fig.1: The Memorial Hall Façade facing Albert Square. KJP1 (CC BY-SA 3.0).

Fig.2: View of the Quadrangle and Chapel, Keble College, Oxford. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.3 Doge's Palace, view from the Grand Canal. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.4: Interior view towards the Grand Canal of the Venetian Gothic Windows, Ca' Foscari. Cafoscaritour (CC BY-SA 3.0).

Fig.5: Plate VIII from Ruskin's *Seven Lamps* (1849). Image in Public Domain.

² John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (London, 1849), p. 129.