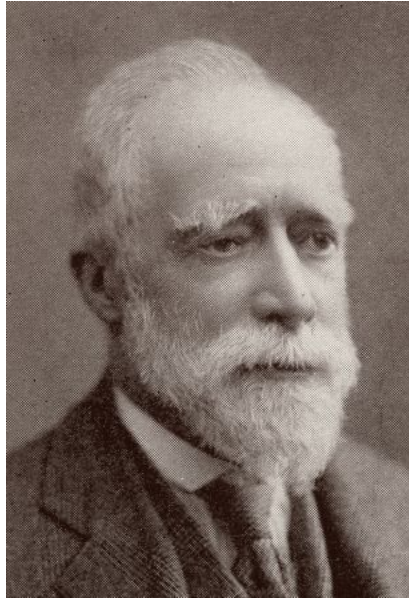


PEOPLE HEADINGLEY



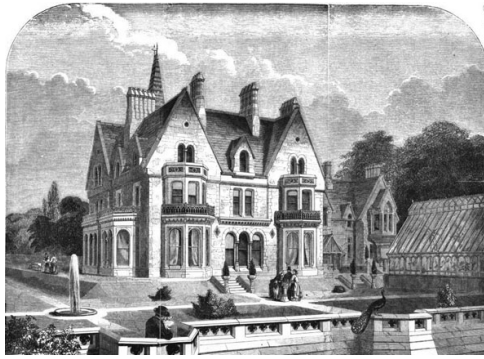
George Corson 1829-1910
Architect

If you walk along Wood Lane from Headingley, you'll see set back on your right a massive stone gatepost with the engraved name 'Dunearn'. It's all that remains now of the imposing house which the distinguished Leeds architect George Corson built for himself here in 1871, as his home and as a showcase for his skills. In his day he was the pre-eminent architect in Leeds, responsible for some of the city's landmark buildings including the Grand Theatre and the Central Library with its magnificent 'Tiled Hall'. He lived here in Headingley for over 50 years and played a part in the development and character of the neighbourhood.



His success and reputation were won almost entirely within Leeds but he was not a Leeds man himself. A Scot, born in Dumfries in 1829, he began his early training with the distinguished Scottish architect Walter Newall, following in the footsteps of his elder brother William Reid Corson. William left for London to continue his architectural training with the influential designer Owen Jones, but then set up in practice in Leeds, initially in partnership with another architect/designer, Edward La Trobe Bateman – Leeds's booming economy must have seemed to offer exciting prospects. George joined them in 1849 aged just 20. His work in the practice gave him valuable hands-on career experience, but he was also allowed time to travel in Europe and around the country. In 1851 he visited the Great Exhibition in London where he could see first-hand Owen Jones' exotic interior design for the Crystal Palace. Jones's work, notably his magnificent publications on the Alhambra, was an early influence on Corson, visible in his frequent use of Moorish features and his rich use of colour and decoration.

Fox Hill, Weetwood, 1862



George worked under his brother's name on a range of commissions, forging valuable connections professionally and socially with the important men of the day, but in 1858 when his brother moved to take over a practice in Manchester he got the chance to establish himself in his own right. He took on a wide portfolio of work across the thriving business community: warehouses for William Lupton & Co, Cloth Merchants; new brewery buildings for Tetley's, whose architect he remained for some 40 years; sale rooms for Hepper & Sons, Agents and Auctioneers; retail premises and offices around the city centre. He branched out into school and church design, building two churches which sadly no longer survive. His business connections led to domestic work too: at Weetwood he designed the grandiose Fox Hill (now Moorlands School) for Francis William Tetley and in Headingley the more modest Clareville in Cardigan Road for John Hepper, one of the first houses to be built on the site of the old Zoological Gardens.



Clareville, Cardigan Road

The 1870s/80s saw his greatest success and achievements. In 1873 he won the competition for the lay-out of the newly-acquired Roundhay Park and the development of its adjacent estate. In 1876 he came first in the prestigious competition for the design of the new Public Offices in Leeds (now the Central Library building) and the adjoining School Board Offices, with a palatial design of classical grandeur to match Brodrick's magnificent Town Hall across the way. In the same year he took on another important and much heralded project for a new Grand Theatre and Opera House, designating his assistant (also trained in Dumfries) to visit the great European opera houses and oversee the work. When the Grand opened in 1878 it was hailed as the finest theatre in the land. Among his private commissions, one of the finest was the impressive house 'Spenfield' (now apartments, next to the Village Hotel) designed for the Oxley family of bankers. Highly respected by his professional colleagues, in 1877 he was appointed the first President of the Leeds Architectural Association which aimed to foster high standards in building and promote the ongoing improvement of the town.



Spenfield, Otley Road, 1875

The opening of the Leeds Public Offices in 1884 after 8 years of consultation and revision brought him many accolades: dubbed 'the People's Palace', its rich décor and handsome features, including the magnificent 'Tiled Hall', were much admired and established him as Leeds's pre-eminent architect. It remains today one of Leeds's finest

buildings, well worth exploring or re-visiting. On the strength of this great public success he entered competitions elsewhere for similar projects, including in Glasgow where he won first prize but lost the contract. So he remained in Leeds, focussed on work within the town or nearby, his final major work an extension to George Gilbert Scott's General Infirmary. His success and reputation were based on his commitment to his projects: his attention to detail and to his client's needs and wishes; the variety of his architectural skills and facility in rich ornamentation; and his concern for quality, employing always the best available materials and craftsmen.

He led a quiet private life. He came to Headingley to live around 1860, renting a house in St George's Terrace, Claremont Road, one of the spacious new stone terraces built in the 1850s on the old Headingley Moor. In 1871, when he was 42 years old, he designed and built his house, 'Dunearn', on land purchased from the Cardigan estate in leafy Wood Lane. The house was featured in professional journals – an extravagant design in stone from the Weetwood quarries, with a steep red tiled roof broken by numerous gables, with turrets and half-timbering, and rich decorative features. Inside it was spacious and well equipped, with three reception rooms, six bedrooms and two dressing



Dunearn, Wood Lane, 1902 © The Thoresby Society

rooms, all provided with the luxury of washbasins, and good services and servants' quarters. It was a house for a successful professional man, a visible symbol of his status and achievement. He married late in life, at 53, and it was here that he brought his wife and they raised their three children – none of whom followed him into architecture. Their holiday home on the west coast of Scotland was a frequent family retreat.

He played an active part in local Headingley affairs. He was the architect for the new Parochial Institute, opened in 1884 in Bennett Road, with its tall church-like window and ornate low porch (now the Vineyard Church). He designed the buildings and the layout of the grounds at Lawnswood cemetery, which in 1875 took over as the burial ground for Headingley when St Michael's graveyard was closed. He acted as adviser on the possible extension of the old St Michael's church when it was proving too small for its congregation. However his principal local interest was in the development of Wood Lane and the newly planned Shire Oak Road, where he bought plots of land from the Cardigan estate.



Parochial Institute, Bennett Road

In Wood Lane, on the plot next to the one designated for his own house, he built the tall stone house called St. Ives, which still survives, extended during the twentieth century, now converted into apartments. This large, well-equipped house, set in spacious grounds with stables and a coach house, would guarantee him neighbours of a certain standing; he rented it out, first for a Ladies' seminary and then to the distinguished industrialist

Colonel Thomas Walter Harding. Along the newly-formed Shire Oak Road, he bought and refurbished the old farm behind Headingley Hall (now divided into cottages and called Corson Court), and as the road was opened up and developed during the 1880s, he



built a large house at the end, St Michael's Mount (1883), for William Wailes, a wealthy stockbroker (demolished and replaced by the Mary Morris International Residence), and a pair of semi-detached houses, Ballamona and Ravenstone (now Haley's Hotel) in 1887. All these properties were rented to their occupants initially rather than sold: he did not put them up for sale until 1903, after his retirement.

Ballamona and Ravenstone, Shire Oak Road

When he retired from practice around 1900, he sold Dunearn, moved for a time to Ballamona in Shire Oak Road, then left in 1908 to move to a smaller house close by: 14 Woodland Park Road, off Wood Lane, where he died in 1910, aged 80, after a period of illness. He was buried at Lawnswood, the first grave in the new section of the cemetery. His grave is a simple Celtic cross and says little of him beyond that he was an architect, with Scottish family origins; his wife, who left Leeds after his death, was buried there in 1928. It's a plain, modest memorial: his true memorial is to be found in the handsome buildings he left as a legacy to his adopted town of Leeds.



Woodland Park Road

Eveleigh Bradford

Local Historian, 2022

See also Chapter 12 of Eveleigh Bradford's *Headingley* (2008), and for a fuller account of George Corson's career, watch Eveleigh's talk 'A Rich Legacy: George Corson, 1829-1910, Architect of Leeds', 3 November 2021, for The Thoresby Society, on *YouTube* at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1c6216Ofk8E>

For more historic Headingley figures, go to [People in the Past](#).