

Retirement of Mr Samuel Bird - Nearly 60 years with Peterborough Contractors

Generalled the Great Restoration of Minister

A great participator in the restoration of many of the Cathedrals and Churches of England, Mr Samuel Bird, of Burghley Square Peterborough, is to retire on the 25th of this month. This is after 59 years and 8 months continued service with Messrs John Thompson and Sons Ltd, the world famed firm of contractors. Although still in full possession of his faculties he has reached the ripe old age of 77 years and feels, in his own words that "he has had enough and should make way for a younger man".

An "Advertiser" representative called on Mr Bird on Tuesday, found him busy in his office situated in the extensive yards behind Messrs Thompson's business premises in Cromwell Road. There for the past 30 years he has been general foreman supervising the fashioning of crude slabs of timber into works of art that, eventually beautified Cathedrals and Churches in all parts of the country. Alert, and epitomising the craftsman that is said to be fast disappearing, his greeting was a friendly one, accompanied by a ready smile and a hearty shake of the hand showing that he carried his 77 years lightly.

Early Years

This wonderful man began his career, he explained, with his father, the late Mr James Bird, of Grafton Underwood. He was apprenticed as a joiner to his father, who was a builder residing on the estate of the Duke of Buccleuch of Broughton House nr Geddington, Northants, for whom they did contract work. In 1874 he came to Peterborough and his long connection with Messrs Thompson began. His first job in the city was to assist in the erection of the roof of the premises of this journal in Cumbergate.

Six years later he became foreman and works manager and his first important charges was supervision, in 1880, of the restoration of St John's Church when the galleries that ran round the interior were taken down, the roof taken off and replaced with oak, and new seating installed. With the completion of this restoration, Mr Bird had established a reputation of the highest order, and in succeeding years he was engaged at various times on no less than four cathedrals – Peterborough, Lincoln, Rochester and Chester besides numerous Churches. On January 1st, 1883, he was put in charge of the rebuilding of the Central Tower of Peterborough Minster, a work which took ten years to complete. He has vivid memories of the laying of the corner stone on May 7th, 1883, recalling that it was done by the Earl of Carnarvon, Worshipful Grand Master of Freemasons in the name of H.R.H Prince Albert Edward of Wales. He and the present Editor of this Journal, both young men at the time, were side by side at that important ceremony, and have not lost sight, or admiration of each other since !.

"There was a great gathering of Freemasons on that occasion" Mr Bird remarked, "and copies of the Advertiser" and "The Times" together with current coins of the Realm, from £1 to a sliver penny, new from the mint, were placed beneath the stone. Mr J T Irvine was the clever Architects Clerk of the Works at the time.

West Front Restored

About 1897 he erected the massive timber scaffold (alone costing £1000) to the West Front of the Minister, and took down the upper part of the Front which was leaning towards the Market Place. After restoration the whole was rebuilt, with its Saints and Great Wheel Window, each stone carefully numbered so it could be put back in its original position, where its soundness permitted. It was an enormous and responsible task. At other Cathedrals his restoration work included; Rochester

(West Front); Lincoln (Chapter House, Library and Cloisters); and Chester (Chapter House and new Groin, Ceilings to the South Transept and Aisles). He also travelled the country to Shoreham Church, Brighton, Lambourne Church, Berks, St John's Church, Eton, Selwyn College, Cambridge etc. In 1903, Mr Bird, returned to Peterborough from Chester to take charge as general manager of the shops on the retirement of the late Mr E Frisby, and has supervised the works in the joinery department for 30 years.

Finished products have gone from this department to the following places amongst many; Ripon Cathedral; St Asaph's Cathedral; North Wales, St George's Chapel, Windsor; Imperial Service College, Windsor; Church House, London; Braintree Town Hall; New Church, Bournemouth; American Church, Paris; Crowland Abbey; Oundle School Chapel; Coventry Cathedral; New Church at Dalkeith, Scotland; Sandringham House, Sandringham Church; Gedling (Notts) Church; Sherburn Church, Melton Mowbray Church, New National Provincial Bank Peterborough, Barclays Bank Peterborough and the new Municipal Buildings Peterborough. Works for Manchester Reference Library and Nunthorpe Church (Yorks) is now in hand.

A Timber Expert

Mr Bird is considered an expert in his knowledge of all kinds of timber, and has been buyer for the firm for 30 years, thus becoming well known to most of the timber merchants in both London and the provinces. An official of the firm said his purchases had run into thousands of pounds, and as he was a good business man, his services had been invaluable.

Mr Bird has had as many as 100 men under his control, at a given job, a figure that varies according to the amount of work in hand. Until the war years, the day's work began 6 am, but although now it begins at 8 am Mr Bird still rises at 5.30 despite his 77 years!

Messrs John Thompson Ltd, appears to attract men who stay with them for years, and foreman, besides Mr Bird, who remained with them for 50 years include Mr Ted Frisby, Mr Jim Ball, Mr Jack Gatony and Mr John Rowell, all of whom were expert craftsmen.

The firm has changed considerably during Mr Bird's time. Until 1898 the principal was Mr John Thompson, and when he died it became John Thompson & Co, the principals being Mr Walter Hill, Mr Thomas John Thompson and Mr Walter Stuart Thompson. In 1909, when Mr Hill died, the present title John Thompson & Sons Ltd was adopted, Mr J T Thompson and Mr W S Thompson continuing together until 1915, when the former died, leaving Mr W S Thompson as the present principal.

Over 50 years at Minster

Apart from his work, Mr Bird has been associated with Peterborough Minster for 53 years. He has been a member of the Voluntary Choir, and carried the cross which was a memorial to Bishop Thicknesse. The later he does still, adding dignity to the processions by his upright demeanour. He has also been a member of the Board of the Peterborough Provincial Benefit Building Society for 40 years and is a Vice President. His technical knowledge is invaluable in his position as one of the surveyors of the Society.

Mr Bird was married at Grafton Underwood, and he and Mrs Bird, who is still with him, although in indifferent health, celebrated their Golden Wedding four years ago last Easter. One son is a school master in London, another is at Peterborough Post Office and a third in the City Engineer's Department.

Mr Bird will continue to reside in the City during his retirement and citizens will wish him a happy enjoyment of his closing years as a just reward for his services to the community at large during so great a period of his life.