

George Myers, 1803–75, Stonemason, Builder, Contractor

PATRICIA SPENCER-SILVER

Records of British nineteenth century building firms are scarce and little is known of the men who owned and managed them. Research is difficult as archive libraries seldom index builders and with one or two exceptions they did not warrant obituaries or entries in the DNB. George Myers was one of the greatest and most prolific of these men. It has been possible gradually to piece together the pattern of his life and work, and although many parts are still missing, a picture is emerging.

Early Years

In the Spring of 1873, George Myers applied to become a Freeman of the Carpenters' Company and subsequently of the City of London. He declared that he had been born in Hull, Yorkshire, in the year 1803, "the son of George Myers, Whitesmith, etc.", and that he was "not an alien". No other reference to his birth has been discovered.

From 1791 to 1823 the name 'George Myers, Whitesmith' is to be found in the Hull directories. He lived first in Waterworks Street and then at 8, Ordovas Place, Chariot Street, so presumably that is where Myers spent his boyhood. Hull, then a prosperous east coast port, was described in 1826 [1] as a town where the shops rivalled any outside London and where there were "a number of well regulated 'public' schools . . . a spacious theatre, a large and well selected subscription library and a good museum". Although nothing is known of young Myers' early schooling, it appears that good education facilities were available in Hull.

Sir G. G. Scott, for whom Myers later worked, recorded in his autobiography that Myers had been apprenticed to William Comins, the master mason at Beverley Minster [2]. No record of the apprenticeship exists, but presumably Myers would have started when he was about 14 years old, in 1817. The first time George Myers' name appears in any authentic document or manuscript is on the first page of Comins' day book for 1827–33, the only relevant day book that still exists. It records the weekly payments beginning 24 February 1827. From then on Myers' name appears on every page without a break till mid-April 1829 [3]. It is assumed that when he had finished his apprenticeship he continued working at the Minster as one of the team of 5 masons who were paid £1.4.0. for a six day week. Quite often he worked seven days for an extra 4/- [4], the usual rate for a day's work, there being no overtime pay for Sundays. The day book records that during those years Myers worked on the carving of the altar rails and on the north side of the choir. Presumably he showed considerable talent at an early age or his father would have either kept him at home to help with his business or apprenticed him to another whitesmith in Hull.

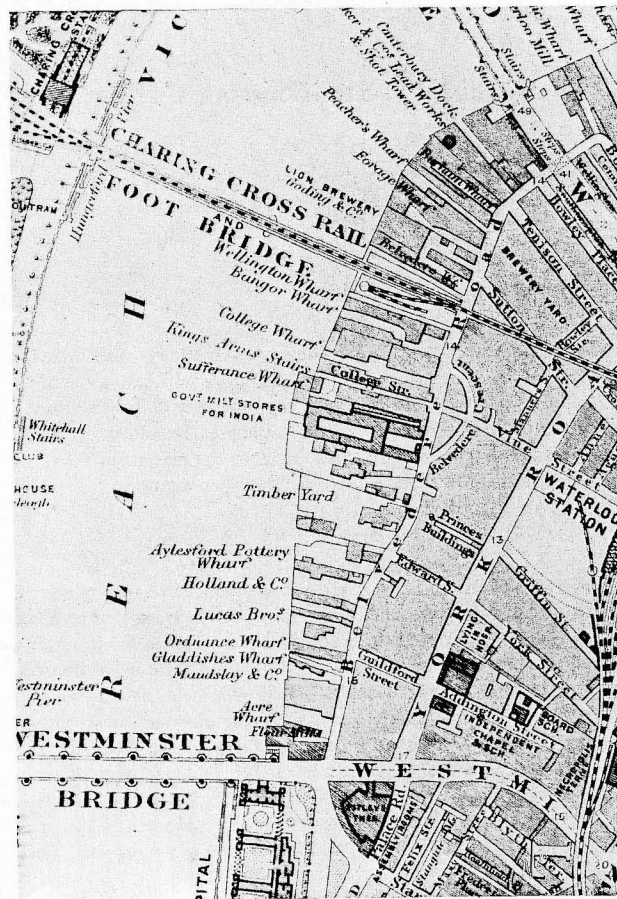


FIG. 1. The Ordnance Wharf area in the 1870s (Stanford sheet 10: 1877).

In 1812 William Comins, who had worked under William Shout at York, was appointed master mason at Beverley and the de-Georgianising of the Minster began. It is possible that Myers helped with the restoration of the reredos [5] because in his will drawn up in 1871, there is a reference to "my drawing of the reredos as restored at Beverley Minster." We know that the brick-vaulted roof was restored at this time as the day book records the delivery of 1000 bricks one day in 1828. William and Joseph Fowler of Winterton, who were the architects in charge of the restorations, carved new Victorian-Gothic pews. Myers must have learnt not only how to carve and sculpt but also how to use bricks and stone for building.

It was while he was working in the Minster in about 1827 that Myers met the young A. W. N. Pugin, the future Gothic Revival architect. Pugin, who had come to sketch, would have been 15 and Myers 24. Ten years later they were to meet again and

from then on they worked together till the end of Pugin's life [6]. Pugin's influence on Myers was great and it is from the former man's vivid, descriptive letters to his friends and patrons that we learn much about Myers. Writing to the Rev. Mr Bloxam of Oxford in the 1840s, Pugin described Myers as "a rough diamond, but a *real* diamond". In another letter, Pugin explains that he has no clerk or assistant, in fact he has not even an office, but that Myers can work without true architectural drawings, which no other builder could, or would. Pugin adds, "that is the reason I employ Myers who takes a deal of these minutiae off my shoulders" [7].

Information about Myers is also to be found in correspondence between Pugin and the Rev. James Hornby concerning St Oswald's Church, Winwick, in 1847. In one of his letters Mr Hornby expressed surprise that the agreement that he was about to sign (concerning building by Myers) contained "neither bondsmen nor penalties, both of which have formed part of all my former agreements. Myers says neither are requisite" [8]. Pugin confirmed that this was correct and Mr Hornby was satisfied. It was because of this very special understanding and trust between Pugin and Myers, that Myers was known to his contemporaries and to future generations as 'Pugin's Builder', though they worked together for only 14 years, ending with Pugin's death, aged 40, in 1852.

In April 1829 Myers left Beverley, returned to Hull, married and started up in business with his friend Richard Wilson. It is not known where the money to establish the business came from. By this time Myers was living in what had been his father's house and his father's name had disappeared from the Hull directories.

Messrs Myers & Wilson appear to have prospered quite quickly and very soon occupied extensive builders' yards in Paragon Street and Carr Lane near the present railway station, and a wharf where the River Hull flows into the Humber [9]. But no building of note done by them at this time has come to light. They made roads and flagged pavements, and built small terraced houses [10]. They were employed on restoration work by the churchwardens of Holy Trinity, the fourteenth century brick-built parish church of Hull [11]. In 1834, when it was decided to erect a memorial to William Wilberforce, Hull's most famous son, Myers & Wilson were chosen to do the work [12]. There does not appear to be any progress in the size of the contracts they undertook until 1837–38 when they tendered for and got two contracts of considerable size, both about 70 miles from Hull. One was for the building of a workhouse at Loughborough [13], for which 26 year old G. G. Scott was the architect, and the other was St Mary's Catholic Church in Derby, designed by A. W. N. Pugin [14].

Pugin and After

The gaining of the Derby contract was a turning point in Myers' career. Pugin, though only 25, was renowned for his controversial writing on architecture and his designs for Barry's Houses of Parliament. He had acquired several rich and influential patrons, foremost amongst whom was the Earl of Shrewsbury, but he had done very little building.

Pugin's first biographer, Benjamin Ferrey, describes the scene when Myers and Pugin met in Derby. Pugin recognised Myers as the mason who had helped him so many years ago in Beverley Minster and in a theatrical embrace clasped Myers in his arms and promised in future Myers should "execute" all his buildings [15]. And this is what happened, except when Pugin was over-ruled by his employers.

From now on Richard Wilson faded gradually from the scene. Pugin's biographers refer to the building firm of Myers & Wilson simply as "Myers", though all contracts

up until 1844 were signed by both partners. It was not until 15 June 1844 that the partnership between George Myers and Richard Wilson was dissolved “by mutual consent” [16]. Two years before this Myers had taken a house in London, 9 Laurie Terrace, St George’s Road, Southwark, and installed his family there. He was now carrying out Pugin’s work all over the country, including four cathedrals, Newcastle, Birmingham, Nottingham and the Catholic St George’s in Southwark, as well as working for other architects in Hull, so it might well have been useful for him to have had a partner in that town. But even so, he and Wilson parted, although Myers continued to own property in Hull at least until 1863 [17].

Myers and Wilson had banked with the Hull Banking Company and their credit was good. In March 1843 they owed the bank £2200, a considerable sum in those days. As security they had deposited with the bank the agreement for the purchase of ground in Carr Lane on which they had erected cottages and tenements. But on 11 June 1847, when Wilson had been on his own for three years, the bank manager was instructed to inform him that “unless the small balance of £5/4/10 due from him be discharged within 14 days, the company solicitor would be instructed to adopt measures to enforce the same”. Wilson struggled on for two more years, but was bankrupt by 17 May 1850 [18].

When George Myers first moved to London, his business letters were headed “9, Laurie Terrace”, his home address, so it was presumably where he had his office. The first letter to come to light headed “Ordnance Wharf, Lambeth” is dated 17 March 1847. Ordnance Wharf is now the site of County Hall. This was a prime position on the River Thames, of great value when so much transport was by boat. There is an illustrated description of the Wharf in *Illustrated London News* of 9 February 1850. The article is headed “Great Fire in Lambeth” and it describes how the premises belonging to Mr G. Myers, an “eminent builder and contractor”, were wholly destroyed by fire. The buildings consisted of timber yards, offices, saw mills, workshops and stables with their contents including four valuable horses. Craftsmen’s tools were also destroyed, as was the “valuable carved stone work being executed for Mr Pugin, the eminent architect”. The conflagration “exceeded any catastrophe of the kind with which the Metropolis has been visited for many years past”.

Myers’ premises and the contents were insured (with the West of England and Phoenix Fire Office) and so were the owners of the other yards in the area such as Messrs. Grissell & Peto, who were engaged on work at the new Houses of Parliament. Five uninsured tenement houses near by were razed to the ground and others suffered considerable damage [19].

Fires were a constant hazard in workshops and builders’ yards. Myers’ premises were partly destroyed again in 1862 and when a third disastrous fire occurred in July 1867, a lengthy article in *The Builder* pointed out that it was the terrified occupants of the nearby tenements who first raised the alarm, rather than the night watchman. The article asked a great many questions about the type of men who were employed as watchmen, what they were paid and also about the safety precautions insisted on in factories and stores. Shortly after this a Parliamentary select committee made recommendations concerning the protection of life and property against fire, the fire-proofing of buildings and the storing of flammable oils [20].

One of the attractions at the Great Exhibition opened in May 1851 was the Medieval Court, designed by Pugin. Myers exhibited many objects including an altar, a tomb with an effigy of Dr Walsh the Catholic Bishop of Birmingham, a staircase, a fireplace and a lunatic-proof window. He was awarded a medal [21]. Myers ordered

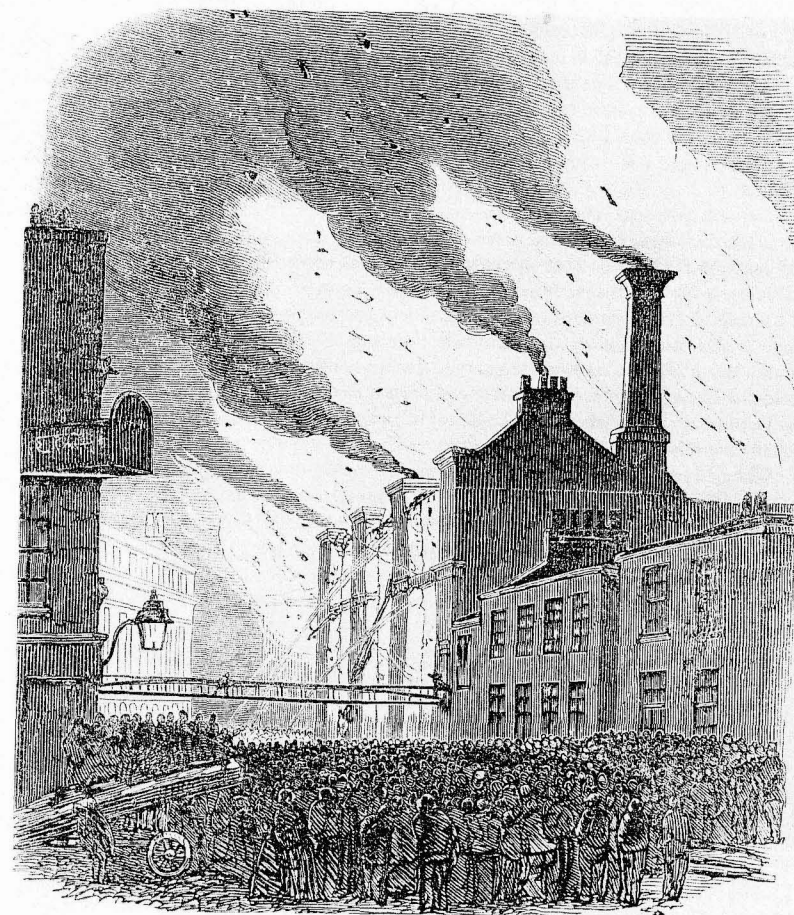


FIG. 2. The fire at Myers’ wharf (from the *Illustrated London News*, 1850).

10,000 trade cards for the occasion, so he must have been expecting considerable interest to be generated by his exhibits [22]. The Great Exhibition was the climax of Pugin’s career. He died the following year at his home in Ramsgate. The house and the church next door had been built by Myers who was also to carve the effigy for Pugin’s tomb, designed by his son E. W. Pugin [23].

‘George Myers & Sons’

By 1852 Myers was recognised as one of the leading contractors in the country. As well as his yards and workshops at Ordnance Wharf, he owned brickyards in Ealing

and quarries in Somerset. His two eldest sons were his partners, the firm now being 'Myers & Sons'. Later, date unknown, he was to install his three younger sons as iron manufacturers at the River Lee Iron Works in Canning Town [24].

In 1852 he moved to a more spacious house, 143 Clapham Road, Lambeth. The house had a large garden, the sort that would need at least two gardeners to look after it [25]. Indoors, Myers' wife had three servants to help her [26].

Myers' name was prominent amongst those who gave to builders' charities and he attended dinners and balls in aid of good causes. But however generous he may have been in this respect, in 1853 he was one of the last of the master masons to give in when the men struck for 5/6d a day. Other master masons looked to him for advice and leadership when the Nine-hour Movement was being discussed [27].

There is no doubt that Myers' masons were a tough crowd. There is a description of them in A. R. Godwin-Austen's "The Staff and the Staff College" which says that when Myers was building the Army Staff College at Camberley in 1859 the masons established a regular reign of terror. All public houses were closed to them save the Golden Farmer, their special haunt, "wherein no local man dare show his face". But on 14 December 1859, when the Duke of Cambridge laid the foundation stone, the masons stood in attendance in their craft clothing, white coats and beaver hats [28].

When Myers built Ferrières near Paris (1855–59) for Baron James de Rothschild he took 400 of his masons with him. As they were known to be the best in Europe, he paid them more than the Frenchmen recruited locally. The Frenchmen did not strike in protest, instead they expressed their displeasure by fighting their age-old rivals, with fatal results, as three gravestones in the village churchyard testify [29].

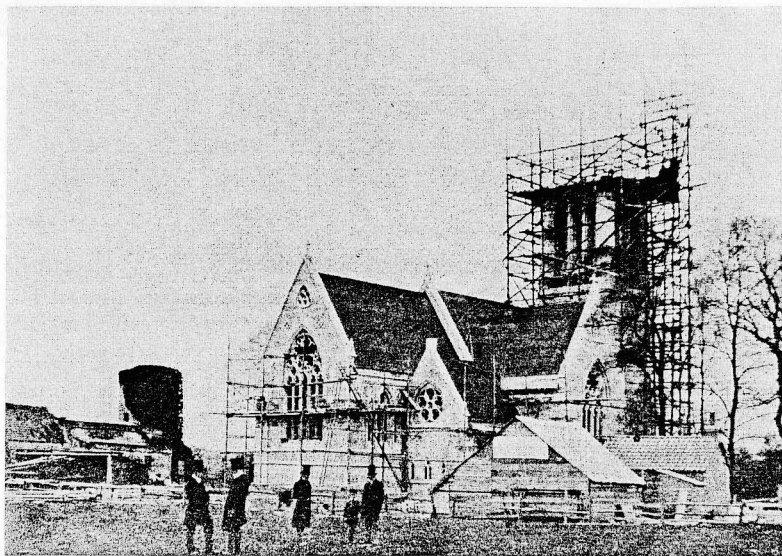


FIG. 3. St Mary's, Dalton Holme, Yorkshire under construction, 1858–61 (Humberside County Record Office).

When Myers worked for Pugin there was no question of tenders. Anyone who wished to employ Pugin as architect, had Myers as builder, except occasionally in the case of large land-owners such as the Earl of Shrewsbury who sometimes wished to employ their estate workers. When Lord Middleton wanted a local builder to do the work, Pugin called the builder a "modern humbug" and said that in future he must decline executing any work to which he could not appoint his own builder. Lord Middleton acquiesced [30].

Myers' name first appears in *The Builder's* list of tenders in May 1846, in which year he tendered twice. The number of contracts for which he tendered increased as the years went by, reaching a climax of 57 in 1864. They then declined until 1874 when for the first time for nearly 30 years there was no mention of him. Between 1846 and 1873, Myers tendered for nearly 800 contracts. *The Builder* seldom gave any indication as to which tender was accepted and on at least two occasions when tenders submitted by Myers were the lowest, someone else did the work. Where work of special importance was concerned, it was usual to ask two or three chosen contractors to submit tenders, as happened when restoration work at the Tower of London was to be carried out by the architect Anthony Salvin. He wrote to the Lt. Governor of the Tower, Lord de Ros and suggested that Myers, G. Smith and Kelk should be asked to tender [31]. Myers got the contract and worked on the restorations from 1856–67 [32]. It seems remarkable that it was thought worth tendering in the normal way for so many contracts, considering the time involved in calculating costs, and travelling, when the site was out of London. When he was working for Pugin, Myers once travelled to Cornwall to cost the building of a parsonage. On that occasion, Pugin decided that it was not worthwhile for so small a commission [33].

Myers in Historical Perspective

George Myers lived at a time of great social change. To study a list of his buildings is to realize a history of the nineteenth century. The first stone of his William Wilberforce memorial was laid on 1 August 1834, the day Parliament abolished slavery in the Colonies of the British Empire. The earliest of his buildings outside Hull to be discovered by this researcher was the Loughborough Workhouse. Many workhouses were built in the eighteenth century, but following the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, they were to proliferate. Myers was to build two more workhouses for the City of Westminster in 1852 [34].

The Shaftesbury Lunacy Acts of 1831 made the establishment of asylums for the care of the insane poor compulsory in every county in England and Wales. George Myers built three of these, Colney Hatch in 1850 [35], Bracebridge near Lincoln in 1852 [36] and the Essex County Lunatic Asylum at Brentwood in 1855 [37]. The most spectacular of them is Colney Hatch at Friern Barnet, designed by S. W. Daukes. A plaque in the entrance hall says that Prince Albert laid the foundation stone on 8 May 1849 and that George Myers was the builder. His tender of £139,982 was £61,000 below the nearest rival. The building was finished by 1 November 1850. In 1851 special trains were run so that visitors to the Great Exhibition could visit this remarkable building. The 'folly' in the park is now a listed building [38].

Several of Myers' contracts were as a result of the casualties of the Crimean War. He built the Royal Victoria Patriotic Asylum in Wandsworth for "the education and training of three hundred daughters of soldiers, seamen and marines who perished in the Russian War and for those who hereafter may require like succour". Queen

Victoria laid the foundation stone on 11 July 1857 [39]. Myers built the Herbert Hospital at Woolwich [40], the first hospital to be built according to Florence Nightingale's 'Pavilion' plan, with plenty of fresh air and light. He also built the Victoria Hospital at Netley on Southampton Water [41]. This was the hospital Miss Nightingale tried to persuade Lord Palmerston, the Prime Minister of the day, to pull down, arguing that it had been built for the glorification of the architect, not the good of the patients. Myers built the Army Staff College at Camberley in 1859 and reference to well over 70 churches built by Myers in London and the provinces has been discovered. He also enlarged and adorned others. He built new houses for the rich: hardly a year went by between 1853 and 1873 when he did not carry out some major building project for the Rothschild family; he built new stables and made improvements to Cliveden for the future Duke of Westminster [42]; he built a school for the Duke of Bedford [43], a parsonage for the Duke of Devonshire [44] and a cathedral for the Duke of Norfolk [45]. He also built a very pretty house for Mr Barchard at Horsted Place in Sussex [46].

He did much restoration work. As well as the Tower of London he did work at the Guildhall in the City. The roof installed by Dance after the Great Fire of 1666 had been flat and out of keeping with the rest of the building. Myers made new windows for the Great Hall and a beautiful new roof [47] which was destroyed by a bomb in 1942. Despite bombs and clearance schemes a great deal of Myers' work still stands, a monument to one of the greatest of the Victorian craftsmen/builders.

On 30 June 1873 Myers retired. He sold his share of the contracting business to his sons David Benson Myers and Joseph Patterson Myers, his partners for the previous twenty years, for £20,000 and an annuity of £4500 secured on their Trinity Bonded Warehouses on Tower Hill [48].

In March 1874 he had a stroke and died ten months later at his home in Lambeth on 25 January 1875. His death certificate states that he died of "Exhaustion". By coincidence the lease of Ordnance Wharf also came to an end that year. It was not renewed. The next year there was no reference to "Messrs. Myers & Sons, Contractors", in the Post Office Directory. It appears that when George Myers died his business died with him.

Correspondence: Patricia Spencer-Silver, 26 Muncaster Road, London SW11 6NT, United Kingdom.

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Appendix: Costs of Selected Myers Buildings

Building	Cost (£)	Notes
Wilberforce Memorial, Hull [49]	1250	1834
Loughborough Workhouse [50]	5647	Contract signed 1838
St Mary's Church Derby [51]	8027	Foundation stone laid 28 May 1838, Consecrated 9 Oct. 1839
St Chad's Cathedral Birmingham [52]	20,000	Foundation stone laid 29 Oct. 1839, Consecrated 21 June 1841
St George's Cathedral, Southwark [53]	30,000	Price for Church, priests' house, convent and schools. 1840–48
Chancel of St Oswald's Church, Winwick [54]	3633	Basic cost only, there were many extras. 1847–48
Tower of London restoration work [55]	6997	1856–68
Colney Hatch Lunatic Asylum, Friern Barnet [56]	138,000	1848
Bracebridge Lunatic Asylum, Lincs. [57]	32,870	1850
Brentford Lunatic Asylum, Essex [58]	55,666	1851–53
Royal Victoria Patriotic Asylum, Wandsworth [59]	31,397	1857
Herbert Hospital, Woolwich [60]	180,000	1861–65
Staff College, Camberley [61]	40–50,000	1859
Mentmore (for Baron Meyer de Rothschild) [62]	15,472	Contract signed 1851