

## **Steeple Barton Vicarage – designed by a maverick and home to pioneering research**

### **Samuel Sanders Teulon --- A ‘Rogue Architect’**

It was the coat-of-arms with the double-headed eagle on the front wall that first caught the attention of the History Group. Did Steeple Barton vicarage have some connection with Russia? And above the bay window, there is a second coat-of-arms. Two puzzles which triggered our interest in this building. What we did know was that the vicarage was built in 1856, on the site of a previous one, by a famous Victorian architect.

He was Samuel Sanders Teulon (1812-1873) an architect who was 'out to shock'. He was known to the Duke of Marlborough, who employed him to design the National School in Woodstock in 1854. The Duke was patron of Steeple Barton church, which is probably how Teulon came to design our vicarage in 1856.

As a prolific member of the Gothic Revival school of Architecture which flourished in the mid-1800s, Teulon was simultaneously loathed and loved. Comments such as '*positively corpulent; outrageous; an arch exhibitionist*' were matched with '*remarkable; frenetic; pursuit of originality; an astonishing life force.*' Teulon was on the fringe of the 'rogue' architects of the Victorian era who all had a penchant for 'streaky bacon' architecture: red, yellow, blue, black multi-coloured (polychromatic) brickwork like Keble College.

Teulon's style is succinctly summarised in a fascinating biography by his great, great, great nephew Alan Teulon and my conversations with Alan have been very illuminating.

*'Teulon introduced some theatrical, dramatic and colourful elements of medieval architecture into his work. Elaborate decoration using bricks, tiles and polychromy. He revelled in anything pointed and rarely missed an opportunity to add a spire, tower, turret, cupola, pinnacle or any other feature that went skywards. Other favourite features included octagonal bases for towers, diamond shaped patterns (diapering) of colourful slate on roofs, clocks in small housings, oriel windows, ogee porches, mosaic work and serpentine signs.'*

After all this, it's rather an anticlimax to realise that our vicarage has few of these features, hence Pevsner's description of Steeple Barton Vicarage as '*a restrained design, unusual for this architect.*' Teulon's trademark features are more apparent in his churches and large country houses. But the hall in our vicarage is worth noting and described by Pevsner as 'hexagonal'. The present occupants kindly invited me to see this and in my view the hall (and landing) is based on Teulon's typical octagon, not a hexagon. Four sides complete exactly half an octagon, with the stairs and front doorway fitting more conventionally into the remaining space. On the outside, there is faint evidence of polychromatic design. But to see true 'Teulonesque' architecture, one needs to go further afield. Some of his dramatic pinnacles can be seen at Middleton Stoney church where he remodelled the Jersey family mausoleum. They do seem strangely out of proportion. There's a 'serpentine sign' on the old school, Oxford Road, Woodstock and a squat octagonal tower on St Frideswide's church, Botley Road, Oxford. However, none of these buildings can really claim to shock. For polychrome and turreted madness, Bestwood Lodge in Nottinghamshire and Elvetham Hall, Hampshire are good places to start. One of

his prettiest monuments is the Buxton Memorial fountain in Victoria Tower Gardens, near the Houses of Parliament. It is a memorial to the abolition of slavery, with highly coloured enamel tiles and decorated ironwork. I've known it for some time and was astonished to find it was by our village architect. Look out for it when they are doing an outside broadcast from Westminster!

But going back to our coats-of-arms: The Russian connection was fanciful and in retrospect, it was no surprise to discover that it was the arms of the church patron, the Duke of Marlborough. The second coat-of-arms has proved to be more elusive. It has the motto '*nec temere nec timide*' --- '*neither rashly nor timidly*'. This is the motto of the Cottrell-Dormer family who have always been our Lords of the manor. Sure enough, Rousham church revealed the motto popping up all over the place. Mrs Cottrell-Dormer confirmed the motto, which is actually common amongst many families, but she was dubious about the coat-of arms and she recommended contacting the College of Arms.

A reply came from a herald at the College who had the magnificent title 'Portcullis Pursuivant.'

*'The arms are those of a husband and wife. The husband's arms are on the left as you look the shield, and the wife's on the right. In my opinion what you have purport to be the arms of Henry Hall (1808-1862) of Barton Abbey Oxfordshire, impaling the arms of his wife Catherine Louisa Hood, 4th daughter of the 2nd Lord Bridport. The arms on the right are those of Hood.'*

The fascinating detective work which had led him to this conclusion is too long to include here. But he also added that he had not been able to confirm that the Halls of Barton Abbey were actually entitled to use the arms on the left, though these arms are similar to those used by families called Hall.

I had earlier considered the Hall family as a likely possibility for this coat-of-arms, but rejected the idea because the motto didn't match. So we have a new mystery. A Hall crest with the Cottrell-Dormer motto.

Back to the Portcullis Pursuivant: '*Mottos are not controlled by the College of Arms. Families can change them at will, although in practice it is rare for them to do so. Why Mr Hall adopted the motto "nec temere nec timide" is anyone's guess.'*

I'd love to think that this mix-up was our architect being 'rogueish' but I'm afraid that would be too far-fetched. So having pursued one mystery, another little puzzle remains.

#### **Acknowledgements**

Nell and Oliver Harvey, Steeple Barton Vicarage  
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Mr Christopher Vane, Portcullis Pursuivant, College of Arms.

#### **Bibliography**

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