

Frederick Thatcher – Architect of the Battle Union Workhouse



As we are told in the article on Battle Union Workhouse (*section D*) this was one of the very few architectural designs by Frederick Thatcher in Britain. Thatcher himself was (nearly) a local boy. He was born in Hastings at All Saints Cottage, All Saints Street, and baptised at All Saints Church in the 'Old' Town on 14 December 1814. He was the youngest of four children born to Robert Thatcher and his wife Mary Ann Stanford who married at All Saints in 1806. Robert was a 'Riding Officer' part of the smugglers coast watch – a moderately well paid but sometimes hazardous occupation. His mother 'owned some land'. The Thatchers appear to have been long term Hastingsers and can be identified there in the 17th century.

Frederick took up architecture and worked in London from 1835 and was one of the first 15 associates of the new 'Institute of British Architects in London' (now the Royal Institute of British Architects), being admitted in 1836. One of the founders in 1834 was Decimus Burton (b.1800) of St Leonards-on-Sea fame of which he designed much after 1828 after his father James started building there. But we have no information about how or when Frederick decided that architecture was his career path, except to guess that he may have been influenced by what was going on around him.

Frederick married Elizabeth Watt on 30 June 1840 in London at Holy Trinity, Gray's Inn Road. Elizabeth was born 15 Jan 1816 and baptised that April at St George's, Bloomsbury. Her mother Susanna Dungate was from Crawley Down. This was the year he obtained the contract to design Battle Union Workhouse and once they had chosen their land, the Battle Guardians moved quickly. Work began in 5 weeks and it was built remarkably quickly with the building opening on 13 November 1840. Frederick Thatcher managed to design a hybrid of the square or hexagonal models for such buildings recommended by the Poor Law Commission in 1835, one it seems of only three such hybrids in Britain, and also adopted elements of English mediaeval Gothic with some Tudor overtones.

As a young man he was influenced by a new architectural movement led by the 'Cambridge Camden Society', which issued a somewhat pretentious booklet '*A few words to church-builders*' in 1841. In 1845 it moved to London, and changed its name to the 'Ecclesiological Society'. Its rather narrow principal objective was that English medieval Gothic should be the only permissible style for a church. One of the society's 'favourite' architects was William Butterfield who applied some English mediaeval Gothic ideas in rather over-vigorous Victorian fashion to St Marys Church, Battle (*see article section F*). The society was short lived and faded away in 1869. Another more generalist academic society with the same name, but for those who are interested in and enthusiastic about church history and church architecture was formed in 1879.

Frederick's wife died on 1 March 1842. She was buried at St Andrew's, Holborn. Frederick left Britain for New Zealand the next year, with his brother in law, Isaac Newton Watt, on the *Himalaya*, landing at New Plymouth on 23 December 1843. The landing place and date suggests that they had bought plots of land from the New Zealand Company, which sold land for farming. But Frederick failed to make a success at New Plymouth and soon moved to Auckland, where as one of the very few architects in this new land he was soon employed, in particular by Bishop Selwyn, the first Anglican bishop of New Zealand. But he did not solely design churches and church buildings as he also worked for Governor Sir George Grey and as a land auctioneer!

After leaving Taranaki for Auckland Thatcher had multi-functioned – as superintendent of public works (1845–46), lieutenant in the Auckland Militia (1845), and assistant private secretary to Governor Grey (1846–48). He designed Auckland's Anglican minister training St Johns College's chapel, which was consecrated in 1847. In 1848 he entered St Johns to train as a minister, was ordained deacon that year and priest in 1853, but he continued his architecture as well.

On 6 November 1849 he married Caroline Wright, sister-in-law of William Bolland, the first vicar of Taranaki (the area of the west of New Zealand's North Island which contains New Plymouth and has Mount Taranaki as a major geographic feature). Their only child was Ernest Grey Thatcher, whose second name was after Sir George and Lady Grey who were his godparents.

Because he had to mainly use wood Thatcher created a wooden Gothic style of church, which reflected ecclesiological principles. One of New Zealand's foremost historians, Michael King, as reported by the New Zealand Institute of Architects, called wooden Gothic churches '*our one memorable contribution to world architecture*'. 'Selwyn-Thatcher' wooden Gothic churches may be seen throughout New Zealand. They seem so new to 'Old World' eyes, but they marked the start of the European history of New Zealand.



St John's College Chapel, ca 1900. This still stands in the grounds of the college at Meadowbank, Auckland

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<http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/Cyc02Cycl-fig-Cyc02Cycl0206a.html>



Extract from a watercolour of about 1857 by John Kinder of St Mark's Chapel, Remuera, which was designed by Frederick Thatcher.

Remuera is now the 'Chelsea' of Auckland. St Marks Church is now much bigger but retains recognisable features.

In December 1856 Frederick Thatcher left New Zealand because of a throat problem and returned to England.

He returned once more to New Zealand five years later in 1861 and was appointed to St Paul's parish in Wellington, staying until 1864, when he had to resign again for health reasons. He designed St Paul's Church (1866), now Old Saint Paul's, Wellington's first Anglican cathedral, and the (unusually for New Zealand) stone built Kinder House on Ayr Street, Parnell in Auckland. Both are now Category 1 New Zealand heritage sites



Kinder House, Parnell, Auckland. Top image from an old photograph. Listed as a Category I Historic Place in NZ it is the last & only Gothic Revival designed NZ colonial property of the 1850's. Today (left) it stands on a busy junction 



Old St Paul's as first built in 1860 (from 'Old St Paul's', extract from URL: <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/media/photo/old-saint-pauls>, (Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 8-Oct-2014). **It has since been extended and is a Category I Historic Place of NZ.**

The interior (below) used native New Zealand woods spectacularly. Old St Paul's, Frederick Thatcher's dark timber church, has been called 'magnificent, like the upturned hull of a galleon'. Danish architect Julius Toxward who followed on from Thatcher in 1866 made the church more complex, but continued the ideas established by Frederick Thatcher, including ensuring that the way in which the church was built could be clearly seen in its architecture.



Frederick returned again to England in 1868, and settled in Lichfield where he became secretary first to the Bishop of Litchfield who was the former Bishop of New Zealand George Selwyn, after whom Selwyn College, Cambridge is named, and after Selwyn's death in 1878 to Bishop William Maclagan.



Frederick Thatcher in about 1880

Thatcher retired in 1882 and died in 1890 at Bakewell, Derbyshire, where his son Ernest Grey Thatcher was curate. He was buried at Lichfield. Ernest was to go on to Australia, but finally settled in Canada.

Frederick is said to have had a genial, friendly manner. 'A rare man', Sarah Selwyn called him, 'attracting all by the sweetness of his nature', and combining 'strong good sense with no lack of backbone...and a great capacity for business.'

The Old Workhouse, that became Battle Hospital and a Grade 2 listed building was tastefully converted to dwellings in the late 1990s, with the development named 'Frederick Thatcher Place'.

The adjacent slightly newer 'Sunny Rise' development attempts to emulate some of Frederick Thatcher's 'ecclesiological' features.



Google 'Street View' images in 2017 of the entrance to Frederick Thatcher Place (above) and the adjacent Sunny Rise development, with its architectural echoes of Frederick Thatcher (below)



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