

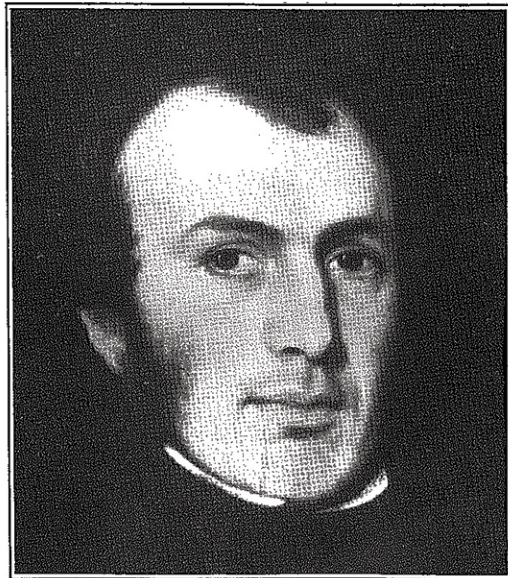


Joseph Hansom, architect, journalist and inventor, was born in York in 1803. His father Henry Hansom was a joiner who seems to have spent much of his life in trying to rise above the level of craftsman. Perhaps he was a rising builder, optimistically hoping to develop a business after the depression occasioned by the war. Certainly he did not anticipate his son's architectural career, for whatever promise Joseph displayed as a youth, he left school at 13 and was promptly apprenticed to his father as a joiner.

By the following year however, his aptitude for design and construction was noticed, and so his articles were allowed to lapse, new articles being taken with Matthew Philips, an architect of York. While working in Philips's office, Hansom managed to do some small architectural works on his own account. He also taught at a night school where he contrived to improve a somewhat defective education enough to help him in subsequent literary work, his pamphlet on Birmingham Town Hall and especially his work as first editor of *The Builder*.

On Philips's untimely death in 1825, Hansom moved to Halifax as assistant to another architect, John Oates. There two important things happened to him: he worked on such Gothic Revival churches as All Saints, Huddersfield, and Holy Trinity, Idle; and he met in the office another young architect, Edward Welch.

By 1828 Hansom and Welch



A GLC Blue Plaque was erected in Kensington, London, this week to commemorate Joseph Hansom. Marking the event we publish the story of the man who was founder Editor of *Building*, a prolific ecclesiastical architect, and the inventor of the Hansom cab. *By Denis Evinson.*

had left John Oates and entered into a partnership based in York. Between them they ranged far and wide, building churches in York, Hull and Liverpool, then extending their activities to Anglesey and the Isle of Man.

It was during this period that Hansom's design was chosen for

the prestigious Birmingham Town Hall, against 69 other competitors. The partners promptly moved to Birmingham, where Hansom became builder of the Town Hall as well as its architect, and Welch managed other jobs in the town.

As building work proceeded

on the Town Hall, Hansom showed those marks of originality that surfaced constantly throughout his life. Using the island site of the Town Hall to his advantage, he set up a kiln, and had 200 000 bricks made from the clay dug from the foundations. The heat of the kiln, moreover, not only dried the walls, but gave quite a favourable temperature to the men working on the scaffolds.

In another part of the shell, Hansom had a steam engine for cutting up large blocks of stone, while the remainder was occupied with workshops. Later, he had the series of timber frameworks for the roof prepared on the ground and hoisted a height of 70 feet, an arrangement that was considered quite ingenious at the time.

Hansom also planned the scaffolding for the interior, constructed of timbers of specific lengths intended for subsequent re-use. Afterwards he had the scaffolding for the ceiling suspended from the roof beams by means of iron rods, so that the floor of the interior was left free for brick-making and other work. Then the ceiling was hauled up and installed in ready-made compartments.

It was over the matter of stone that Hansom ran into difficulties that resulted in his bankruptcy. The quarrier with whom he had arranged for the supply of limestone known as Anglesey marble failed. Hansom arranged for more stone to be sent by barge to Birmingham but it proved impossible to obtain all the stone required

before the onset of winter. Building came to a standstill and with the money exhausted bankruptcy was proposed to Hansom as the only course open to him, although £500 would have appeased all his creditors.

The Commissioners then called upon John Foster, a Liverpool architect, who reported that the building though incomplete was so far satisfactorily constructed. He offered his services for nothing and was given charge of the work. Having put the Town Hall into readiness for its opening in 1834, Foster was warmly thanked but was not retained as architect for the further work of extension and completion.

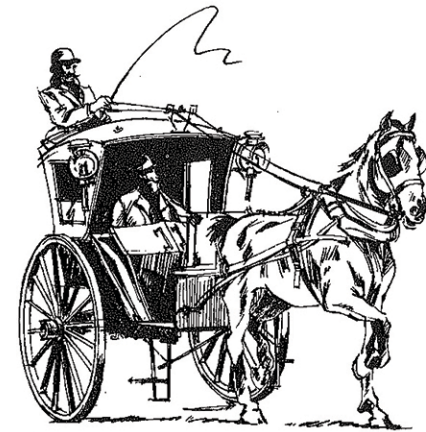
Hansom meanwhile, his partnership with Welch ended, had withdrawn to the small market town of Hinckley. There he became agent to Dempster Hemming, a wealthy barrister, until he was able to resume the practice of architecture. It was at Hemming's suggestion that he patented the idea for the safety cab. Paradoxically, the vehicle that he invented bore little resemblance to the later elegant vehicles with which the term "hansom cab" is usually associated; and doubtless Hansom would have preferred to be remembered on account of his buildings rather than for his brief excursion into the sphere of transport.

The first model to his specification was constructed by a coachbuilder called John Fullylove. The body was almost square, and stood only ten inches from the ground, thereby rendering an upset almost impossible. The cab seated two passengers, and the driver's seat was high up at the front.

A company was formed to promote it, and the specimen cab attracted attention in the streets of London for about three months while it was undergoing trials. Then, rather surprisingly, Hansom left the company with the view of easing it of expense, and of devoting more time to his professional work.

Over a period, changes were made to the cab design and with them Hansom cabs began to take on the characteristics of the very graceful vehicles that were so much a part of the late 19th century social scene. The company continued to call the cabs "hansom cabs", not so much through choice, but because usage had familiarised the public with this name.

Hansom's connection with the company must have become for him a



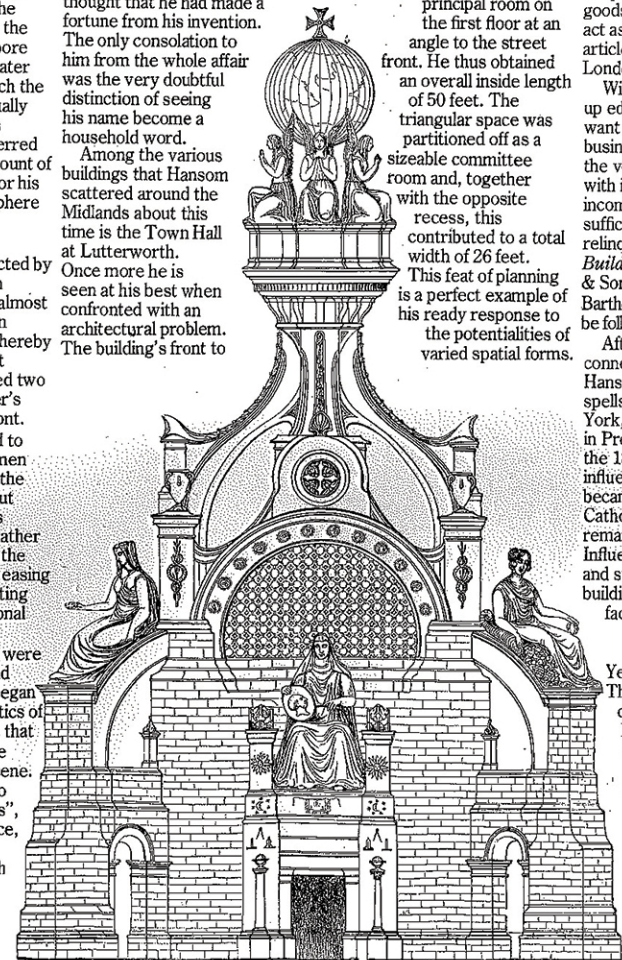
Above: the Hansom cab which developed from Hansom's first design. Below: Hansom's romantic proposal for a memorial to the Duke of Sussex.

permanent source of frustration and regret, for there were adaptations of his invention from which others were making profits. Moreover, he quite early sold his rights in the Hansom cab (although he was never paid) yet people thought that he had made a fortune from his invention. The only consolation to him from the whole affair was the very doubtful distinction of seeing his name become a household word.

Among the various buildings that Hansom scattered around the Midlands about this time is the Town Hall at Lutterworth. Once more he is seen at his best when confronted with an architectural problem. The building's front to

the High Street is about 37 feet long. The building committee was restricted to an internal room limited by this measurement, although it wished for something larger.

Hansom overcame the problem by placing the principal room on the first floor at an angle to the street front. He thus obtained an overall inside length of 50 feet. The triangular space was partitioned off as a sizeable committee room and, together with the opposite recess, this contributed to a total width of 26 feet. This feat of planning is a perfect example of his ready response to the potentialities of varied spatial forms.



On his feet once more, Hansom left Dempster Hemming's service and moved to London, where he lost no time in founding *The Builder*, a paper, intended for the architect, master-builder and workman. During his short period as editor, Hansom gave attention to such subjects as the incorporation of the trades unions, the Metropolitan Building Act, architectural competitions, working class housing and the prospects for the use of iron in building. His theory of iron construction using a grid with an infilling of other materials seems to have anticipated construction methods by about 40 years.

Several of Hansom's forward-looking ideas on the practice of building found a place in the pages of *The Builder*. One reads of a register kept at the office, of workmen wanted and of workmen seeking employment. *The Builder* also undertook to keep on show specimens of goods advertised. It would even act as an agent in procuring articles for country readers from London business houses.

Within a year Hansom gave up editorship of *The Builder* for want of capital. Never a shrewd business man, he had started the venture on a shoestring, and with insufficient advertising its income had not developed sufficiently. He was forced to relinquish his interest in *The Builder* to the printers, J L Cox & Sons, who appointed Alfred Bartholomew in his place, soon to be followed by George Godwin.

After the severance of his connection with *The Builder*, Hansom left London. Following spells of work in Leicester and York, he settled for some years in Preston. It was at this time, the 1840s, that under the influence of Pugin, Hansom became the dedicated Roman Catholic architect that he was to remain to the end of his life. Influenced by Pugin's writings and still more by his actual buildings, Hansom developed a facility for turning out Gothic Revival churches in large numbers.

Yet he was no slavish copyist. The experimenting that characterised all of Hansom's work is evident in the churches. In deference to his patrons at St Walburge Church, Preston, Hansom dispensed with aisles and designed a large hall crowned by a superb hammerbeam roof. Here Hansom dared to revive a medieval device on ▶