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W.E. Nesfield and the Missing Archives

©Dick Lloyd

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**Saffron carving and date above Barclays Bank doorway in Saffron Walden.
Photograph (c) Jacqueline Cooper.**

Neither the rector nor the architect could have foreseen the consequences that were to follow once the Rev J.F.W. Bullock had asked William Eden Nesfield in 1867 to restore and enlarge his parish church at Radwinter.

Nesfield, then aged 32, was still in partnership with Richard Norman Shaw, probably the better known of the two. Bullock, a staid and dedicated country parson was to develop an unlikely but friendly and productive partnership with Nesfield, the bohemian and witty, sometimes

moody but accomplished Londoner. A partnership that was to survive for 20 years. Of Nesfield, it has been said: 'he ranks in the forefront of Victorian architects'.¹ We are fortunate that we are able to judge this for ourselves in Newport, in the Saffron Walden Market Place or in the church and village of Radwinter.

The first stage of the church restoration was completed in 1870, but just as work was about to start on the second phase, a devastating fire in 1874 destroyed the centre of the village. Twenty-four thatched cottages surrounding the church and nearby *Red Lion* were lost, causing much distress but no loss of human life. Bullock and Nesfield, with at least part of the church safely restored, turned their minds and energy to the replanning and rebuilding of the village, unhindered then by local authority. It was a model of early rural planning that was to help the Parish Council gain later on a substantial Lottery grant towards the restoration of the Village Hall – the one time Reading Room.

With the closeness of Walden (population under 6000), its market and the surrounding villages, together with Bullock's influence, it is not surprising that the Gibsons turned to Nesfield when they decided to replace their bank on Market Hill with a building to reflect their flourishing business. So in 1874 came to be built by Nesfield his only commercial building in one of the town's most prominent positions. Since it was to adjoin the Gibsons neighbouring property, the *Rose & Crown*, which they owned but did not run, he was asked to improve the ground floor plan, the stabling and to redecorate the frontage to be more in keeping with their new bank next door. Tragically, as many residents know, the *Rose & Crown* was burnt and pulled down for the gap to be filled with bland architecture.

In 1875 was Nesfield asked by the Governors to prepare plans for new buildings and a headmaster's house for Newport Free Grammar School. When the plans and costs were put before the Charity Commissioners, they were dismayed at the ambition and cost, 'but the Governors, realising they had a good architect who was making best use of the site, were not going to be put off'. So in December 1877 the Governors were able to hold their first meeting in the new school.²

From his office in London, Nesfield travelled to the station at Saffron Walden where he might be met by Bullock's coachman or by Bell or Whiffin, the builders. Work in Radwinter church also continued, but gradually overwork and illness brought about his early retirement, and a younger architect, Temple Moore, completed his plans for church and village with great sympathy. Nesfield, who died in 1888, would have been pleased that his client's church was thought worthy enough to be included in the recently published volume of England's thousand best churches, alongwith those of Walden and Thaxted nearby.³

And what of the Nesfield archives? Some 20 years ago, an interested resident of Radwinter, moved by a note in the church guide, asked at the Essex Record Office to see the Eden Nesfield letters concerning the rebuilding of the church. (Subsequently it appeared that these letters, not widely known even within the parish, had been placed there by a former rector in the 1950s.) There was dismay and concern, however, both at Chelmsford and in Radwinter, when the letters could not be found. Eventually, thanks to the persistence of the original enquirer the letters were traced, returned to Radwinter and placed in the care of the Parochial Church Council, not one of whose members had seen the letters before. Their great significance and appeal, though, were recognised and a decision made that before their return once again to the Record Office they should be published not only for the benefit of those in Radwinter but for a wider readership. So the letters came to be printed both in facsimile to retain Nesfield's sketches and in typeface, together with other relevant material, in book form under a title taken from one of the letters, *A Deuce of an Uproar*.⁴

Research for the book brought wider notice to another and larger collection of letters close at hand written by Nesfield to Murray Tuke on the building of the Gibsons' new bank and the restoration of the *Rose & Crown* (figures 1 & 2). Apparently a thoughtful porter had spotted the letters in some waste he had been instructed to destroy and brought them to the notice of the manager, whose successors thereafter kept them in the manager's office.

Barclays Bank, Saffron Walden

To end this account, there is yet another twist. It seemed wise to check that the Bank's collection of letters was still available to be seen by arrangement, as it had in the past. The last and probably first time the collection had been seen by the public was at Barclays Centenary exhibition in 1996. Once more when enquiries were first made, there was cause for concern. The manager and senior staff had all been changed since 1996. The Nesfield letters were unknown to their successors, even the manager's office had been put to other use. The letters, after a thorough search, even in the vaults, could not be found. But once again, as before, the mystery has been solved. This time, with the manager's persistence, the letters were traced and for safe keeping in case of further change, transferred to the care of the Bank's Archivist in Manchester. The Archivist who perhaps fortunately had a copy of *A Deuce of an Uproar*, undertook to send a complete set of copies of this further valuable Nesfield archive for the Town Library collection.

One mystery, though, remains unsolved. In 1992 a visiting American post-graduate student preparing a thesis on Nesfield, had also been able to see some Nesfield material in the Saffron Walden Town Archives

relating to the new Bank and the *Rose & Crown*. It was not listed and never subsequently found.

Notes

1. Saint, A., *Richard Norman Shaw* (1976).
2. Thomson, F., *Newport Free Grammar School: a brief history* (1987).
3. Jenkins, S., *England's Thousand Best Churches* (1999).
4. Friends of Radwinter Church, *A Deuce of an Uproar: William Eden Nesfield's letters to the Rector of Radwinter in Essex* (1988).