

The work of the Pearsons at Middlesex Hospital Chapel

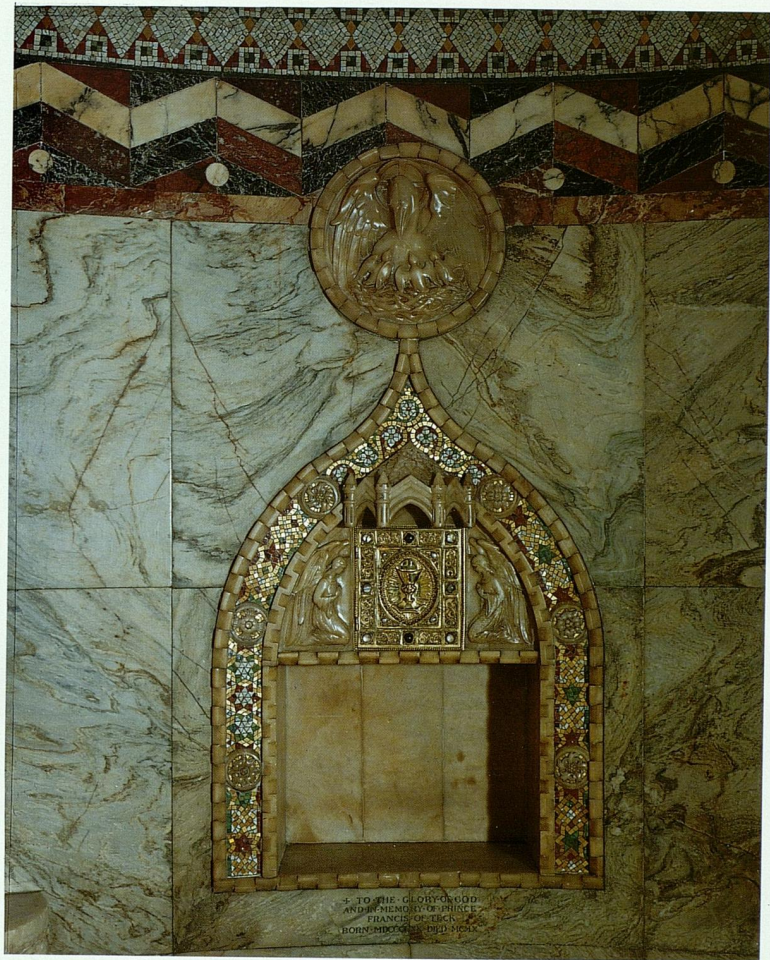
A decorative *tour de force*

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Hidden behind the austere façade of the Middlesex Hospital in central London is a chapel of astonishing richness (Fig. 2). Only recently has the quality of its sumptuous marble and mosaic interior decorations been recognized by a listed building status of Grade II*.¹ Built in 1890-1, to the designs of John Loughborough Pearson (1817-97), it was completed after Pearson's death by his son Frank. Indeed, the decorative scheme was not finished until the 1930s, raising the question of the extent to which Frank Pearson contributed to its final appearance.

With the help of Michael Sturridge, the Middlesex Hospital Archivist, it has been possible to consult documentary material relating to the building of the chapel, including much original correspondence between Pearson's office, the hospital, and the various contractors involved. This provided not only the chronology of development, but also an insight into the working relationships between patron, client, architect and craftsmen.

The Middlesex Hospital chapel was built as a memorial to Major Alexander Henry Ross, MP, chairman of the board of hospital governors for twenty-one years, who died in December 1888.² Prior to this, divine service was held in the hospital board room, a cause of inconvenience to some staff. Somewhat fortuitously, the decision to erect a chapel as a memorial to Major Ross was quickly followed in May 1889 by the offer from Mary Ann Leicester, a hospital governor, of £1,500 for a new chapel.³ This 'fulfilled an object dear to the heart' of George Lawson, an eminent ophthalmic surgeon at the hospital, who had initiated the idea of building a chapel in 1882. At that time, when Matthew Wyatt (1840-92) was architect to the hospital, Lawson had approached John Loughborough Pearson; and it seems that this nebulous understanding, and the existence of plans by Pearson, brought about his employment to the exclusion of the hospital's new honorary architect, Keith Young (1848-1929). Although most governors must have relished the prospect of possessing a chapel designed by a renowned ecclesiastical specialist, Pearson's appointment was opposed by Lord Sandhurst, chairman of the



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1 Aumbry of c. 1910, designed as a memorial to Prince Francis of Teck by F.L. Pearson

Ross Memorial Sub-Committee, who wanted Young to have the job.⁴

For the rather cramped site at the north-western corner of the main hospital building, Pearson designed a simple rectangular nave and an apsidal chancel, with a small narthex or ante-chapel at the west end.⁵ There was no room for transepts, and a ward wing abutted the south wall of the nave.

Overleaf

2 Middlesex Hospital Chapel. General view toward east end

3 Baptistry of c. 1927, by F.L. Pearson, with font of 1909







4 Chancel floor as finished to J.L. Pearson's designs, c. 1891

Major Ross's family decided that the interior decoration and fittings of the new chapel should serve as his memorial, establishing a special fund for this purpose. The Ross family then met Pearson, who provided alternative schemes: one featured an open timber roof of oak, a marble floor 'in a simple design', and walls of marble and alabaster with a limited amount of Venetian mosaic; the other, more expensive design, had a groined roof, marble and alabaster lower walls, and extensive mosaic decoration. In the end, a compromise between the two schemes was selected in which the chancel roof was to be groined and decorated in mosaic, the nave roof was to be of oak, and the walls to be lined with marble to a height of 3.6 m. (It was stated at the time that the upper walls could later be treated in marble or alabaster should funds become available, as eventually happened.)⁶

By April 1890, working drawings had been completed and J.W. Bunning & Son appointed building contractors. All the ornamentation in the chapel was undertaken from Pearson's designs by Robert Davison, whose Decorative Art Studios were nearby in Marylebone.⁷ Davison also worked for Pearson during the refurbishment of the choir of

Peterborough Cathedral in 1890-2, and later executed two monuments designed by Frank Pearson: an ornate memorial fountain of 1909 for Great Ormond Street Sick Children's Hospital, and a war memorial in the Soldiers' Chapel of Beverly Minster of c. 1924.⁸

Work on the chapel proceeded rapidly, and by the end of 1891 the first phase of construction was complete. The basic structure, with its plain exterior of red brick and minimal Portland stone dressings, had been finished by Bunning & Son, and Davison had laid the marble floor. The hospital authorities had hoped that the chapel would be ready for use by Christmas, although Pearson advised against this, pointing out that Davison's work had only just been completed and was probably not sufficiently set to walk upon 'especially as the weather has become unfavourable for anything setting or drying'. In the event, services were held in the chapel on Christmas Day 1891 (in order to allow for festivities in the board room), but the official opening by the Bishop of London was deferred until June 1892.⁹

From 1890, while construction work was in progress, Pearson began to design some of the chapel furnishings: these included the 'organ chamber', choir stalls, nave seats and

an altar table. He also designed a low alabaster screen, incorporating a lectern-pulpit, to be placed at the entrance to the chancel, which was supplied by Henry Poole & Sons Ltd, of Millbank Street (Fig. 2). This comprised pierced lattice panels, reminiscent of the screens of medieval Italy, as in the twelfth-century Palatine Chapel in Palermo.¹⁰ Later Pearson was to design other fittings, such as the altar rail and an altar frontal, and a colour sketch of the latter survives in the hospital archives.¹¹ Such attention to detail was typical of Pearson. It was said that 'no detail is too insignificant for him to personally design', and he considered every element in a building to be an important and integral part of the whole. At Treberfydd House, the Tudor-style mansion at Llangasty Talyllyn commissioned by the Tractarian Robert Raikes, he even designed the door-locks to the water-closets.¹²

Pearson's close personal involvement with the Middlesex Hospital chapel commission is evident from surviving correspondence. He was quick to complain when gates were included in the altar rail, stating that they would 'seriously impair the effect of your little chapel' and that he had eschewed such gates for a very great number of years. Simi-



5 Chapel ceiling to either side of the chancel arch

larly, in March 1892 Pearson requested to be put in communication with the organ maker, as 'the effect of the west end of the chapel will depend in a great measure upon the organ'.¹³ That he should keep such a keen watch on every aspect of the building's fabric and appearance was unusual for these later years of his life, when he had grown to rely more and more on assistants, men such as John Codd, J.E. Newberry, W.D. Caröe, and his own son, Frank Pearson.¹⁴

By 1893, the facing to the lower walls of the nave and sanctuary had been finished. Pearson used green onyx slabs for this, topped by a broad band of chevron-patterned marble and intricate mosaic work. The sumptuous, Cosmatesque inlaid floor had also been laid by this date. This first phase of decoration shows, as noted above, that Pearson's primary source of inspiration was medieval Italy (Figs. 2, 4). In April 1874 Pearson had spent three weeks touring and sketching in Italy, visiting Genoa, Pisa, Siena, Orvieto, Florence, Rome and Naples.

His sketchbooks are dominated by drawings of marble pavements, from churches such as S Clemente, S Maria del Popolo and S Maria della Pace in Rome, and the Florence Baptistery. In addition, he acquired numerous photographs of inlaid marble floors from areas which he did not visit, such as Lombardy and the Veneto.¹⁵ The impact of these buildings can be seen in the sumptuous marble floors Pearson designed for the sanctuary and baptistery at Truro Cathedral (from 1879), the choir at Peterborough Cathedral (1890-2), and for several other commissions of this period (see below). At Peterborough, the carving and inlaying were the work of Italian craftsmen, under Robert Davison's superintendence, with marbles imported from Italian quarries, and it seems that a similar procedure was used at the hospital chapel.¹⁶

Work on the mosaics for the chancel ceiling (Fig. 5) did not begin until early 1893 and, even here, was carried out piecemeal as funds permitted: groin by groin. As a result,

the east end took several years to reach its present appearance. The richness and colour of the ornamentation is breathtaking. The mosaic work on the roof-vaults forms a pattern of blue stars against a gold background, with decorative bands, similar to those in St Mark's, Venice, in place of cross-ribs. There are red marble colonettes between the lancet windows, and honey-coloured alabaster facing the upper walls.

By 1894, with work on the chancel roof still in progress, Pearson was busy designing the stained glass windows for the lancets in the apse. He intended that these should portray figures of saints and groups of the sick and blind to convey the idea of Christ as the consoler, with the inscription 'Come unto me'. The working drawings were prepared in June from Pearson's designs by his favourite stained-glass artists, Clayton & Bell. It was of great importance to Pearson that the chapel should present a unified scheme, exemplified in his rejection of a design by a Mr Oldaker for a memorial window, which



6 Chapel of St Peter's Convent, Woking. General view towards west end

he considered 'quite out of harmony with the architecture of the chapel', adding that the plain glass already in the windows would be preferable.¹⁷

In April 1897 Pearson sent a design to the hospital showing how memorial tablets and inscriptions – a predominant feature of most hospital chapels – might be arranged in the ante-chapel. The walls were to be lined in marble to correspond with the rest of the chapel, with inscriptions cut on white marble slabs flush with the surface of the walls. A charge of 20 guineas was to be made for each individual commemorated in this way.¹⁸ Designs were prepared by Pearson in the short time before his death in December 1897, and most of the work was in place by July 1898, when Davison offered to complete the rest at his own expense, on condition that an inscription in memory of the architect be included.¹⁹

Pearson's son Frank immediately informed the hospital of his father's death, adding that 'it was his express desire that I,

who have now been associated with him in his practice for upwards of 16 years, should complete and continue his work'. The Board of Governors complied and appointed him as architect of the chapel in succession to his father.²⁰ When Frank Pearson took over the work early in 1898 there were still two bays and two ribs of the chancel ceiling without mosaic decoration and the chancel arch soffit had not been begun. This last was particularly elaborate and expensive, estimated at £203, requiring additional finance from the Ross family.²¹ The design included thirteen roundels, containing portrayals of the apostles to either side of the sacred monogram *IHC*. The style of the work blends Byzantine forms, reminiscent particularly of the mosaic decoration in St Mark's, Venice, and the churches at Ravenna, but with a more naturalistic representation of the figures (Fig. 5).

Frank Pearson had little opportunity at this stage to alter or adapt his father's plans, should he have so desired. With such a dis-

tinctive form of interior decoration, it was important that his father's scheme should be continued. The chancel and chancel arch were finished by Davison in 1898-9 and more money was offered by George Lawson to complete the upper walls of the nave. Davison submitted his account for this work to the hospital in April 1901, 'all to the design of F.L. Pearson Esq', but closely following the existing work started by his father.²²

Frank Pearson's contributions to the chapel at this time were limited to the design of additional furnishings and fittings, many of them the gift of (Sir) John Bland-Sutton, one of the hospital's most eminent surgeons. A new altar, of white marble with mosaic panels, was installed in 1904-5, and a large font, of Verd Antique marble on a plinth of Grand Antique, was added in 1909, inscribed with a Greek palindrome copied from the font in Hagia Sophia (Fig. 3).²³ Following the death in 1910 of Prince Francis of Teck, brother to Queen Mary, Bland-Sutton donated the funds for a memorial group of aumbry, credence table and piscina.²⁴ The aumbry, set into the south wall of the sanctuary, is particularly ornate (Fig. 1). With the exception of the font, with its Byzantine form and symbols, most of these fittings are in a medieval-Italian style, sympathetic to the chapel's appearance.

Frank Pearson, in combination with Clayton & Bell, also continued with the installation of stained glass in the chancel and nave, including memorial windows to William Charles Storer Bennett, a dental surgeon, and George Lawson, who had done so much to ensure that the chapel was erected to Pearson's plans.²⁵ But the real opportunity for Frank Pearson to make a personal impact on the appearance of the chapel came with the decision, in 1926-7, to rebuild the main hospital building.

A survey of the hospital in 1926 by its new architect, Alner W. Hall, revealed that the existing eighteenth-century building was outdated, with serious defects in the construction of the floors. Following Hall's advice, the board decided to demolish the old hospital and erect a modern main block. Hall's new scheme retained the original H-shaped plan, though on a larger scale, but realigned the hospital farther to the east, thus creating space between it and the chapel. This enabled Pearson to extend the ante-chapel and to provide a small baptistery in a south transept.²⁶

The narrow, apsed baptistery (Fig. 3), with its lapis-lazuli-blue dome featuring angels bearing scrolls, is more emphatically Byzantine in appearance than the rest of the chapel. This was perhaps a reflection of Frank Pearson's own taste, as he later designed two Romanesque/Byzantine-style churches for the English communities of Madrid and Cap d'Antibes (though these



7 Crypt of St Peter's, with decoration by F.L. Pearson

are, themselves, reminiscent of his father's designs for a cemetery chapel at Floriana, near Valetta, in Malta).²⁷

In the summer of 1929 the chapel committee proposed replacing the open oak timber roof in the nave – by this time regarded as 'somewhat ugly' – with groined vaulting, to match that in the east end, thus transforming the chapel into something approaching J.L. Pearson's original 'expensive' scheme.²⁸ Work also began on the marble facing to the arched narthex screen wall, beneath the organ loft (Fig. 8). By May 1933 the Art Marble and Mosaic Company were tendering estimates for work in the nave. This was probably the company which carried out the remaining decoration of the chapel, including the marble and mosaic work in the north transept, added by Frank Pearson at about the same date.²⁹

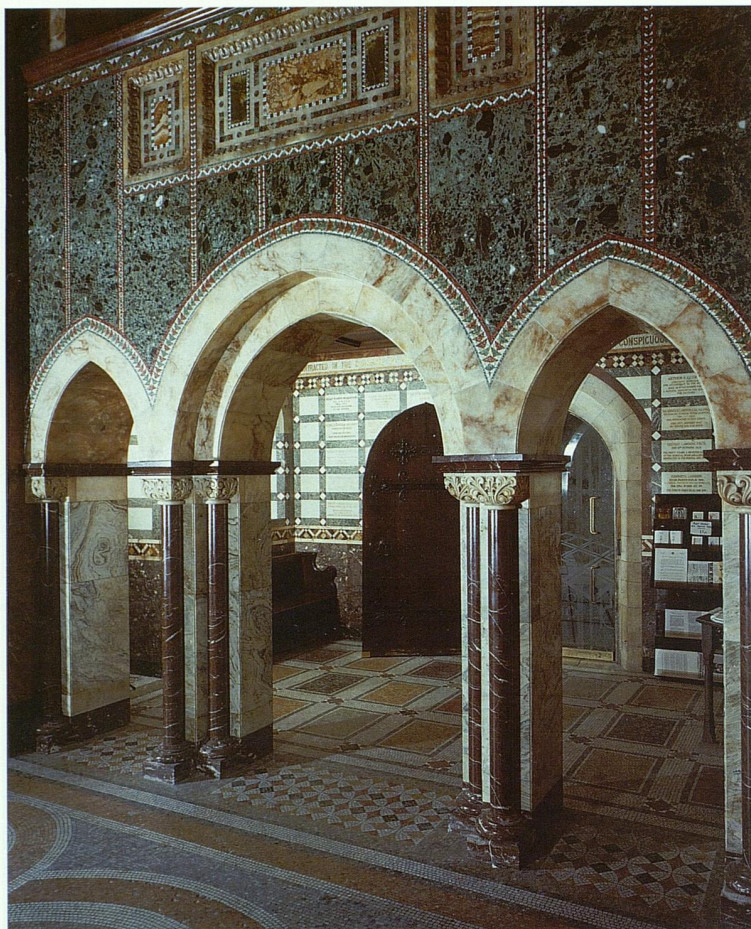
By the time the new Middlesex Hospital was officially opened by the Duke and Duchess of Teck on 29 May 1935, the chapel was structurally complete. However, an archive photograph of 1936 (of the lying-in-state of Rudyard Kipling) shows how much of the decorative work was still to be carried out. The new nave vaulting can be seen in

place, but without its mosaic covering, and the south wall windows have yet to be inserted. Although the decorations were dedicated by the Archbishop of Canterbury on 24 January 1939, the new windows were not added until after World War II.³⁰

The Middlesex Hospital chapel holds an intriguing position in the work of John Loughborough Pearson. A master of architectural space, he is not well known for his interior detailing; indeed, it has been said that 'the textural and colour effects of materials did not seem to have interested him'.³¹ However, throughout his career, there can be traced a willingness to experiment with colour and pattern when required by his clients or, more importantly, when allowed by adequate funding. One of his earliest commissions, the Church of Llangasty Talyllyn (1848-50), for Robert Raikes, has an ornate, Puginesque interior with texts and symbols painted on the walls and roof. Even in his middle years, when he merged the vigour of Early English Gothic with more refined French influences to produce his characteristic 'noble and austere' style, Pearson retained an interest in decoration. St Mary's, Dalton Holme, Humberside, of

1858-61, has a wealth of rich carving, both inside and out, and was described at the time as being 'of more than usually ornate character'.³² Similarly, Christ Church, Appleton-le-Moors, Yorkshire (1863-6), features much interior decoration, although subdued in colour, including a red-and-white figurative frieze in the apse and mortuary chapel. Even, St Peter's, Vauxhall (1863-4), generally regarded as typically 'Pearsonesque' in the austerity of its finished form, was designed with an elaborate scheme of carved and painted decorations, which was modified for financial reasons.³³ St Augustine's, Kilburn (from 1871), regarded by many as his finest creation, has a richness of decoration that can, perhaps, be seen as the culmination of Pearson's work in this manner, with its patterned walls, painted friezes, reliefs and sculptures.

Patterned marble floors became a common feature in Pearson's work after his sketching tour of Italy. As well as those at Truro and Peterborough Cathedrals, there are fine examples at the Catholic Apostolic Church, Maida Avenue (1891-3), and the chapel of St Peter's Convent at Woking in Surrey (Fig. 6), one of his last works, designed in 1897 and



8 Narthex, screen wall and organ gallery

completed after his death by Frank Pearson. These demonstrate Pearson's ability, at the height of his powers, to combine a brilliant handling of architectural space with an understanding of the value of fine craftsmanship and decoration. In his last decade, Pearson seems to have been more willing than ever to experiment with style, form and colour. The circular-plan cemetery chapel at Malta (completed 1896) shows him trying his hand at the Byzantine and Italian Romanesque; and in the convent chapel at Woking, the three tall apses of the east end create a distinctly Byzantine atmosphere, which was later complemented by Frank Pearson's marble and mosaic decorations in the crypt beneath (Fig. 7).³⁴ Whether John Loughborough Pearson's late interest in Byzantine forms can be attributed to his son's influence, with his apparent predilection for the style, is uncertain. The mosaic decorations of the Middlesex Hospital chapel also have an affinity with the work of the school of decorative artists associated with Sir William Richmond and James Powell & Son

at St Paul's and Westminster Cathedrals. Above all, Pearson, although a Gothist, was an assiduous student of all styles of architecture, and was primarily interested in architecture as a 'comprehensive art rather than an aggregation of divergent styles'.³⁵ Indeed, W.D. Caröe, who worked with Frank Pearson and J.E. Newberry as an assistant in Pearson's office, said that 'to him style was but the clothing of great architectural ideas', and pointed out that 'a great classical or renaissance work was, in his later years, a... cherished ambition'.³⁶ Certainly, Pearson appears to have enjoyed the Middlesex Hospital chapel commission, with its emphasis on decoration, combining a host of Byzantine, medieval Italian and Romanesque motifs under one roof.

The research for this article was undertaken as part of a national survey of hospital buildings carried out by the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England. A book is now in preparation, analysing hospital architecture in England from 1660 to 1948.

³⁴ The chapel had been listed as Grade II until November 1990, when it was upgraded to Grade I*.

³⁵ *The Times*, 4 Dec 1888, p. 10; 8 Dec 1888, p. 13. For fur-

ther biographical information on Major Ross see F. Boase, *Modern English Biography*, vol. III, 1965, p. 293.

³⁶ Middlesex Hospital Archives (hereafter MHA), Weekly Board Minutes, 15 January 1889, p. 257; 14 May 1889, p. 178; Ross Memorial Sub-Committee Mins, 9 May 1889, p. 293.

³⁷ Middlesex Hospital Nurses' Guide, 1931, p. 25; MHA, Weekly Board Minutes, 9 May 1882, p. 302; 13 June 1882, p. 328; Ross Memorial Sub-Committee Minutes, 8 January 1889, p. 235; 15 January 1889, p. 257; Loose papers, Box 46, Bundle 203, Lord Sandhurst to Mr Lawson, 4 March 1890.

³⁸ In referring to the chapel, all directions are liturgical; it is in fact aligned on a roughly north-south axis.

³⁹ MHA, Loose papers, Box 46, Bundle 203, J.L. Pearson to Hospital Secretary, 17 December 1889; Bundle 84, estimate of 18 June 1890; Ross Memorial Sub-Committee Minutes, 30 January 1890, p. 317; 24 June 1890, p. 338.

⁴⁰ *The Post Office Directory* for 1890 gives Davison's address as 182 Marylebone Road, with his works behind this, in Dorset Mews (now Dorset Close).

⁴¹ *The Builder*, 11 June 1892, pp. 451-2; 4 April 1924, p. 529; *Building News*, 1 October 1909, p. 491.

⁴² MHA, Loose papers, Box 46, Bundle 71, Pearson to Melhado, 23 December 1891; typewritten history of the chapel, n.d.

⁴³ MHA, Loose papers, Box 46, Bundle 71, account of 9 October 1891.

⁴⁴ MHA, Loose papers, Box 46, Bundle 84, colour sketch for altar cloth by J.L. Pearson.

⁴⁵ J.E. Newberry, 'The Work of John L. Pearson, RA', in *Architectural Review*, vol. I, November 1896-May 1897, pp. 1-11, 69-82 (p. 1); Anthony Quiney, *John Loughborough Pearson*, 1979, p. 30.

⁴⁶ MHA, Loose papers, Box 46, Bundle 71, J.L. Pearson to Melhado, 21 January 1892, 31 March 1892.

⁴⁷ Quiney, op. cit., pp. 162, 167.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 115-16.

⁴⁹ *The Builder*, 11 June 1892, pp. 451-2: information sheet on chapel from Middlesex Hospital.

⁵⁰ MHA, Loose papers, Box 46, Bundle 84, J.L. Pearson to Melhado, 29 May 1894, 24 Jan 1895; Chapel Committee Mins, 17, 20 July 1894, pp. 88, 93.

⁵¹ MHA, Loose papers, Box 46, Bundle 84, J.L. Pearson to Melhado, 21 April 1897; Chapel Committee Minutes, 8 October 1897, p. 29-30.

⁵² MHA, Loose papers, Box 46, Bundle 84, Secretary-Superintendent of Hospital to Davison (draft), 26 July 1898.

⁵³ MHA, Loose papers, Box 46, Bundle 84, F.L. Pearson to Melhado, 28 December 1897, 13 January 1898.

⁵⁴ MHA, Loose papers, Box 46, Bundle 84, Davison to F.L. Pearson, 15 February 1898.

⁵⁵ MHA, Loose papers, Box 46, Bundle 84, Davison account.

⁵⁶ The palindrome reads 'NIPSONANOMEMAMEMO-NANOSPIN', which translates roughly as 'wash away my sin and not only my face'. MHA, Chapel Committee Mins, 5 July 1905, p. 316; 29 September 1909, p. 47; Loose papers, Box 46, Bundle 84, F.L. Pearson to Gunson, 12 August 1909.

⁵⁷ MHA, Loose papers, Box 46, Bundle 84, F.L. Pearson to Gunson, 6 May 1910; Chapel Committee Minutes, 13 July 1910, p. 83.

⁵⁸ MHA, Loose papers, Box 46, Bundle 203, Clayton & Bell to Melhado, 30 November 1900, 10 December 1900, 29 January 1901; Chapel Committee Minutes, 8 June, 12 October 1904, pp. 276, 293.

⁵⁹ MHA, Rebuilding Committee Minutes, 19 September 1928, pp. 6-7; 31 October 1928, p. 78.

⁶⁰ Quiney, op. cit., pp. 212, 216; *The Builder*, 12 November 1915, p. 348; obituary in *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, November 1947, p. 39.

⁶¹ The original timber roof and some mosaic decoration on the gable of the chancel arch survive as surprising features in the attic above the present groined ceiling.

⁶² MHA, Rebuilding Committee Minutes, 26 June 1929, p. 16; 30 July, p. 250; Weekly Board Minutes, 1 March 1933, p. 248; Middlesex Hospital Nurses' Guide, 1931, p. 25.

⁶³ MHA, typescript history of the hospital, n.d.

⁶⁴ D. Lloyd, 'John Loughborough Pearson: noble seriousness', in *Seven Victorian Architects*, ed. J. Fawcett, 1976, p. 82.

⁶⁵ *Companion to the Almanac... for 1862*, p. 259.

⁶⁶ Quiney, op. cit., pp. 28-30, 54-7, 68-72, 77-8.

⁶⁷ Newberry, op. cit., p. 69; Quiney, op. cit., pp. 212-16, 221-2.

⁶⁸ W.D. Caröe (published anonymously), 'The Late John Loughborough Pearson, RA', in *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, 3rd series, vol. V, no. 5, 1897-8, pp. 113-121 (p. 113).

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*