Jesse Rust and His Son, Vitreous Mosaic Manufacturers of Battersea

Rita Ensing

This is the story, though incomplete, of Jesse Rust of Battersea, manufacturing chemist, glassmaker and vitreous mosaic manufacturer. In fact there were two men of that name: Jesse the father, originally from Chelmsford in Essex, who founded the firm as Rust, Kimber & Co. in Lambeth in 1856, and Henry Jesse, his son. The name Kimber was dropped very early from the company's title – perhaps it was only a financial interest. In the 1890s Henry Jesse moved the factory to Battersea, very near to where both he and his father had always lived, and he carried the business into the twentieth century. Sadly there is little of their work to be seen: it has been demolished, is inaccessible or simply not recorded. Also, much of their work was in manufacturing mosaic tesserae and in laying simple vitreous mosaic floors which, if they survive, go unnoticed under our feet.

The history and technology of mosaic

Mosaic possibly began in primitive times as a floor covering made of pebbles. It developed in the Greek Empire around the Mediterranean, and reached a peak in the Roman Empire. Here in England there are outstanding examples from as early as AD 55-60. Towards the end of the third century AD the increasing sophistication in the decoration of Romano-British villas produced splendid examples of black and white geometric and polychrome pictorial mosaics. Chedworth in Gloucestershire and Bignor in Sussex are remarkable, and would have been known to the Victorians, who developed throughout their own period an enthusiastic taste for all forms of ceramic decoration-tile and mosaic

The art continued to flourish in the Byzantine Empire in the domes and on the walls of cathedrals and churches in Ravenna and Rome in the fifth and sixth centuries. It continued into mediaeval and renaissance times in the service of the church, especially in Rome where a school of mosaic was established in the Vatican. The finest example of mediaeval mosaic in England is that of the pavement in the shrine of Edward the Confessor in Westminster Abbey. Commissioned by Abbot Richard Ware in 1268 it was made from antique porphyry and marble in the style of Roman Cosmati work by Italian masters.

The difference between tiles and mosaic is that tiles are thinner than mosaic and larger in size. Standard Victorian tiles were 6 inches (152mm) square and ½ inch (12mm) thick. They were pressed flat onto prepared mortar. Mosaic is made from small cubes called tesserae about ¾ inch (20mm) square or smaller, pressed into a prepared multi-layered bed which has a thick surface of mortar. It is this deeper construction that makes mosaic superior for durability. Ceramic mosaic was made from clay hardened by heat. Glass mosaic was made from glass and vitreous material such as sand, heated to very high temperatures. Jesse Rust's place in making mosaic was two-fold: as a glass manufacturer he could transform old glass into cheaper and more durable material; as a manufacturing chemist he could also produce colours suitable for wall decoration.

The firm of Jesse Rust and its earlier achievements

The firm of Jesse Rust had started in 1856 at 43 Carlisle Street, Lambeth, virtually under the London & South Western Railway line from Waterloo. Throughout the 1860s it flourished; by 1861 he was employing ten men and seven boys. He obtained his first patent in 1861 as 'Jesse Rust

of Lambeth Glass Works'. It was for applying a solution of caustic baryta and other chemicals to stone and cement to harden the stone and prevent decay. The patent would have made his name public. For example, at a meeting of the Ecclesiological Society in 1864 on the challenge to produce a building material which could be coloured, but would also not be subject to the decay of natural stone, a report praised the mosaics of Dr Salviati at St George's Chapel, Windsor, and went on, 'Mosaic is also being successfully manufactured by other artists: Messsrs Heston, Butler and Bayne; Messrs Harland and Fisher; and Mr Jesse Rust.'

Rust's mosaic work had already started when he came to the notice of Henry Cole of the South Kensington Museum (now the Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A)) who was wildly enthusiastic about mosaic as a building material, and had started a Mosaic School at the Museum in 1862. Rust was the first to lay mosaic floors in the Museum. Behind the familiar 1909 front of the V&A in Cromwell Road there lie the confusing buildings of the South Kensington Museum of different dates from the 1860s; the earlier iron buildings are now part of the Bethnal Green Museum. The land was part of the estate purchased from the profits of the Great Exhibition of 1851. The aim of the Royal Commissioners was to improve the standards of manufacture by setting up schools of design all over the country. The schools would collect examples of good design of all times and include commissioned works. The confusion was due to building being spread over many years mainly because of financial difficulties reflecting, as the *Survey of London* put it, 'the rhythm of annual drips from the Treasury tap'.

Rust's floors were in the north court but they have long since disappeared. All that remains are descriptions of them in the unpublished work *The Decorations of the South Kensington Museum* 1862-1874, which recorded that two floors by Rust were the 'first trials' for mosaic floors. One was a glass mosaic pavement, black, white and red with figures of birds, designed by Frank Moody. Another was in the cloister next to the north staircase: this was in black and white 'after the style of the old Roman mosaics'. Another floor in the west cloister of the north court 'displayed a pattern of yellow diamonds intermingled with yellow stars'. Rust described to Cole how he made his material:

I take old glass of any description and fuse it with a large quantity of sand together with the colouring matter. I thereby get a material resembling marble, but which is much harder and will resist moisture. Any colour and shape can be made in a fused state. I then press it into moulds, in the shape required either for geometric designs, or in squares to be broken up for mosaic.

His work as a mosaicist at the Museum was mainly in flooring, but he also made two modest contributions of pictorial panels for various schemes set up by Cole from 1863 in his almost fanatical enthusiasm for mosaic. The first was to what became known as 'The Kensington Valhalla'. This was a collection of thirty-five or more life-size portraits set into the arcade niches that run round the upper levels of the South Court. Artists including Lord Leighton, John Tenniel and Val Prinsep were commissioned to paint portraits of famous artists of all times, though the finished portraits include many little-known mediaeval artists. The paintings were then executed in various forms of mosaic: ceramic, and Italian and English glass. The majority were in English ceramic made by pupils of the Mosaic School that Cole had set up in 1862 and included his own daughters. Their work was supervised by Minton Hollins & Co., which had been allowed to set up a factory on the Commissioners' land in South Kensington. Eight were made by Salviati in glass mosaic.

Jesse Rust's contribution was in glass mosaic from a painting by Reuben Townroe, a decorative artist of the South Kensington team whose work is widely seen in the building. The subject was Bernard Palissy, a French potter in the sixteenth century and a Huguenot martyr. Palissy made

enamelled earthenware decorated with modelled snakes and reptiles, and some of his works are in the V&A collection. The mosaic was completed and delivered on 9 September 1866 at a cost of £150. The Valhalla has long been in storage with only a few of the portraits on display.

Rust's other pictorial coloured mosaic is displayed, though it can barely be glimpsed, on the façade of the Lecture Theatre on the north side of the garden. Recessed behind the pediment are three roundels in mosaic. The designs are based on drawings by Geoffrey Sykes (who had died in 1866), completed by James Gamble and Reuben Townroe, depicting Poetry, History and Philosophy. They were all on a gold background. One was by Salviati in Venetian glass and cost £50; another was in English ceramic by W. B. Simpson and cost £60. The third was by Jesse Rust in English glass and cost £60. The design had been approved in 1864, and Henry Cole noted the arrival of Rust's completed roundel of History in his diary for 1 June 1868.

An article in *The Builder* for 2 July 1864 commented that

but a few months since Mr Jesse Rust was as innocent of the knowledge of mosaic enamels, as he probably is of Hebrew. Being challenged to produce artificial mosaic minerals, and mosaic gold and silver, by a party little expecting any other result than failure [probably Salviati] his attempt proved successful.... At his glass works in Lambeth, he is now actively manufacturing the artistic minerals, and also gold and silver enamels, used in mosaic art. It is also not less creditable in his perseverance, ingenuity, and industry, that with little preparation and training, he has already submitted for public criticism, very fair specimens of mosaic formed from tesserae of his own manufactured enamels.

This early work of his as a mosaicist was being shown that year at an Architectural Exhibition in Conduit Street, London, which was open to the public, and similar work was also shown at an exhibition at the South Kensington Museum. In the latter he had submitted

a mosaic design; a chromatic scale; a mosaic wall tile; a panel of geometric mosaic; an altar piece (mosaic cross); and specimens of gold, silver and enamel bosses, for architectural decoration. However unpretending and humble these efforts may be, they give promise of future improvement and advance, claiming encouragement, as manifestations of native enterprise and skill. They are unambitious but sufficiently deserving of the fostering solicitude and patronage of the promoter of decorative art.

Jesse Rust appears to have been a reluctant mosaicist, thrust by Cole in the 1860s into competition with Minton Hollins & Co. in ceramic work (Rust was also delivering ceramic tiles to the Museum in 1868-69), but especially with Salviati in glass mosaic. Dr Antonio Salviati was a Venetian lawyer and entrepreneur with a glass factory in Murano in Italy run by Lorenzo Rudi. His work always outshone that of Rust. For example, his 1866 mosaic of The Last Supper to a design by Clayton & Bell was in the centre of the reredos in the High Victorian rebuilding of the Sanctuary of Westminster Abbey. 'Heads of women below by the same designer but executed by Rust of Lambeth,' was how Pevsner dismissed Jesse's contribution.

An indication of the struggles of the firm of Rust & Co. while making the pictorial panel of Bernard Palissy is the request in a letter to the Museum in December 1865 to see the laying of tesserae. Rust always called himself a glass manufacturer. His patents describe his methods of fusing glass and sand at very high temperatures for several hours. In the 1867 patent he also cites a whole range of colours produced by adding chemicals. The emphasis is always on producing a building material in decorative colours. Rust wrote to the Museum in 1864 that he was not disposed to execute just one single colour in mosaic. He seems anxious that his skills as a chemist should contribute to the then contemporary trend for warm rich colours. One of his works at this time was in the rebuilding of

the Old India Office. *The Builder* of 16 July 1864 reported his facing material of glass, mainly red and green. In his patent of 1869 he goes into detail to 'inform the practical man'. Is this a protest against the art world? He also always emphasised the use of old glass because it was cheaper.

The only Rust mosaic at the V&A that can easily be seen at present demonstrates his practical side: this is the East Staircase. The original staircase of 1864-65 had become worn. As it was one of the principal architectural features it was felt that it should 'possess a dignified character', and as the Museum had often made experiments with materials, it was decided to repair the stairs by laying strips of glass mosaic with gun-metal edging to the treads. These were laid by Jesse Rust and Powell & Son; the design of the treads and landings was by Frank Moody, and the work was completed in 1875. The metal edging foreshadows a much later Rust patent of 1895.

In the 1860s Jesse Rust came to the notice of Alfred Waterhouse, one of the leading Victorian architects. He was famous for his use of terracotta and red brick which changed the face of buildings from stone, stucco and yellow stock brick into 'beefsteak red'. Waterhouse was noted for his loyalty to his teams of contractors and subcontractors. Rust's firm was one of these, laying mosaic floors until nearly the end of the nineteenth century. Dates are imprecise because building often spread over several years.

Waterhouse was of a Quaker family, but there is nothing of Quaker simplicity in Manchester Town Hall, which was built between 1867-77. It was one of those enormous flamboyant public buildings that may be thought of as the Victorian equivalent of mediaeval cathedrals. Not many grand country houses were built by Waterhouse but the next Rust contract was at Eaton Hall in Cheshire built for the Duke of Westminster and begun in 1868. Then followed Owens College in Manchester in 1869 and the Cleveland Grammar School in Middlesbrough in 1873-77. Rust's only departure from mosaic flooring for Waterhouse was a mosaic clock-dial for Pembroke College, Cambridge, in 1875-79. Rust returned to flooring for Liverpool University's Victoria Building in 1888-93, and then two last buildings, large commercial premises for which Waterhouse was famous. These were Foster's Bank in Cambridge in 1891-94 (now a branch of LloydsTSB), and the Pearl Life Assurance Office in Liverpool of 1896-98.

Jesse Rust's son joins the firm

This long span of work for Waterhouse by the firm of Jesse Rust, one that lasted into the 1890s, raises the question of the entry into the company by his son, Henry Jesse, who was born in 1856. In 1868, the year after Jesse began work for Waterhouse, his son would have been twelve years old, the usual age for apprentices to start work – in 1861 his father was employing seven boys, it will be recalled – but at the age of fifteen in 1871 Henry was still at school. At the census of 1881 he was married, but living alone with his parents at 6 Grove Villas in Battersea where he had been born, and with no occupation given. It can be assumed, however, that at some time in the 1870s he became part of the firm, and contributed to the Arts & Crafts church of Ayot St Peter and to the mosaic clock-dial at Pembroke College in Cambridge. The factory had moved from Carlisle Street, Lambeth, in 1870, and the patent of 1872 was submitted from nearby Bond Street, Vauxhall. The firm then moved to the newly completed Albert Embankment at no. 24 and was still there in 1879. By 1884, however, the firm of Rust & Co. was at 290 Wandsworth Road, still in Lambeth, and by 1888 it had become Rust & Son. In 1892 it was at last in Battersea at 353 Battersea Park Road.

Mosaic works of both flooring and wall panels were completed during those years. They included St Peter Kirkgate in Leeds in 1872; Hook Memorial Church also in Leeds, where the whole pavement was described in *The Builder* of 7 February 1880 as 'becoming richer towards the east'; St James's Hall in Piccadilly, then London's leading concert hall though since demolished, where a new entrance was built in 1883 with mosaic panels in the ceiling; St John the Baptist in Leicester in

1884; and St George's Church, Jesmond, Newcastle, in 1888-89. The Imperial Institute in South Kensington of 1888-89 included Rust flooring but was demolished to make way for Imperial College. The entrance to the Albany private apartments in Piccadilly has mosaic paving to the top of the stairs dating from 1894.

There were a number of patents in the 1880s. Jesse's patent of 1884 was a further step in improving his process. He fused powdered glass, old and new, with sand in a furnace, and then ground this to powder and mixed it with Portland cement and water, and poured the result into moulds. When dry this would be burned to red heat. When cold, 'this will form the substance to be painted upon'. His title for this patent was 'Improving the manufacture of vitreous slabs for painting upon or otherwise colouring'. In March 1885 there were two patents applied for with identical titles, 'vitreous materials for paving', one in the name of Jesse Rust and Henry Jesse Rust, the other Henry Jesse Rust and Jesse Rust. This may have been to ensure the security of the patent for the firm, but was not printed and probably not proceeded with. Significantly, a patent of 1888 by Jesse alone has the same title. In 1887-89 the patents were still in the name of Jesse Rust, all highly technical and still improving the material, the patent of 1887, for example, adding iron to produce brown or red colouring. This patent of 1887 marks the retirement of Jesse Rust. During the process of obtaining the patent he was initially still a 'glass manufacturer', but then of '12 Randall Street, Battersea, late of 290 Wandsworth Road'.

Jesse Rust and his wife, Mary, lived at the same house, 6 Grove Villas, Hyde Grove, Battersea (renamed 12 Randall Street in 1881), from at least 1851. Situated between industrial Battersea Reach on the Thames and the newly formed Battersea Park it was typical of many parts of London where terraced houses had occupants in the same street involved in a wide range of occupations, and with incomes from poor to comfortably off. Jesse Rust died in December 1895, and Henry Jesse was now head of the firm. In that year the company moved to a site on Garden Wharf, leased from the Morgan Crucible Co. This had furnaces and kilns, but the Jesse Rust Vitreous Mosaic Co. was increasingly employing women and girls as mosaic workers. From as early as about 1905 Henry Jesse began to acquire a block of terraced houses in Battersea Church Road starting with no. 47, which became the permanent address of the company, and eventually nos. 39-49. These properties provided an added source of income for him in the form of their rents. In the years when both father and son were engaged in the business there was potential conflict between Jesse the glass manufacturer and Henry Jesse the mosaicist and aspiring art worker. However, the naming of the firm as the Jesse Rust Vitreous Mosaic Co. signalled a compromise, since it paid tribute to Jesse's pioneering work in transforming glass into vitreous material.

Henry Jesse's mosaic workers used the reverse technique which enabled them to assemble, ready for transport, the tesserae in slabs round a large table in quite small premises. First, the artist's cartoon had to be translated to form the mosaic design on brown paper, but in reverse. The tesserae were stuck onto this with gum arabic in slabs of a manageable size for shipment. At the site the slab was laid, right side up, in the correct place on a cement screed. When this had hardened, the paper was soaked off, and the mosaic was cleaned, polished and grouted.

A work of interest during the first decade of the twentieth century was in a building designed by Arthur Beresford Pite for the London, Edinburgh & Glasgow Insurance Co. at 194A Euston Road in 1906-07. The west side of the building, no. 1 Melton Street, became government offices but is now closed, though the whole building has English Heritage Grade II* listing. There is a mosaic floor in the entrance porch, probably by Rust, which includes the signs of the zodiac and inscription, 'Founded Anno Domini MDCCCXXI' and the entwined letters, 'ELG'.

However, the greatest mosaic work by Henry Jesse, for which the name Jesse Rust should be internationally known, is the reredos in the apse of St Aidan's Church in Leeds. The church is in

the red-brick Italian Romanesque style and dates from 1891-94. It was the parish church of R. H. Kitson, who offered to pay for a painting to cover the vast space in the eastern apse. The artist, Frank Brangwyn, whose work ranged from large wall paintings to small objects, was selected in 1908. The subject was to be the life of St Aidan who had been chosen by King Oswald of Northumbria to establish Christianity. From his monastery and church on Lindesfarne he founded churches throughout Northumbria in the seventh century.

The apse at Leeds was to show four episodes in the life of St Aidan, while the two lateral walls in the chancel would have groups of pilgrims expressing toil and sorrow, appearing to make their way to the altar. For two years Brangwyn worked on sketches; then in December 1910 he started painting one panel on an enormous canvas measuring 14ft by 29ft. He was beginning to worry about the dense smoke pollution in the city. Like the Vatican turning to mosaic to preserve its frescoes in Rome, Brangwyn suggested mosaic and marble. The new vicar objected, but changed his mind when Kitson showed him a small mosaic in a new building in Leeds. This was probably at Leeds College of Art where the firm of Rust had executed a mosaic panel by the artist, Gerald Moira.

Jesse Rust's constant emphasis in his patents on the cheapness of vitreous over glass mosaic was now justified, for his son's firm had quoted a figure only a fifth of the estimate of the first firm approached by Brangwyn. A stained-glass painter, Sylvester Sparrow, was engaged to translate the design for mosaic to Brangwyn's satisfaction, and a team of girls in Battersea was engaged to set the tesserae in slabs for transport to Leeds. By the summer of 1916 the mosaic was finished and installed, and the work was unveiled at a dedication service on 13 October that year.

Jesse Rust had remained all his life at 6 Grove Villas/12 Randall Street and his children were born there. Henry Jesse grew up in this area with its streets of terraced houses, small industries, the Park and the riverside as his playground. In 1901 Henry Jesse was living at 69 Rosenau Road with his wife, two daughters, together with their governess. He is described as a 'Mosaic Manufacturer' and employer. Another hand wrote on the return 'Earth' over the word 'Mosaic'. After moving the firm to Garden Wharf, he himself moved, but only round the corner, to 11 Stafford Mansions in Albert Bridge Road. These had been built on the site of 81 Albert Bridge Road, and they were mansion flats, a popular style of dwelling for those who did not want the responsibility of house ownership and the upkeep of a garden.

Final years

With work substantially completed on the mosaic at St Aidan's Church in Leeds, the firm could now begin on a commission much nearer home in the church of St Mary le Park. This was Henry Jesse's own church. The site had been bought in 1877, the church being built in stages and dedicated on 5 May 1883. The second portion was completed in 1896; the third in 1902. A mosaic floor was laid in the sanctuary in 1915 whilst the country was at war, partly paid for by Henry Jesse and other members of the congregation such as the Misses Ashcroft of Ethelburga Road and Miss Gibling, who were also mosaic workers. Other work followed: mosaic over pillars in the east end represented the symbols of the Four Evangelists and the sacred monograms of Alpha and Omega. By August 1918 the chancel floor was also laid with mosaic. All these, together with new stained glass windows, were dedicated in a service combined with thanksgiving for the end of the war on Sunday, 17 November. The church of St Mary le Park, Battersea, was demolished in 1967. It was considered too costly to remove and save the mosaics, and so the one really local example of Rust mosaic work is lost.

On 1 October 1931 Henry Jesse made a will signing it 'H. Jesse Rust' and describing himself as a 'mosaic and tile manufacturer'. Four years later, on 29 August 1935, he died. The firm of Jesse

Rust came to an end with the Second World War. The use of mosaic declined, but now seems to be enjoying a revival. Applying mosaic-like patterns to garden and household ornaments is a popular craft hobby. More importantly, Victorian and Edwardian mosaic floors are being uncovered at the V&A, the National Portrait Gallery and elsewhere, proving its superiority as a permanent material. The Rust floors and pictorial mosaics, scattered over England and Wales, deserve searching out and recording.

List of sources

Primary sources:

Censuses: 1841, 1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891, 1901.

Kelly's Directories. Scattered dates in various libraries, mainly for determining the factory addresses, but also for how the firm was styled.

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The Builder, 2 & 16 July 1864, 7 February 1880.

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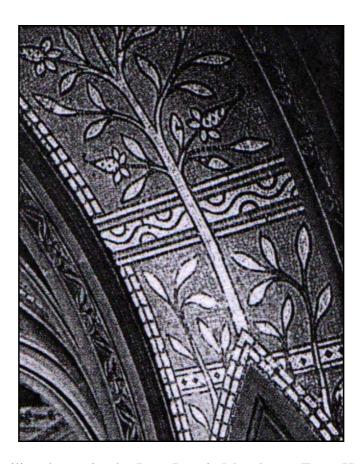
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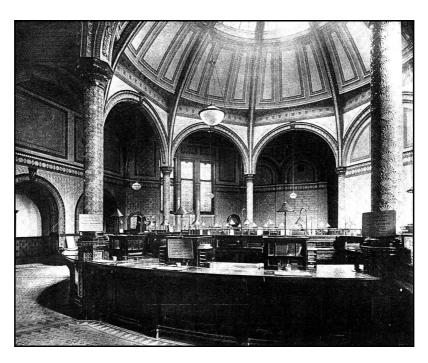
Pevsner, Sir Nikolaus, *Buildings of England* series (Penguin Books/Yale University Press, 1951-date). Indexes for all counties etc. checked, but an unsatisfactory source for the purposes of this research. Pevsner was usually dismissive of mosaic in general – not even including it in his glossary – and of Rust in particular.

Survey of London, vol. XXXVIII, South Kensington Museums Area (Athlone Press, 1975). This volume supplements the work of Physick for the V&A and includes the Imperial Institute.

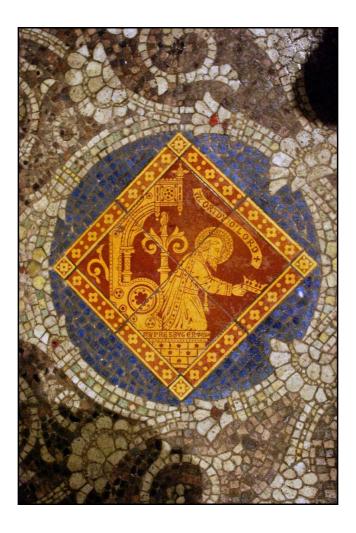
Examples of the work of the firm of Jesse Rust



Glass mosaic ceiling decoration by Jesse Rust in Manchester Town Hall, c.1877, from *Alfred Waterhouse 1830-1905: a biography of a practice* by Colin Cunningham and Prudence Waterhouse.



A photograph from about 1900 showing the banking hall of Foster's Bank, Cambridge, with its mosaic flooring installed by Jesse Rust, from *Alfred Waterhouse 1830-1905: a biography of a practice* by Colin Cunningham and Prudence Waterhouse.



The firm of Rust carried out work in churches, laying mosaic (more expensive than tiles) often at the east end, regarded as the more holy part of the church. This example, probably of 1882, is in St Padarn's, the parish church of Llanbadarn Fawr, east of Aberystwyth, Wales. The church is on the site of a monastery founded by the early Celtic missionary. The medieval church was restored in phases between 1867 and 1884 by the architect, John P. Seddon, who would have known the work of Rust.

Photograph: Trevor Shaftoe. The writer thanks Angela Wise for her help in supplying photographs and information.

Sources: Schedule of Church in Wales Records, National Library of Wales, ref. SD/F/236, vol. 2, p. 25, and National Monuments Record, ref. Site file Llanbadarn Parish Church only (file 4), NA/CD/99/004.



It is good to know that one example of Rust's work can easily be seen in Battersea. The Old Town Hall built in 1893 on Lavender Hill is a monument of municipal pride when Battersea was a civil vestry in the parish of St Mary before becoming a Metropolitan Borough in 1900. This in turn became part of the Greater London Borough of Wandsworth in 1965. The building was always a place of entertainment as well as municipal offices. It survives as BAC (the Battersea Arts Centre).

The architect was Edward Mountford (1855-1908) who had already designed many buildings in Battersea, including the Central Library on Lavender Hill. The grand entrance hall has a mosaic floor by the Jesse Rust Vitreous Mosaic Company. The motif of the bee has been explained in many ways; one suggestion is that it is a symbol of industriousness.

Photograph: Gordon Pullenger. Ref: Stanley, Jo, *Battersea Old Town Hall 1893-1993* (BAC, 1993).



Decorated apse in St Aidan's Church, Leeds, by Henry Jesse Rust to designs by Frank Brangwyn.