

FOREWORD

May we not call them the ghosts of departed quantities? — Bishop George Berkeley

It was the winter of 1976. Gordon Aston fixed us with a disconcertingly steely gaze and invited us, pleasantly, to justify our proposition that the early records of his beloved firm be transferred to a fledgling architectural archive perched in a Merrion Square attic. Edward McParland and I, the objects of his scrutiny, must have acquitted ourselves to his satisfaction, for on 5th January 1977 the first instalment was snugly deposited in a former broom cupboard at 63 Merrion Square.

Our request was an ambitious one. In 1948 Aston had become the fourth partner in the history of a quantity surveying practice that almost since its inception in 1860 had been eminent. It had accumulated along the way a body of papers encompassing some of the most serious building projects undertaken in Ireland, and reflecting the role of its principals in the development of Irish quantity surveying as an effective, independent profession. This book tells the story of the firm's first hundred years.

At the time Gordon Aston came to research it, conditions at the Irish Architectural Archive (for all the right reasons) had become grossly overcrowded, and on occasion he had to battle his way past sweeping brushes and dustpans and mops to get to the firm's treasures. He endured all of this stoically, and rejoiced with us when the Government stepped in to provide spacious premises at 73 Merrion Square, where, far removed from the paraphernalia of the broom cupboard, the firm's records were encouraged to expand in greater comfort. The initial meeting with Aston had been arranged by one of his partners, Michael Webb, whose recruitment to the firm in 1959 had neatly coincided with its centenary. Little did we know that the rapid growth of the Archive's holdings would necessitate a further move in 2005, under Webb's skilful chairmanship, to the largest house on Merrion Square, Number 45, restored and adapted for our use by the

Office of Public Works on behalf of the Government.

Practising as Patterson & Kempster since 1872, Patterson Kempster & Shortall since 1970, and Davis Langdon PKS since 2002, the firm is known to Archive readers simply as PKS. The three-volume catalogue of its papers, compiled by Aisling Dunne and consulted by readers on a daily basis, describes in full all of the documents, and in many cases the reader does not need to handle the original documents. Nonetheless, original material from the collection was accessed by scholars repeatedly last year. The PKS database has some 2,784 entries, and the monumental *Alfred Jones Biographical Index of Irish Architects and Builders*, compiled by Ann Martha Rowan, contains 1,278 entries based directly on PKS material. I applaud the decision of Aston and his partners to continue to deposit documentation of the firm with the Irish Architectural Archive, where it dovetails with so many of our other holdings to provide a fascinating record of Ireland's historic buildings since 1860. (One such holding comprises the minute books, from 1875 onwards, of the Dublin Artisans' Dwellings Company, a body also chaired by Gordon Aston) And I thank the architectural, engineering and building firms, the art historians and photographers, that have followed their good example; so numerous are they that, as mentioned above, Michael Webb has had to oversee the Archive's move to even grander quarters as it celebrated its thirtieth birthday.

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Some of the calculations involved in surveying are, of course, as old as the building process itself. St Luke asks: 'For which of you, intending to build a tower, sitteth not down first and counteth the cost, whether he have sufficient to finish it?' Shakespeare talks of first surveying the plot, then drawing the model,

*And when we see the figure of the house,
Then must we rate the cost of the erection.*

But, as Webb indicates in his Epilogue, the profession stems more from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The founder of PKS, Benjamin Thomas Patterson, emerges from Gordon Aston's account as not only its early driving force, but the main formative influence on the development of quantity surveying as an independent profession in Ireland. His fastidious personal diaries might seem to confirm a certain dryness. His entry for Tuesday, 25 December 1877 reads:

Xmas Day

– <i>Xmas cards</i>	1s 0d
– <i>Xmas box, mother, E & Alice</i>	3 5s 5d
– <i>Do for family</i>	3 0s 5d
– <i>Xmas boxes for others</i>	1 10s 0d
– <i>Betty Lowry</i>	1 5s 3d
– <i>Postman & Biker</i>	2s 0d

But his letters and memoranda tell of a passionate professional whose intense dedication to his work, allied to the sharp and precise mind that gave rise to those diary entries — indeed his whole exacting personality — were necessary prerequisites for the unique and individual role he played in the foundation of the QS profession, and the standards he was to set for his successors both inside and outside his firm. He must have been a real scourge to the sort of builders — and there were many — captured in the anonymous epigram, *On the Building of a New Church*:

*They built the front, upon my word
As fine as any abbey
But thinking they might cheat the Lord,
They made the back part shabby.*

Gordon Aston cites a letter in 1910 from Patterson’s partner, John Kempster, responding gently to an OPW architect who had apparently complained about charges for site visits. ‘We are of opinion that it is advisable for a surveyor to keep in touch with the work while it is in progress and before a considerable portion is covered in’. Patterson’s riposte would have been somewhat testier.

If Patterson was first and foremost a quantity surveyor he was also a Victorian, and a Victorian of the most intense sort – single-minded, absolute and correct throughout both his public and private life. Subsumed by, and in, his work he played little and found his true pleasure, it would seem from his diaries, only from a job well done. In the 1870s his working day ranged between twelve and fourteen hours for six days a week, dedication that assured the early success of his company. From the mid-1870s, after he had taken Kempster into partnership, the practice flourished, developing links between architects such as the Deane dynasty and Thomas Drew, and patrons such as the Guinnesses and the Office of Public Works, which would bring the firm into the twentieth century with a flourish.

As Patterson & Kempster set standards for their successors in the professionalism of their approach, so, too, they stood at the forefront of the introduction of new technology and new ideas. Only fourteen months after the invention of the typewriter, P&K purchased one for their offices, paying over £40 for it in December 1878. The

firm's first telephone was installed in April 1906 (at £10 per annum), yet it was to be seventy years after the firm's foundation that its first female member of staff was engaged, as a typist, in 1930.

Dublin in those times was a small world, and I was intrigued to learn that William Beckett, indentured to the firm in 1886, left in 1891 and shortly afterwards commenced his own successful partnership with my great-great uncle, William Medcalf. In 1897 Kempster's proposal of a merger between the firms fell through, and some bad blood between the parties subsequently is recalled in the book. As a happy postscript, PKS worked on Trinity College's quatercentenary building in 1992, the theatre named for William Beckett's son, the playwright Sam.

Gordon Aston's account is really all about the exacting skills of the quantity surveyor's profession. My father, writing about his own profession, quoted Edmund Burke: 'What is an inaccurate accountant good for?' I am sure Patterson posed a similar question to his fellow surveyors. Accuracy, integrity, shrewdness, reliability, independence, management of new techniques, new technology — these are the exacting standards set by Benjamin Patterson who died almost one hundred years ago. They were calibrated anew by Aston himself, whose own eminence as quantity surveyor and arbitrator will surely be recounted in a future volume.

Nicholas K. Robinson

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