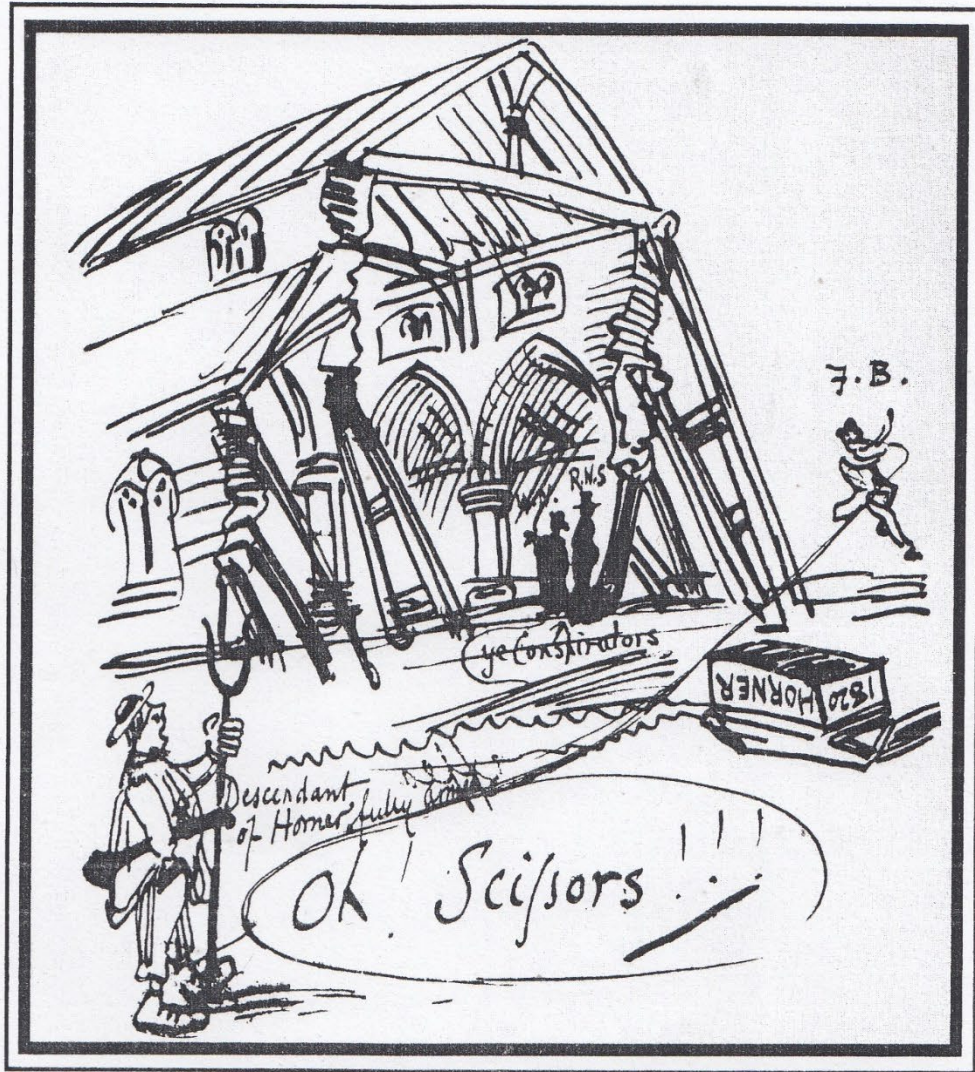


a Deuce of an uproar



WILLIAM EDEN NESFIELD'S LETTERS TO
THE RECTOR OF RADWINTER IN ESSEX

1588



William Eden Nesfield c. 1865 drawn by Sir William Blake Richmond R.A.
National Portrait Gallery, London.

PART I

William Eden Nesfield

Andrew Saint

Most architects are remembered, if at all, for their buildings and their designs, not for their personalities. With W.E. Nesfield (1835–88), the restorer and embellisher of Radwinter Church, the case is not so simple. If we knew nothing of Nesfield's life and had only his buildings, he would still rank in the forefront of Victorian architects, as a consummate designer, draughtsman and ornamentalist, and as one of three or four individuals who transformed the whole feeling and destiny of the larger English house in the '60s and '70s of the last century. Having, as we do, the astonishing and beautiful Radwinter letters which Nesfield wrote to his friend and client, 'Fred' Bullock, one's curiosity turns from the buildings to the man himself. Whose was this extraordinary, proud, quixotic, witty and melancholic temperament? And how did it get caught up in the mundanities of restoring a little Essex country church?

Nesfield was an enigma. We know enough about him to discern ability amounting practically to genius, a career only half-fulfilled and a personality fraught with contradictions: high spirits vying with depression; bouts of industry alternating with lethargy; a strong sensuality coupled with lofty, snobbish standards of honour and behaviour; and a dedication to his calling as an architect at seeming odds with his disdain for publicity or professional advancement. More knowledge might, or might not, help us to explain all this. The facts are that Nesfield had in extreme form the qualities of a certain type of mid-Victorian 'art-

architect', coupled with the advantages and drawbacks of having been born with at least half of a silver spoon in his mouth.

William Eden Nesfield was the eldest son of Lieutenant William Andrews Nesfield (1793–1881), veteran of the Peninsular War, water-colourist and landscape gardener. Always a traditionalist and (as he told Murray Tuke of Saffron Walden) an upholder of 'Conservative principles, Political and architectural', the younger Nesfield seems to have modelled himself much on his father. He depended upon him for early connections and commissions, and always liked to work with and take advice from him. They shared the same London house for thirty years, right down to 'the dear old Dad's last moments – his hand in mine,' as Nesfield told Bullock.

Nesfield senior seems to have had the same vigour, sense of honour and capacity for mordant self-expression as his son, but his temperament was easier going. An able amateur painter, he drifted into landscaping almost by accident, after Humphry Repton's death left a gap in that noble English profession. Nesfield's sister had married Anthony Salvin, a budding young country-house architect. In 1838, when young Nesfield was three, Salvin built the two families a pair of villas at Finchley which his brother-in-law tried his hand at landscaping. This soon led on to a new career. All through the 1840s and '50s, Nesfield senior was reorganising the gardens and parks of some of the largest country houses in the land. In London, he was called in to make a formal

garden in front of Buckingham Palace and to alter St. James's Park, Kew Gardens and Regent's Park; and at Kew and Regent's Park he brought in his sons to help him. A younger son, Arthur Markham Nesfield, inherited the landscaping business and did most of the work in laying out the Broad Walk at Regent's Park, but died in 1874 aged 33, after being thrown from his horse in a London street. Without him, the old man soldiered on giving informal advice and help on gardening matters until his death.

The Nesfields, an old Durham family, were comfortably circumstanced. William (the name by which the architect was privately known, though he signed his letters until his father's death as W. Eden Nesfield, and was sometimes styled Eden Nesfield) was sent to Eton. The experience was formative. He fraternized there with the coming young aristocracy and upper squirearchy, and imbibed social superiority and an admiration for heredity. At Eton or at home, he also got the rudiments of a good literary education. His letters are dotted with poetic allusions and mottoes, some of them recondite; and he was at least acquainted with Carlyle.

For some reason, Nesfield did not go on to university. He wanted to be an architect like Uncle Salvin. So he was articled in 1850, but not to Salvin: instead, to his father's friend and frequent colleague William Burn, a dour, sixty-year-old Scot who was then the doyen of British country-house architects. The arrangement did not work well. Already an able draughtsman (having had private lessons from J.D. Harding the water-colourist), Nesfield was too impatient and, probably, too wilful to submit to the discipline and tedium of a long pupillage. He broke his articles after two years and transferred to Salvin, with whom he worked on and off for five or six years, acquiring growing respect and independence in the office as his artistry revealed itself. While with Salvin he travelled a good deal. He spent much time visiting and

sketching the great cathedrals and churches of France, amassing the splendid topographical drawings which eventually went into *Specimens of Mediaeval Architecture* (1862), one of the finest of Victorian architectural books. But in a prolonged tour of 1857–8 he reached as far as Greece and Turkey – still then far from commonplace destinations in a young architect's foreign itinerary.

The time with Burn was not wasted. Nesfield learnt much there about the practicalities of planning and building gentleman's houses – skills which were to stand him in good stead. Moreover in Burn's office he fell in with a young Scot nearly four years his senior, with whom his name was to be inextricably linked: Richard Norman Shaw. Theirs was a comradeship based on contrasts, overlaid by a shared passion for architecture and a liberal measure of bounce and wit. Tall and thin, Shaw was relaxed, light-hearted, but sane, even-tempered and simple in his habits and tastes. Nesfield was short, fat (at least in later life) and altogether a more extreme, less forbearing personality. Eventually the differences led to their drifting apart; but for more than fifteen years they were inseparable.

For the first fifteen years of Nesfield and Shaw's friendship, their inspiration was the Gothic Revival, a flame which devoured all the bright young architects of the 1850s. They went to the funeral of A.W.N. Pugin, meteor of the Revived Gothic, in 1852; they sketched Pugin's brilliant details for the rising Houses of Parliament; and on their journeys abroad they studied Church-Gothic above all things. Church-building was the great Gothic architectural enthusiasm of the 1850s. Shaw, a quietly religious young man, took it all a shade more seriously than Nesfield and went on to build several new churches. Nesfield, by contrast, though a good friend of Parson Bullock and aware of all the little niceties of 'ecclesiology', was perhaps not a believer at heart and never showed a deep commitment to church-



The Frontispiece from 'Specimens of Mediaeval Architecture' by Wm. Eden Nesfield 1862 for which some of the plates were put on stone by Nesfield who had studied engraving and lithography. Town Library, Saffron Walden, (Essex Libraries).

building. His whole background was in the picturesque tradition of English house-building, and to this in the end he stayed faithful. Radwinter and four or five other church restorations (the nearest comparable example is at King's Walden in Hertfordshire) are the exceptions in his career. There is no entirely new church by Nesfield, and therefore nothing which could be called 'Nesfieldian' in Victorian church architecture, though there are features and details at Radwinter which could be by no one else – not even Shaw. Almost everything else he designed was domestic – almost, for North-West Essex boasts two notable exceptions: Barclays Bank, formerly Gibson's Bank, in the Market Place at Saffron Walden, built in 1873–5; and the original portion of Newport Grammar School, of 1875–6. It is likely that Bullock's influence in the district had something to do with these deviations from the norm.

This is to anticipate. Nesfield set up in architectural practice in 1859, but travelled as much as he worked over the first few years. Much of his architecture in the 1860s consisted of farm buildings, cottages and lodges on the country-house estates which his father was helping to reorganize. This was the type of job he relished: private, unhurried and probably unremunerative, but always a challenge because Nesfield looked for the highest standards of appearance, materials, workmanship and practicality. A born artist, he was preoccupied with style, ornament and detail. In what style were these buildings to be? At first he toyed with simplified Gothic or Classic. But Shaw and he began to feel that both the traditional country-house architects and the Gothic Revivalists had made their domestic architecture too grim. They set out, therefore, to aim at least in their cottages for something prettier, suppler, more informal and more giving.

In 1862 they tramped over the Weald of Sussex and Kent with the clear intention of bringing the freshness and charm of tradi-

tional English timber architecture to bear upon modern brick houses and cottages. The next year, Shaw joined Nesfield in practice and a new style was born, Nesfield trying the ideas out at a lodge in Regent's Park, Shaw at a lodge at Bromley, Kent (both buildings, alas, have been demolished). This 'Old English' style, as it is nowadays called, came to be more associated with Shaw than with Nesfield, because Shaw was the first to transfer it from cottages to larger middle-class houses and had no reservations about publishing the results. Nesfield used the style often, somewhat more ornamentally but just as effectively (at Radwinter, not only the cottages but also the church porch show what he could do in it). But he confined it at first to small buildings, perhaps on the grounds that Old English was somewhat too 'cottagey' and undignified for his grander clients. When he built or added to country houses, he went in either for Gothic (Combe Abbey), Tudor (Cloverley Hall – in connexion with which Bullock's advice was sought for a motto to adorn the stable block), or for the informal, ornamental Classic style misleadingly labelled 'Queen Anne', of which Nesfield evolved a special variant (Kinmel Park and Bodrhyddan). The style would depend on what was there beforehand and what a client wanted. But as a virtuoso designer Nesfield loved getting the hang of styles, mixing them together, and coming out with something artistic, fetching and quite unlike anything or anybody else.

It is the decoration of Nesfield's architecture which is generally most startling. None of his buildings depends upon ornament; they are mostly well if heavily proportioned and cleverly planned, in terms of the needs of the age. But whenever he had the chance (and he must have had a silver tongue with his rich clients), he loved to break out into ornament: stamped leadwork, carved and moulded brickwork, stained glass, wrought iron finials, incised plasterwork, and even green bottle-bottoms stuck into external plaster-

ing. Among other Gothic Revivalists, only William Burges was as ornamental as Nesfield, and Burges's range of effects was stiffer and more limited. Where Nesfield got his ideas would take an essay to explore. Much of his vocabulary, like the castellated gutter-heads which are almost a signature on his work, is heraldic and mediaeval in inspiration. Some motifs, like the 'pies' or circles which he scattered over the surfaces of his buildings, are certainly Japanese. Nesfield was an ardent collector and shared in the passion for oriental *objets* which prevailed among 'advanced' artistic circles in the 1860s. 'He has a very jolly collection of Persian, Indian, Greek and Japanese things that I should really like you to see,' his painter friend Simeon Solomon told the poet Swinburne. Most of Nesfield's domestic interiors have been dismantled now, so it is hard to envisage the heady mixture of tough, chunky furniture, exotic blue pots, Japanese prints and fans, stamped leather and other 'antiquities' which once adorned them. Like the artist he was, Nesfield liked to 'control' these interiors as much as he could and designed everything he could lay his hands on. Sometimes he got his artist friends, like the painters Albert Moore and Thomas Armstrong, to help him. The carved panels of storks on the outside of the Saffron Walden bank, for instance, are said to have been sketched by Randolph Caldecott, the short-lived illustrator. But almost anything in any material which did not involve figure-work, Nesfield himself could and did manage. To execute the designs, he went to the best craftsmen he could find, and was merciless in his criticism of their work. James Forsyth, a Scots carver capable in both stone and wood, is a good example. He worked regularly for both Nesfield and Shaw, and probably carried out most of the elaborate carving at Radwinter Church.

It sounds like an idyllic life, as Nesfield flitted from house to house as the guest of this peer or that baronet, designing costly

buildings and fittings which were executed without delay by the best craftsmen and builders. After a time, however, it palled. Exactly when or why it is hard to say. Nesfield was a man of moods, and there is ebullience in the later letters to Bullock, just as there is in the first, carefree correspondence of 1868. But things were perhaps not the same after 1866-9, the years in which Nesfield and Shaw were in formal partnership. Even in this period they continued to design their own jobs, helping each other out only over minor and business matters, but some friction arose which led them to discontinue the arrangement. Shaw's marriage in 1867 may not have helped. Nesfield was a bachelor, fond of smoking, drinking, bohemian company and, remarks Simeon Solomon with a smirking pretence at morality, 'I deeply grieve to say, of women'. He did eventually marry, three years before his death, perhaps in order to do the 'right thing' by his bride (an architect's daughter). In any case, during the 1870s he suffered a gradual decline of spirits and health, until after his father's and his Uncle Salvin's death (both in 1881), when he was only forty-six, he threw up architecture altogether. Professionally, however, the 1870s were the busiest portion of his career. Perhaps this was part of the problem. The delightful avocation of the idealistic gentleman-amateur had turned into an unceasing daily grind, one of unending professional commitments and responsibilities. As a conscientious and painstaking designer, Nesfield could not take less trouble and he found it hard to delegate. His office staff was always small: a trusted clerk and an assistant or two for working drawings. He seems simply to have liked the situation less and less and, when he could afford to retire, did so.

Until the late 1870s there are no signs of a falling-off in Nesfield's work. Some of his best buildings, like the additions at Bodrhyddan (one of a number of Welsh commissions) and the Saffron Walden bank, belong to

1872–5. But thereafter his more intimate letters become increasingly taken up with frustrations and complaints, almost ‘cries for help’, a psychiatrist might say. ‘Personal work is very difficult and I think becomes more so in one’s sere and yellow – it used to be so nice,’ he suddenly tells Mrs. Walker of Lea Wood in 1877, in the midst of a characteristically learned and bumptious letter about possible mottoes for her fireplace. The correspondence with Bullock mostly stays serene, but to Murray Tuke of the Saffron Walden bank he keeps bursting out about the habits and failings of builders. George Whiffin, who built Nesfield’s new front to the Rose and Crown (now demolished) next to the bank in Saffron Walden, as well as his cottages at Radwinter and the church porch, is represented as ‘the most perplexing man I ever dealt with’; and then later, to Bullock, as a ‘shifty little beast’. Nesfield also tells Tuke that he ‘never had so troublesome a man to deal with’ as Macey, the reputable London contractor who built the bank; even Bell, the solid Saffron Walden builder who did most of the restoration at Radwinter, comes in for lambasting. At Kiplin Hall in North Yorkshire, where Nesfield is busy in the late 1870s, the poor builder (who eventually goes bankrupt, and asks for financial help for his passage to Australia) is ‘a most troublesome man to deal with, and you have no conception of the time I have devoted to this unfortunate work’. Here however the client has his say as well. He finds his architect extravagant and inefficient but concludes charitably: ‘I feel quite sure that Mr. Nesfield has made nothing out of the business himself and that owing to his total want of business habits etc. he will have had all his trouble for nothing which I expect is generally the case with him.’ The Bullock correspondence confirms this diagnosis. In 1878 Nesfield brightly tells Bullock that he has been ‘overhauling my books with an Accountant’, whose trials may be imagined. A bill is then sent in, but the final account for

Radwinter is not paid till 1885, when Nesfield thanks Bullock casually for a cheque he had entirely forgotten about.

So, after 1881, Nesfield withdrew without compunction from the work which for twenty years had been, despite these latter trials, the *raison d’être* of his existence. A tone of resentment persists into his retirement. ‘I can hardly tell you the worry and anxiety a poor Architect has,’ he tells Captain Crowe of Kiplin in 1882. ‘He does not control men in battalions, with Captains and officers and martial law, but has to fight single-handed for his client and his own credit, and then when among the lawyers, “Sauve qui peut”. And to Bullock in 1885 he writes: ‘I look back on my professional career with wonder that so noble an occupation is mixed up with such a blaguardly crew, and that Hanwell [Lunatic Asylum] has not opened its doors to me ten years since. I have been an invalid for the last two years ... I am all right now and principally occupy myself with painting which I am passionately fond of.’ 1885 was the year of Nesfield’s marriage to Mary Annetta Backwell, *née* Gwilt. They lived at Brighton and there, three years later, he died, aged 53. On his death certificate appears: ‘scirrhomia of liver’.

What are we to make of W. Eden Nesfield? His was one of the highest and proudest architectural talents in an age of high and proud architectural aspiration and individualism. No English architect has ever sketched or drawn better. Despite his rejection of publicity, he came to be recognized as one of the moving forces in the reform of English domestic architecture. In this he resembled William Morris’s great friend and adviser, Philip Webb. Webb, an austerer man and architect, lived much longer, had a strain of the teacher in him and came to be a tremendous influence on the next generation of designers. Nesfield was no kind of teacher; he had, as has been said, few pupils or assistants, and only occasionally was his

special brand of architecture imitated (Leicester Town Hall, designed by his pupil F.J. Hames with some reputed help from the master, is one of the few exceptions). For him, the satisfactions of architecture were the private ones of producing buildings of great refinement for individual clients who shared his social and aesthetic views. Furthermore, Nesfield's architecture was superficially hard to distinguish from that of his easier, more prolific but no more able friend and erstwhile partner, Norman Shaw. Nevertheless the strength of his work and personality shone through sufficiently to keep his buildings remembered and his memory alive. Articles in the *Architectural Review* for 1897 by one of his better-known assistants, J.M. Brydon, revealed the rich diversity of his work to the architects of the succeeding Arts and Crafts

era. His lofty standard of refinement and care over the smallest details, practical or artistic, was a legacy of lasting value to this generation. And some of his small innovations, like the narrow facing bricks which he liked to use in his costlier buildings, became part of the permanent stock-in-trade of English domestic architecture.

Radwinter, in its church, its cottages and in the marvellous letters to Bullock, shows Nesfield at his best, working in the way that he liked and with a man he clearly loved. Let Nesfield's carver, James Forsyth, have the last word. 'He was a man of strong impulses, equally actuated by strong likes and dislikes. When thoroughly interested in project or person he was all there, body and mind; no difficulties could shake his resolve.' Radwinter village can boast permanent proof of this.