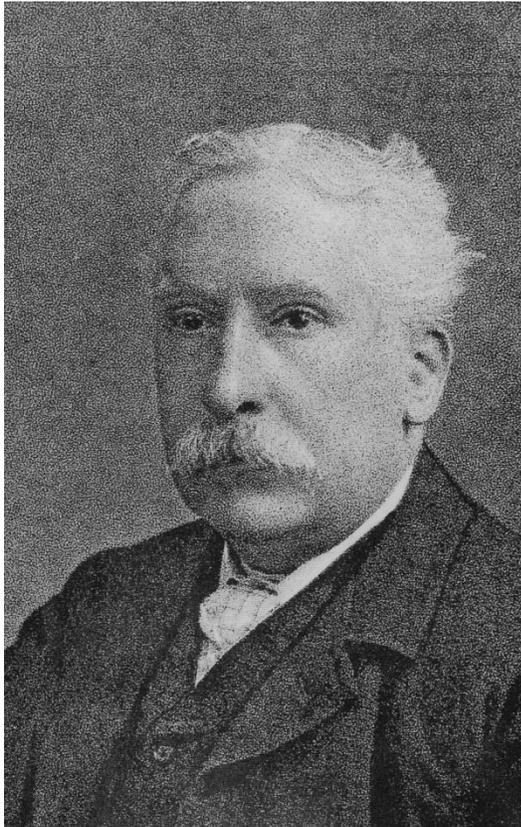


A note on the architect of Emmanuel, James Cubitt



James Cubitt (1836-1912) was one of the foremost nonconformist architects of the nineteenth century. He was born on 20 March 1836 at Ilford, Essex, the son of a Baptist minister, and was articled first to Isaac Gilbert, of Nottingham.

James' first design as an independent architect was of the East Hill Baptist Church, Wandsworth, in 1862, followed by one at Elswick, Newcastle on Tyne, in 1864. He then entered a partnership with Henry Fuller. Together they designed the Clapton Park Congregational Church in Hackney (usually known as the Round Chapel), one of the best-known nonconformist buildings in London. Cubitt was responsible in particular for the Sunday Schools, for which he took inspiration from the great church on the island of Torcello in the Venetian lagoon.

His architectural ideas for places of worship were published in an influential manifesto, *Church Designs for Congregations*, which he issued in 1870. Nonconformist chapels, free from over-attention to ritual or liturgy, were to be places where the word should be preached and all should see and hear, unimpeded by pillars, church furniture, and so on; "breadth, space, and largeness of parts", a new form of building for the new, confident nonconformity of the late nineteenth century..."a grand open space before the pulpit and communion table – surely a natural arrangement for a Protestant church". Thus Cubitt was an advocate of the new architecture; though he adapted freely from historical forms, both Romanesque

and Gothic, he was hidebound by neither. As such, his works were much admired by Hermann Muthesius and other commentators on modern architecture of the period.

Emmanuel was a major commission for Cubitt, in which he could put his theories at least partly into practice. That was determined by the shape of the site, which precluded the polygonal forms Cubitt often advocated. The Building Committee also insisted on a tower, which Cubitt may not have wanted, but he made it into a dominant feature of the design, especially as seen from the street. Piers were necessary to support the great span of the roof, but Cubitt adopted the expedient of very wide spans and shallow arches, so as not to impede the participation of the congregation in worship. He calculated that only one per cent of the full church would have no view of the pulpit. A gallery under the tower (which was thus integrated into the body of the church) was adopted to increase the seating capacity to 700.

Several of the architectural features of Emmanuel are specialities of Cubitt, including the beautiful rose window in the street front, and the echoing trefoils in the arch of the Sunday school hall, visible from the side entrance in Little St Mary's Lane. (A Sunday school building was provided at the rear, with rooms off for classes, a variant of the Akron principle he used elsewhere). Lancet windows and arched doors are also common Cubitt motifs. Stained glass by Leach of Cambridge was provided, later replaced by the present glass.

Other extant churches by Cubitt include the great Union Chapel at Islington (his *magnum opus*, near the present Highbury & Islington station), the Welsh Church at Cambridge Circus in London, Westgate Rd Baptist in Newcastle, and Streatham Congregational Church. Emmanuel and Union Chapel are perhaps his most confident designs, Emmanuel being described in Prof Binfield's study of Cubitt (2001) as "a cathedral built for an angular congregation on an angular site in the very teeth of the Colleges".

James Cubitt lived at Loughton in Essex most of his life, and in Loughton are his only extant domestic buildings, including the extensive Staples Road school s, three private houses and a grand stable block. He died at Monghyr Cottage, Loughton, on 8 August 1912, where he is commemorated by a blue plaque. He is buried in his wife's grave in Loughton Town Cemetery, but his name was never added to the gravestone.

Chris Pond

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Further reading:

Clyde Binfield: *The Contexting of a Chapel Architect, James Cubitt 1836-1912*, pub. 2001

Chris Pond: *The Buildings of Loughton and Notable People of the Town*, 2nd ed, 2010