

As Companions working in the Wyre Forest seek to deepen our knowledge of the Guild's links with the local area, and ahead of this year's Ruskin Lecture, 'The Sombre Robe': Ruskin and Birmingham, to be given by Bernard Richards, Emeritus Fellow of Brasenose College Oxford, Stuart Eagles writes about the life and career of the Guild's second Master.

PAST MASTERS: A BUILDER OF BIRMINGHAM, GEORGE BAKER (1825-1910)

Stuart Eagles

'George Baker was a man of strong individuality, of most genial and affectionate nature, esteemed and beloved by all who knew him.' So reads Baker's anonymously written obituary in the Society of Friends' *Annual Monitor* (1911). The *Birmingham Post* called him 'one of the builders of Birmingham as we know it.' He was, they said, 'one of that band' of public-spirited men around Joseph Chamberlain (1836-1914) who transformed the city. 'Alderman Baker's success in public life...' announced the *Annual Monitor*, 'was essentially as a thinker ... few have made a deeper or more permanent impression in the minds of the citizens as a devoted servant whose sole desire was to leave his native town better than he found it.'

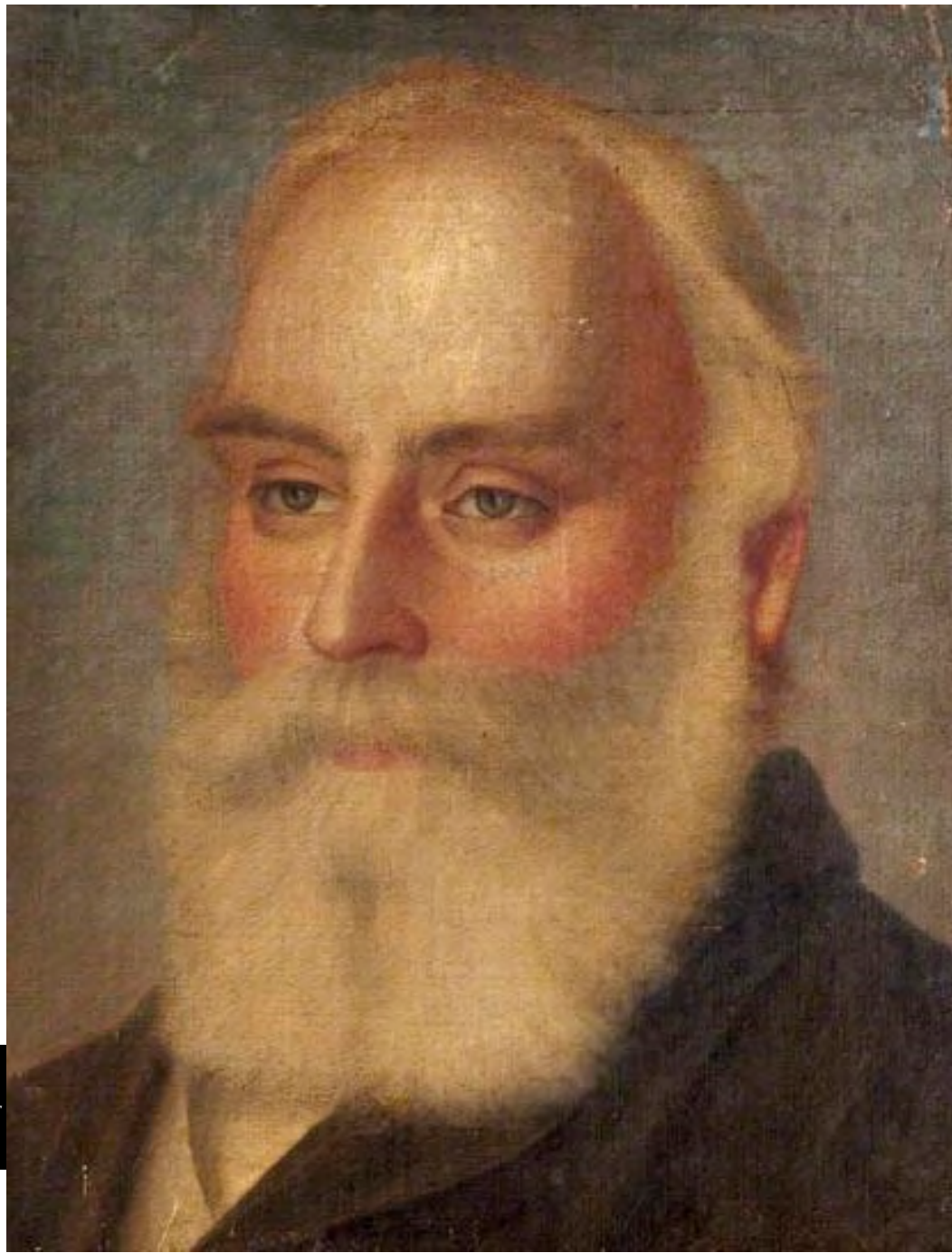
Despite the recent revelations of Mark Frost's hugely important study, *The Lost Companions* (2014), which seriously questions the nature of Baker's approach to working-class Companions employed by Ruskin in the Wyre Forest, it is difficult to find fault with his career as a municipal administrator and civic leader. Confined to a few thousand words in this article, my intention is to focus on those aspects of Baker's life and work that are not directly linked to the Guild and are therefore less well-known perhaps to readers of this magazine.

George Baker was born in Birmingham on 11th May 1825. His Quaker heritage, and his Birmingham roots, reached back to at least the seventeenth century. His great-grandfather, Samuel Baker (c. 1730-1813), a hard wood turner by trade, was appointed one of the first fifty Street Commissioners in 1769, tasked with overseeing the municipal government of Birmingham. George's father, Edward Baker (1800-1857), was the son of a button maker, George Baker Snr. (1762-1801), who died when Edward was an infant. Edward was sent aged nine to the Friends' Ackworth School located near Pontefract, West Yorkshire, and founded in 1779 for boy and girl boarders. He remained there from September 1809 to December 1813.

According to some sources, Edward set up what became his family firm of blacking manufacturers as early as 1818, though given his age at that time this seems improbable. When in 1824 he married Maria Downing (1795-1869), his marriage certificate recorded that he was a Grocer. Edward probably established the factory, which was on Birmingham's Granville Street, in the early 1830s. Later called Edward Baker & Sons it boasted that it was a 'blacking manufacturer, importer of black lead, and sole agent in the Midlands for Rothwell's patent fire lighters, and wholesale dealers in lucifer matches'! The

firm was certainly in business by 1833.

George followed his father to Ackworth School, but the circumstances were unusual insofar as he was admitted at the tender age of eight on 4th September 1833 because the school roll had fallen short of numbers. At that time there were no school holidays, and it is extremely unlikely that he would have returned home before his schooling ended. It must have been a comfort, therefore, to have been joined by his siblings: James Baker (1826-?) in December 1834, and John Edward Baker (1828-1908) in May 1837. George left the school on 7th September 1838, returning to Birmingham



Portrait by his nephew, Joseph Southall (Victoria Art Gallery, Bath, donated by George's grandson, Guild Companion Olaf Baker). Reproduced with permission.



founder and a member of another prominent Birmingham Quaker family. Rebecca died on August 20th 1864, shortly after the birth of the couple's seventh child and only daughter, Lilian Rebecca (Lily) Baker (1864-1884), who herself was only twenty when she died.

George's public career began in earnest in 1860, when he was appointed to the Board of Overseers, becoming Chairman in 1867. In 1864, he had been appointed a Poor Law Guardian, and chaired the Board a few years later. He reorganized the system for vaccination of the poor. He created new wards for elderly women in the workhouse, and arranged for the successful purchase of the land on which an infirmary was later erected. He also played a leading role in establishing Rubery Hill Asylum. Eventually built in 1882, it could accommodate up to 600 patients. With its own chapel, library and laundry, the asylum was set in 150 acres of parkland.

Baker was a life-long member of the Birmingham Liberal Association which was founded in 1865. A close friend of its President, John Skirrow Wright (1822-1880), Baker was honorary secretary during its most active years. He was a leading member of that group of civic reformers led by Joseph Chamberlain. He was elected to Birmingham Town Council in 1867, representing St George's Ward. He never followed Chamberlain and the majority of Birmingham's Liberals into support for Unionism following the Liberal split over

via Wakefield. Intriguingly, he was collected by one William Lloyd, and the agent responsible for his enrolment at the school had been one Charles Lloyd. Given the prominence of the Quaker Lloyd families in Birmingham and Staffordshire, it is tempting to speculate that these men might have been relatives of Anna Lloyd (1837-1925), one of the many women artists trained by Ruskin by means of correspondence, and whose work, 'Study of a Tulip' (1886) is one of the treasures of the Ruskin Collection. She cannot have failed to have known of George Baker later in the century when they both lived in Birmingham and contributed handsomely to its civic life.

Soon after his return to the family home, George's brother, Morris Baker (1829-1898), left for Ackworth, enrolling on 5th October. His sisters, Anne Baker (1831-1877) and Elizabeth Maria Baker (1833-1922), would also study at the School. It is worth pausing here to consider a few notes of family history. It was Elizabeth who married Joseph Sturge Southall (1835-1862), a pharmaceutical chemist of Nottingham. The sole issue of their marriage was Joseph Edward Southall (1861-1944), the artist and pacifist who drew up the plans for a Guild Museum in Bewdley that was never built (the plans are in the Ruskin Collection). In 1903, he married his cousin, Anna Elizabeth (Bessie) Baker (1859-1947), the eldest of the five children of John Edward Baker whose schooling at Ackworth had overlapped for a while with George's. (For more on J. E. Southall, read Companion George Breeze's entry for Southall in the *Oxford Dictionary for National Biography*, and his exhibition catalogue, *Joseph Southall, 1861-1944: artist-craftsman* (1980).)

George Baker's career in the family firm began as soon as he left Ackworth. At first he served as a clerk, and then as a sort of travelling salesman. According to his Quaker biography in the *Annual Monitor*, he hauled a case of samples around the country. He gradually took

on more responsibility, and by the time of the 1851 census when he was in his mid-twenties, he was able to describe himself as a 'Blacking Maker employing two men, two boys and ten girls'. George's brother, John Edward, who from school had been apprenticed to T. & W Southall, chemists and druggists of Birmingham and probably relatives of Joseph Sturge Southall who later became his brother-in-law, eventually joined him in the family firm. They added new departments of business, expanded its operations, and steadily won a reputation as an important enterprise

As young as twenty, in the mid-1840s, George began his long association with Birmingham's Quaker First-Day School at Severn Street, becoming one of its first teachers. It had been founded by Joseph Sturge (1793-1859), a Radical businessman, to improve reading, writing and scriptural knowledge among adolescents, but it soon came to focus on adults. Baker was a trustee of the school's Savings Fund for decades, and during his tenure the fund is said to have risen in value from £700 to £17,000. By the 1850s he had gained a reputation as an efficient and dependable financial administrator. Education remained a particular passion. He became a member of the Birmingham Education Society in 1868, and the National Education League (campaigning for non-sectarian education) in 1869, but he failed to be elected to the Birmingham School Board in 1870. He played a part in the reform of King Edward VI Grammar School, and served the reformed institution as a Governor.

In 1848, George had married Rebecca Baker Pumphrey (1824-1864), the daughter of Josiah Pumphrey (1783-1861), a brass



Birmingham's Severn Street Schools.

Irish Home Rule.

His priority on being elected to the Council was to join with those reforming the town's system of drainage and sanitation, helping to oversee the construction of a new sewage network which did much to improve public health. (He later served as Chairman of the Drainage Board from 1892 until his death in 1910.) He was a member of the Water

Committee that secured Birmingham's water supply, and he was on the Improvement Committee that oversaw the clearance of the slums that had occupied what became Corporation Street. One of the chief developers of the city centre was Baker's friend, the architect John Henry Chamberlain (1831-1883)—no relation of Joseph's. J. H. Chamberlain was appointed a trustee of the Guild of St George in 1879, where he served alongside Baker. When Baker became an Alderman of Birmingham in 1874, few appear to have doubted that his record of public service had earned the accolade.

Joseph Chamberlain was elected Mayor of Birmingham in November 1873, but resigned in June 1876 to stand for Parliament. Baker was elected to succeed him, and was re-elected in May 1877 to serve for one further year. It was difficult to maintain the momentum for reform that Chamberlain had built up, but Baker's enthusiasm seems to have been undiminished.

It was whilst Baker was Mayor that he met Ruskin, and Ruskin's letter of August 1877 to the workmen and labourers of Great Britain in *Fors Clavigera*, was written from Baker's home, Bellefield (Bellefield House, west of Winson Green Road, since demolished, was on Birmingham Heath, opposite the present site of Birmingham Prison). Readers of *The Companion* will know how uncomfortable Ruskin was to meet Birmingham's leading businessmen and politicians. The letter is worth reading in its entirety for what it reveals about the tensions between Ruskin and his disciples. For all that Ruskin enjoined his readers to take action to improve the world around them, he shared none of his disciples' sense of hope that a remarkable amount of good could be achieved in the industrial cities.

Baker made a particular effort during his Mayoralty to advance the interests of Birmingham's cultural institutions. In 1877, he convened a conference of representatives from a range of municipal authorities with the aim of persuading London to share its cultural treasures, particularly its public art collections, with the provinces. It helped pave the way for the passing of the National Gallery Loan Act of 1883. Baker also keenly encouraged the establishment and expansion of public libraries, and must have known fellow Birmingham Guild Companion, the antiquarian and historian of Warwickshire, Samuel Timmins (1826-1902). Timmins was a founder, with the radical Rev George Dawson (1821-

1876), of the Shakespeare Club in the 1860s which led to the formation in 1881 of the Shakespeare Memorial Library based in Birmingham Reference Library.

In 1879, Baker re-married: Gulielma Patching (1854-1930) was nearly thirty years' his junior. Her father, Frederick Patching (1822-1887), was a woollen draper and tailor based in Edgbaston, who for some time had lived at Spring Bank, Bewdley. Like her husband, Rebecca had also attended Ackworth School (1864-5). The couple had one daughter and one son, the latter of whom was born when George was nearly 57. His daughter was Elma Chiswell Baker (1880-1962) (Chiswell was the maiden name of George's paternal grandmother) and it is once again worth pausing to entertain a tantalising digression. Elma married Alfred Miller (1883-1958), the brother of the sculptor, Alexander (Alec) Miller (1879-1961), whose son was schooled at Bembridge. Alec wrote to Van Akin Burd and Jim Dearden in 1960 to tell them that his sister-in-law had shown him letters from Ruskin to her father (George Baker) that he believed she still possessed. For a variety of reasons the matter was not pursued, and I have so far been unable to trace the whereabouts of this potential treasure-trove.

In 1886, George Baker became chairman of the Improvement Committee. Despite facing keen opposition from fellow politicians to his house-building plans, Baker nevertheless successfully persuaded the Council to build twenty-two cottages in what became Ryder Street which were completed in 1890. In the following year, he achieved the more ambitious goal of building 82 houses in Lawrence Street. In 1895, he persuaded the Council to purchase and then demolish insanitary housing in Mill Lane, and though his plans for 64 new homes on the site were defeated two years later, the houses were eventually built under a barely modified scheme shortly afterwards. The responsibilities of the Improvement Committee were transferred to the Estates Committee in 1899, and Baker became its first Chairman, before retiring aged 75 in 1900.

In his official capacity as Alderman, Baker met Prime Minister W. E. Gladstone and US President Ulysses S. Grant, and in 1909,

Ruskin's letter to Baker, thanking him for his hospitality at Bellefield and for the trip to the Wyre Forest.

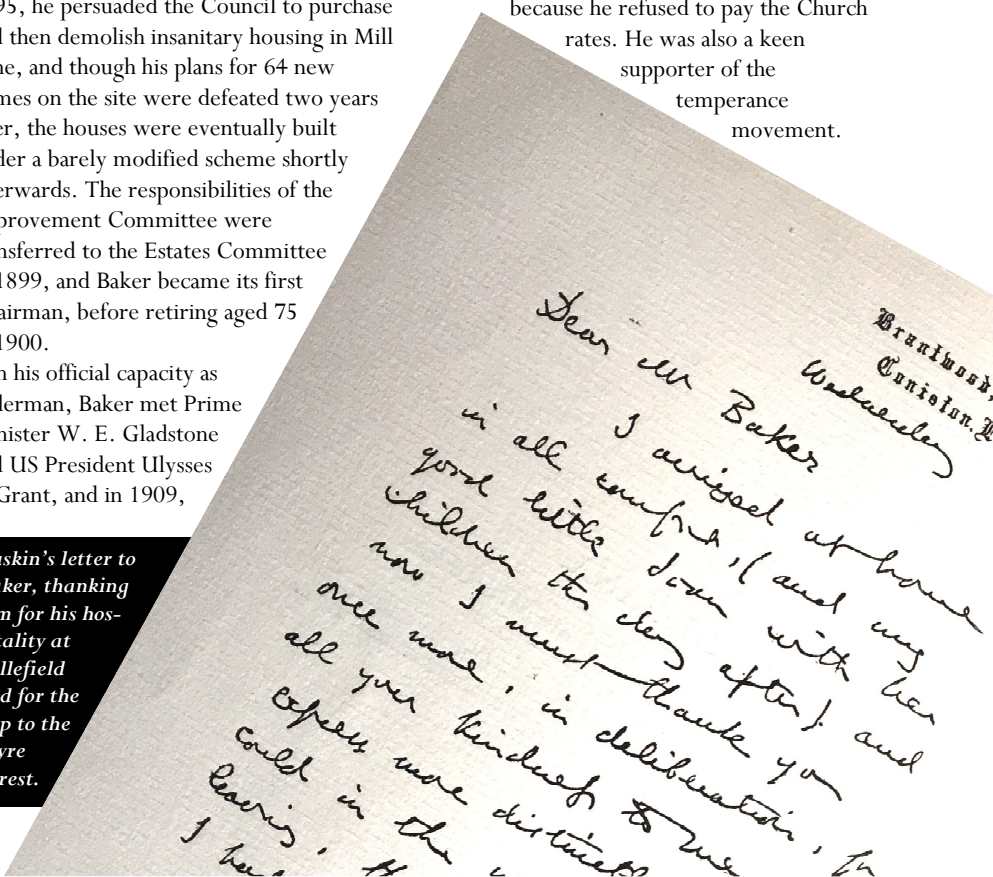


George Baker, miniature portrait (in the possession of Dale and Alex Parmeter).

at the opening of the new University buildings, when Baker moved the Corporation's address, he was presented to King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra as 'Father of the Council'.

He was a tireless promoter of international peace, serving as the President of the local branch of the Peace Society, the foundation of which owed much to Baker's old friend and ally in adult education, Joseph Sturge. In 1857 he visited Finland with Wilson Sturge (1834-1899) on a relief mission to fishermen whose property had been destroyed by the British navy during the Crimean War.

Baker was a defender of civil and religious freedoms, and early in his first marriage suffered some confiscation of property because he refused to pay the Church rates. He was also a keen supporter of the temperance movement.





BEAUCASTLE

The Venetian influence is particularly evident in the ornate external 'bachelor' staircase, so-called because unmarried gentlemen guests weren't allowed to use the same staircase as the ladies. Originally, this outside staircase led to four bedrooms unconnected to the rest of the house, a prudish arrangement that has been reversed with the addition of communicating doors.

The elaborate wrought-iron balcony that runs around the rear of the house was probably inspired by Ruskin's Alpine travels. Inside and out, the level of craftsmanship is sublime, from the magnificent drawing room with its beamed ceiling elaborately vaulted with handmade mouldings, to the oak-panelled hall and dining room, and the four exquisite stained-glass windows [the figures of which were designed] by Edward Burne-Jones, which are thought to have been made in William Morris's factory.

Beaucastle was in less than pristine condition when, in the early 1990s, Mr and Mrs Amor bought the house from its previous owner, George Clancey, who had lived there for 40 years. It was he who had laid out Beaucastle's 12 acres of park-like gardens and grounds, with meandering lawns and a picturesque lake created from a former clay pit.

The Amors relaid and insulated the roof, rebuilt the tower, and renovated the interior, installing bathrooms and a splendid farmhouse kitchen/breakfast room. The 10,697sq ft house now has four reception rooms, a sumptuous master suite, six further bedrooms, two bathrooms and a billiards [sic] room, from where a spiral staircase leads to the observation tower with its spectacular 360° views over Bewdley and the surrounding countryside. Below the house, a courtyard of buildings includes former coach houses, stables and grooms' quarters, all suitable for conversion subject to planning consent.

—Country Life (October 22nd 2009).

residences. They desired to clear away all the insanitary dwellings in the borough, and to improve it in every possible way. In few places so beautifully situated as Bewdley was there to be found such a noble river as the Severn, and he saw no reason why the town should not be supplied with the electric light, the motive power for the dynamos being obtained from the river. In places less happily placed than Bewdley that had been successfully accomplished, and why not, therefore, at Bewdley? His Worship concluded by moving a resolution appointing a standing Visitors' Committee, to promote the interests of Bewdley, Wribbenhall, and neighbourhood, their duties being to give information to persons seeking health and pleasure and place of residence. . . .

The motion having been carried, the MAYOR was thanked for convening and presiding over the meeting.

—'The Attractions of Bewdley' *Worcestershire Chronicle*, May 24th 1890.

Bewdley was, Baker thought, an attractive, modern-thinking and environmentally-sensitive town whose natural virtues Baker sought to enhance. How many people in Bewdley, I wonder, were aware of the Guild settlers in the Wyre Forest? Writing in 1901 to her fellow Guild Companion, the solicitor Sydney Morse (1854-1929), Edith Hope Scott (1862-1936), the future Guild historian and Wyre settler, remarked:

Bewdley has been tending to become a new Guild centre, & therefore seems the most suitable place for at least beginning any new Guild work. The Master lives there. The 20 acres of Ruskin land are there. And two Guild companions already own small plots of land there.

—Brotherton Library: Edith Hope Scott, unpublished letter to Sydney Morse, n.d. 1901.

Much of that hope, which promises to be fulfilled by the Guild in the coming years with a greater degree of success and fidelity

Having purchased 381 acres of Crown land in the Wyre Forest, Baker commissioned William Doubleday to design the Gothic mansion, Beaucastle, which became Baker's principal residence in the 1870s. It is often remarked that Baker was highly unusual in serving two different towns as Mayor, but it is not sufficiently appreciated that when Baker served as Mayor of Bewdley in two consecutive years between October 1888 and September 1890, he did so at the same time as continuing to represent St George's Ward in Birmingham and carrying out his formidable burden of committee work there. In reality, he was more of a figure-head in Bewdley, but as the

recorded, his ambitions for the town were no less great as a consequence.

On Monday evening a public meeting was held in the townhall (sic) to promote the effort which is now being made to make Bewdley an attractive health resort. The Mayor, Mr. George Baker, presided over a large attendance, which included many of the leading residents and tradesmen of the neighbourhood.

The MAYOR said that what was now being done was an experiment, but it had answered at Bridgnorth, Malvern, and other places. They desired to attract visitors to Bewdley, not only the 'trippers,' [but] for persons who desired healthy and well-situated

Looking out from the viewing tower at Beaucastle. *Worcestershire Chronicle*



to Ruskin's vision than was ever possible in the past, nevertheless owes a great deal to the considerable foresight and prodigious energy of George Baker, Acting Master during Ruskin's long decline, and second Master of the Guild from 1900 until his death in 1910.

'Until within a few weeks of his death,' the *Quaker Annual Monitor* recorded:

[George Baker] was still engaged in public life. Taken ill whilst visiting his wife's mother [Mary Patching née Wheeler (1830-1914)], [at 19 Charlotte Street] in Edgbaston, his malady became so serious that he could not be moved to Bewdley. Late at night on the day he died [10th January 1910] a great fire broke out in the Cornwall Works, and the sounds of many alarm-signals reached the ears of the dying man. Recognising their import, he feebly asked his wife whose works were on fire. On inquiry through the telephone, he was told that it was George Tangye's works. 'Give him my love and sympathy' were almost his last words.

—*Annual Monitor*, p. 9-10.

That love would have been genuinely felt. Baker's relationship with the Quaker, manufacturer and philanthropist, George Tangye (1835-1920), stretched back many decades, and was strengthened by a shared commitment to education that expressed itself in an active involvement with the Severn Street Schools. Together with his brother, Richard Tangye (1833-1906), George had given £11,000 towards the foundation of the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, and a further £10,000 towards the Birmingham School of Art. Richard, who had served as a Liberal Councillor in Birmingham, had been particularly influential in the choice of J. H. Chamberlain as the School's architect. The School would eventually count the sculptor, artist-craftsman and Guild Companion Benjamin Creswick (1853-1946), among its leaders. When Sir Richard Tangye came to publish the catalogue of his own library, it revealed that he owned many Ruskin volumes, including Chamberlain's Ruskin bibliography.

Like many members of his wider family, George Baker was buried in the Friends' section of Birmingham city cemetery, at Witton. His estate was

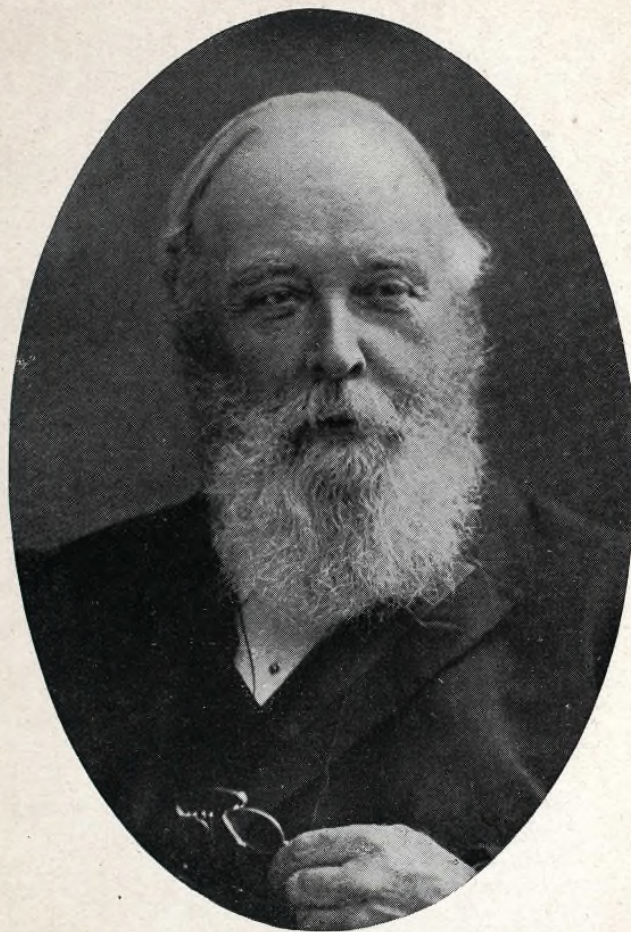


Companion Annie Creswick Dawson with three of the capitals carved by her great grandfather, Benjamin Creswick, which adorn the Bachelor Staircase at Beaucastle. Edith Hope Scott wrote that Creswick 'carved the capitals of the short pillars on the outside stone staircase [at Beaucastle] with the wild life of the forest, squirrel and rabbit, deer and bird among the oak and the wild growth of the wood. Work delightful to himself and a delight to everyone who sees it.' Photo: Paul Dawson.

valued at £15,500 (a simple RPI multiplication would measure the modern equivalent value at £1.5m but by many factors it was probably worth more than that figure suggests). His widow never remarried and moved back to Edgbaston where she died in 1930.

'For over fifty years,' reported the *Birmingham Gazette*, 'Mr. Baker ranked as a public man, and for the last forty, at any rate, he occupied a very prominent position in the municipality.' [*Birmingham Gazette* (January 17th 1910).]

Special thanks to Dale and Alex Parmeter, the current owners of Beaucastle, for welcoming a party of visiting Companions to their home on June 11th this year, and for permission to reproduce the 'miniature' of Baker and to publish photographs taken on that day (an account of the visit will appear next time). Heartfelt thanks, also, to Celia Wolfe, honorary archivist at Ackworth School, for providing me with valuable information for this article.



George Baker, photograph published in the Annual Monitor (1911).

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The next issue will carry an article about past Master, George Thomson.

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