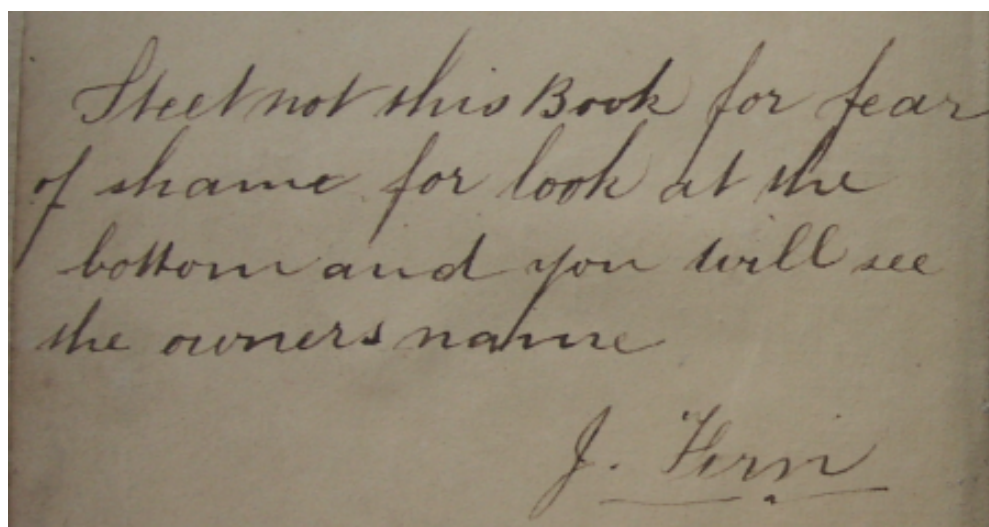


Trading Stories, Working Lives

Graham Barker investigates the rise and fall of a family firm of church builders and monumental masons.

Tucked at the very bottom of our old family tool-chest, there's a dusty book. And tucked inside the book, there's an inscription carefully written in copperplate script.



The spelling, punctuation and poetic rhythm might not bear close scrutiny, but this inscription – on the title page of *A Treatise on Mensuration*, published in 1859 – provides a tangible link to my distant relative, John Firm, a stone mason and builder in Victorian Leicester.

Nestling alongside in the tool-chest, there's one of John Firm's pocket notebooks from 1871-2. The used pages have, alas, been cut off, but their jagged stubs offer tantalising glimpses of his day-to-day work; remaining pencil jottings show Firm's measurements for a job at the 'New Cattlemarket' and his estimate for work at '3 Shops, Humberstone Road'.

Inspired by these discoveries, I was intrigued to find out more about John Firm's working life. How could I get a sense of the man whose notebooks I now had in my hand?

A trot through the records on Ancestry (www.ancestry.co.uk) quickly reveals the basic facts. Born in Stamford in 1813, John Firm moved with his parents to Leicester around 1821. By the time of the 1841 census he had established himself as a stonemason on Humberstone Road, following in the footsteps of his father, a 'stone cutter'. In 1847 he settles in Midland Street and the census returns track his growth from 'Mason' (1851), to 'Builder employing 46 men and 9 boys' (1861) and 'Master builder employing 50 men and 4 boys' (1871).

Trade directories show that he was initially in partnership with Warren Lindley, as 'stone and marble masons'. Some creative Google searching uncovers a couple of notable jobs undertaken by Lindley & Firm – stonework on the new

West Bridge (1841) and building Thomas Cook's Temperance Hotel on Granby Street (1853).

Lindley and Firn also developed a reputation for church work; the Ilkeston Pioneer in 1858 reports on their restoration of the De La Warr memorial, "The manner in which the work has been done, and the correctness with which every detail has been followed, reflects the highest credit on Messrs Lindley and Firn, who have shown themselves not only workmen but men of good taste."

The partnership was dissolved in 1860 upon the retirement of Warren Lindley, who was ten years Firn's senior (www.london-gazette.co.uk).

NOTICE is hereby given, that the Partnership heretofore subsisting between us the undersigned, Warren Lindley and John Firn, lately carrying on business in Midland-street, in Leicester, in the county of Leicester, under the style or firm of Lindley and Firn, as Stone and Marble Masons and Modellers, was dissolved by mutual consent, on the 21st day of April now last past, and that all debts due to and owing by the said copartnership will be received and paid by the undersigned John Firn, who will in future carry on the said business on his own account.—Dated this 8th day of May, 1860.

*Warren Lindley.
John Firn.*

But work continued for John Firn. Walking along Midland Street in the 1860s, you'd have heard a team of stone engravers chipping away with mallets and chisels. Their monuments – in marble, limestone, granite and slate – were mainly intended for Welford Road Cemetery. Opened in 1849, the Cemetery is speckled with examples of their urns, obelisks and crosses, including memorials to John Flower, 'the Leicester artist' (1861) and local radical John Biggs (1871).

JOHN FIRN,
BUILDER,
Statuary & Mason Carver,
TOMBS, MONUMENTS, GRAVESTONES, &c.
Midland Street, Leicester.

But much of Firn's work involved church restorations and re-builds. I had the good fortune to track down Dr Geoff Brandwood's book, 'Bringing Them to Their Knees: Church Restoration in Leicestershire and Rutland 1800-1914' (published by the Leicestershire Archaeological Association). It proved to be a gold mine of invaluable information.

"Victorian churches were built in numbers which vastly eclipsed the output of the previous three centuries put together," he explains, with up-to-date Victorian churchmen favouring "open benches from which they might survey the choir in chancel stalls, the rich hues of stained glass, and masonry and mouldings restored to a greater precision than when the Medieval masons had packed their tools away."

John Firn was able to capitalise on this flurry of church-building activity and – thanks to Brandwood's meticulous research – I discover that he worked on at least 23 churches from 1861-1874, including:

- St Mary and All Saint's, Stoughton (1861-6), where – as both 'architect' and 'contractor' – he re-built the church tower, spire, north aisle, chancel and south porch, and sculpted an especially fine octagonal font.



- St Margaret's, Leicester (1862-5). He was in good company here, as "The north and south walls and windows have also been restored by Mr Firn, of Leicester, under the direction of G Gilbert Scott Esq, RA, the celebrated architect," known for the Albert Memorial and St Pancras station.

- St Luke's, Leicester (1867-8) was his only completely new church – the result of a Leicester Church Extension Association competition – but he also virtually rebuilt from their foundations St Michael's, Markfield (1865), St John the Baptist, Enderby (1867-8), St Luke's, Thurnby (1870-3) and Holy Rood, Bagworth (1872-3).

Much of Firn's work survives to this day. Wander along College Street in Highfields, for example, and you'll spot his limestone figures of John Wycliffe and Hugh Latimer inset into elaborate Gothic niches on the former Wycliffe Congregational Church. According to newspaper reports of the unveiling in 1872, he donated sculptor's models to the fund-raising bazaar, to be sold for £10 each.

John Firn died in October 1873 and was buried at Welford Road Cemetery. He's surrounded by many of the gravestones his firm had sculpted though, ironically, his own memorial – shaped like a stunted church spire – has not weathered as well as some of his clients' commissions.

Apparently, he left behind a prospering business – with a reputation for fine craftsmanship – and an estate worth over £3,000. What, I began to wonder, became of the firm after John's death?

I'd long known that his two sons, George and John, had also been stonemasons. But a search in the London Gazette yielded some less palatable news. In December 1868:

“George Firn, formerly of No 36, Nicholas-street, in the borough of Leicester... stone engraver, since of the Fountain Inn, Humberstone-gate in the said borough, Licensed Victualler and Dealer in Tobacco, and now residing in lodgings at No 7, Gas-street, in Leicester aforesaid, Journeyman Stone Engraver, having been adjudged bankrupt...”

Oh dear. At a time when the stonemasonry business appears to be prospering, 24-year old George – dabbling as a publican and tobacco dealer – had not inherited his father's prudence and commercial savvy.

But there was worse to come. A trawl through the British Newspaper Archive (www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk) reveals that George was summoned before the local magistrates at least five times during his early 20s. Most of these hearings relate to a long-running feud with Warren Lindley, his father's former business partner. In September 1870, for example, the pair have an altercation in Nichols Street, in which Lindley uses abusive language – alleging Firn to be a thief and a ‘damned scamp’ – and Firn retaliates by giving Lindley a black eye, knocking two of his teeth out, and smashing his spectacles. Both were found guilty and fined.

The underlying grudge between the two men, which ran for at least seven years, is hard to unpick – financial fiddling, coupled with a fondness for beer,

perhaps? – but discovering such blow-by-blow newspaper accounts is, of course, a delight for the family historian.

Following the death of his father, George – on the face of it – hoped to continue the family stonemasonry business.



But what this advert doesn't reveal is that much of the Firn property on Midland Street and Nichols Street had been auctioned off in the previous year. And by December 1875, George is selling off what remains of the business premises. The auction advert describes the set up:

“ALL that highly valuable FREEHOLD PROPERTY, situate at the corner of Midland-street and Nichols-street, Leicester, now in the occupation of the owner, comprising large stone mason's yard, workshops, shedding, office, stabling, coach-house, and other conveniences, together with the excellent DWELLING HOUSE and Outoffices adjoining thereto, having a frontage of 67 feet to Midland-street, and 80 feet to Nichols-street, and containing an area of 578 square yards.”

His stock-in-trade – including “very fine blocks of Derbyshire, Yorkshire, Ancaster, Bath, Hollington and Dumfries Stone, a quantity of Marble, capital scaffold poles, planks, ropes, ladders, office fittings, and sawing tackle” – is sold off two months later.

From there, it's a downward spiral for George. We find him in the newspapers again – for furiously driving a horse and trap on Belgrave Gate (Nov 1875), stealing 6 cwt of lead piping from a yard in Wimbledon Street (Feb 1878) for which he was imprisoned for three months' hard labour, and using obscene

language in the Market Place (Jun 1879). A couple of weeks later, he dies in Sheffield – for reasons as yet unknown – aged only 35.

And so the boom-and-bust story of the Firns comes to an end. Unlike most ancestors, they've certainly left a legacy – church buildings, monuments, and a trail of old newspaper snippets – and yet it's the jottings in John Firn's notebook, handed down through the family, that most resonate with me. I can picture him, standing by '3 Shops, Humberstone Road' pencil in hand, noting down his measurements and estimates. A glimpse into his day-to-day working life, that first captured my interest.