

# A Pillar of Town and Chapel

## ARTHUR WAKERLEY

### LEICESTER ARCHITECT

Arthur Wakerley, architect and local politician, was for most of his life a member at Bishop Street Methodist Church. He was born in Melton Mowbray on 15 May 1862 and was educated at a private school there. He left at 14 to work in his father's, (John Wakerley) brick and tile business. In 1878 at the age of 16 he was articled for four years to the Leicester architect James Bird and went on to become a much respected and sought after Leicester architect. His work includes Belgrave Methodist Church (1898), the Synagogue on Highfield Street (1898), the Turkey Café, Granby Street (1901), the Coronation Buildings (Singer Building) on High Street (1901-03) and 128 London Road (1901), all now listed buildings. He also designed factories, hotels, housing for every point in the social scale, and many of his buildings survive around central Leicester.

### NORTH EVINGTON

His ambition went beyond individual buildings, and he aimed to found a model industrial suburb at North Evington. He had been able to buy substantial areas of land from 1885 to 1890, before the area was brought within the town boundary. But rather than simply sell at a quick profit, he spent the next 35 years building an area of mixed housing and factories, hoping to create a community along the lines of Saltaire in Bradford. Expanding on the work of Revd F G Burnaby, who in 1877 commissioned George Gilbert Scott to build St Saviour's Church at the top of Wood Hill, his first factory was against a steep bank at Halstead Street, with an upper floor access to 'Saxby', the factory owner's house on Wood Hill. Naming his streets and houses after Leicestershire villages, he laid out a grid of 24 streets, built a fire station and police station, and by 1914 had attracted 28 factories, employing over 5,000 workers, producing a huge variety of the manufactured products of the time.

### LEICESTER'S YOUNGEST MAYOR

Arthur was passionate about local Liberal politics. He became a local councillor in 1881 at the age of 19, and was on the Town Council 5 years later. He twice stood for Parliament in the Melton constituency, in 1895 and 1900, but failed to be elected. In 1897 he was made an Alderman, and in the same year was elected as Town Mayor, aged 35, making him Leicester's youngest ever mayor.



Turkey Café, Granby Street



North Evington Industrial Suburb. The first factory was in Halstead Street



Leicester's youngest Mayor in 1897



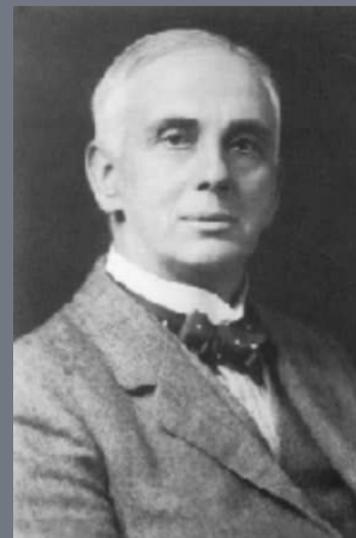
Workshops for the blind - now part of Vista



Wakerley Council Houses, Linton Street



Belgrave Hall Methodist Church and schoolrooms, designed by Wakerley in 1898, have been a community centre since 1974.



### WYCLIFFE SOCIETY FOR HELPING THE BLIND

In 1896 he bought, and restored as a holiday home, a decayed manor house in Suffolk called Gedding Hall. (It later became the home of Bill Wyman). He gave this name to Gedding Road, on the southern side of North Evington. Four nearby streets were named after daughters, Gwendolen, Dorothy, Margaret and Constance. It was at the junction of these streets that he focussed a major charitable effort, a complex of buildings providing housing, employment and recreation for blind people, through the Wycliffe Society for Helping the Blind – now called Vista.

### WAKERLEY COUNCIL HOUSES

After the war the pressing concern of the day was affordable housing. Arthur Wakerley came up with a design for semi-detached housing which could be built for £229 – almost half the price of alternative designs. These were widely adopted around the city, and also in Glasgow and Belfast. Four pairs of these in Leicester, with their original sash windows intact, are now grade II listed buildings, but hundreds more remain as testimony to their sound design and construction.

### CHAPEL AND FAMILY

Arthur attended Bishop Street Methodist Church. He married Bertha Elizabeth Gunn in 1882 and four of their daughters were baptised here. Gwendolen later married Captain Harry Leslie Wostenholm, the son of the serving Minister at that time. Arthur was a lay preacher for 40 years, was Circuit Steward in 1900, and president of the Leicester Temperance Union. His brother, Revd J E Wakerley, was President of the Methodist Conference.

Their only son, Jack Wakerley, had ambitions to become a Wesleyan Minister and went to Peterhouse College, Cambridge. He joined the army in 1914, was promoted to Captain but was killed leading a raid in June 1917 near Lens. He is commemorated on our War Memorial, and the lectern at Great Glen Methodist Church was donated in his memory. Arthur Wakerley had bouts of ill health throughout his life, which forced a periodic withdrawal from public life. He died on 4th April 1931, and his funeral was held at Bishop Street with a large crowd in attendance, led by his family, the Lord Mayor, the Town Clerk and representatives of the civil, religious and

political life of Leicester. He had put his eloquence, creativity, industry and idealism at the service of a grateful Town and Chapel. He is buried in Welford Road Cemetery.