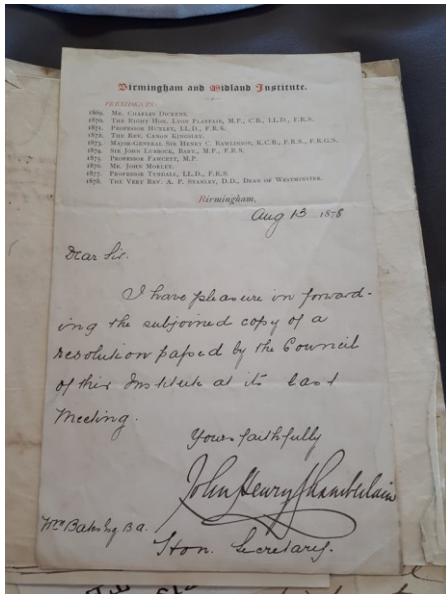


J H Chamberlain: Shakespeare, Architecture and ... doodles?

John Henry Chamberlain was the architect behind many of Birmingham's iconic nineteenth century buildings, including the exquisite interior of the Shakespeare Memorial Room. He was also one of the founders of the Shakespeare Collection, remarking in 1876 that it should be housed in 'the very best room in town'.¹ My research into this remarkable figure has revealed an unexpected detail— he loved to doodle. Let's delve into the archives of J H Chamberlain, led by his sketches and scribbles...

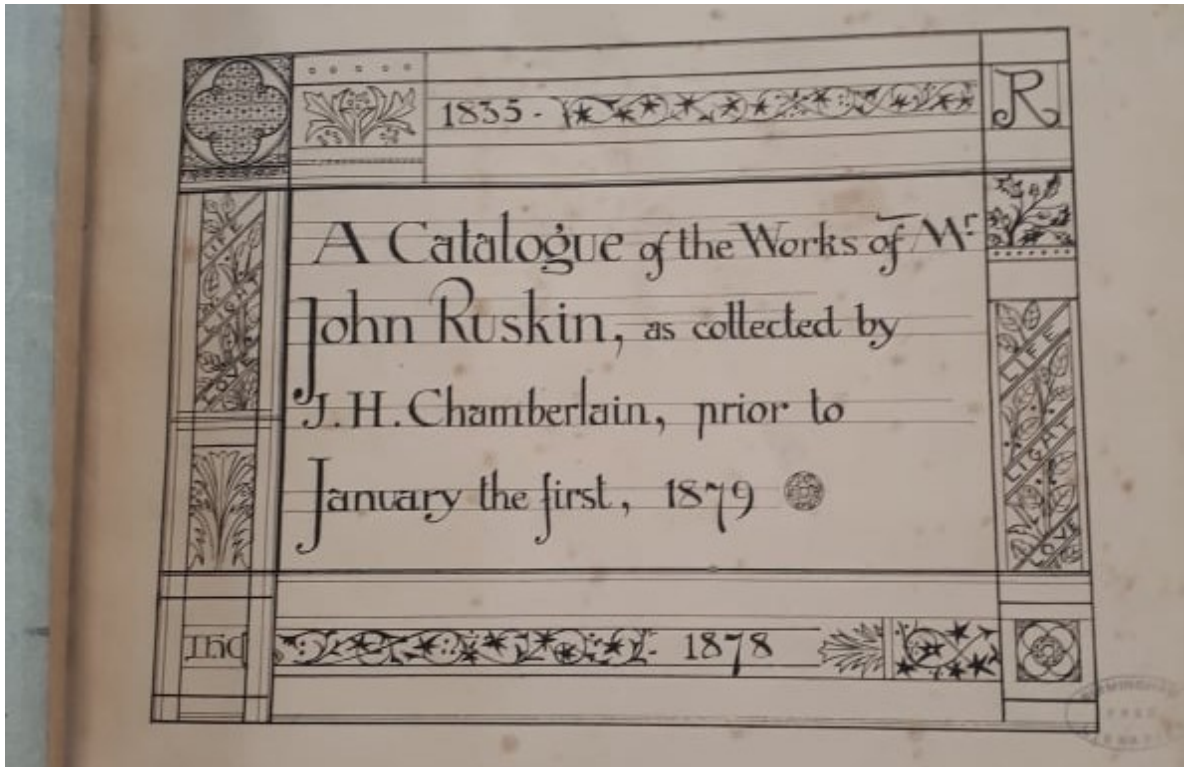


Letter from the Birmingham Midland Institute

¹ *Materials for a History of the Shakespeare Memorial Library Birmingham, 1871-1930*, courtesy of the Library of Birmingham

Here we have a seemingly ordinary document: a letter from Chamberlain, writing as Honorary Secretary of the Birmingham & Midland Institute. Turning over this letter reveals a mysterious sketch.

This figure looks more like a rural worker than a Victorian gentleman, which reminds me of Chamberlain's interest in 'living art'. During his 1883 lecture on 'Exotic Art', he spoke of 'our own ancestors, living for the most part very ordinary commonplace English lives'.² Was this country fellow the kind of ancestor that Chamberlain had in mind?

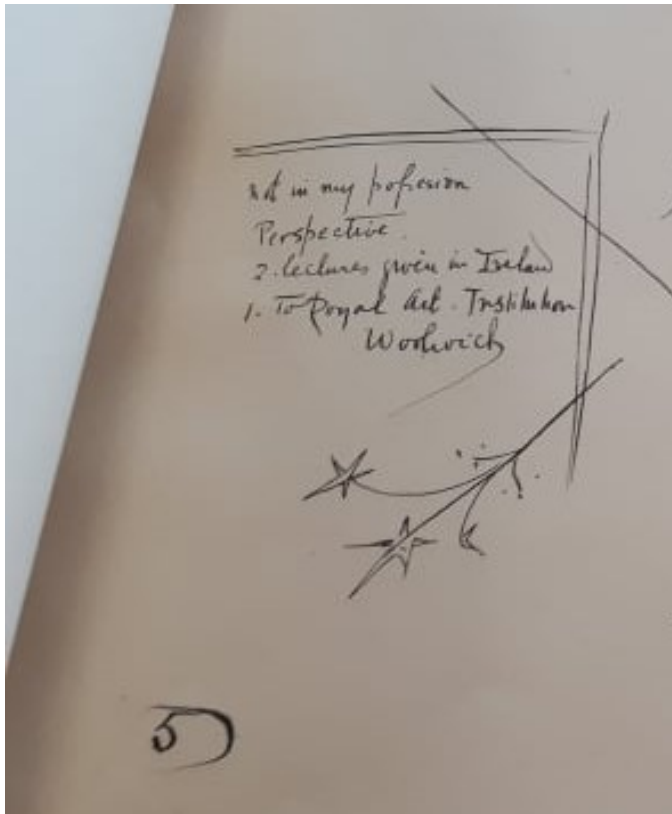


A Catalogue of the Works of John Ruskin

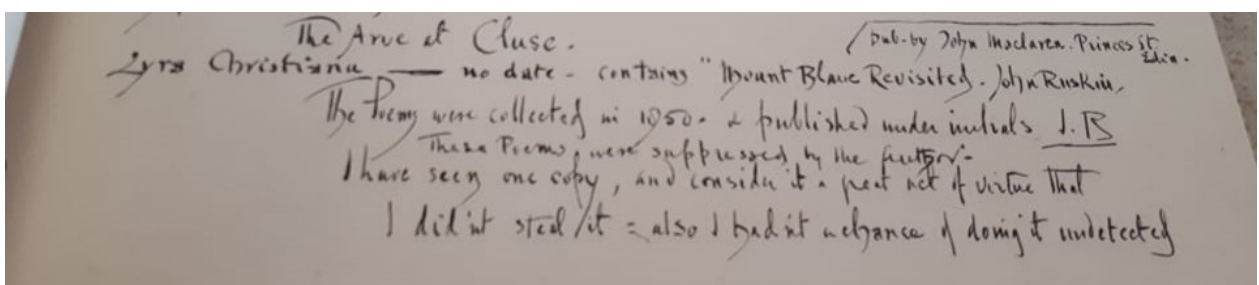
Chamberlain was a huge admirer of John Ruskin, the Victorian writer and art critic, following many of his architectural principles. In particular, he adopted his theories on naturalistic ornamentation, and believed in 'building beautifully and building well'. He collected hundreds of Ruskin's works, including letters, lectures and poems.

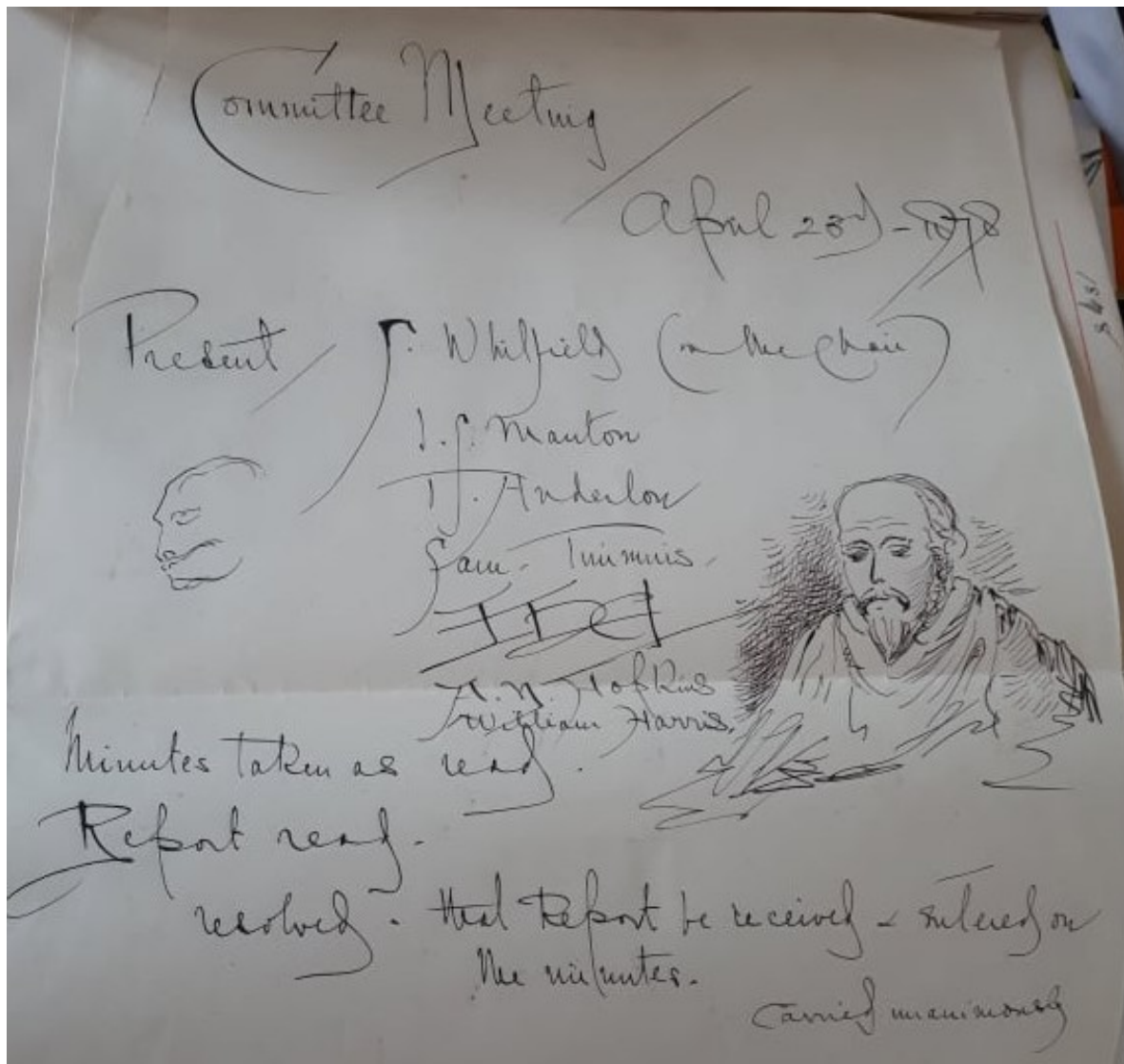
This decorative title page uses natural motifs like leaves and star-shaped petals, and you can also see Chamberlain's prominent signature in the bottom left corner. The 'life', 'light' and 'love' might be a summary of how Chamberlain felt about Ruskin.

² John Henry Chamberlain, *Exotic Art* (Birmingham: Cornish Bros, 1883), p.16.



On page five of this catalogue, a small ornamental doodle decorates a short list of Ruskin's works that are 'not in my possession'. My favourite annotation, however, comes later. Chamberlain mentions a rare, suppressed Ruskin poem that he once glimpsed in a library, candidly commenting: 'I have seen one copy, and consider it a great act of virtue that I didn't steal it – also I hadn't a chance of doing it undetected'.





A Record of a Committee Meeting

Lastly, let's look at this 1878 document from the Free Libraries Committee - the group responsible for establishing Birmingham's first public library. It records details of a meeting, but also features a delightful sketch of a bearded gentleman. While the note is anonymous, I was thrilled to notice Chamberlain's prominent 'JHC' signature in the centre. It's my guess that this is Chamberlain's doodle, but the question remains: who is he? The beard is a little too pointy to be Shakespeare, and a tad too neat to be George Dawson, but could it be an observational sketch of another committee member?

This whistle-stop tour of Chamberlain's doodles may have raised more questions than it has answered, but it also leaves us with a comforting message. J H Chamberlain wasn't simply a solemn intellectual, he was also an artist, who clearly enjoyed decorating his personal items. As I look further into Chamberlain's legacy, I'm going to keep his creativity in mind, and see what he can teach me about appreciating life and art.

Francesca Rhodes

'Everything to Everybody' Heritage Ambassador

All images courtesy of the Library of Birmingham, Archives and Collections



Using Birmingham's forgotten past to inspire our future:
Unlocking the world's first great people's Shakespeare Library for all

