**Basil Spence**

**Guide to records**

**Coventry Archives** is located in the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Jordan Well, Coventry, CV1 5QP. Admission to both the Reading Room and Research Room is free. Documents and books can be consulted without charge, but a charge is made for photocopying or the taking of digital images. Visitors are required to make an appointment to view original documents in the Research Room. Material in the Reading Room is available without the need of an appointment.

**Opening hours:** The Coventry Archives Reading and Research Rooms are open, 10.30 am – 3.30pm, Wednesdays – Fridays; the Reading Room is open on alternate Saturdays, 10.30 am – 3.30pm. Please refer to the Coventry collections online catalogue at <http://coventrycollections.org/> or further details, or telephone on 02476 237583.

**Introduction**

Basil Spence, a pioneering architect and designer of the reconstructed Coventry Cathedral, was born on the 13th August 1907, in Bombay, India. He was the third generation of his family living as part of the British Raj, and his father Urwin was an Analytical Chemist for His Majesty's Royal Mint. Urwin was of Orkney descent.

Until age 12, Spence attended John Connon School, established by the Bombay Scottish Education Society. Here, Spence developed his enthusiasm for Gothic architecture, and also recounted feeling inspired by the caves and temples of India.

In 1919, Spence and his younger brother were sent to a boarding school in Edinburgh. His father died in 1934, and after this point the family did not return to live in India. Spence enrolled at Edinburgh College of Art in 1925, originally to study painting and sculpture, but he transferred to the School of Architecture during his foundation year because he believed 'it was not sufficient for me to paint or sculpt'.

He met his future wife, Joan Ferris, at a London tennis club, and married her after a five-year correspondence. They later had two children together - Gillian and John Urwin.

In 1939, Spence joined the army, and was transferred to the Camouflage Development and Training Centre at Frensham Ponds, Surrey, as a technical liaison officer. After being discharged in 1945, he returned to his architectural group: Rowand Anderson, Paul & Partners.

The following year, he set up his own company named Basil Spence Architect, with four members from the former group. His first major project was the Sea and Ships Pavillion, as part of the 1951 Festival of Britain, which was admired by Winston Churchill, among others. It was around this time that a competition for designing the Coventry Cathedral was announced, and Spence spent a summer studying medieval churches on the Continent to prepare for his submission.

The original Coventry Cathedral, St Michael's Church, was built in the late thirteenth century and enlarged in the Middle Ages. Coventry was a key target for the Nazis in World War II due to its aircraft factories, and during a 14-hour-long air raid in November 1940, the cathedral was left a roofless ruin (but its original tower and spire remained intact).

Provost Howard of St Michael's originally asked Sir Giles Gilbert Scott to design the new building, but the Bishop considered his neo-Gothic plans ill-fitting with the style of the rest of the rebuilt city. Instead, the architect was chosen through a competition, and Spence's winning designs were published in the national newspapers in August 1951.

With a star-shaped chapel, and Modernist design with shards of stained glass, Spence hoped his cathedral would 'provide a powerful bridge between past and present’. However, certain members of the public reacted that it resembled a 'factor, a cockroach or a supercinema', which led Spence to make some changes such as adding steps and a porch.

There was also opposition from Coventry City Council, who thought that re-building houses should be more of a priority. After ensuring the public that building the cathedral would not hinder any re-homing, work was allowed to begin. Queen Elizabeth II visited Coventry to lay the foundation stone in 1956.

The building was completed in 1962, and featured a statue of St Michael and the Devil by Jacob Epstein. While some still attacked it as 'a monument to poor taste', thousands of daily visitors admired the new building. In the years that followed, tension began to build between the architect and Provost Williams, as Spence was not consulted regarding additions such as a gate and Bishop's study.

Spence resigned from an advisory position with the cathedral in 1967. He went on to design several more significant buildings, such as the new University of Sussex(1958-73) and the British Embassy in Rome(1960), but Coventry Cathedral remains his most famous work.

In 1975, Spence and his wife moved out of London to Yaxley Hall in Suffolk, where he spent his final weeks working on the sixteenth-century house. He died of cancer on the 19th November 1976, and was buried nearby at St Mary's Church, Thornham. A Requiem mass was held in his honour at Coventry Cathedral on the 11th December, and an inscription was added in the porch by Raplh Beyer: 'Remember with gratitude Sir Basil Spence O.M:K.B.E, Architect of this Cathedral.'

Our collections cover the destruction and reconstruction of the cathedral through books, pamphlets and newspaper articles, including writings by Spence himself on his architectural approach.

**Archive material**

PA2506 (Collection) - Coventry Cathedral Archives (held at the cathedral)

PA2712/22/77 - Letter, 12th October 1954, From Basil Spence (48, Queen Anne Street, London W.1) to W.B. Martin (60, Benedictine Road[, Cheylesmore], Coventry) agreeing to work something out [to say at the exhibition].

PA2935/3 - Booklet: 'Coventry Cathedral, the Church and the Men who Made it'

**Local study material**

**Pamphlets - all JN726.6**

Coventry Cathedral, Work on Foundations, from *The Builder*, 20th April 1956 (includes details of materials, dimensions, costs)

Service for Laying the Foundation Stone of the New Cathedral by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, 23rd March 1956

A Vision Comes True in Coventry, Illustrated - 31st July 1954 (details controversy between cathedral building and housing priorities)

The New Cathedral, Church of England, Newspaper & The Record, May 18th 1962, including 'Basil Spence Talks to the CEN', p.7

John Laing Construction Ltd Press Release - The Construction of Coventry Cathedral

Coventry Cathedral - Complete Guide to the Consecration Service and Festival Programme, May 1962, *The Birmingham Post*

Coventry Cathedral: A New Cathedral for the Modern World, by HCN Williams

The Story of Coventry Cathedral: The Latter Glory, by HCN Williams

Coventry: The Cathedral That Leaves Me Cold - 'Geoffrey Wheatcroft Reflects on Sir Basil Spence's Monument to Poor Taste', *Daily Telegraph*, 1/6/87

Architects Journal 9/5/84 - Building Revisits Coventry Cathedral - contains short bio of Spence and controversy about his design

JN265.9 - The Cathedral Church of St Michael, Coventry: The Unveiling and Dedication of the Statue of Saint Michael and the Devil, 24/6/60

JN 265.9 - The Cathedral Church of St Michael, Coventry: A Service for the Royal Institute of British Architects, 12/7/62

**Reading Room Books**

JN726.5 - Designs for the New Coventry Cathedral, 1994-1951, including details of the architectural competition and designs displayed at the Henry VIII school

JN726.6 - Basil Spence and Henry Soek, Out of the Ashes: A Progress in Pictures Through Coventry Cathedral, including notes and building plans on all aspects, and details of excavations from 1043 cathedral

JN726.6 - Phoenix at Coventry:The Building of a Cathedral, by Basil Spence (London: Geoffrey Bles Ltd, 1962)

JN726.6 - Consecration of the Cathedral Church of Saint Michael, Coventry, 25-26 May 1962 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962)

JN726.6 - Reconciling People: Coventry Cathedral's Story, eds. by Christopher A. Lamb (London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2011), see in particular: 'Architecture, War and Peace' by Louise Campbell, pp.1-33

JN726.6 - To Build A Cathedral: 1945 - 1962, eds. by Louise Campbell (Rugby: Jolly & Barber Ltd, 1987), see particularly 'Basil Spence and His Office', pp.27-38

JN283 - Ruined and Rebuilt: The Story of Coventry Cathedral 1939-1962, by R T Howard (Hertfordshire: The Garden City Press Ltd, 1962), see 'Winning Design andits Architect 1951', pp.44-50

JN283 - Coventry Cathedral Festival, Programme Book, 25 May - 17 June 1962, see particularly 'The New Cathedral Note by the Architect, Sir Basil Spence RA, p.7

JN726.6 - 20th Century Cathedral: An Examination of the Role of Cathedrals in the Strategy of the Church in the Changing Pattern of a Twentieth Century Community, by HCN Williams (London: Hodder & Stoughton Ltd, 1964)

JN726.6 - Basil Spence: Buildings & Projects, eds, by Louise Campbell, Miles Glendinning and Jane Thomas (London: RIBA Publishing, 2012), see pp.72-104 for Coventry Cathedral

**Newspaper Articles**

Vicar of Holy Trinity Criticises Cathedral Rebuilding, Coventry Evening Telegraph, 8/6/42, p.5, c.2-3

Spence Explains Design to Public Meeting - CET, 22/10/52, p.3, c. 5-6

City Council Oppose Immediate Building, CET, 5/11/52, p.3, c.1-2

Appointed Professor of Architecture at Leeds - CET, 22/11/55, p.3, c.3

Queen Lays Foundation Stone, CET, 23/2/56, p.1, 14-19

New Design for Chapel of Unity, CET, 19/9/57, p.15, c.3-5

Gift of Marble from Bethlehem, CET, 21/11/59, p.9, c.3

Elected R.A. - CET, 22/4/60, p.17, c.2

Knighthood - CET, 11/6/60, p.9, c.1

Epstein Statue Unveiled, CET, 25/6/60, p.4, c.1-6

Placing of Spire, CET, 17/11/61, p.23, c.2

New Book on Cathedral - CET, 8.7.63, p.2, c.3

Spence resigns as Cathedral Consultant Architect - CET, 7/12/67, p.1, c.1-2

Sir Basil Spence Comes Back to his Cathedral - CET, 18/5/72, p.15, c.1-2

Death Aged 69 - CET, 19/11/76, p.1, c.2-3

Will, CET, 24/1/77, p.1, c.7

Tribute to Sir Basil Spence, CET, 15/11/78, p.13, c.1

Study to Glory of Cathedral Architect, CET, 20/5/05, p.37, c.1-4

Building a Book on Basil, CET, 22/9/12, p.288, c.3-6; p.29, c.1-5