

## ELIAS GEORGE BASEVI—Honorary Architect of St Mary’s Hall, Kemp Town, Brighton



It is intriguing that in many articles and publications on the internet, including official biographies, there is an absence of references to St Mary’s Hall in the ‘works of George Basevi’.

I turned to Tim Elliott’s ‘History of St Mary’s Hall’ to seek an explanation. Tim writes: *“To believe that only a chance encounter was responsible for involving George Basevi (pronounced Baseevee) in the building of the School is to be naïve, and to belittle the Founder’s judgement and planning as much it detracts from what was a long-standing friendship...We know that the two men were friends before 1818: in a letter to his mother from Greece, written on 20th September 1818, Henry states: “Our present party of English at Athens is numerous – ten besides ourselves – and of these ten, four of our friends: Mr Wilson, Mr Basivi (sic), Lord Balgonie and Mr Wrench ...George Basevi, to become famous after 1834 for the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, was also responsible (1824-1840) for Belgrave Square – except for the corner houses – and on a more bread-and-butter level rebuilt St. Andrew’s Church in Hove, hardly a stone’s throw from Brunswick Square, the work being completed in 1836...That he agreed, either then or, more likely, as a result of well-structured persuasion, to be the architect [of SMH] and to do so for nothing, is entirely to his credit...”*

Elias George Basevi FRS (1 April 1794 – 16 October 1845) was the youngest son of a City of London merchant, also named George Basevi and closely connected by marriage to the Disraeli family. Basevi was educated at the Reverend Dr Burney’s school at Greenwich, and then trained professionally with Sir John Soane, after which he spent three years studying in Greece and Rome. In 1821 he became the first surveyor of the Guardian Assurance Company, a post he held until his death. His work for the company involved personally inspecting and reporting on buildings where there was a great risk, or which were insured for large amounts. He also remodelled their premises in Lombard Street.



In 1822 he designed St Thomas' Church, Stockport (pictured, left).

He went on to design Belgrave Square (see plans on the right) for the developers William and George Haldimand. It was built between 1825 and 1841.



Belgrave Square is a large, grandiose architecture 19th-century garden square in London. It is the centrepiece of Belgravia and its architecture resembles the original scheme of property contractor Thomas Cubitt who engaged George Basevi for all of the terraces for the 2nd Earl Grosvenor, later the 1st Marquess of Westminster, in the 1820s.

This led to his appointment as Surveyor to the Trustees of Smith’s Charity at Brompton, and to the adjoining Thurloe estate. At first his duties for the Smith’s Charity estate were utilitarian, but in 1832 the bankruptcy of some tenant nurserymen freed eight acres for development, and between 1833 and 1845 he worked with the builder James Bonnin to develop Pelham Crescent, Pelham Place, part of Pelham Street and Egerton Crescent. He also designed the houses in Thurloe Square, off the Brompton Road, for the Thurloe estate.

In 1835 he won the competition to design what was to become the building for ever associated with him, a museum for Cambridge University, funded by a bequest from Viscount Fitzwilliam, with an imposing design in the Corinthian style. He did not live to see it completed due to his untimely death in an accident. Their tribute to Basevi can be found here:

[https://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/gallery/hiddenhistories/biographies/bio/commemoration/basevi\\_biography.html](https://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/gallery/hiddenhistories/biographies/bio/commemoration/basevi_biography.html)



Basevi built two Gothic churches in Chelsea, St Jude and St Saviour, and another, Holy Trinity at Twickenham Green. In 1834-6, he largely rebuilt the church of St Andrew, Hove, which had been in ruins since the collapse of its tower some years earlier. The church at Eye in Northamptonshire was also rebuilt to Basevi's designs. It was opened in 1847, two years after his death and a steeple was added in 1857. He also used the Gothic style at almshouses in Stamford and Ely, and at Coulsdon rectory, Surrey. He carried out some work for Balliol College, Oxford including a Gothic ceiling for the chapel, and was invited to design a whole new frontage for the college, but the plans were never carried out, due to the intervention of a faction amongst the fellows who commissioned an alternative set of plans from Pugin.



Other work included the stables at Bretton Hall in Yorkshire, Bywell Bridge in Northumberland\*, the Entrance Hall and Dining Room at Painswick House for his brother-in-law William Henry Hyett, and the remodelling of Gatcombe Park for the economist David Ricardo. In 1834 he made extensive alterations and additions to the Middlesex Hospital and later built a new medical school and operating theatre there. In the same year he designed Beechwood House in Hampstead for his brother, Nathaniel. Basevi also planned the enlarging of the prison at Ely and building of a new prison at Wisbech, Cambs.. In collaboration with Sidney Smirke he designed premises for the Conservative Club (1842–45). Basevi became a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1843.

He died on 15 October 1845, aged 51, after falling through an opening in the floor of the old bell chamber of the west tower of Ely Cathedral while inspecting repairs. His resting place is alternately reported as being in the North Choir Aisle towards the east end of Ely cathedral and at St Andrew's Church Hove where his name is on a vault.

For former students and staff of St Mary's Hall, however, there is only one monument to Basevi, in the form of our School. Who among us does not remember the intrinsic beauty of the exterior of the original Hall, or of the carving and floors which even the boots of the Canadian Army were unable to bring to ruin? Or indeed the Minton tiled floor in the entrance hall. However utilitarian the later additions, the bones of the building remained throughout its life as a school and are the reason for its 'listing' which enabled the NHS Trust in whose care it now lives on, to restore and renovate it with care and sympathy, preserving it into the 21C despite its narrow escape from ruin after closure.

Another 'memorial' to Basevi exists in Brighton, alongside one to our Founder, in the shape of the number 49 bus. The Brighton and Hove Bus Company tribute can be read here:

<http://history.buses.co.uk/history/fleethist/453gb.htm>.



Our 1952 Newsletter features a 'short biography of George Basevi', by a pupil at St Mary's Hall, Charmian Orton, who was 15 at the time. It may be read in full in the Newsletter on our website but I think it appropriate to quote a few lines from it here. Charmian wrote "Today, design and function are allied and schools should possess amenities which will help to forward their work of educating the young. In 1836 the urge to improve the minds of the young was the same and thought was given to the planning of schools, but it seems the aim was negative rather than positive. For example, most of the windows at St Mary's Hall were constructed high above eye level and Basevi's design of some of the form rooms shuts out the view in order, presumably, to enable wayward pupils to give their undivided attention to the lesson. Some may condemn such a limitation but in this age of multiple distraction which is provided no less by 'pictures' than by jet aeroplanes, Basevi's plan is advantageous to both the pupils and teachers at St Mary's Hall."

There is a note at the end of this piece as follows:

Readers will be interested to know that Charmian Orton had the following extract published in the "Evening Standard" on Wednesday August 13th:- 'I find great pleasure in looking at the plaques on the walls of many London buildings and I was particularly interested when you wrote (Memorials in Blue, August 11th) that the name of George Basevi must be comparatively unknown to the general public. It is very well known to me as he was the architect of my School, St Mary's Hall, in Brighton, one of the oldest girls' public schools in England.

Only a couple of days ago I was walking through Savile Row and saw the very plaque you mention. I remarked to my mother "I wonder how many people have heard of George Basevi besides the girls who go to my school?" Charmian Orton, Cornwall Gardens, South Kensington.'



Those who know me will realise that no article I write is complete without at least one piece of irrelevance and one of personal association so here they come.

Illustrated, centre above, is the Palacio de la Magdalena in Santander brought to our attention by Old Girl Vivienne Lagraulet (Goff, 1962-67) who commented that she had seldom felt closer to SMH than when staring this Gothic 'Hall' by the sea – although not designed by Basevi it bears a striking resemblance. Its history, which starts in 1908, can be read here <https://palaciomagdalena.com/en/historia/> and, if you feel inclined, you may holiday there! And the personal association is \*Bywell bridge, illustrated above right, which IS a Basevi design, to be found spanning the River Tyne in Northumberland not two miles from my front door. To build the bridge all traces of the earlier Roman crossing were destroyed. (But plenty more remain, nearby).

Penny Harrison (Titheradge, 1969-73)  
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