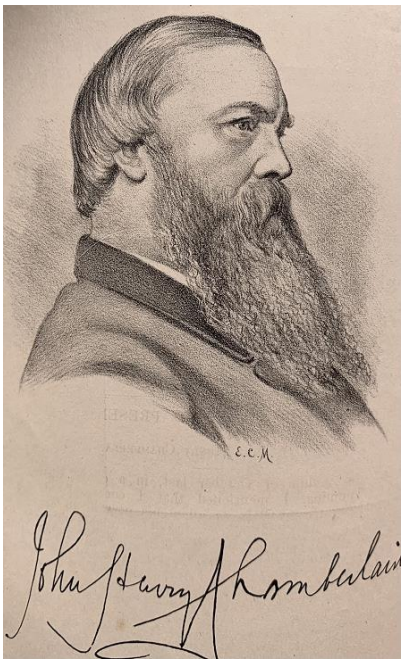
Made in Birmingham: John Henry Chamberlain and the Shakespeare Memorial Room

'The Very Best Room in Town'

In 1862, 'Our Shakespeare Club' was established as a meeting place for prominent Birmingham thinkers to discuss and celebrate Shakespeare. Their biggest event of the year, the Shakespeare Anniversary Celebration on the 23rd April (Shakespeare's birthday), was always a lavish affair. The 1867 celebration, held at the Hen and Chickens Hotel, began with a Shakespeare Cantata that rang out the line: 'a lord of many acres in an old manorial hall / bids cheery Christmas-welcome to his neighbours, great and small'. Two years later, the celebration at the Royal Hotel featured a quote from Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*: 'in her days, man shall eat in safety, under his own vine'. A clear theme of house and home was being crafted around Shakespeare, but crucially, Birmingham's Shakespeare collection did not yet have a resting place.

It was at the anniversary celebration of 1863, the Tercentenary of Shakespeare's birth, that plans began to be drawn for Birmingham's first publicly owned Shakespeare collection. Described as an 'art-monument to the Immortal poet', this would commemorate Shakespeare through his works, instead of with a statue. One man was at the centre of these decisions: the architect John Henry Chamberlain. The very first meeting of the Shakespeare Library committee was held at his office in July 1863, and it was he who decided that the collection deserved a fitting home. He reportedly stated, 'we should like the Shakespeare idea to grow in the same proportion as the accumulation of the Shakespeare property', concluding that the Shakespeare library 'ought to be the very best room in town'.



Left: from the Stephen Roberts collection

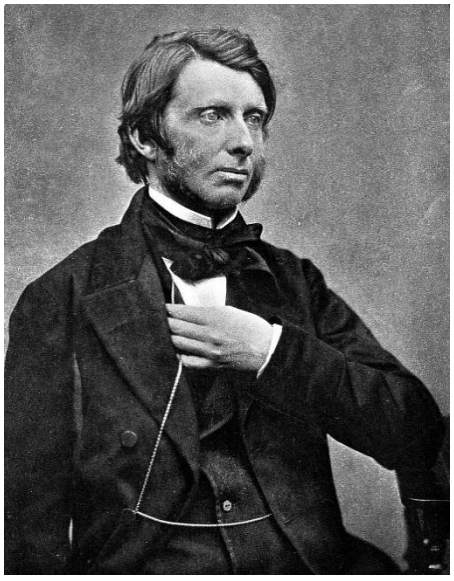
As such, the precedent was set for a Shakespeare Room that would capture the magnificence of the collection, as well as the social vision of Birmingham's nineteenth century thinkers. This was not an easy task, as it required sufficient space for books as well as for ample decoration; it needed to be grand but also approachable for the people of Birmingham, and both funding and voluntary assistance was required for its execution. The committee decided ambiguously that the room should be of 'appropriate design', hosting paintings and a bust of Shakespeare, with a ceiling that 'ought to be adorned in a familiar manner'. Chamberlain rose to the challenge of designing every aspect, from the oak

bookcases and elbows to the extensive ornamentation and the stained glass. Before we turn to the result of this ambitious project, it is worth looking at Chamberlain's extensive architectural portfolio in Birmingham, to see how he used his experience and commitment to the city to inform his most imaginative work.

John Henry Chamberlain (1831-1883)

Chamberlain was born in 1831 in Leicester, the son of Rev. Joseph Chamberlain, minister of a congregation of Calvinistic Baptists. He was educated in Leicester and London, and soon began to show an interest in architecture, particularly through the work of Victorian art critic and writer John Ruskin. He spent some time touring Venice and other Italian cities, before settling in Birmingham upon his return to England in 1856. Despite his hard work and big ideas, by 1864 Chamberlain had not gained any real success as an architect and considered emigrating to New Zealand. Just several years later, however, he became one of the most influential men in Birmingham, establishing connections with figures like George Dawson and Joseph Chamberlain (no relation). He soon took on several pioneering positions, acting concurrently as Vice-President of the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists, Honorary Secretary of the Birmingham & Midland Institute and Professor of Architecture at Queens College. Central to all his work was a belief in the beauty and value of buildings, which was shaped by his extensive reading of John Ruskin.

Ruskin and Chamberlain



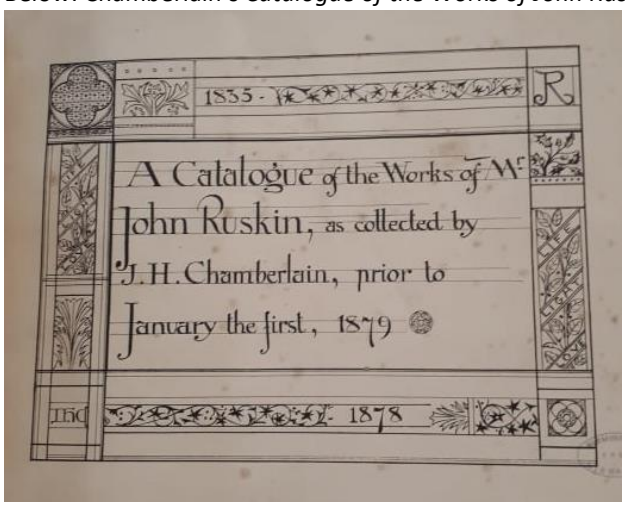
Left: portrait of John Ruskin. Wellcome Collection

John Ruskin relayed his theories on architecture, art and literature through lectures and writings that circulated widely in the nineteenth century. His stance on the design and construction of buildings was unique in many ways. He thought that the popular Venetian model, which favoured light and highly decorative styles, was 'hardly stronger than a piece of lace' and instead Ruskin called for buildings of solid stone. As buildings are viewed from various distances, Ruskin thought that there should be rankings of ornament according to perspective. For example, from a distance the viewer would see broad cornices, up closer they would see shafts and pinnacles, and even closer niches, statues and flowers would become visible.

In terms of ornamentation, he believed that this was a key opportunity for artistic freedom and creativity. In fact, Michael W Brooks argues that 'Ruskin's call for the workman's freedom was one of the most continuously fruitful aspects of his influence throughout the nineteenth century'. By the 1850s, many ornaments could be produced mechanically,

creating large volumes at a small unit cost. Despite the inexpensive and higher technical finish of this method, Ruskin condemned the use of machines. He thought that machine ornaments had a look of monotonous sameness, whereas the imperfect products of the workman possess 'qualities of life and subtle variation that can only be given by the human hand'. For the ornaments themselves, he thought that the loveliest forms in architecture were also those that are commonest in nature. As someone trained in natural theology, and accustomed to regard nature as the art of God, he ardently defended even the most intricate natural designs.

Below: Chamberlain's *Catalogue of the Works of John Ruskin*, Library of Birmingham Archives and Collections



Chamberlain diligently collected the works of John Ruskin for several years, keeping a record of his library in an elaborately detailed catalogue. Spanning lectures, letters, poetry and even portraits, Chamberlain included dates, publishing information and personal comments. These annotations are humorously candid at times, for instance his comment about a rare, suppressed Ruskin poem that he had come across in a library: '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'. He even went as far as to offer his own judgement on a Ruskin portrait from 1878, commenting that 'the mouth is vulgarised and completely spoiled'. On the title page of the catalogue, Chamberlain sketched elaborate foliage and star-shaped petals around the words 'life', 'light' and 'love', perhaps as an ode to his favourite author.

Despite this evident admiration, Chamberlain was unafraid to challenge Ruskin's views, and define his own independent approach. In particular, Chamberlain disagreed with Ruskin's argument that architectural beauty should only come after constructional necessity. He thought that beauty should be a leading and central part of all building designs, complementing its utilitarian function. While Ruskin dismissed Birmingham as a smoky and noisy city where the idea of fine art seemed impossible, Chamberlain thought that it was worthy of buildings as beautiful as the structures he had seen during his time in Venice. He used Ruskin's principles to design not only ornate, private homes for the social elite, but also countless public buildings like libraries, waterworks, pumping stations, hospitals and schools. In the words of Brooks, 'he did this by uniting his Ruskinism with the Civic Gospel'.

An Architect for the Environment

From Chamberlain's own lectures and articles, he shaped an architectural philosophy that was remarkably focussed on the natural world and its preservation. He defended the Law of Compensation, namely that 'an artist must replace in his own way all the natural beauty

that the city dweller has lost'. This is achieved by studying nature attentively to reproduce its structures, and also ensuring that buildings are well looked-after and not easily destroyed. As he stated during his *Introductory Lecture on the Office and Duties of Architecture*, delivered before students at Queen's College, we can repay our debt to nature by 'building beautifully and building well'.

This principle also fed into his belief that the architect has a direct and profound social responsibility. He began his *Introductory Lecture* by stressing the importance of providing 'fit and proper habitations for all classes of society'. Whether one is designing a cottage or a palace, these may differ in size or expensiveness, but 'not in the thought devoted to them or the provident care spent over them'. Crucially, he warned against the dangers of overcrowding, and the difficulties faced by those living in houses with poor drainage and access to water. In such cases, 'we are wasting human life and wealth continually', and he urged students to keep society at the forefront of their designs.

Thirdly, he thought that 'architecture testifies to the moral worth of the culture that produced it'. He criticised the historical disregard for the style of public buildings, where only the richest have access to decent architecture. In a lecture on *Exotic Art*, delivered just moments before his death, Chamberlain argued that 1851 marked a key change in architectural thinking, which he summarised thus: 'then, no one wanted art, now, we want art for all'. By turning to some of the most prominent public buildings that Chamberlain designed, we will see that he followed this principle through, and brought the gift of 'art for all' to the people of Birmingham.

Art for All – Chamberlain's Birmingham Buildings

Chamberlain's oeuvre of Birmingham buildings are for the most part instantly recognisable through their use of iconic red brick, terracotta ornamentation, and fairy-tale turrets. But these structures are not exclusive, security-protected buildings – they are places for us all to use and appreciate. An early example is the Police Station on Moseley Street, completed in 1877. With gables decorated with curt brick work, and sash windows with leaded and stained glass, it's not difficult to see why this building is now Grade II listed.

Moseley Street Police Station, now St Anne's Hostel. Photo by Elliot Brown

Moving into 1878, Chamberlain and his partner William Martin designed the Selly Oak Pumping Station, built by the Birmingham Corporation Waterworks Department. This housed a Boulton and Watt steam engine, providing water for domestic use. With its

practical function, and striking appearance in the style of a French Gothic Royal Chapel, this shows Chamberlain marrying architecture with industry.

Possibly the greatest achievement of Chamberlain's career occurred in around 1879, with the designing and building of thirty board schools. This was made possible by the Birmingham School Board Act, which was set up to pay the fees of the poorest children. Each school was designed with both form and function in mind, with plenty of windows for fresh air and light, and an air chamber turret over the staircase for ventilation. Here, aesthetic beauty met social value, leading the *Pall Mall Gazette* to comment that 'in Birmingham you may generally recognise a board-school by its being the best building in the neighbourhood'.

Before creating his immortal monument to Shakespeare, the architect designed a memorial for another well-loved figure, Birmingham Mayor Joseph Chamberlain. Like the Memorial Room, this was made possible through public funds, and its concept reflected the Mayor's devotion to society. The turret sits above a fountain, in reference to the municipalisation of the Birmingham water system. The elaborate carvings and spire were executed by Samuel Barfield Leicester, J H Chamberlain's favourite architect. This memorial has become one of Birmingham's most iconic landmarks, standing proudly in Chamberlain Square and providing a refuge for locals and tourists alike.

Left: Chamberlain Memorial Fountain, photo by RcsPrinter123

Chamberlain did also design private homes, such as the majestic Highbury Hall built for Joseph Chamberlain, but it was his public buildings that gave him a chance to show his commitment to social change. All of the principles used in these structures: from delicate ornamentation of flowers and birds, to strong practical materials, were used to inform the Shakespeare Memorial Room, making it a centrepiece of Civic Gospel architecture.

'If We Cannot Have Good Architecture, We Must Have Good Books'

Thanks to Chamberlain, Birmingham was slowly emerging as a fine industrious town, but people were still sceptical about the purpose of a public library, and some raised the question of why a Shakespeare collection was relevant for the city. In 1873, one newspaper complained about the lack of 'cleanliness' and 'beauty' in Birmingham, commenting disapprovingly that 'if we cannot have good architecture we must try to get good pictures and good books'. This scathing article also announced: 'at last we have arrived at the

conclusion that it is also wise to spend public money for the benefit of those who are not bankrupt in purse, in intellect, or morality', entirely missing the objective of the proposed collection. This new library and Shakespeare Room would be for everyone, including and especially welcoming working people. As the Mayor declared upon its opening: 'they are reminded that it is their duty to encourage everything which can tend to refine the taste, to encourage the conceptions, and to exact the aims of the working classes'.

There were also concerns about the function of a public library generally. Before, only lavish private lending libraries had existed for those who could afford it, and these buildings resembled gentleman's clubs more than practical reading spaces. London librarian W H Overall complained that architects often desire to 'erect a grand hall, without the slightest regard to use it as a library'. The Chairman of the Birmingham Free Libraries Committee disagreed, thinking that this kind of grandeur was necessary, as in order to 'improve a [working] man's manners and his taste, they must bring him into contact with neatness, politeness and elegance'. A compromise was reached with the opening of the first Free Public Library in 1861, which used minimal non-functional accessories, but did host a prominent portrait on the wall: a painting of Joseph Sturge, radical politician, Quaker and champion of working-class rights.

Below: Reference Library gallery rail, Library of Birmingham Archives and Collections

When this building was replaced by the Central Lending and Reference Library, J H Chamberlain played a central part in the design. Alongside designs by E M Barry, Chamberlain was responsible for the ornamental wrought-iron gates and bookcase in the Reference Library. The gallery railings anticipate the intricate design of the Shakespeare Memorial Room, which was to be placed inside this building. In 1869, Samuel Timmins read a report to the committee members concerning the state of the room. He relayed that the carving had been carried out by a Mr Barfield, which included 'several elbows to bookcases, twenty capitals to standards of ditto, foliage in cornice over door, and the carving to the mouldings', before calling for donations for its completion. This highlights the collaborative nature of the project, which was both funded and executed by countless individuals working together.

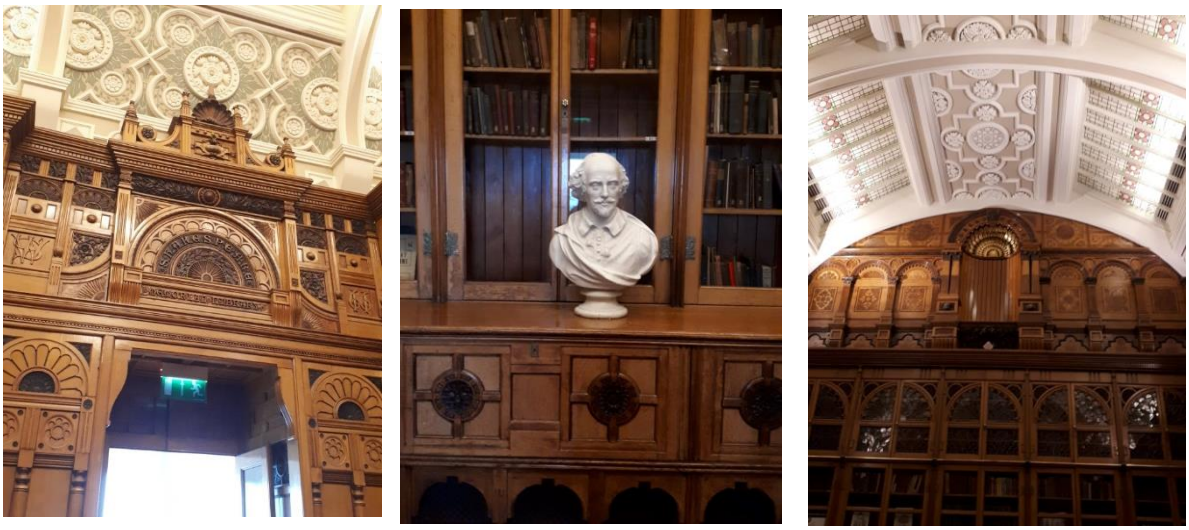
Making a Mark

When the room was still half-finished in 1868, a meeting of the donors and committee members was held to celebrate their progress. The Chairman of the Subscribers Committee urged the gentleman to look around the room, which hosted 'various works of art, some of which were not complete'. He gestured to the uncarved finials and cornices, suggesting that the group mark their initials in pencil on them. It was then reported that 'several gentlemen

in the room took advantage of this opportunity of “making their mark”, after which the donors entered their names in a book provided for the purpose’. Whether or not this story about the initials is true, it does express the pride and sense of ownership that Birmingham people felt towards this room.

There is only one known surviving image of the original Shakespeare Memorial Room – an illustration published in an American journal, *Harper’s Weekly*. We know so little about this room as it was destroyed by a vicious fire in 1879. This not only eradicated a huge portion of the priceless Shakespeare collection, but also ‘the valuable cases in which the books were contained, and which were in themselves an integral part of the Memorial Library’. Despite this seemingly hopeless devastation, the Free Libraries Committee immediately made plans for the restoration of the building, hoping for a new place that would be restored ‘not only to its former importance, but that will also be in many respects a more fitting memorial’.

A Picturesque Room for a Picturesque Collection

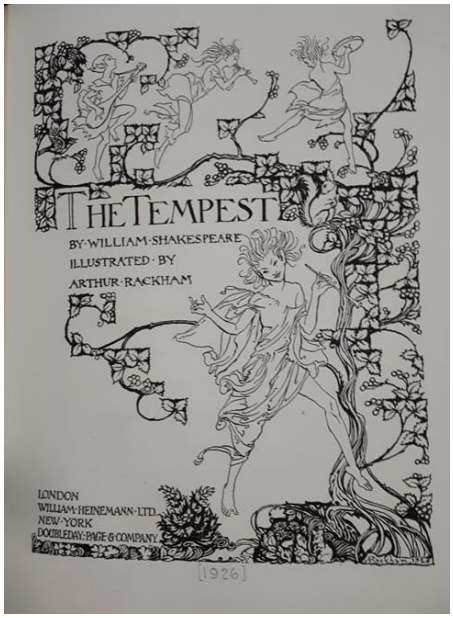


The Shakespeare Memorial Room, 2021. Photos taken by the author.

The second attempt at designing and constructing the Shakespeare Memorial Room was a great success. Described as a ‘magnificent example of Victorian style and craftsmanship’ it included thousands of blue and white Minton floral tiles and stained glass windows. Its beautiful design also complemented the growing Shakespeare collection, which was building up again rapidly after the fire due to generous donations.

From the initial conception of the Shakespeare Memorial Library, it was designed to represent the playwright visually as well as through his plays and poems. George Dawson noted in one of the very first library committee meetings that alongside books, ‘I would add portraits of Shakespeare, and all the pictures illustrative of his works’. This was achieved through the acquisition of items such as Nicholas Rowe’s pioneering *Works of William Shakespeare* from 1709. Not only was this the first collection to divide the plays according to

Acts as well as Scenes, but it was also the very first illustrated edition 'in Six Volumes, Adorn'd with Cuts'. In Rowe's dedication to the first volume, he writes that he has tried to capture 'those natural images, those passions finely touched, and that beautiful expression which is everywhere to be met with Shakespeare'. Many of the illustrations specifically depict performance images, where Troilus and Cressida are depicted taking a curtain call, for example.



Helena from A *Midsummer Night's Dream* (left) frontispiece to *The Tempest* (right) both illustrated by Arthur Rackham. Library of Birmingham Archives and Collections

The collection also includes illustrated editions by Arthur Rackham, an English book illustrator, including *A Midsummer Night's Dream* from 1909. Created just a few decades after the reign of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, a group of influential Victorian artists and poets, these illustrations show signs of influence. This beautiful study of Helena (above) is reminiscent of the red-headed figure that featured in paintings such as *Prosperine* by Dante Gabriel Rosetti. J H Chamberlain lectured on Pre-Raphaelite art at the Birmingham Midland Institute in 1859, so it is fitting that this edition made it into the collection. The title page of Rackham's *The Tempest* also includes elaborate foliage that might remind us of Chamberlain's naturalistic ornamentation.

Nineteenth century Birmingham was a pivotal time for art, as it began to interact with industry. In addition to the aforementioned Pre-Raphaelite movement, the Arts and Crafts movement sought to combine fine art with technical crafts like metalwork. The Birmingham School of Art, where Chamberlain sat as chairman of the committee, began to liaise with local industries, and to teach Arts and Crafts as part of its mainstream programme. One effect of this was that the school attracted more female students, who excelled in practices like embroidery, wood engraving and enamelling. This included two prominent Birmingham women: the daughters of John Thackray Bunce, a journalist and one of the founders of 'Our Shakespeare Club'. Kate and Myra Bunce both attended the Birmingham School of Art in

1880s, where they were taught to work with a variety of materials. Kate first exhibited at the Birmingham School of Artists aged just 16, and her exquisite paintings depicted medieval subjects, inspired by Rosetti. Myra was best known as a metalwork designer, creating many ornate picture frames for Kate's paintings, including her most famous work, *Musica* (below), for which Myra is also believed to be the model. The pair have been described proudly by Catherine Hendrick as Birmingham's own 'Pre-Raphaelite sisterhood who made their own mark in the art world'.

Left: *Musica,* Kate Bunce, Birmingham Museums Trust, Digital Image Resource

Chamberlain himself was a firm believer in the complementarity of art and industry. He produced many etchings, watercolour and oil paintings, designs in jewellery, lace and furniture, in addition to his architectural pursuits. His Shakespeare Room was made by local industries, particularly John Hardman & Co, who specialised in forms of medieval craftsmanship such as woodcarving. When it was reinstated in Library of Birmingham, another local firm A. E Edmonds reinstated the wooden panelling. This was designed to match the original library using stencils, photographs and fragments that had been carefully kept. At every stage of the Shakespeare Room, therefore, it kept Birmingham industry at its very heart.

Remembering John Henry Chamberlain

The golden age of the Shakespeare Memorial Room began to draw to a close around the 1960s, with the plans for a new central library, in a brutalist style that would not accommodate Chamberlain's Victorian design. In a manner that entirely contradicted Chamberlain's ethos about the importance of protecting buildings, the room was sent into storage – even though the brutalist library itself lasted under 30 years. It was re-erected in 1985 as part of the Paradise arts complex, designed as a place for meetings, but rarely visited. Fortunately, 2013 saw the Shakespeare Memorial Room reinstated in the new Library of Birmingham, designed by Francine Houben, gaining pride of place in a gold dome atop the building. The exterior of the library is decorated with metal rings to pay homage to Birmingham's jewellery quarter.

The Shakespeare Room has stood the test of time, but little is remembered now about its original architect. When J H Chamberlain died in 1883, just hours after delivering his lecture on Exotic Art, he was mourned across the city. The *Birmingham Daily Post* reported that the blinds of the Mayor's Parlour at the Council House were drawn, as were those of the Birmingham & Midland Institute, while the flag at the Society of Artists was lowered to half-mast. A procession of Magistrates, the Town Council, and School Board members took place

across the city, before his funeral at Key Hill Cemetery. The inscription on his tombstone read: 'Dead he is not, but departed, for an artist never dies'.

The following year, an *In Memoriam* address was delivered by Bunce at the annual dinner of 'Our Shakespeare Club', held as always on Shakespeare's birthday. Bunce described him as 'the life and soul of our Shakespeare Club', and particularly drew attention to his conception of the Memorial Room. He described it as 'a shrine in which we lose count of the lapse of centuries, and pass at a step into Shakespeare's own time, and, as it might be, into Shakespeare's own home'. This was also linked to Chamberlain's wider architecture:

> 'His works speak for him […] you see them in our streets, in those admirable and often very noble schools […] you see them in the renewed Free Library […] with its rare fancy in style and ornament and its richness of Venetian colour […] and of the great reference Library, the most graceful as well as the most sumptuous room of its character in our country'

Bunce also highlighted that although Chamberlain wasn't Birmingham-born, he had been 'adopted' as part of the city, and 'he cared for the municipal life of our town with a steadfast and passionate feeling'. While the creator of Birmingham's great memorials did not himself receive a statue or a turret, he did earn many literary tributes. The Birmingham & Midland Institute printed a dedicatory poem that described him as 'the people's artist and the student's friend'. A painting was even donated in his memory by Richard Tangye to the Corporation Art Gallery, namely Albert Moore's *Dreamers*. Chamberlain had greatly admired this piece, and its title might remind us of how the newspapers reported on the original plans for a Shakespeare collection: 'these works of the *dreamer* will rest in a town where to *dream* in the day-time has always been regarded as a crime'.

Albert Moore, *Dreamers*, Birmingham Museums Trust, Digital Image Resource

Chamberlain's dream, to make Birmingham into a town with great architecture, great public services, and great works of art, did become a reality. But although we walk past his buildings every day, we've forgotten the man and the meaning behind them. Remembering John Henry Chamberlain means fighting against homelessness in Birmingham, campaigning for affordable housing across the West Midlands, and championing the importance of public schools and libraries. It means using the Shakespeare Memorial Room, as a place for study, for exhibitions, for reflection, or simply as a place to be, which is a key ambition of the *Everything to Everybody* project.

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