

82 Ambrose Street, York

A House with Unusual Wallpaper and Other Decoration



Building Ambrose Street

Unfortunately, it is not known who built number 82. Also, we do not know whether it was rented or sold to its first occupant, George Bennett and his family, who lived there for some 27 years, from 1881/2, until 1908. From the design of the wallpaper, it is likely to have been installed when they lived there, and George worked at Hadfield's Box Makers in North Street, York.

Ambrose Street was the final housing project developed by Ambrose Walker - hence its name. Walker was from a family of butchers based in Little Shambles, York. He apprenticed as a plane maker and later worked at an Asylum in Middlesex before returning to York as a butcher in the family business.



But Ambrose must have wanted more from life than butchering. In February 1861 he won the contract to operate the Cattle Market, and in October he won another contract to provide fodder and provisions to the Cavalry Barracks.

In 1868 Walker moved into property development, buying Fishergate House and Fulford Grange. He then owned most of the land on the west side of Fulford Road from Blue Bridge Lane to Alma Terrace, and he quickly began erecting villas, terraces and shops.

Van Wilson's book, *'Beyond the Postern Gate: A History of Fishergate and Fulford Road'* says that the original plan for Ambrose Street was surveyed by W G Penty, a significant York architect, whose buildings include the Lighthorseman in Fishergate. Ambrose Walker commissioned the builder Edward Keswick, to erect houses on the south side of the street in 1881. George Jennings and Edwin Potter built further houses, and a joiner from Heslington, Robert Penty built another group.

Layout of the house

The house is mid-terrace, with a back yard with a gate to a ginnel. The front door opens to a hall, with the stairs rising between the front and back rooms. A landing runs between the front and back bedrooms, with a staircase rising to a third bedroom in the loft, lit by velux windows in the roof. The banister of both staircases is similar, suggesting that the loft bedroom is contemporary. Adjacent houses also have loft bedrooms.



The first occupants of 82 Ambrose Street

In 1871, the census records both 13-year-old George Bennett and his 15-year-old brother John as Box Makers, living with the family in Norwood Terrace, Hull. Their father, 44-year-old William Bennett is described as a Sawyer. 10 years later, the 1881 census now records George as a Sawyer, but his father is a General Labourer, but probably still working in the timber manufacturing industry.

George is first recorded as living at No.41 Ambrose Street in the 1883 register of electors. This is actually No.82, as the register shows that the houses were numbered consecutively until 1889 when they were changed to even on the north side and odd on the south.

The 1891 census for 82 Ambrose Street records George Bennett as a General Labourer, aged 32 and his wife, Emma, aged 31. No paid occupation is recorded for Emma, but she has her hands full caring for their 4-year-old daughter, also named Emma, her 3-year-old sister Anne and 1-year old brother George. Unfortunately, we do not know why George and Emma moved to York and the census does not record his employer.

Ten years later, in 1901, the family in 82 Ambrose Street has grown, with the addition of 8-year-old Edward and 7-year-old Alice. Emma still has no paid employment recorded, but George has become a Manager at a Box Mill. The census page has 'Paper' added above box maker, written in a different hand, perhaps George's.

By the time of the 1911 census, the Bennett family had moved to a larger house, 38 New York Terrace (at the Bishopthorpe Road end of Nunnery Lane). George is still described as a Box Mill Manager, and Hadfield's is given for the first time as his employer.

The next occupant of 82 Ambrose Street, recorded in the 1911 census, was Samuel Owen, a Police Constable, and his wife Annie. Also living with them is Samuel's 72-year-old father, William and his wife's 30-year-old sister, Mary Anne Bolton.

George, Emma, Annie, young George and Edward Bennett are recorded again at 38 New York Terrace in the 1921 census. George is now retired as manager of Hadfield's Box Makers, with the factory address given as North Street, York.

Wallpaper and other decorative features

The unusual wallpaper was discovered on the wall of the stairs and extending around the landing. There are two wallpapers separated by a decorative paper freeze, all with an eclectic, classically inspired design.

The lower paper has a formal pattern of urns and griffins, bordered by decorative columns at the side of each feature, with twin flower designs within a red rectangular background.

The upper paper is a little more free flowing, but with a symmetrical design of plant tendrils, lantern-like bowls, ribboned harps and mirrors.



The current owner has discovered traces of further decorative paper in the hall, and the front room is also believed to have been wallpapered.

In addition to the wallpaper, the front room fireplace has a decorative plaster mantelpiece, with a semi-oval mirror topped with a broken pediment over the face of a Green Man, or Neptune, perhaps wearing a crown.



A search of the V&A online wallpaper archive has not found these patterns, and enquiries with the Wallpaper Society have also been unsuccessful.

Other searches of wallpapers on Pinterest and other sites has not found anything like these designs.

Strangely, a similar design was seen by the writer in 2008 in a tiny Fortuni shop in Venice. Pictured left.



The hall-beam supporting the wall above has two plaster angels added to each side of the original decorative moulding, pictured above. Combined with the eclectic wallpaper in the hall, the entrance to the house and front parlour would have made quite an impression on visitors.

Why is the house decorated in this way?

There are no reports of other houses being similarly decorated, although wallpapering was widely used by the end of the 19th century. A newspaper advert of July 1881 inviting tenants for 24 Ambrose Street (later No. 48) refers to the house being 'newly wallpapered'.

No mention of the house or George Bennett has been found in newspaper archive searches, York Explore or the Borthwick Institute.

The York Institute was built in Clifford Street in 1883 to provide adult education for working men. The Institute was very popular and George Bennett may have attended lectures and joined classes on the decorative arts.

It has not been possible to discover what type of boxes were made by George Bennett's employer, Hadfield's. Their works was in North Street, close to some of Rowntree's operations, so Hadfield's may have made decorative boxes for their products.

As George Bennett rose in Hadfield's Box Company to become the manager, perhaps he was involved in commissioning designs for their boxes and may have developed a deep interest which he applied to the decoration of his home. But apart from the information and interpretation contained in this article, much remains to be discovered.

The current owner will welcome any suggestions and information, as will Fishergate, Fulford and Heslington Local History Society.

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