



History Nugget for July 2025 : Hadrian's Wall and Vestry Hall

The Vestry Hall was opened on 18th May 1887, the year of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee.

My sources for this history nugget start with Eric Montague's book, *Mitcham Histories* number 5 Lower Green West, in which he devotes a whole chapter to the Vestry Hall. In it he tells us that two commentators took a dim view of the building. The first, in the 1895 publication "Surrey Highways and Byways", the author simply says that it was a "TERRIBLE BUILDING". The second, in 1971, Nikolaus Pevsner, as part of his epic 46 volume series *The Buildings of England*, which he started in 1945, refers to it as "UGLY".

Montague makes no more mention of the architecture of the Vestry Hall, and continues with the histories of the people listed on the stone tablet that is now in the entrance hall of the building, and of Mitcham leading up to its construction and later use.

My next source was a weekly trade journal that was started in 1843 by Joseph Hansom, an architect who incidentally was also the inventor of the Hansom Cab. This journal was called *The Builder* and the Vestry Hall gets a mention in the 16th July 1887 issue. This article, titled "A New Public Hall at Mitcham", has no author named, but is likely to have been Robert Masters Chart, the architect of the Vestry Hall. I'll summarise the key points:

- Built in the "Queen Anne Style"
- Uses red brick, patent red brick window heads and bands
- Shawk stone dressings, entrances and cornice
- Frontage of 80 feet, ridge of the high-pitched roof is 60 feet and the clock tower 80 feet high
- In a central position above the ridge of the roof is a ventilating flèche rising to the same height as the tower
- The ground floor has a committee room and 3 offices: 1 for the Mitcham Parish, 2 for the Croydon Sanitary Authority
- The upper floor has a hall which can seat up to 400 persons, and is 32 feet to the apex of the roof which has 3 central outlets connected with the ventilating flèche.

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The dimensions lead us to view the Vestry Hall as being a 'square' of 80 feet, but the high and steeply sloping roof is now explained by the ventilation system for the upper floor hall. The narrow space near the outlets acts as a means of reducing the volume, and increasing the speed, of the hot air rising from the assembled body of up to 400 people.

But it's the reference to 'Shawk' stone that is the subject of this nugget. The entrances and cornice are now painted white, but this stone, which is red or a dark pink, can be seen in the 'string course', the division between the lower and upper floor. The wavy line pattern of this string course is not explained, but it could be a reference to the river Wandle.

The stone was mined in a quarry about 5 miles south west of Carlisle in what was then called Cumberland, now Cumbria. Which leads to the question as to why Mr Chart chose a source for this sandstone so far from Mitcham.

Inscriptions by Romans have been found on Hadrian's Wall and also in quarries, such as the Shawk quarry. An inscription noted in 1600 was written on Shawk by Gaius Varronius and Aelius Lucanus, for example.

Presumably Mr Chart chose this sandstone for its qualities, but was he aware of the connection with Hadrian's Wall?