Book Review: In the footsteps of Peter Ellis by Robert Ainsworth and Graham Jones; Liverpool History Society, 2013, £24

Peter Ellis (1805-1884) is known, if at all, as the architect of two remarkable buildings in Liverpool: Oriel Chambers and 16 Cook Street. This book is about the life of Peter Ellis and his family rather than a critique of his architecture. The early chapters provide a detailed account of the areas in Liverpool where Ellis grew up in the early nineteenth century (Shaw's Brow, Primrose Hill, Gloucester Street and Low Hill), profusely illustrated with contemporary maps, paintings and extracts from directories. The three main sources are Liverpool Record Office, the Liverpool Mercury online archive and the Athenaeum library.

Ellis's father, also Peter, was what would now be called a developer, acquiring land and building houses. Little is known of his son's architectural training, apart from working with his father, but the younger Peter entered the competition for St George's Hall in 1839 and published a book of his unsuccessful designs. As well as houses, he designed a school, a dispensary and a chapel. A major fire in 1863 gave Ellis the opportunity to build the work for which he is mainly known: Oriel Chambers. It was an innovative design with a cast iron frame, fireproof floors and much glass. The reception to the building was not uniformly positive: an article in a local satirical publication, The Porcupine, later published nationally in the Builder, mocked it. Two years later it was described in the Building News as "lunar gothic" and "greenhouse architecture gone mad". The importance of the building was not recognised until the 1940s and Oriel Chambers is now seen as a precursor of the American skyscrapers. Pevsner in 1969 described it as "one of the most remarkable buildings of its date in Europe".

The authors refute the myth that Ellis gave up architecture as a result of the criticism of Oriel Chambers. Although his work in civil engineering and valuation became more important, he continued to work as an architect, designing the Welsh Baptist Chapel in 1866. In his later years he turned inventor, applying for a number of patents including an improved water closet, and the paternoster lift.

Thoroughly researched and beautifully designed, with modern photographs complementing the old prints, this book is a valuable contribution to the history of Liverpool. The enthusiasm of the authors for their subject and for the process of research is apparent.

More information can be found at: http://www.liverpoolhistorysociety.org.uk/329/#more-329