

Sir Herbert Baker (1862 - 1946)



Herbert Baker was born at Cobham in Kent. He came to Tonbridge in 1875 as a boarder in Judde House. He excelled in maths and drawing, but was also a fine sportsman, playing four years in the 1st XI cricket and two years in the Rugby XV, captaining both. He decided on a career in architecture, training in London and winning the RIBA's Ashpitel Prize in 1889.

In 1892 he set out for South Africa to seek his fortune as an architect there. A chance meeting with Cecil Rhodes led to a commission for Rhodes' Cape Town residence at Groote Schuur and this brought Baker an avalanche of work in South Africa. This included the design of the Rhodes Memorial on the side of Table Mountain, the huge new Union Buildings in Pretoria to house the new post-Boer War government, cathedrals in Pretoria and Johannesburg, and over 300 private houses, including one for Rudyard Kipling. In Baker's own words he had 'the opportunity for an architecture which establishes a nation' and became the dominant force in South African architecture.

In 1912 he left South Africa and began a long collaboration with his old friend, Sir Edwin Lutyens on the design of the government buildings in New Delhi, including the Parliament House. Back home in England in the 1920s he was active in transposing his grand imperial style on to the design of India House and South Africa House in London, and Rhodes House in Oxford. He also worked for the Imperial War Graves Commission, supervising the construction of over 100 cemeteries and memorials in France and Belgium, including Tyne Cot cemetery near Ypres and the South African memorial at Delville Wood.



He also designed several school memorials, including the cloister at Winchester, which he regarded as his masterpiece. His last big assignment was the new Bank of England building in London.

He wrote his own autobiography 'Architecture and Personalities' in 1944 after retiring to Owletts, his family home in Kent, which he gave to the National Trust in 1937. Cricket remained a passion and he was active in Kent cricket, as well as designing a new stand at Lord's. He was knighted in 1926 and held many honorary degrees, including a DCL from Oxford.

He died in 1946, the end of his life marking also the beginning of the end of the British Empire and the grand-manner classical style with which his architectural career was associated.

