In July 1912, ‘The British Architect’ reported on the construction of Leeds Teacher Training College observing that it had taken 8,000,000 bricks to build. Many of us will be familiar with the austere red brick architecture of our Headingley Campus, reflecting a style inspired by Wren and later Georgian architecture. The original layout of the Campus still provokes vaguely militaristic and regimented impressions perhaps exposing the anxiety felt by Edwardian Britain amid the rising power of rival nations including Germany and Russia. In the first of a two-part feature, Keith Rowntree takes us back to the birth of the buildings that we now know as Headingley Campus, starting with the James Graham Building.

When the decision was taken by Leeds Corporation to develop the estate of Kirkstall Grange as a teacher training college an architectural competition was announced in September 1909. The City of Leeds Education Department steered by James Graham, then Secretary for Education for Leeds, produced the grandly entitled “Instructions to Architects submitting Competitive Designs for the proposed City of Leeds Training College for Teachers, at Kirkstall Grange, Far Headingley, Leeds.” The competition was limited to architects practicing in Leeds, entries were anonymous and it was stipulated that entries must not bear any marking or stamps that would give any clue to their origin. A deadline was set for 12 o’clock, noon on Saturday 18 December 1909 and Sir Aston Webb C.B. R.A. F.R.I.B.A. was appointed as Assessor. A general scheme had been devised by the Education Committee’s architect Fred Broadbent under the watchful eye of Graham; this overall layout was supplied as a guide and stipulated that the style of architecture and materials were left to the competitors. What Leeds, and Graham in particular, were seeking was a solution to a deficiency of places for training teachers but had an eye looking beyond local needs, as Committee papers record the College was built to meet ‘not only local but the national demand for increased Training College accommodation.’

Out of twenty-seven entries Webb chose the designs of architect George Walter Atkinson. It is his overall style that we see today but as a consolation the architects whose designs were next in merit were each given halls of residence to work on. Atkinson was charged with the lions share; his brief included the Education Block (today named the James Graham Building after the Secretary of Education at Leeds), Bronte Hall, houses for the Principal and Vice-Principal, the games pavilion, swimming baths, laundry and lodges. Next in merit came Sydney D. Kitson who carried out Fairfax and Cavendish, followed by Albert E. Kirk who took responsibility for Caedmon and Leighton. Next was W. Peel Schofield taking Priestley and the firm of Percy Robinson and W. Alban Jones taking Macaulay. Although the overall architectural style was that of Atkinson, each hall bears some detailing introduced by its architect. The most visible manifestation of this can be seen on the exterior of each hall including the architectural treatment of the porticos, fanlights, chimney stacks and the arrangement of pediments which reflect the broken pediment on the Grange, the original mansion on the site.

The main focus was to be Atkinson’s Education Block. It is difficult to pin down an actual date for the James Graham designation. The Hall within the Education Block was badly damaged by fire in 1978; the roof, floor and pipe organ were completely destroyed but some wooden panelling on the walls survived. Before the fire the hall was known as the Great Hall, restoration took two years to complete after which it was renamed the James Graham Hall. It is possible that this designation eventually broadened out to the rest of the building, becoming the James Graham Building.

James Graham was Secretary for Education for Leeds from 1907 until 1918 when his title was changed to Director of Education; he remained in post until his death in 1931. Graham was born in Sanquhar, Dumfriesshire in 1869, the son of a ploughman. He was orphaned at six and lived with his uncle in Lincolnshire. By 1888 Graham had moved to London where he earned his living as a teacher, in his spare time studying Modern Languages and Commerce, spending some time on the Continent perfecting his skills. At a relatively young age he became Inspector for Modern Languages and Commerce for the West Riding before moving to Leeds in 1906, where he worked closely with Fred Kinder in pushing forward the development of secondary education throughout the city. James Graham was a complex man, full of contradictions both professionally and personally. On the one hand he demonstrated a clear vision and a meticulous attention to detail, on the other he could be authoritarian and bullying; often over fussy about each facet of a project. No doubt these traits were a contributing factor during his involvement in the ‘scandal’ that engulfed the City of Leeds Training College in its early years prompted by the resignation of Vice Principal Winifred Mercier. Despite criticism of his role in this he continued in his position at the head of education at Leeds living just long enough to have a hand in the early stages of the Carnegie College of Physical Training being built in Leeds at the Beckett Park site.

In the next edition of LS126, Keith will take a tour of the Headingley Halls and the historical figures they are named after.