



DAVID MEIN NESBIT
1855-1929



Founder and 1st President HVCA

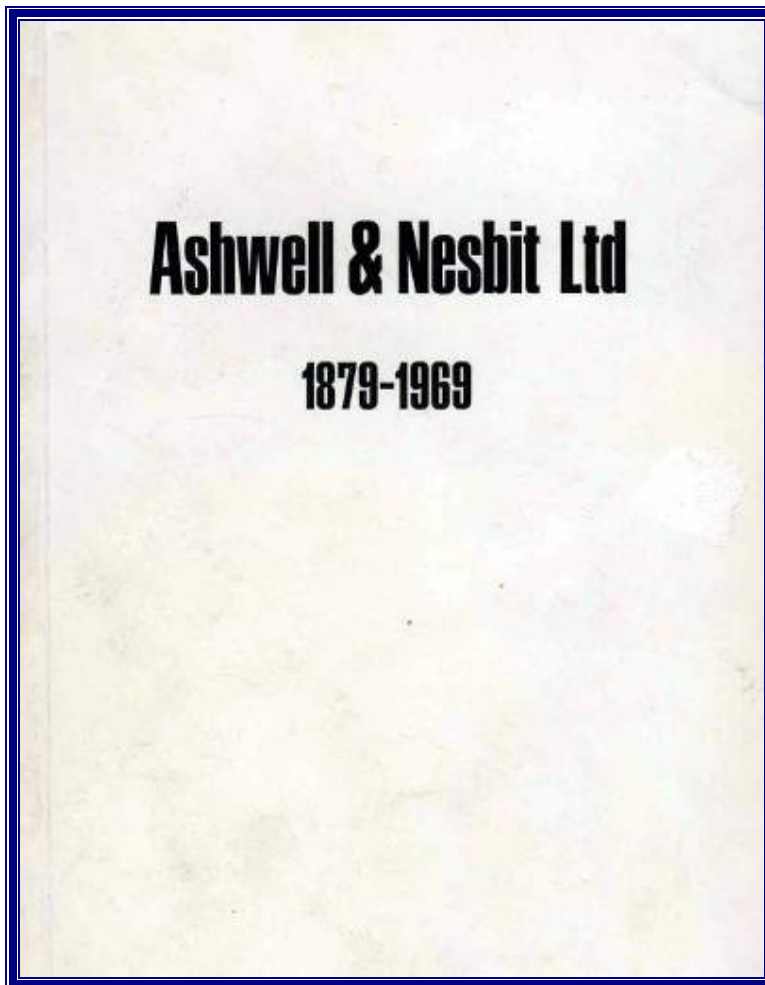


[268] David Mein NESBIT

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First President of HVCA (1904-1909). Ashwell & Nesbit, Leicester and London. Third President of IHVE (1900). Nesbit addressed the Master Steam and Hot Water Fitters' National Association in New York (1894), but the discourtesy shown at his reading of his technical paper so incensed Hugh Barron [248] that, with others, he founded ASHVE. Nesbit was one of ASHVE's first international members and can thus claim the unique distinction of having been involved in the founding of three great "comfort" organizations.

(Mini-biography from "The Comfort Makers," Brian Roberts, ASHRAE, 2000)



A History of the Company (CIBSE Heritage Group Collection)



Frank Ashwell

As will be seen the heating department was taking on a considerable volume of work and the amount of business in 1891 fully justified the offer of a partnership to David Nesbit whose responsibilities had greatly increased with the growth of his department, and in due course of time a partnership agreement was drawn up for an initial period of seven years. At first it was suggested that the arrangement should apply only to the heating department; but subsequently it was decided to extend it to the whole concern on the understanding that David Nesbit's share should be confined to half the profits of that department only. He would have no claim on the profits of the works but was indemnified against all liabilities of the firm, while Frank Ashwell would continue to find all the capital required to run the business and keep all accounts under his control. As David Nesbit possessed no capital he agreed that his drawings from profit should be limited to £300 per annum, the balance due to him being allowed to accrue until his capital reached a reasonable figure; and an amount of £1500 was suggested. It is highly probable that David Nesbit considered this arrangement to be a fair one and in the first year of the partnership his share of the profit amounted to £900. By 1894 his capital had reached a figure of £1900 and thereafter the partnership continued on a two to one basis. From the 1st July 1892, after the signing of the partnership agreement, the firm traded under the style of Messrs. Ashwell and Nesbit.

The effect of the sudden death of her husband, in his forty-second year, on Helen Ashwell, and on her four young children, can be imagined; and, also, for the firm he had founded it was nothing short of a disaster. The partnership had been in existence for only four years. David Nesbit was a resourceful engineer and a great deal of credit was due to him for the success of the heating department of which he had been in charge since 1884; but the commercial and financial aspects of the business had been very largely in the hands of his senior partner. The latter had been responsible for finding the capital outlay to run their affairs and, in addition, had reserved the management of the works entirely to himself. Also much of the goodwill of the firm was vested in Frank, who had built up a fine connection both in the heating and the mechanical trades.

David Nesbit was still manager in London, which had become the real centre of the heating and ventilating side of the business, and arrangements had hurriedly to be made to hand over the responsibility of the office in Great James Street to a deputy, while he returned to Leicester to look after the remainder of the business. There were a number of important contracts in progress, including the Manchester City Asylum, which may well have demanded his attention; but at this time his more urgent task was to take charge at Sycamore Lane.

It has already been suggested that D. M. Nesbit had an inventive turn of mind. This facet of his character is shown fully in an examination of his notebooks or of a catalogue of the various products or "specialties" manufactured by the works under his control. He was also a man with a strong tendency towards the expansion of his business without always taking sufficient account of the financial resources available – a failing to which many enthusiastic engineers are sometimes prone: but nevertheless he was able to convince his colleagues that expansion must go forward and many developments which he sponsored were brought to a successful conclusion.

The formation of British Steam Specialties Ltd., which was the name adopted for this new company, was no doubt D. M. Nesbit's idea. Its management was entrusted to H. W. Waudby who had previously been chief draughtsman at Leicester, and in 1900 an agreement was drawn up to put the relationship with the parent company on a proper basis. This document consisted of nine clauses and laid down that B.S.S. should buy all steam specialties which the Great Central Street works were able to manufacture; that Ashwell and Nesbit should not purchase direct from any other manufacturer who supplied B.S.S. with goods, and that they should be able to purchase supplies from B.S.S. at better discounts than any other client. The new company had been able to make purchase agreements with certain American manufacturers and the right to stock and make use of products from these sources was reserved to Ashwell & Nesbit. There were a number of patented articles which were supplied to B.S.S. Ltd., by the works and for which royalties were paid to D. M. Nesbit. Although this is hardly the place to describe these in any detail it might be worthwhile to mention a few, such as the 'Nudeemen' Grease and Water Separators, and Vacuum Pressure Steam Traps. There was also the oddly named 'Perk Pick' ventilation inlet for which D. M. Nesbit was paid 5/- for each one sold; and the 'Nestor' range of traps. These were Compound and Bucket type traps, large and rather cumbersome compared with the more modern thermostatic traps which have superseded them. Compound traps were recommended for draining the condensation from apparatus such as calorifiers, steam boiling pans and grease separators whilst the Bucket types were for more general use.

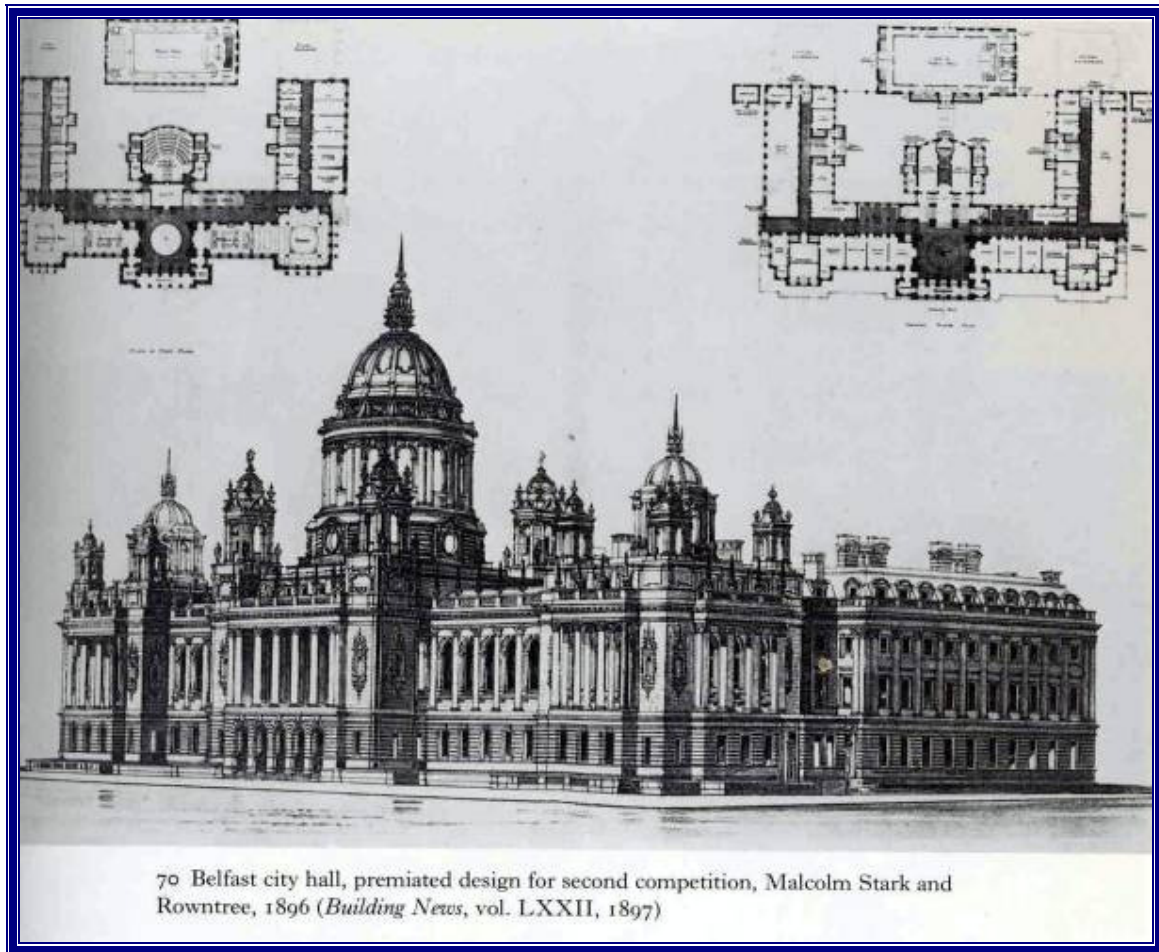
Another patent granted to D. M. Nesbit at about this time concerned an apparatus for heating water for process work and pre-heating boiler feed water which was known as the 'Nuconomiser' system.

There is little doubt that D. M. Nesbit was a man of strong views and dominating, sometimes domineering, manners. One hears conflicting opinions of his character from those who remember him. Ill-temper and rudeness seem to have alternated with a certain generosity and sentimentality. An adulatory description of him is contained in an article in the "Leicester Guardian" of the 18th June 1904, under the title of "Captains of Local Industry", which includes the following piece of Edwardian journalese:

"Personally Mr. Nesbit is a warm friend, and an equally warm enemy; genial, bluff, straight-speaking, and whole-hearted in everything. Family affection has always kept his heart tender and true; and it was to a sister he was indebted for a quotation that he is always remembering and desirous of applying, to the effect that we should do what good we can, as we pass by in life, for "we shall never come this way again." But woe to the man to whom the application of this inspiring motto does no good; who discloses meanness or deceit, instead of honour, loyalty, and faithful dealing. The wrath of his would-be friend, rumbling internally like a gathering storm, will explode only when the full force of a tornado had been generated, and is no longer safe to restrain. Then it bursts, and its expansive energy will be limited by no such confining trammels as those of the conventional vocabulary. But, nevertheless, the victim who discreetly bows his head to the storm, will soon discern clearer weather in the steel blue eyes, a sign of twinkling, that will rapidly brighten into sunniness, and as last a deep laugh from the chest will follow in most cases making the rafters ring, and chasing away the thunderous clouds below the horizon. He is a man that Rabelais would have delighted in . . . "!

Such at any rate was a contemporary view. That D. M. Nesbit was a good engineer cannot be disputed but his uncertain character and his lack of sound commercial sense was a continuing source of anxiety to his colleagues, particularly his co-directors.

(Text extracts from "Ashwell & Nesbit Ltd 1879-1969")



70 Belfast city hall, premiated design for second competition, Malcolm Stark and Rowntree, 1896 (*Building News*, vol. LXXII, 1897)

Belfast City Hall, 1901 (Competition drawing from "Victorian & Edwardian Town Halls," Colin Cunningham, 1981

SOUVENIR.



MIDLAND HOTEL, MANCHESTER.

Engineers: **ASHWELL & NESBIT, Ltd.,**

A Test made on Saturday the 5th September, 1903, showed, that our Ventilating Apparatus was delivering **SIX MILLION CUBIC FEET OF AIR PER HOUR** into the Hotel, which means that with air at 62° Fahr. = **203 TONS WEIGHT.**

LONDON,
LEICESTER,
NOTTINGHAM,
MANCHESTER.

*Ashwell & Nesbit Souvenir Brochure: Midland Hotel, Manchester, 1903
(CIBSE Heritage Group Collection)*



Methodist Central Hall, Westminster, London, 1912 (Photos Frank Ferris)
For more information see under
Buildings with Historical Equipment/Ventilation *on this web site*

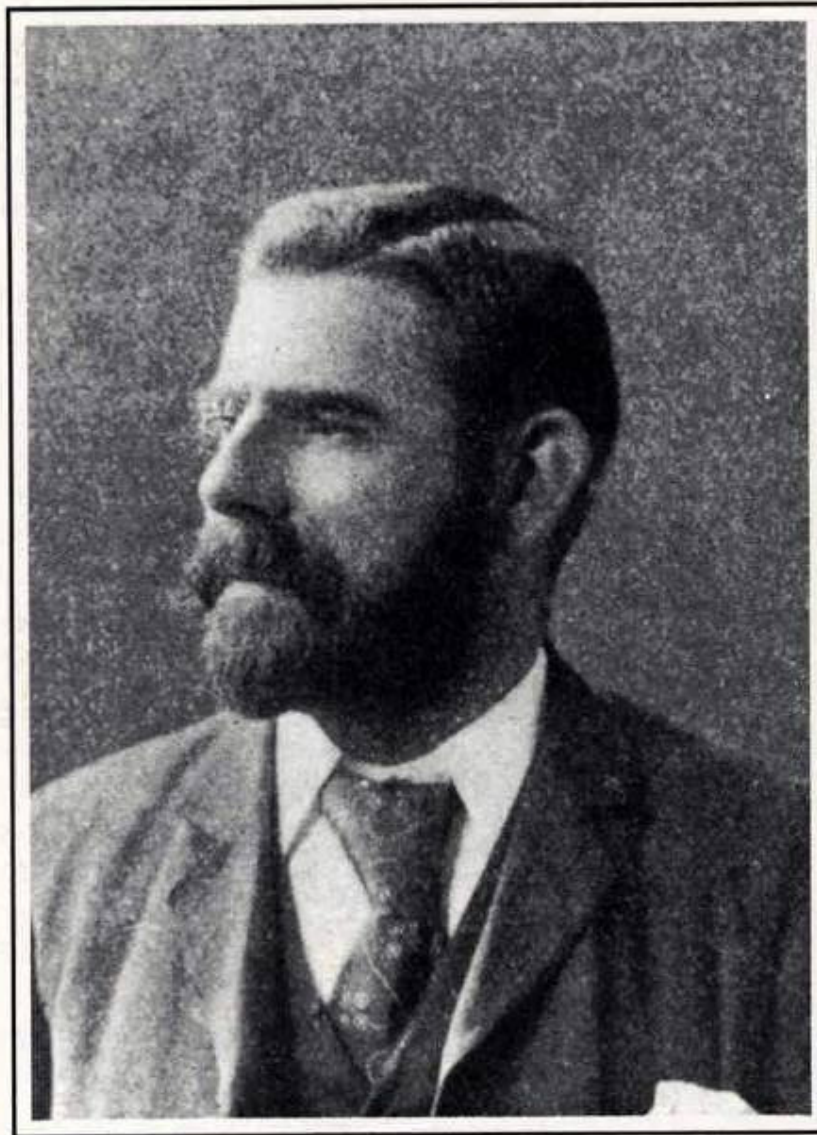


Figure 9-5 English heating engineer David Nesbit was perhaps the first “international member” of the ASHVE. The tepid response of the Master Fitters convention to his paper delivered at its 1894 convention was one of the factors that led to the formation of the ASHVE by several “disgusted” individuals (from *Heating and Ventilation*, January 1899, p. 9).

*(“Heat & Cold: Mastering the Great Indoors,
Barry Donaldson & Bernard Nagengast, ASHRAE, 1994)*

Unfair tendering practices, payment problems and, in particular, demarcation disputes were features of contracting life in the late 19th century heating industry. The demarcation issue came to a head in **December 1899** when plumbing operatives objected to heating engineers installing domestic hot water pipework at the Leicester Isolation Hospital – and went on strike.

The Institution of Heating and Ventilating Engineers (IHVE) – formed in **1897** – provided a forum for engineering, manufacturing and installing employers (often the same company) to discuss technical matters. On **11 April 1900**, its president, David Nesbit, called together other employers over demarcation and secured their support in making a stand. However, clients and architects, fearing labour problems, began to refuse heating engineers the opportunity to tender for plumbing work, and awarded some heating contracts to plumbers. The proposed solution was an agreement that only plumbers would undertake lead work, but that either trade could carry out iron, copper and brass work. In **May 1902**, the IHVE and the National Association of Master Plumbers agreed – but the operatives refused to accept it.

By **June 1903**, the perceived need for heating engineers to safeguard their interests had grown into a proposal to form an association of heating contractors, and the firms met again in **January 1904** for this purpose, with Nesbit presiding. He stressed that “the proposed association was not in any way opposed to the IHVE”. Rather, the new body would “watch the commercial interests of contracting engineers”. On the question of demarcation, he wanted to avoid any monopoly in installing piping materials except lead – which he conceded should fall to plumbers. The meeting resolved to form an organisation to be known as the National Association of Master Heating and Domestic Engineers (NAMHDE). This had its first official General Meeting on **16 March 1904** at the Holborn Restaurant, London, at which Nesbit was elected president.

(Text extract from “HVCA @ 100,” Brian Roberts, HVCA 2004)



HVCA@100

Brian Roberts



1930 Imperial College of Science, London (Delivery of a large hot water calorifier by Sulzer Bros)

*Celebrating the Centenary of the
Heating and Ventilating Contractors' Association
1904-2004*

Title page (CIBSE Heritage Group Collection)