**Bentley, John Francis** (1839–1902), architect, was born at Doncaster on 30 January 1839, the third surviving son of Charles Bentley, wine merchant, and his wife, Ann, daughter of John Bacchus of that town. He received his education partly at home and partly at a private school in Doncaster. In boyhood he made a model from memory of St George's Church, Doncaster, after its destruction by fire in February 1853, and when George Gilbert Scott began the rebuilding in October 1853, Bentley frequented the fabric and rendered some services to the clerk of works. In 1854 he acted as voluntary superintendent in the restoration of Loversall church, Yorkshire, and there tried his hand at carving. His father, who deprecated the artistic career on which his son had set his heart, placed him for a short time, early in 1855, with Sharpe, Stewart & Co., a firm of mechanical engineers at Manchester; but in August 1855 Bentley entered on a five years' indenture with the building establishment of Winslow and Holland in London. The next year his father died, and Richard Holland, a partner of this firm, placed him (1857) in the office of Henry Clutton (1819–1893), an architect in extensive domestic and ecclesiastical practice, who had joined the Church of Rome. Bentley took the same step in 1862, taking the baptismal name Francis. In 1860, though invited by Clutton to join him in partnership, he preferred the risks of independence. In 1862 he took chambers at 14 Southampton Street, Covent Garden.  
  
While waiting for commissions, Bentley continued the sketching and modelling which had already occupied his evening leisure, and often made for other architects designs for work in stone, metal, wood, stained glass, and embroidery. Works designed by him were shown at the exhibitions of London (1862) and Paris (1867). These included stained glass made by the firm of Lavers and Barraud (after 1868 Lavers, Barraud, and Westlake), and metalwork made by Hart & Son. He designed over forty organ cases for his friend the distinguished organ builder T. C. Lewis. For St Francis's Church, Notting Hill (the scene of his own baptism by Cardinal Wiseman), he designed the stone-groined baptistery, font, and porch, as well as the altars of St John and the Blessed Virgin (with paintings by his friend N. H. J. Westlake), a jewelled monstrance in the Byzantine style (now in the City of Birmingham Art Gallery), and at a later date the high altar. In 1866 he undertook for the poet Coventry Patmore the adaptation of an old Sussex house, Heron's Ghyll, near Uckfield (now Temple Grove preparatory school). His work betrayed from the first conscientious anxiety for perfection and soundness of construction. His own experience of entering the competition for a new church at Heigham, Norfolk, in 1858 led him to regard architectural competitions as inimical to art.  
  
In 1868 Bentley received the commission for the seminary of St Thomas at Hammersmith (built 1876–88; since 1893 the Convent and High School of the Sacred Heart), one of his best works, and in the same year transferred his office to 13 John Street, Adelphi. In 1870 he designed the altar and reredos of the church of St Charles, Ogle Street, Marylebone. In 1887–8 Bentley built in the style of the Renaissance (but with a Gothic chapel) the large preparatory school (St John's) in connection with Beaumont College (now closed) at Old Windsor. For some years (beginning in 1874) he spent much thought and labour on the internal decoration and furniture of Carlton Towers, Selby, Yorkshire, for Lord Beaumont. On 6 October 1874 he married Margaret Annie (1857–1939), daughter of Henry J. Fleuss, a painter, of Düsseldorf (later art master at Marlborough College); they had four sons and seven daughters, of whom one son and one daughter died in infancy, and the remainder survived him.  
  
For thirty years Bentley was engaged at intervals on the church of St Mary of the Angels, Moorhouse Road, Bayswater, where he designed additional aisles, a baptistery, various chapels, and furnishings. Apart from Westminster Cathedral, only five churches were erected to Bentley's designs. The church and presbytery of St Mary at Cadogan Street, Chelsea (1877–9), and the church of Our Lady of the Holy Souls at Bosworth Road, Kensal New Town (1881–2), are simple examples of Bentley's brick construction. In 1886–7 he built the unfinished portion of Corpus Christi Church, Brixton Hill, in Early Decorated style. The fine church of the Holy Rood at Watford, his Gothic masterpiece, was, with its schools and presbytery, in hand from 1889 to 1900. Bentley's fifth church was for the Church of England. The commission for St Luke's, Chiddingstone Causeway, Kent (built 1897–8), came to him on the recommendation of John Singer Sargent.  
  
For the Redemptorist Fathers, Bentley did varied work at Bishop Eton, Liverpool, and Clapham. To the church of Our Lady of Victories at Clapham (his own parish church) he added a fine lady chapel (1883–7), a transept, stained-glass windows, and a monastery, completed in 1893. For the church of St James, Spanish Place, London, he designed several altars and some glass. In 1898–9 he built with stone and red brick in the early fifteenth-century style the convent of the Immaculate Conception for Franciscan nuns at Bocking, near Braintree. The screen and organ case of St Etheldreda's, Ely Place, Holborn, are from his designs. Bentley also had commissions from the Church of England. In 1893–4 the two City churches of St Botolph came under his care. For St Botolph without Bishopsgate he provided external repair as well as internal decoration (1889–94), and for that at Aldgate he designed numerous embellishments (1888–93), notably the fine cornice of angels bearing the shields of the City companies. Similar works were done at St Mark's, North Audley Street. For St John's Church, Hammersmith (designed by his old friend William Butterfield), he schemed a morning chapel, organ case, and some decorations.  
  
In 1894 came the great opportunity of Bentley's life. Cardinal Vaughan called upon him to design the Roman Catholic cathedral of Westminster. The conditions laid upon the architect were that the church should have a nave of vast extent giving an uninterrupted view of the high altar; that the design should be such that the fabric could be erected comparatively quickly, and the decoration added later; and that rivalry with the nearby Westminster Abbey should be avoided. Vaughan was thinking of an Early Christian basilica, but Bentley won him over in favour of the Byzantine style. Bentley perceived that his design should be preceded by special foreign study, and though not in robust health set out in November of the same year for a tour of Italy. After visiting Milan (especially for Sant' Ambrogio), Pavia, Florence, Rome (where the work of the Renaissance disappointed him), Perugia (which with Assisi delighted him), and Ravenna, he came at last to Venice, where cold and fatigue compelled him to rest before he could study St Mark's. His natural wish to proceed to Constantinople was frustrated by the prevalence there of cholera, and after returning to London in March 1895 he was ready by St Peter and St Paul's day (29 June) for the laying of the foundation-stone.  
  
The cathedral is outwardly remarkable for its tall campanile and its bold use of brick and stone. The design is throughout marked by the greatest simplicity, largeness of scale, and avoidance of trivial ornament. Internally the vast nave consists of three bays measuring 60 feet square and each surmounted by a concrete dome. A fourth bay nearest the nominal east forms the sanctuary, and beyond it is an apse. The nave is flanked on each side by an aisle; outside the aisles are the many chapels. When first opened for worship, and before any progress had been made with the marble decorations, the interior effect was a triumph of pure form. The construction was remarkable, Bentley having set himself to avoid any structural materials but brickwork, masonry, and concrete. ‘I have broken’, he said, ‘the backbone of that terrible superstition, that iron is necessary to large spans’ (Howell, 1982, 90). The cathedral was praised by Richard Norman Shaw as ‘beyond all doubt the finest church that has been built for centuries’ (*Architectural Review*, 10, 1901, 171). At the time of Bentley's death in 1902 the whole fabric of the building was complete, except for the final 50 feet of the campanile, but only a part of the marble revetment of one chapel had been installed. The first great ceremony held in the cathedral was Vaughan's requiem, on 25 June 1903. It was consecrated in 1910. The marble decoration is largely complete, but comparatively little of the mosaic decoration has been carried out.  
  
In 1898 Bentley was summoned to the United States to advise on the design and construction of the Roman Catholic cathedral at Brooklyn, for which he prepared a Gothic scheme, which remained unexecuted. After being seized in November 1898 with paralytic symptoms, which in June 1900 affected his speech, he died on 2 March 1902 at his residence, 3 The Sweep, Old Town, Clapham Common, the day before his name was to be submitted to the Royal Institute of British Architects for the royal gold medal. He was buried in the cemetery of St Mary Magdalen's Church, Mortlake. His third son, Osmond, succeeded, in partnership with J. A. Marshall, to the architectural practice, and his eldest daughter, Winefride de l'Hôpital, wrote her father's biography.  
  
Paul Waterhouse*, rev.*Peter Howell

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**Likenesses**

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**Wealth at death**

£5961 13*s*. 9*d*.: administration with will, 24 March 1902, *CGPLA Eng. & Wales*

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