

Augustus Welby Pugin: Architect to the English Catholic revival



A week of celebrations mark the bicentenary of Augustus Welby Pugin, one of Catholicism's great architects

The 200th anniversary of the birth of Augustus Welby Pugin on 1 March 2012 is being marked in England and Ireland with celebrations of Holy Mass, book-launches, exhibitions and lectures in Dublin, Birmingham, Cheadle, Nottingham and Ramsgate. Despite his first name, recalling pagan Roman antiquity, he was to be one of the 19th-century Romantic Movement's greatest converts to Catholicism. As an architect and designer he set the tone of the Catholic Revival as something half-escapist — returning to the ideal of a Church undisturbed by the Protestant Reformation and indeed the French Revolution — and half-prophetic, ensuring that Catholics in the English-speaking world would at least in their churches challenge the thrall in which the various Protestant establishments held them. His architectural legacy is to be found in England and Ireland, Canada, Australia (and in particular Tasmania), and the United States.

Pugin was trained in the tradition of recording by measurement and drawing medieval buildings and works of art by his father. He was a brilliant draughtsman, spending weeks and months touring England and the Continent in search of what he called “authorities” for the revival of the Gothic style. A complete sketchbook of the trip to Nuremberg in 1838 is published this week by the Irish Architectural Archive to accompany the Dublin exhibition Celebrating Pugin. He made himself an authority on the arts and architecture of the Middle Ages almost before he created his first building, a house for himself in 1835, the year he became a Catholic. By 1843 he had built over 35 churches, including five cathedrals, two of them in Ireland. He had already twice provided crucial sets of drawings for the architect Sir Charles Barry's rebuilding of the Houses of Parliament in London and from 1844 he was to design much of their internal architectural detail, decoration and furniture. He

even gave us the design for the top stage of the Clock Tower, the iconic “Big Ben”, today seen as a symbol of Britain all over the world.



However, Pugin was more interested in his work for the Church than the State. At Ramsgate he built and paid for the church of St Augustine (1843-52), gifted to the diocese on his death. He saw himself in the tradition of the medieval master-masons building for the glory of God and of the Church, signing his drawings not as “architect” but “mason”. He sought out patrons and found the perfect exemplars in the pious and generous 16th Earl of Shrewsbury, in the metalwork manufacturer John Hardman and in Bishop Thomas Walsh, producing for and with them the first Catholic cathedral in England since the Reformation, St Chad’s in Birmingham (1839-41). He insisted that its “style of pointed architecture [was] totally different from any Protestant erection. Any person would be aware that this was a Catholic church at first sight”. This it was indeed with the frank expression of its brick architecture and its twin-spired west front, nave, aisles and deep apse. Even more Catholic was its gorgeous interior, for which Pugin gave a German statue of the Virgin and Child, the Earl a pulpit and the lectern — all 15-century works of art — and John Hardman the rood screen (In 1967 the bishop demolished the rood screen and sold the lectern to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). Pugin supervised the design and manufacture of stained glass for the windows, painting schemes for the roof and walls, encaustic tile-work for the floors, wood-work and metalwork for furniture, precious metal for sacred vessels, and textiles and linens for vestments. The 29-year-old Pugin was already able to master the complex decoration that was to be the hall-mark of his work at the Houses of Parliament.

All was brought to a triumphant conclusion with the installation of the relics of St Chad, long-hidden in Catholic hands since the Reformation and now housed in a reliquary within the baldachin of the high altar, all to his design. More characteristic than c

athedrals were Pugin's parish churches, of which St Giles Cheadle, Staffordshire (1840-46) is the apogee, lavishly paid for by the Earl of Shrewsbury and built in beautiful red sandstone from the Shrewsbury estate by the estate workmen. Here Pugin's antiquarian scholarship, architectural form and decorative br

illiance are held in perfect balance, achieving one of the great works of art of the Romantic Movement. His revival of an English parish church of the time of King Edward I (1297-1327) is "perfect", as he himself said, "a model for all good men", both patrons and architects. Visitors were brought to their knees by its intensity, the interior is like entering a medieval illuminated book of Hours, "Porta coeli", as Newman exclaimed in front of the screen of the Blessed Sacrament chapel.

Pugin was a leading liturgist and reformer of worship, anticipating much of the thrust and dogmatism of the Liturgical movement. His book *The Present State of Ecclesiastical Architecture* (1843) provides a vade-mecum to his vision of liturgical revival. He returned to sources, by analyzing medieval churches, liturgical books and commentaries, vestments and altar fittings. He banished tabernacles from high altars, introduced lecterns, Gregorian chant and illustrated an English-Latin missal. He lambasted the liturgical minimalism of the Low Mass and encouraged Gregorian chant High Masses and Vespers over Benediction. Pugin's architectural and liturgical scholarship could prove too nice for the clergy struggling with the realities of towns like Birmingham, and he was challenged directly by a circle associated with Wiseman, the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, after the Restoration of the Hierarchy in England in 1850, and might have been thought to have died a broken man two years later.



In fact Pugin's early death aged forty in 1852 began a re-assessment; as an Anglican paper, the *Ecclesiologist*, wrote "we have lost ...the most eminent and original architectural genius of his time". The cathedrals of Enniscorthy and Killarney in Ireland, held up by the Famine, were to be completed by his first Irish follower JJ McCarthy, the "Irish Pugin". He was to add the chapel to Pugin's great St Patrick's College Maynooth (1845-49). Pugin's son Edward continued the practice and set up an Irish partnership responsible for St Colman's Cathedral, Cobh (1859-1919). John Denny, his clerk of works at Cheadle and the architect WW Wardell (who said he owed his own conversion to Pugin) arrived in Australia, and Wardell was to build two cathedrals — St Patrick's, Melbourne (1858-1938), and St Mary's, Sydney (begun in 1868 and finally completed in 2000). Pugin had already in the 1840s sent out wooden models for new churches along with "model" vestments, chalices and other church goods with Bishop Robert William Willson, first Bishop of Hobart, Tasmania, where important Puginesque churches are to be found. For him, Pugin and Hardman melted down a chalice sent by the Pope, and remade it in the Gothic style.

From Ireland came young followers who were to have spectacular careers as church-architects in the United States: Patrick Keely, architect of Holy Cross Cathedral, Boston (1866-75), and Jeremiah O'Rourke. Building the Sacred Heart Cathedral Newark, New Jersey (begun in 1899 but not completed until 1952), the commissioning priest and O'Rourke toured England and Ireland in search of the "elder Pugin".

When Pugin became a Catholic in 1835 he and all other Catholics in the British Isles referred to their humble places of worship as “chapels”. This second-class citizenship was born of centuries of persecution and marginalization of Catholics in the English-speaking world. Pugin by his architecture and church decoration at least made the people princes in their own churches. Wiseman preaching at the consecration in 1839 of the Pugin church St Mary’s, Derby, recognized it as “the real transition from chapel to church architecture amongst us”. Pugin was one of those who, like Daniel O’Connell, “The Liberator”, and Blessed John Henry Newman, brought 19th-century English-speaking Catholics out of the catacombs and into the light.

For events in England and Ireland: www.puginociety.org.uk; in Australia: www.puginfoundation.org/bicentenary

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