

Pugin Foundation

St Benedict's Church, Broadway, New South Wales

Brian Andrews

Introduction

St Benedict's Church is a building whose stylistic and planning roots can be traced to the ideals and impact of the Englishman John Bede Polding OSB, first Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, and of the great English early-Victorian architect, designer and theorist Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812–1852).



St Benedict's from the south-east, April 2006 (Image: Fr Don Richardson)

John Bede Polding OSB (1794–1877), a Benedictine monk, formerly of Downside Priory, Somerset, was the pioneering Catholic bishop in Australia and, from 1842, Archbishop of Sydney and founder of the Australian Catholic hierarchy. His attitude towards church architecture and furnishing, allied to his belief in the importance of beauty, dignity and reverence in the setting and performance of the liturgy, was quintessentially Benedictine.¹ This attitude can be seen in his choice of the fashionable Bath architect Henry Edmund Goodridge to furnish the plans for small

¹ Benedictine monastic houses throughout history have been distinguished in this regard. St Benedict, in his sixth-century Rule, enjoined his monks when intoning the psalms and antiphons to do so 'with humility, gravity and reverence'. (Justin McCann (ed. & tr.), *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, Burns, Oates & Washbourne, London, 1952, p. 109.)

churches that he brought out to Australia in 1835.² Goodridge had previously designed Gothick monastic buildings for Downside, a project in which Polding had been involved.³

Polding's consistent motivation for seeking only the best for his churches was well captured by his Vicar-General, Henry Gregory Gregory OSB, in a c.1850 report to the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda,⁴ when he wrote:

As regards the style of [church] building also, we may without boasting congratulate ourselves. The Archbishop has expended considerable pains and anxiety on this point; not only because churches built with propriety and good taste, formed upon, though with no servile adherence to models of acknowledged authority, are eventually the cheapest, but because in a new community unhappily but too much engrossed in material pursuits, it is of no inconsiderable importance, in its due place, to present even to men's senses, the forms and suggestions of other beauties and more lasting interests.⁵

In June 1841 Polding landed in England on his first trip home from Australia. Pugin was riding the crest of a wave of approbation, building churches with stunning interiors filled with colour and imagery the likes of which had not been seen since the Reformation. Polding was to experience this bold assertion of the power and magnetism of emancipated English Catholicism within days of his arrival when he attended the dedication of Pugin's St Chad's Cathedral, Birmingham, on 20 June in the company of a great gathering of prelates. The conviction of its architecture, the glowing colour of its painted and stencilled surfaces, its genuine medieval pulpit, statues and fittings, its splendid stone altar and reredos under an elaborate canopy and especially the glorious rood screen would have stood in stark contrast to Goodridge's romantic sham at Downside which had been his former inspiration and to the feeble boxes of local architects in Sydney. Polding would have another opportunity to admire this radical new building when, on 27 October 1842, he consecrated Robert William Willson there as first Bishop of Hobart Town. Doubtless Willson would have told Polding of the great church of St Barnabas, the largest Catholic church in England since the Reformation, which he was in the course of building to Pugin's designs in Nottingham.

But perhaps the greatest stimulus for Polding to approach Pugin seeking designs for Australian buildings would have come from contact with his brethren at his old home Downside Priory. The community was in possession of a marvellous design prepared by Pugin for a vast new monastery in the Early English style on a scale surpassing a great many English medieval abbeys. The monastic buildings were arranged around

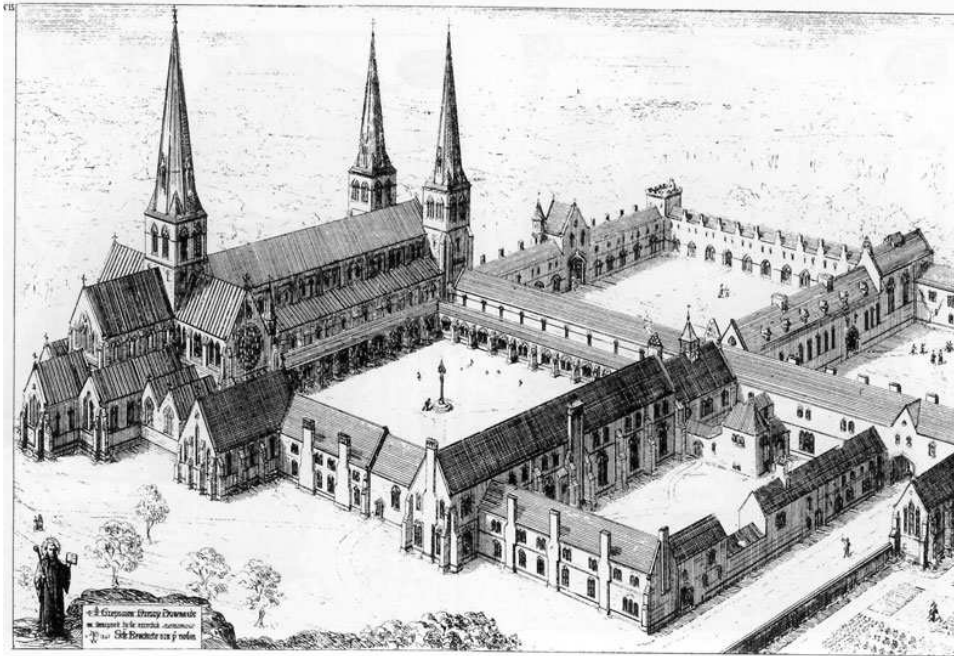
² Eleanor Joan Kerr, *Designing a Colonial Church: Church building in New South Wales 1788–1888*, PhD, University of York, Institute of Advanced Architectural Studies, 1977, vol. 1, pp. 151–63.

³ These and other ecclesiastical buildings designed by Goodridge were in an idiom termed 'Gothick', denoting a superficial application of Gothic elements and details without the framework of archaeological and ecclesiological understanding of medieval churches that would be later successfully championed by Pugin.

⁴ The then Roman Congregation that directed and promoted the Catholic faith in missionary territories throughout the world. Australia was at that time deemed to be a missionary territory.

⁵ Henry Norbert Birt, *Benedictine Pioneers in Australia*, 2 vols, Herbert & Daniel, London, 1911, vol. II, p. 172.

four large courtyards and included a huge cruciform church with a trinity of spires. Surely, the psychological impact of Pugin's visionary scheme on the Downside monks and on Polding must have been immense.



Pugin's design for Downside Priory, Somerset (Source: Pugin's Present State)

On 10 December 1842, a month after Polding set sail from Liverpool, Pugin's diary recorded delivery of drawings for Sydney to Fr Thomas Paulinus Heptonstall OSB, Polding's London agent.⁶

Pugin's 1842 package of designs for Archbishop Polding included: a temporary free-standing bell tower for St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney, along with major extensions destined ultimately to replace that ungainly Gothic building; a school; and at least five designs for churches ranging in size and elaboration from small two-compartment buildings with nave areas less than 93 square metres to a spired triple-gabled structure with a nave and aisles area of over 370 square metres. This last, Pugin's largest Australian church design,⁷ would be utilized in the 1840s for a church—St Benedict's—not far from the heart of Sydney.

None of these churches were simply copies of Pugin's previous English or Irish designs. All were structured and equipped in accordance with his architectural, ecclesiological and singular liturgical stance, the latter predicated upon his hope that the late medieval English Sarum Use would one day prevail in the Catholic churches of England and its colonies.⁸ All, therefore, had a bellcote or a spire, an antipodean

⁶ Pugin's diary for 1842, National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, Pressmark 86 MM 61, L5163 1969.

⁷ This is not counting his Sydney cathedral design.

⁸ The Use of Sarum was a late medieval variant, in minor details, of the Roman Rite, the manner of regulating the public worship of the church that prevailed throughout Western Christendom. It

north porch, a separately expressed chancel, differentiated from the remainder of the structure by a greater degree of elaboration for reasons of propriety, sedilia, a piscina, an Easter sepulchre, a rood screen and—even in the smallest—a west door to cater for processions and for solemn occasions such as the visit of a bishop.

The design

Amongst Pugin's favoured compositions for larger churches was one in which the nave and side aisles each had gabled roofs. All in all he used this arrangement six times, with variations in placement of the spire and sacristy and the roofing of chancel and eastern chapels.⁹ With the exceptions of his earliest essay, the 1840 second design for St George's Cathedral, Southwark, and his 1845 second design for St Joseph & St Mary, St Peter Port, Guernsey, in both of which the chancel and eastern chapels were separately expressed under their own roofs, the roofs of these buildings had continuous ridges from west to east.

Although it has been proposed that Pugin's medieval inspiration for such triple-gabled church designs was the Austin Friar's Church, London,¹⁰ it seems more probable that two sources well-known to him, namely, the nave and aisles of the Temple Church, London, and the ancient parish church at Islington were in his mind when he developed his own versions. Indeed, in the case of St Benedict's we will see that both these latter buildings had an impact.

In February 1842, in the second of his two *Dublin Review* articles on 'The Present State of Ecclesiastical Architecture in England', Pugin wrote critically of a new Catholic church at Islington, describing it as 'certainly the most original combination of modern deformity that has been erected for some time past for the sacred purpose of a Catholic church.'¹¹ He lamented the fact that 'an ancient Catholic parochial church, dedicated in honour of the Blessed Virgin, and in all respects suited to the present site and wants of the congregation, formerly existed at Islington, and was demolished a few years since to make room for the pewed and galleried assembly room which is at present used for the parochial Protestant service.'¹² The medieval church had been demolished in 1751 but its composition with triple-gabled roof was known to Pugin though an illustration in his copy of John Nelson's 1811 *History, Topography, and Antiquities of the Parish of St Mary Islington, in the County of Middlesex*.¹³

To illustrate his point Pugin included a ground plan and perspective of 'this church as it would have appeared if erected on the site of the present building ...', adding that

originated in Salisbury Cathedral and spread throughout southern England as well as Ireland and Scotland.

⁹ St George's Cathedral, Southwark (1840); St Mary's Cathedral, Newcastle upon Tyne (1841); St Benedict's, Broadway (1842); St Joseph & St Mary's, St Peter Port, Guernsey (1845); St Thomas of Canterbury's, Fulham (1847); and the unexecuted design for St Mary's Cathedral, Hobart (1847).

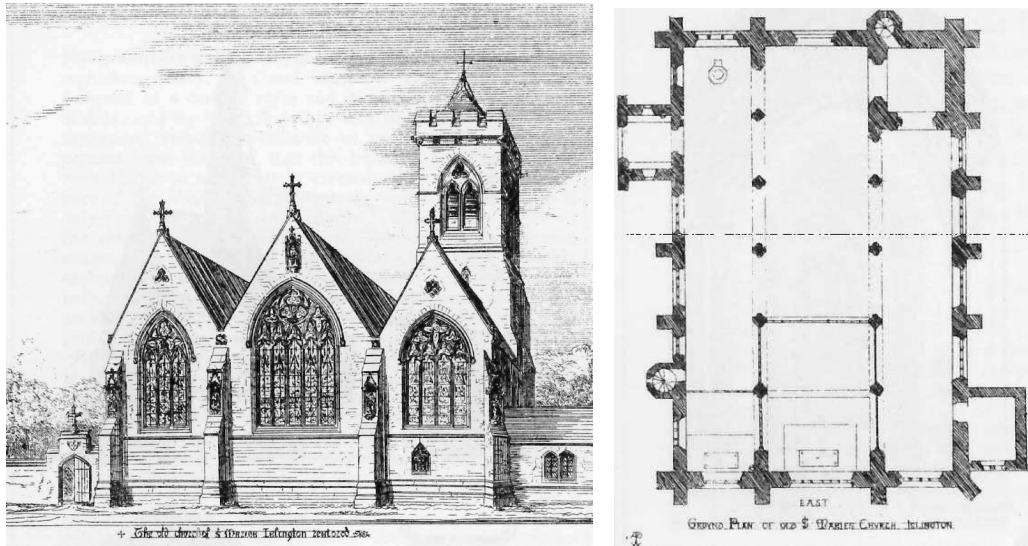
¹⁰ Roderick O'Donnell, 'Pugin as a Church Architect', *Pugin: A Gothic Passion*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1994, p. 68. In fact, the Austin Friar's Church had pent roofs to the aisles, not gabled roofs.

¹¹ [A. Welby Pugin], 'The Present State of Ecclesiastical Architecture in England', *Dublin Review*, vol. XII, February 1842, p. 139.

¹² *ibid.*, pp. 139–40.

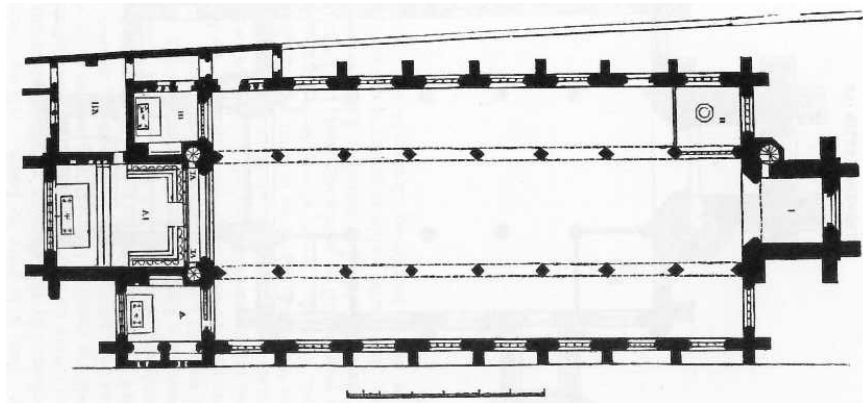
¹³ D.J. Watkin (ed.), *Sale Catalogues of Libraries of Eminent Persons, Volume 4: Architects*, Mansell, London, 1972, p. 262.

‘the tower, at the extremity of the north aisle, would have imparted the true character of a parochial church to the building without encroaching on lateral space’ and because of the plan ‘the high altar could be perfectly seen from all parts of the old church’.¹⁴ When Pugin came in late 1842 to design the church that would be built on Broadway it was the Islington model, mirror-reversed for the antipodes and greatly expanded in length, which provided its plan form and composition.



Pugin’s perspective view and ground plan of a superior Islington Catholic church
(Source: Pugin’s ‘Present State’)

St Benedict’s had a long narrow eight-bay nave and aisles with a south-west spire, its lanky character reminiscent of St George’s Cathedral, Southwark.



The ground plan, St George’s Cathedral, Southwark (Source: Pugin’s ‘Present State’)

Its two and a half bay chancel and flanking eastern chapels were under extensions of the nave and aisle roofs respectively. A porch was situated against the nave north aisle at the third bay from the west end and a sacristy abutted the easternmost bay of the

¹⁴ Pugin, ‘Present State’, op. cit., p. 140.

south aisle. In addition to a formal west door and the congregational entrance via the porch there was a priest's door in the westernmost bay of the north east chapel.

The clear width between columns of the nave and chancel was 15ft 9in (4.8m) and the nave bay length was 11ft 6in (3.5m), the clear width of the aisles and eastern chapels being 12ft 6in (3.8m). Overall interior width was 44ft 9in (13.6m) and the building's overall exterior length was some 130ft (39.6m) over the buttresses.

We can be thankful that St Benedict's is one of a small handful of Pugin's churches for which there is a set of plans. In this case they are not the Pugin originals but are measured drawings made in 1931 by E.D. Johns. They were done during the Great Depression as part of a scheme undertaken between 1929 and 1932 to measure buildings—mainly historic churches—in New South Wales through the Architect's Relief Scheme, under the direction and at the expense of the Board of Architects of New South Wales.¹⁵ I am grateful to the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, for permission to reproduce the drawings.

Although they are not entirely accurate, particularly in relation to the upper parts of the building, well beyond Johns' tape measure, they give a very good indication of the composition, proportions and detail of the church. It needs to be noted that the plans show two additions not in Pugin's original design. They are a western gallery and the structure at the south-east corner labelled 'Vestry' on the plan. The latter had been a later nineteenth-century addition because the original sacristy had evidently proven to be too small. The original sacristy is the structure immediately to the west of the later sacristy and, as is clear from the label on the plan, had been converted into a second south porch. In passing, it should be noted that the original south porch would have been shown on Pugin's drawings as a north porch.¹⁶ Presumably it was constructed on the south side to face Abercrombie Street.

The style of the building was largely Early English, but with its eastern parts in the Flowing Decorated idiom. In addition, the buttress set-offs on the porch with their reverse-curve faces were Flowing Decorated and the priest's door had a four-centred arch characteristic of the even later Perpendicular period of English Gothic. Now Pugin, for his time, had an unrivalled mastery of the grammar and vocabulary of English medieval architecture and could design a building entirely and accurately reflecting any of that period, so we may conclude that such application of various details was deliberate, particularly in the light of his dictum on the very first page of his highly influential 1841 work, *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture*, that: 'In pure architecture the smallest detail should *have a meaning or serve a purpose* ... [Pugin's emphasis].'¹⁷ His use of the more elaborate Flowing Decorated style for the chancel and eastern chapels is a typical example of his principle of propriety, namely, '*that the external and internal appearance of an edifice should be illustrative of, and in accordance with, the purpose for which it is destined* [Pugin's emphasis]'.¹⁸ Treatment of the east end of many of his churches in

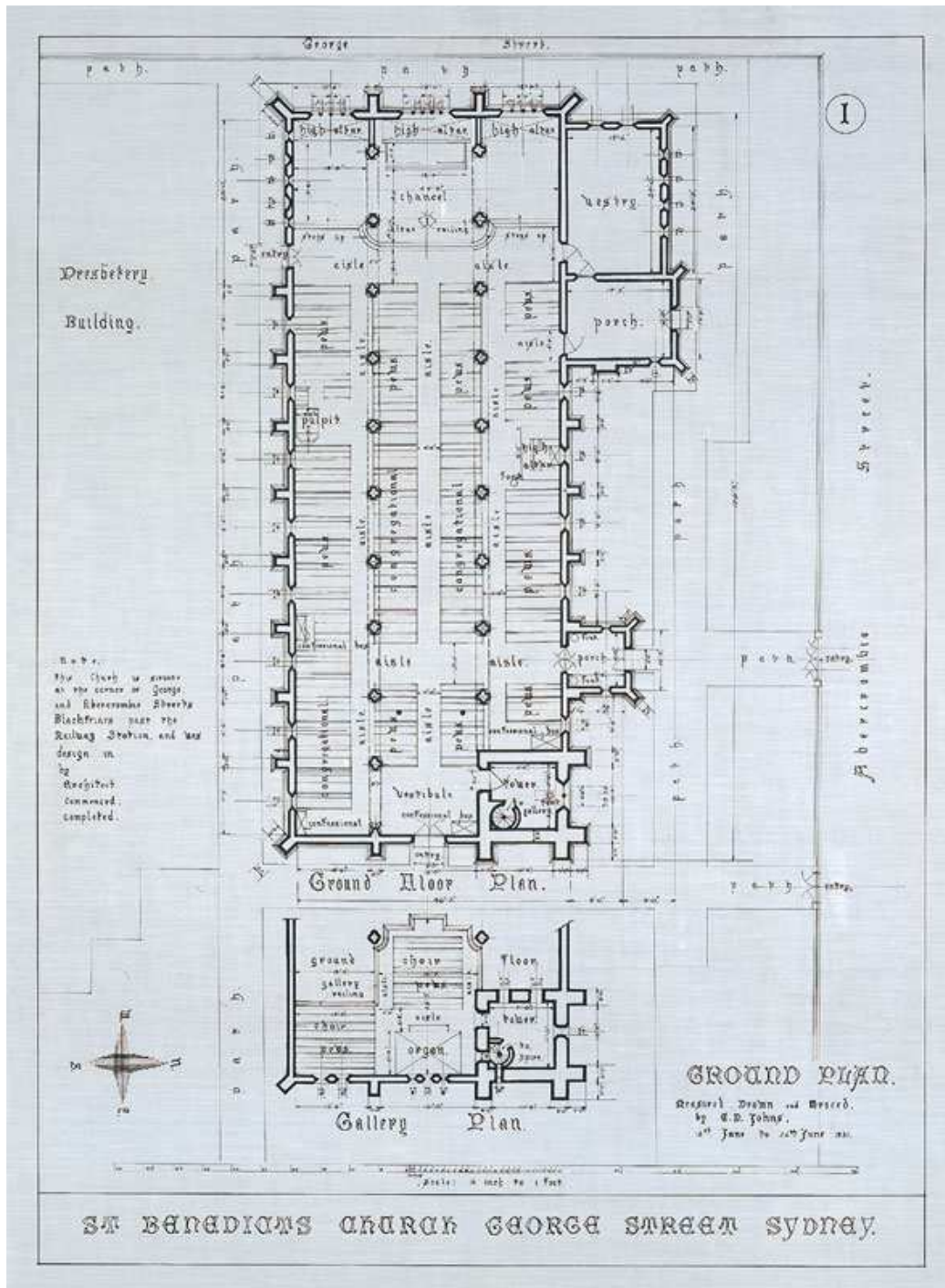
¹⁵ Information from Richard Neville, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.

¹⁶ In medieval England the entrance was on the south, or sunny side, of the church. This therefore dictated a north porch at the antipodes.

¹⁷ A. Welby Pugin, *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture*, John Weale, London, 1841, p. 1.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, p. 50.

this hybrid way reflected his belief that this, the location of the altar, was the more solemn or sacred part of the building.¹⁹



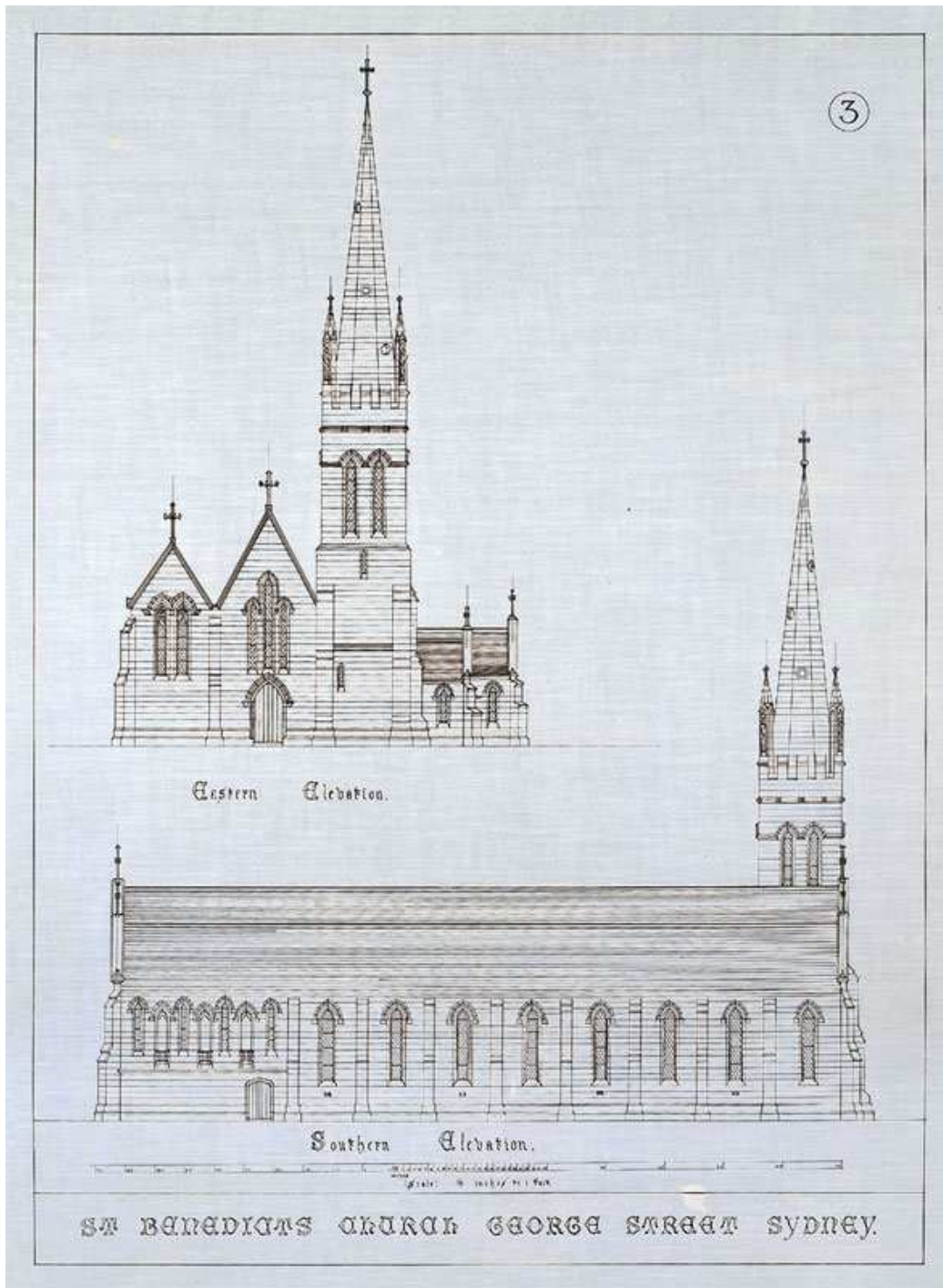
As for the porch buttresses and the priest's door the purpose here might perhaps have been to claim a re-appropriation of the whole of medieval England to resurgent

¹⁹ A majority of his Australian churches were so designed. Also, a number of his earlier English churches and his St Mary's, Tagoat, Co. Wexford, design of 1843 were similarly treated.

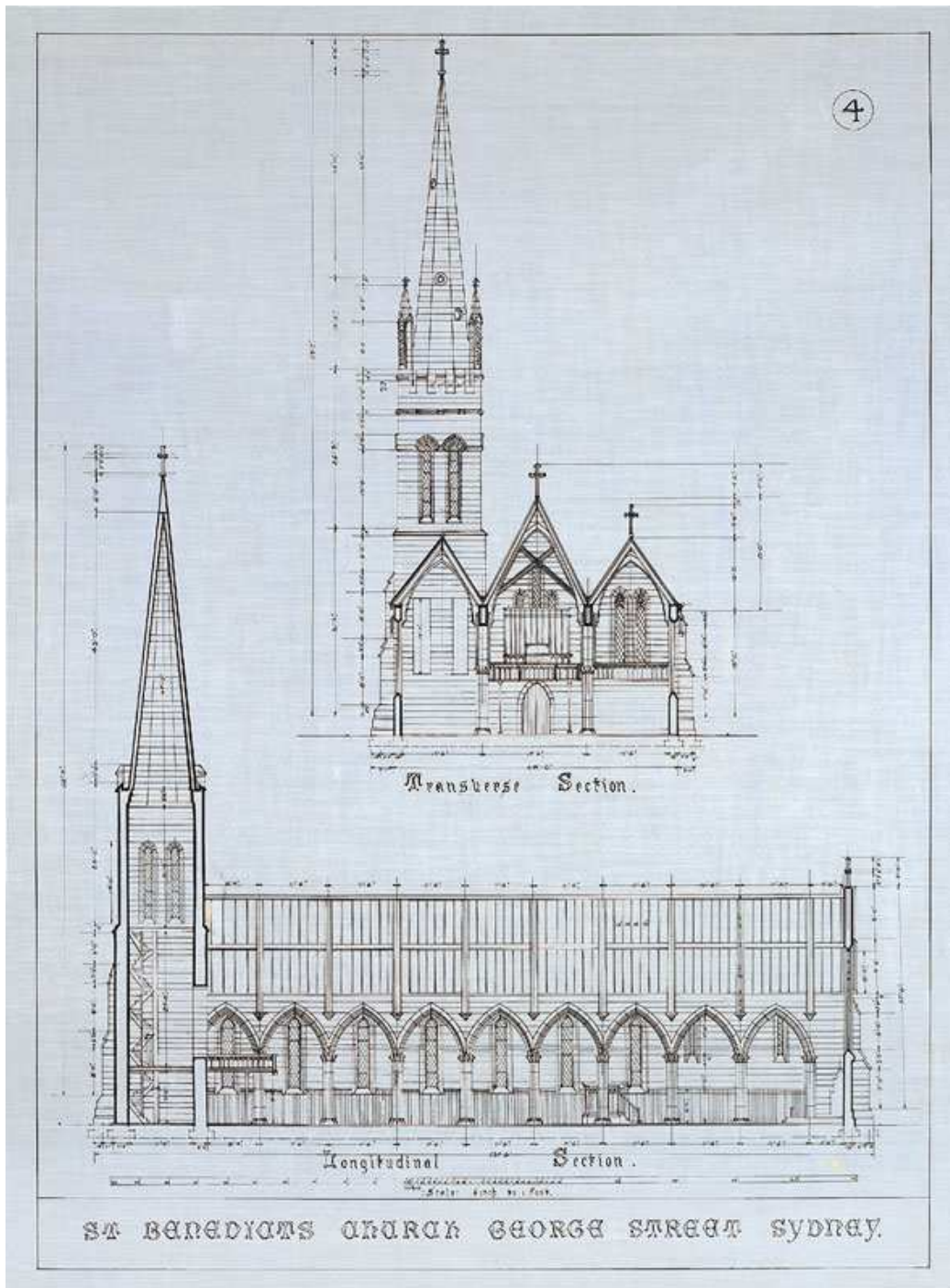
Catholicism, an approach evident in Pugin's design for Mount St Bernard Abbey in Leicestershire.²⁰



²⁰ See Brian Andrews, 'The Significance of Architectural Style at Mount St Bernard Abbey', *True Principles: The voice of the Pugin Society*, Vol. 2, No. 5, Summer 2003, pp. 38–40.



The church had angle buttresses to the nave west, north and south walls, the chancel east wall and south-west tower, with diagonal buttresses to all the building's corners. The nave was lit by single lancet windows in its north and south walls while the north aisle west wall had paired lancets and the nave west wall a trinity of lancets. The latter, with the central light stilted well above the flanking lights, may well have been another reference to the Temple Church, London, where this is the composition of the nave windows. Likewise, the cluster columns of the nave arcade reflected the Temple Church arrangement.



Pugin's treatment of the east end was both elegant and, in the case of the north and south walls of its eastern chapels, unique in his oeuvre. These latter had alternating single lights with traceried heads and trefoil-headed statue niches. The eastern chapels had four-light windows of differing tracery and the chancel had a five-light east window. The whole eastern wall composition, including the statue niche above the chancel east window and the string course embellished with foliated bosses, can be seen to be a close relative of his St Mary's, Islington, model illustrated in our

Newsletter 18. Pugin had similarly embellished string courses in his 1837 St Mary's, Derby, design.



Detail of the chancel and eastern chapels, last quarter c.19 (Courtesy: Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales)



String course embellished with foliated bosses, St Mary's, Derby (Image: Brian Andrews)

The tall elegant steeple had a two-light window with late Early English tracery in its head inserted in south wall of the base stage while the belfry stage had two lancets in each face, their dripstone mouldings continuing around the tower as a string course. Above the belfry stage the top of the tower was defined by a strong string course with foliated bosses and its crenellated parapet had tall pinnacles at each angle. Later, Pugin would terminate his tower on St Thomas of Canterbury's, Fulham, with a parapet and pinnacles.



At left, the spire, St Thomas of Canterbury's, Fulham; at right, the spire, St Barnabas' Cathedral, Nottingham (Images: Brian Andrews)

The St Benedict's pinnacle arrangement shared a powerful similarity with his steeples on St Barnabas', Nottingham, and the incomparable St Giles', Cheadle, even though these two churches had broach spires, namely, diagonally placed statue niches in the pinnacles. All in all the St Benedict's design included twelve statue niches, underscoring its position as the major parish church scheme furnished to Archbishop Polding.

The original drawings would have shown a wooden rood screen across the chancel west end and, in line with it, a pair of parclose screens across the entrances to the eastern chapels.²¹ Such was Pugin's normal treatment of this genre of triple-gabled churches. The narrow spans of the nave and aisles allowed Pugin to use simple roof trusses consisting of just arch braces resting on corbels.

²¹ From the material and documentary evidence associated with two of Pugin's designs for Archbishop Polding as well as from his own consistent practice we can safely assert that St Benedict's plans would have included a rood screen and—doubtless—parclose screens.

Construction

As early as 1838 the Catholic residents of Chippendale, 'a small and unpretentious area of the city',²² were worshipping in a small brick temporary chapel which doubled as a school on weekdays. Located on land granted in 1836 on the corner of Parramatta Street and Abercrombie Street, it lay between Cooper's Brisbane Distillery and Tooth's Kent Brewery with, immediately to its east 'in narrow little streets running back from Parramatta Street,'²³ 'cramped and mean' housing 'occupied by labourers and poor people unable to afford housing closer to town'.²⁴ The area was 'largely inhabited by the families of men who worked at the brewery'.²⁵ Tiny cottages in other narrow lanes round about were described at the time as 'in a most wretched condition, so far as ventilation and cleanliness are concerned'.²⁶

From these miserable tenements came the predominantly Irish worshippers, numbering some 220 regular attendees in 1840.²⁷ By 1845 4,000 Catholics were recorded in the parish, and the temporary chapel could not hold all the Mass-goers with as many as seventy people being obliged to kneel outside.²⁸ In January of that year Archbishop Polding wrote to the recent convert William Leigh of Leamington Spa, Gloucestershire, on the condition of the Catholic Church in Sydney. Noting that there were the only two churches, St Mary's Cathedral and St Patrick's, plus the overcrowded Abercrombie Street school-chapel, to serve a Catholic population of about 14,000, he went on: 'Owing to the sad reverses in the Colony within the last two years, our means are very much crippled. ... We must, however, strive to build another church.'²⁹ A little over six months later on 21 July he laid the foundation stone of this much-needed house of worship 'dedicated to Almighty God, in honour of St Benedict'.³⁰ Tenders had been called for the erection of the church in stone or brick in December 1843, less than a year after Pugin's plans had arrived in Sydney, but the slow, if generous, stream of donations meant that works could only get under way in the second half of 1845 with John Morris as builder.³¹

Work proceeded very slowly by day labour, but was sufficiently progressed by February 1850 for Polding's fellow Benedictine coadjutor Bishop Charles Henry Davis OSB, writing to a member of his former Downside Priory, Somerset, community to observe: 'We have here in Sydney a very beautiful little church early English (and pretty correct) dedicated to St. Benedict.'³² In the previous month a peal of six bells for St Benedict's had arrived from the Whitechapel Road, London, bell

²² Shirley Fitzgerald, *Chippendale: beneath the factory wall*, Hale & Iremonger Pty Ltd, Sydney, 1990, p. 9.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 25.

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 28.

²⁶ Evidence tendered to a select committee 'on the Condition of the Working Classes', 1859, p. 1315, quoted in Fitzgerald, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

²⁷ Source: www.stbenedicts.org.au/history/timeline.html.

²⁸ *Morning Chronicle*, 27 May 1846, cited in www.stbenedicts.org.au/history/timeline.html.

²⁹ Polding to Leigh, 7 January 1845, South Australian Catholic Archives.

³⁰ *Dolman's Magazine*, January 1846, p. 98, quoted in Norbert Birt, *Benedictine Pioneers in Australia*, Herbert & Daniel, London, 1911, vol. II, p. 111.

³¹ 'When Catholics Build & Decorate: Historic St Benedict's, Sydney', *Catholic Freeman's Journal*, 3 October 1940, p. 4.

³² Davis to Sweeney, 28 February 1850, Downside Abbey Archives, M.246. Davis had a discerning eye for correctness having obtained his episcopal metalwork and vestments from Hardmans and Lucy Powell (who made vestments to Pugin's designs) respectively.

foundry of C. & G. Mears,³³ but had to be stored in the St Mary's Cathedral yard until the tower was complete. On 12 December 1850 Archbishop Polding consecrated the bells in the company of his brethren from St Mary's Monastery, Sydney, and a 'numerous concourse of people', the bells being then hoisted into place 'in the tower, amidst the cheers of the spectators'.³⁴ This still-operating peal is the oldest on mainland Australia.³⁵

The spire surmounting the tower was not completed until 8 December 1856,³⁶ that work being executed under the superintendence of Diocesan Architect William Munro.³⁷ 'It was the grandest thing in Chippendale and stood in stark contrast to the cottages of its Irish-descended parishioners nearby.'³⁸



View from the corner of Parramatta and Abercrombie Streets, last quarter nineteenth century (Courtesy: Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales)

³³ John D. Keating, *Bells in Australia*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, p. 78.

³⁴ 'When Catholics Build', op. cit., p. 5.

³⁵ Keating, loc. cit.

³⁶ 'When Catholics Build', loc. cit.

³⁷ The builder to Pugin's plans of St Francis Xavier's, Berrima.

³⁸ Fitzgerald, op. cit., p. 25.



Liturgical east elevation viewed across George Street West, last quarter nineteenth century (Courtesy: Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales)

The church received four splendid carved stone statues for its tower pinnacle niches from the hands of the French Benedictine monk sculptor Fr Jean Gourbeillon OSB, a member of the St Mary's Cathedral-monastery community whom Pugin had met in Paris, probably in 1844.³⁹ One of the first four monks professed at Solesmes, France, for the Benedictine Congregation founded by Dom Guéranger, Gourbeillon was sent in 1841 to the Parisian priory of Saint-Germain.⁴⁰ He was authorised to work in the atelier of Louis-Eugène Bion, a specialist in religious sculpture, which he did until late 1847 despite the closure of the priory at the end of 1845.⁴¹

It was there, early in 1847, that he met Polding who broached the possibility of missionary work in Australia,⁴² although one suspects that the motive might have been strongly influenced by the thought of gaining a first-rate sculptor for works on St

³⁹ 'Edmund Moore's Journal, 1847-8, *Downside Review*, no. XXXII, December 1913, quoted in Terence J. Kavenagh, 'Polding and XIXth Century Monasticism', *Tjurunga: An Australasian Benedictine Review*, no. 8, December 1974, p. 178.

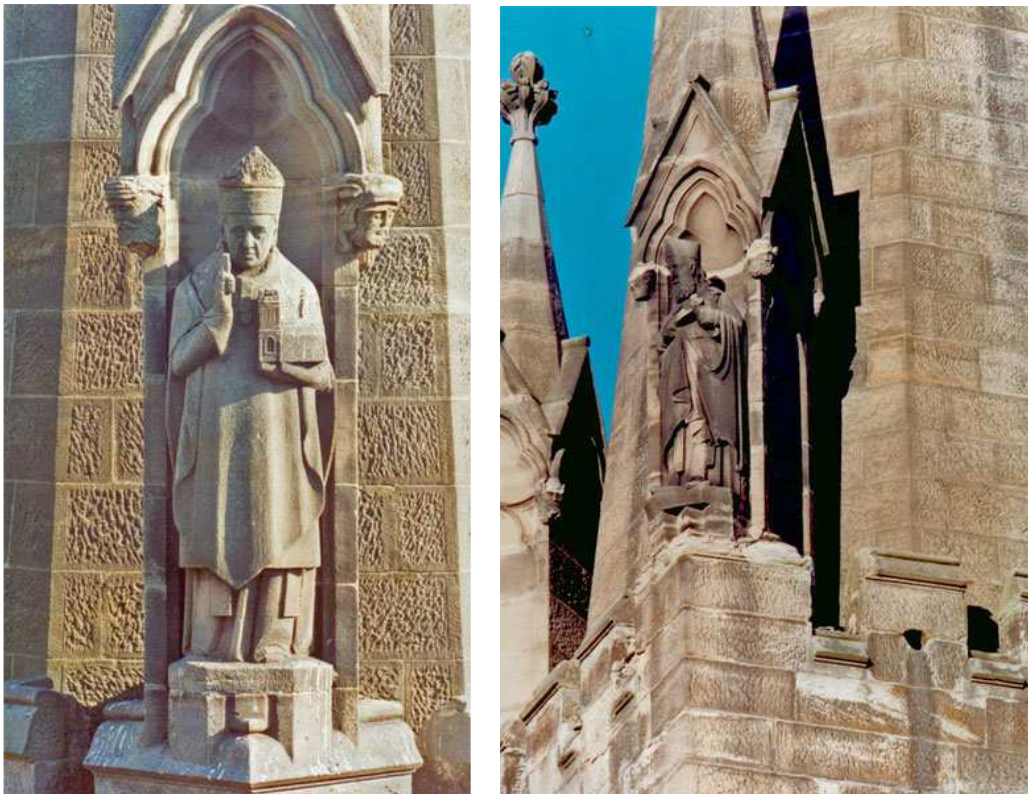
⁴⁰ Roger Gazeau, 'Le Père Jehan de Solesmes, Bénédictin Français, Missionnaire en Australie', *Lettre de Ligugé*, no. 167, 1974-5, pp. 23-4.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴² *ibid.*, p. 25.

Mary's Cathedral and St Benedict's.⁴³ At the end of 1847 Gourbeillon sailed for Sydney with Polding.

Fr Gourbeillon evidently enjoyed carving the statues for St Benedict's and appreciated the building itself, writing about it in an 1857 letter to his father: 'We have just completed a charming church, whose spire is certainly worthy of our fine French monuments. The Gothic tower is of considerable elegance and constructed of ashlar; at each angle is a pinnacle five and one half feet high. I assure you that it has been a sweet consolation to me to carve this Australian stone and to produce the statues of our saints under this beautiful sky.'⁴⁴ Gourbeillon seems to have been profoundly affected by the qualities of Australian light, frequently referring to it in his letters home. His letter continued: 'The church is dedicated to St. Benedict, patriarch of our order. The four statues are: St. Benedict, St. Patrick, St. Scholastica, and our venerable archbishop [Polding] in pontifical vestments, holding according to custom a small replica of the church itself. The church faces the finest and longest street in Sydney.'⁴⁵



At left, Archbishop Polding, holding a model of St Benedict's Church, at right, St Patrick, both by sculptor Fr Jean Gourbeillon OSB (Images: Chris Mc Guirk)

Fr Gourbeillon's return to France in 1859 doubtless prevented St Patrick's eight other statue niches receiving figures, but he did carve a wonderful set of four symbols of the

⁴³ Polding hinted at such in a letter to Dom Guéranger dated 17 April 1847. See *The Letters of John Bede Polding OSB*, vol. 2: 1844–1860, Sisters of the Good Samaritan, Sydney, 1996, p. 83.

⁴⁴ Gazeau, *op. cit.*, p. 25 (Tr. Brian Andrews).

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, which surmount the principal pillars of the main entrance to the church in Abercrombie Street.



Gourbeillon's carved symbols of the four Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, on the Abercrombie Street gates (Image: Fr Don Richardson)

Subsequent History

Archbishop Polding had attended the solemn consecration and opening of St Giles', Cheadle, on 31 August and 1 September 1846, staying as an honoured guest of the Earl and Countess of Shrewsbury with a numerous body of the hierarchy, nobility and gentry at nearby Alton Towers.⁴⁶ The stunning stencilled and decorative schemes of St Giles' interior cannot have failed to make a huge and lasting impression upon him, and so, with the fabric of St Benedict's completed in 1856, it is not surprising that he turned his mind to the decoration of its chancel walls. This decision would have also been in accordance with his philosophy regarding church architecture and furnishing, namely: 'because in a new community unhappily but too much engrossed in material pursuits, it is of no inconsiderable importance, in its due place, to present even to men's senses, the forms and suggestions of other beauties and more lasting interests.'⁴⁷

⁴⁶ [Charles Dolman], *Lord Shrewsbury's New Church of St Giles, in Staffordshire: Being a Description of the Edifice, and an Account of the Consecration and Opening*, Charles Dolman, London, p. 22.

⁴⁷ Henry Norbert Birt, *Benedictine Pioneers in Australia*, Herbert & Daniel, London, 1911, vol. II, p. 172.

For this task he turned to Fr Anselm Curtis OSB, a monk of the St Mary's Benedictine monastery attached to St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney.⁴⁸ Curtis' artistic talents were well recognised in the monastic community for he had earlier bronzed the seven three-foot high plaster statues produced by fellow monk Fr Jean Gourbeillon for the great Pugin-designed organ case in St Mary's Cathedral.

The decorative work was carried out in mid 1861, and a contemporary description leaves us wondering whether the examples in Pugin's highly influential *Glossary of Ecclesiastical Ornament and Costume* might have been a source for some of it:

The panelling is executed in red diapered patterns upon a white ground, with the pax and other symbolic devices in gold and colours in the centres, and the pediment borders, and framework of the paintings in blue upon a white ground, and the tracery of the frames which are Gothic-shaped, in gold with red borders. The cresting in the same style, but of richer design and a greater variety of colour is employed, the different compartments being divided by bands of gold surmounted by *fleur-de-lys* forming crosses.⁴⁹

All very Puginesque. The writer considered that the 'completion of the decorations of the sanctuary is certainly a very great improvement to the appearance of the church, and reflects very great credit on the artistic skill of Father Curtis'.⁵⁰ Just how long this decoration remained in place is not clear. A photograph of the chancel, dating from later than 1896,⁵¹ only shows figurative wall paintings and decorative work above wooden panelling.



The interior looking east, probably early c.20 (Courtesy St Benedict's Parish)

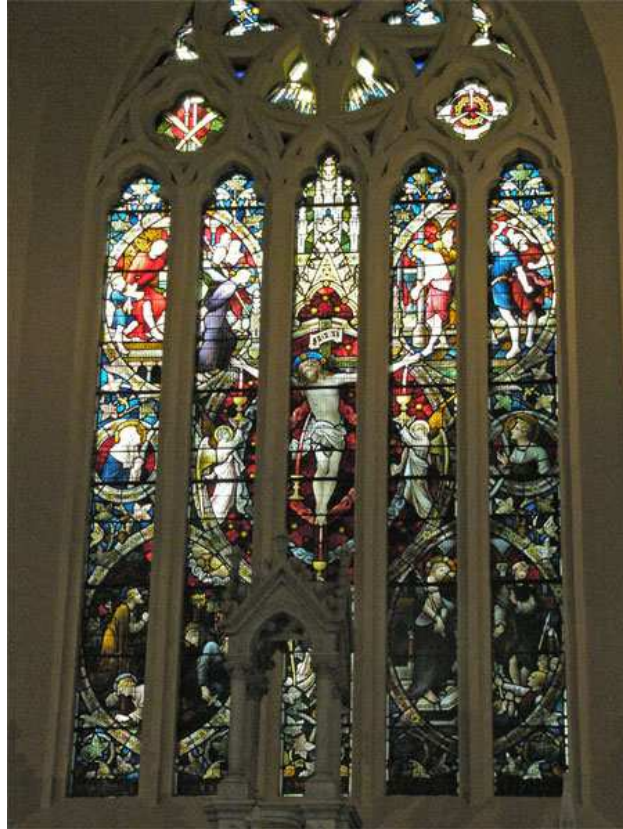
⁴⁸ Anselm Curtis was the first Sydney-born Catholic to become a priest. See Kevin Livingston, 'Anselm Curtis', *Tjurunga: An Australasian Benedictine Review*, no. 8, December 1974, p. 195.

⁴⁹ 'St. Benedict's Church', *Freeman's Journal*, 28 August 1861, p. 3, cited in 'St Benedict's Broadway Conservation Management Plan, John Graham & Associates, April 2005, p. 26.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ It shows marble sanctuary furnishings supplied by the French church furnishing firm of Louis Gille, and these were installed early in 1896. See St. Benedict's Church: Consecration of the High Altar: Mr W.J. Dixon's Gift, *Freeman's Journal*, 4 April 1896, p. 14, cited in John Graham & Associates, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

In the 1890s an organ and choir gallery was constructed over the two westernmost bays of the nave and the westernmost bay of the north aisle, with access via the tower base, and it was opened in May 1893. Two years later the five-light chancel east window received new stained glass from John Hardman & Co., Birmingham, on the theme of the Crucifixion, an appropriate addition to a Pugin church given his role as chief designer for Hardmans up until his death in 1852.



The chancel east window by John Hardman & Co., Birmingham (Image: Fr Don Richardson)

By 1910 Pugin's original sacristy had proved inadequate for the needs of the church so a new one was constructed in the angle between the chancel south wall and the existing sacristy, which latter was converted into an additional porch. Its main axis was east-west so that its gabled roof landed on the chancel south wall below the existing windows.⁵² This modest change to the external appearance of the church would be dwarfed by the radical re-build that would take place around three decades later.

In 1929 the Sydney Municipal Council gazetted seven blocks for resumption on the south side of George Street West between Railway Square and City Road in order to widen the inner end of this major thoroughfare to the city's west. It was to be re-

⁵² This addition can be seen in E.D. Johns' measured drawings of St Benedict's.

named Broadway.⁵³ The most difficult of these resumptions involved the land upon which St Benedict's stood, as it would have necessitated the demolition of the church. Legal complexities involving the title to the land, along with a claim for £127,000 to fully rebuild the church, caused the negotiations with church authorities to be protracted, and it was not until 1939 that a compensation agreement was reached. This entailed removal of 26 feet from St Benedict's land frontage, a westerly extension to its frontage and the provision of £40,623 in funds to rebuild the church and erect a new presbytery. This agreement had come in the wake of church authorities separately commissioning Sydney Catholic architects Clement Glancey and Austin McKay to prepare plans and cost estimates for rebuilding St Benedict's.

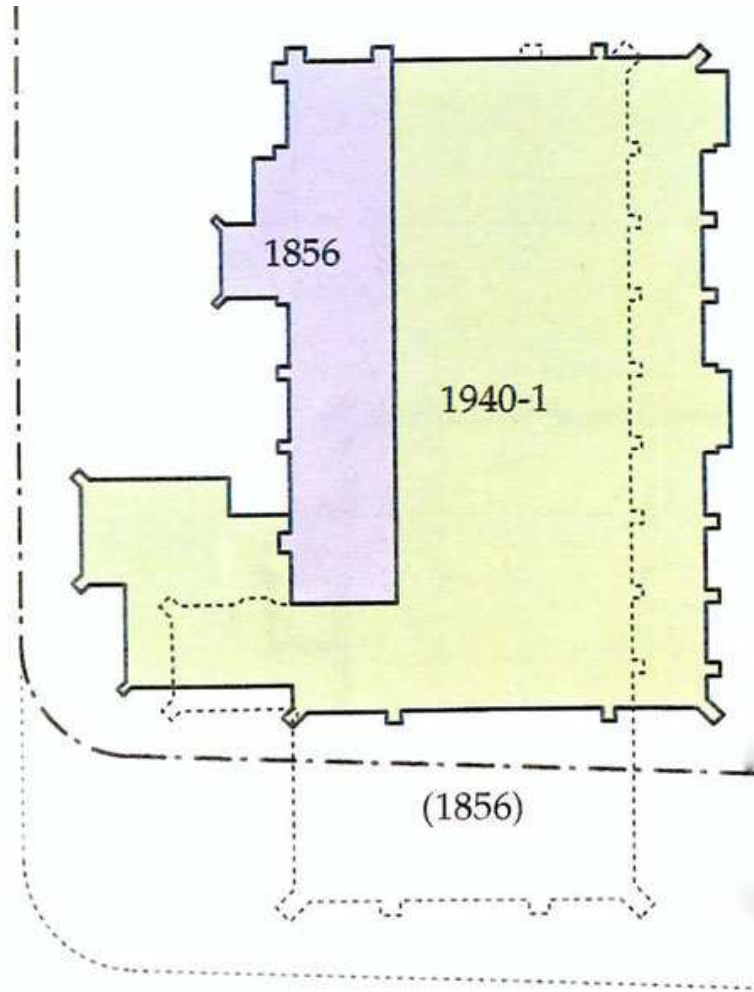
Both architects had independently come up with the same solution, namely, reducing the length of the church by lopping off Pugin's chancel and its flanking chapels, widening the nave towards the north by the width of the north aisle and rebuilding the north aisle, an effective increase in nave width of 11 feet. Widening the building by 11 feet northwards would require demolition of the existing presbytery, hence the need to include the cost of constructing a new one. McKay's estimate was the lower of the two and this was accepted. An artist's impression of McKay's reconstructed church was published in the *Freeman's Journal* issues of 26 September 1940 and 19 June 1941.



Austin McKay's scheme for the reconstruction of St Benedict's (Source: Freeman's Journal, 26 September 1940)

⁵³ A detailed account of the process, including the reconstruction of St Benedict's, is given in Graham & Associates, op. cit., pp. 47–52. I am indebted to the firm for permission to draw extensively from this account.

Partial demolition of the church started in late November 1939. Most of the structure was dismantled, with each stone ‘carefully numbered for the re-building’.⁵⁴ The only section of the original structure to be left standing was the westernmost seven bays of the south aisle, the south porch and the steeple. These works were completed before the end of January 1940, followed by the reconstruction, and the drastically reconfigured church was re-opened in June 1941.



St Benedict's ground plan before and after the 1940–41 reconstruction (Courtesy John Graham & Associates)

Although almost all of the original materials had been re-used, with the notable exception of the chancel north and south walls with their windows, statue niches and priest's door, the new shorter and wider composition made a radical difference to the appearance. In particular, the wider nave with extra windows inserted in its east and west walls obliterated the Pugin external proportions. And this change was even more drastic inside because McKay had covered the wider nave with a boarded ceiling, making the nave both wider and lower. He also built thick ugly trusses in the aisles,

⁵⁴ John Graham & Associates, op. cit., p. 49.

tying the walls together below the wall plate level, as a substitute for Pugin's simple scissor trusses, again lowering the effective height. It requires a great deal of imagination nowadays to see the hand of Pugin in the interior.



The interior looking east, April 2006 (Image: Fr Don Richardson)

The stonework in St Benedict's tower and spire has not weathered well, necessitating attention including stone replacement. Regrettably, this has included removal some time before the early 1950s of the tower string courses and their replacement with plain flush stonework, to the visual detriment of the tower's articulation and the proportions and integrity of Pugin's original design.

Most recently the St Benedict's parish infrastructure has become one of the Sydney campuses of the University of Notre Dame Australia and a restoration of its buildings, including the church, has been completed. St Benedict's future, albeit in a form that Pugin would not have recognised, seems assured.