

## Pugin Foundation

# St John the Evangelist's Church, Richmond, Tasmania

Brian Andrews



### Background

The roots of St John's Church can be traced back to Australia's first Catholic bishop, John Bede Polding OSB (1794–1877) who visited Van Diemen's Land, as Tasmania was then known, in 1835 en route to taking up his posting in Sydney.

Polding was an English Benedictine monk from the Downside Priory, Somerset, community. In 1814 this centuries-old English community from Douay in Flanders had completed its odyssey back to its homeland via Acton Burnell in Shropshire, finally settling in the Bath district on the outskirts of the village of Stratton on the Fosse and naming their new home Downside Priory. Within less than a decade the monastery and its school had outgrown the small Georgian country house and farm building on the

site and plans were made for more substantial and appropriate monastic accommodation. Of the three designs considered, that chosen was by a local architect Henry Edmund Goodridge (c.1800–63).

Goodridge was a Bath architect whose practice was centred on that city and whose works are largely to be found within a radius of some 25km of it. Amongst the more significant of his designs were: a huge Classical church of 1834 in Clifton for Bishop Baines, Vicar-Apostolic of the Western District, which never progressed beyond a half complete shell; a folly, Lansdown Tower, of 1825–26 for the eccentric William Beckford; and a monastic building for Downside Priory.<sup>1</sup>

Containing both monastic and school rooms, as well as a chapel, the Goodridge design was favoured by the community because it was in ‘our national style’.<sup>2</sup> In fact, it was in what is nowadays referred to as the Gothick style, namely, the superficial application of the elements of medieval Gothic in isolation from their structural, compositional and liturgical basis, in competition with other fashions of the era such as Chinese and ‘Hindoo’. Nevertheless, the choice reflected a growing interest in things medieval in the wake of the Romantic Movement and a trend towards the view that Gothic was appropriate for ecclesiastical architecture. This trend would culminate in the earnest archaeologically-based approach of the Gothic Revival in the late 1830s.



*Goodridge's Downside Priory design*

The T-shaped block which was erected in 1823 abutting the country house looked for all the world like a large church. It had Early English detail, and the chapel which occupied part of the first floor made, with the apartments below it, a rather attenuated composition surmounted by a group of slender pinnacles. At the time of its construction Polding occupied the office of Prefect at Downside. Amongst his duties he had the responsibility of raising loans and extending the buildings.<sup>3</sup> He was thus intimately involved with Goodridge's efforts at Downside. It is therefore not surprising that when he was preparing for the Australian mission in 1834 he would turn to this architect for plans for several small churches.

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<sup>1</sup> The controversial and erratic Beckford used his immense fortune to build the greatest Gothick house of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Fonthill Abbey, in Wiltshire between 1796 and 1807. In 1822 he sold Fonthill and had Goodridge build a 47 metre tower on the 248 metre summit of Lansdown, from the top of which he could see the great tower of Fonthill some 42km away, at least until its third and final collapse in 1825.

<sup>2</sup> *Downside Review*, vol. IX, pp. 125–55, quoted in Bryan Little, *Catholic Churches Since 1623*, Robert Hale, London, 1966, p. 62.

<sup>3</sup> Frances O'Donoghue, *The Bishop of Botany Bay: The Life of John Bede Polding, Australia's First Catholic Archbishop*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1982, pp. 6–7.

The design used at Richmond would appear to be one of a small portfolio that Polding obtained from Goodridge prior to sailing for Australia on 26 March 1835.<sup>4</sup> All of these designs were for small rectangular Gothick boxes with Early English detail and pinnacled buttresses at the corners. Because the 1859 additions derived from one of Pugin's church models obliterated the west and east ends of the nave,<sup>5</sup> as well as resulting in replacement of the corner buttresses, it is difficult to have precise knowledge of some of the design details, particularly as the only known image of the original church is a small detail in a c. 1845 drawing.

The Richmond church measured internally 50 ft 6 in (15.4m) long by 19 ft (5.8m) wide. It had four windows in each side with typical wooden Gothick Y-tracery. A door at the east end of the north wall opened into the sacristy which was merely a screened-off area behind the sanctuary. On the façade was a three-light Early English window reminiscent of that on the façade of the Downside Priory chapel. Below it was the entrance door with typical Gothick panelling under a four-centred arch. The corners of the building had deep diagonal buttresses which merged about halfway up the wall into clasping pinnacles of indeterminate section, these rising to above the height of the nave ridge. At the apex of the west gable was a rectangular bellcote surmounted by a cross.

Bishop Polding landed in Hobart on 7 August 1835, on his way from England to Sydney. The following is Cardinal Moran's 1896 recounting of Polding's visit to Richmond:

The Bishop, having heard that there were some Catholic families at Richmond, fourteen miles distant, resolved to bring to them the consolations of religion. The Governor attempted to dissuade him. There were but few Catholic families, he said, and these scattered throughout the district. There was as yet no road to Richmond, but only a bush track, and this was infested by the aboriginals, men of such a fierce character that the Bishop would require a small troupe of soldiers to protect him. Nothing daunted, Dr. Polding set out on his missionary expedition, having first obtained a promise from the Governor that he would on the part of the Government contribute for the building of a church at Richmond an equal amount to that which the Bishop would collect from his flock and other residents at Richmond.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, as early as 1825 the Richmond district had the largest Catholic population outside Hobart and Launceston.<sup>7</sup>

On 23 August 1835 Polding celebrated Mass in the homestead of John Cassidy's property *Woodburn*, a little to the north-east of Richmond village. One of a handful of Catholics in Van Diemen's Land of that period to become large landholders, Cassidy had acquired *Woodburn* on the banks of the Coal River in 1833. He 'had served in the 23<sup>rd</sup> Fusiliers, then the 4<sup>th</sup> Veterans Battalion, and through the 102<sup>nd</sup>, 73<sup>rd</sup> and 46<sup>th</sup> regiments. His recommendation from Governor Macquarie resulted in his initial land grant.<sup>8</sup> Polding gave the Richmond Catholics one of his Goodridge church plans and Cassidy generously donated a parcel of land from the south-western corner of his estate, adjacent to the Coal River, upon which to build a church.

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<sup>4</sup> Art historian Joan Kerr attributed three of Polding's buildings to Goodridge, namely, St Mary & All Angels, Geelong, St Bernard's, Hartley, and St John's, Richmond. See 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.

<sup>5</sup> Throughout this Plan directions are given as though the altar is at the east end irrespective of the actual geographical orientation of the church.

<sup>6</sup> Patrick Francis Moran, *History of the Catholic Church in Australasia*, Oceanic Publishing Company, Sydney, 1896, p. 248.

<sup>7</sup> Peter MacFie, 'Silent Impact: The Irish Inheritance of Richmond & the Coal River Valley 1840–1970', 2000 re-print of paper published in R. Davis (ed.), *Irish-Australian Studies*, 8<sup>th</sup> *Irish Australian Conference*, Crossing Press, 1995, p. 486.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 489.

Before leaving Richmond Bishop Polding blessed the foundation stone for the new church, making this event the first formal act of an Australian Catholic bishop.<sup>9</sup> He departed Hobart Town for Sydney on 5 September 1835.<sup>10</sup>

On 21 September a meeting was held to pursue the raising of money to build the church, local residents subscribing some £700 within weeks. The Colonial government promised a further £500. On 1 January 1838 a notice appeared in the *Colonial Times* as follows:

Tenders will be received by — Cassidy, Esq., Richmond (post paid) until Saturday, the 16<sup>th</sup> instant, for the erection of a Roman Catholic Church in that township. Parties tendering will be required to name two responsible persons as sureties for the due performance of their contract. All offers to be headed, 'Tenders for erection of a R.C. Church at Richmond.' For particulars apply by letter (paid) to the Rev. J. Cotham, Hobart Town, or to — Cassidy, Esq., Treasurer, Richmond.<sup>11</sup>



*Thomas Chapman's c.1845 sketch of the Richmond Catholic church and presbytery. Goodridge's little church is on the far right-hand side (Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery)*

The successful tenderer, as announced in the *Colonial Times*, for 22 March 1836, was a Mr. Buscombe.<sup>12</sup>

St John's the Evangelist's Church was opened on 31 December 1837. The first pastor, Fr James Ambrose Cotham OSB, who had accompanied Polding out from England in 1835, preached at the Mass which was celebrated by Fr James Watkins. Watkins was at that time temporarily in charge of

<sup>9</sup> At this time the laying of a foundation stone was a symbolic act and did not necessarily mean that construction of a church was actually starting. It was more an occasion for stimulating the giving of donations towards the project through a rousing address.

<sup>10</sup> Moran, loc. cit.

<sup>11</sup> 'The Catholic Church in Tasmania. Collections and Recollections', No. XXVI, *The Catholic Standard*, August 1883, p. 129.

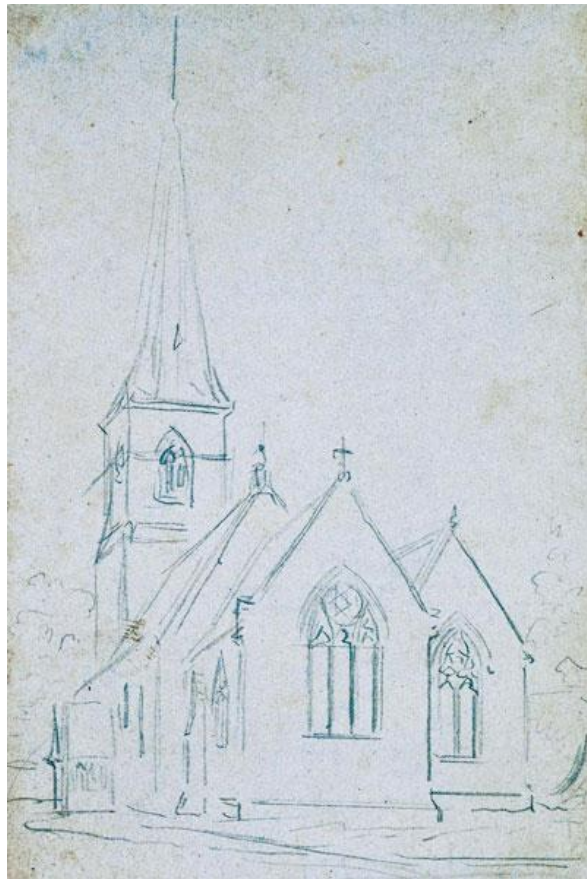
<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

Richmond while Fr Cotham resided in Launceston.<sup>13</sup> A ‘sumptuous repast’ at John Cassidy’s residence completed the ceremonies.

### **The Pugin additions**

By 1858, Goodridge’s Gothick St John’s, Richmond, must have seemed decidedly unfashionable to its pastor Fr William Dunne. Dunne had just erected the charming St Patrick’s, Colebrook, from Pugin’s second church model, so the as-yet unused third model would have presented a potentially useful source of components to convert the existing building into one that was more ecclesiologically appropriate, with a chancel, a sacristy, a tower and a spire.<sup>14</sup>

The model used for extensions to St John’s, Richmond, was—like the other two—a scholarly and completely convincing, yet totally original, evocation of a small English medieval village church. The problem in knowing the composition and details of this, the largest of the three church designs provided as models to Bishop Willson, is purely because only parts of it were used as a basis for the extensions. However, there is a possible source of information. Listed among Pugin’s unidentified designs in Alexandra Wedgwood’s valuable catalogue of the Pugin family works in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London,<sup>15</sup> is a modest sketch which may possibly be his initial thoughts for this building.



*A possible early design sketch for Pugin’s third church model (#640 in Alexandra Wedgwood, A.W.N. Pugin and the Pugin Family. Catalogues of Architectural Drawings in the Victoria and Albert Museum, 1985)*

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> The first of Pugin’s church models was used to construct St Paul’s, Oatlands (1850–51).

<sup>15</sup> Alexandra Wedgwood, A.W.N. *Pugin and the Pugin Family*. Catalogues of Architectural Drawings in the Victoria and Albert Museum. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 1985, p. 246.

It consists of a nave, two-bay chancel, north aisle, north chapel, south porch and a west tower with broach spire. The building appears to be Early English with a Decorated chancel, an arrangement widely applied to Pugin's Australian designs, combining ease of construction with propriety. The unbuttressed chancel east wall together with the form of its kneelers, as well as the form of the tower upper stages and plain broach spire, closely approximate the arrangement at Richmond. Pugin had used a similar form for the tower upper stages and broach spire—particularly the battered transition to the belfry stage—in his 1842 design for St John the Evangelist's, Kirkham. The astringency of the St Mary's, Brewwood, tower and spire design, also of 1842, likewise prefigured the third church model approach.



*Detail of the steeple, St John the Evangelist's, Kirkham (Image: Brian Andrews)*

It needs to be stressed, however, that the above possible source is little better than speculation. Nevertheless, elements of it do, as we have seen, approximate details of the parts of the third model that were actually constructed.

By analogy with the other two church models, there would have been a rood screen across the chancel arch. There was a west door for ceremonial usage, such as processions or the visit of a bishop, and the chancel would have been fitted with sedilia and a piscina in the south wall and an Easter sepulchre in the north wall opposite the sedilia.<sup>16</sup> It was thus liturgically furnished, as was Pugin's normal practice, for the Use of Sarum, an English variant in non-essentials—one of a host of such variants—of the Roman Rite that prevailed throughout late medieval Western Christendom.

The Decorated windows in the chancel were the most elaborately developed elements in the building's structure, and that for reasons of propriety. In *True Principles* Pugin had defined propriety as an essential attribute of a building, whereby '*the external and internal appearance of an edifice should be illustrative of, and in accordance with, the purpose for which it is destined*'.<sup>17</sup> For churches this meant that the chancel should be the

<sup>16</sup> Again, the presence of an Easter sepulchre is by analogy with the evidence presented in St Paul's, Oatlands, the first church to be built from a model.

<sup>17</sup> Pugin, *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture*, John Weale, London, 1841, p. 50.

most highly elaborated part of the building because it was, in Pugin's view, 'the place of sacrifice, the most sacred part of the edifice'.<sup>18</sup>

Abutting the centre of the nave west wall was a three-stage tower surmounted by an elegant broach spire, the belfry stage pierced on all sides by louvred two-light Early English plate tracery openings. In his 1841 *Dublin Review* article Pugin had stated: 'A church tower is a beacon to direct the faithful to the house of God. ... Let no one imagine that a tower is a superfluous expense, it forms an essential part of the building, and should always be provided in the plan of a parochial church. A tower, to be complete, should be terminated by a spire ...'<sup>19</sup>

The sedilia were simple in form, and designed to be made from wood, as for the two other model churches. Medieval English sedilia were either stepped or level (as in the case of Richmond), the priest always occupying the easternmost seat with the deacon and sub-deacon to his west, according to the Use of Sarum. In the Roman Rite the priest occupied the central seat, requiring sedilia to be level so that the priest would not be seated lower than the deacon. Pugin designed sedilia of both types, however, in his Australian church designs the sedilia were always level, their ambiguity making them suitable for either the Roman Rite or the Use of Sarum.

The extent to which Pugin simplified his model church furnishings so as to put their fabrication within the reach of antipodean artisans with limited skills is dramatically illustrated by comparing the Richmond sedilia with his 1839 wooden sedilia, of similar overall form, in St Mary's, Derby.



*The sedilia (Image: Brian Andrews)*

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<sup>18</sup> [A. Welby Pugin], 'On the Present State of Ecclesiastical Architecture in England', *Dublin Review*, vol. X, May 1841, p. 330.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 317.

The piscina, to the east of the sedilia, would be copied from one of the two stone exemplar piscinas carved by George Myers' men and brought out with the church models by Bishop Willson. In fact, the same exemplar as had been copied for St Patrick's, Colebrook, was again used at Richmond.



*The sedilia, St Mary's, Derby (Image: Brian Andrews)*



*The piscina (Image: Brian Andrews)*

There would have undoubtedly been a holy water stoup in the porch west wall. Being situated in the porch and thus outside the church proper it would have conformed to Pugin's 1841 *Dublin Review* exposition. In this respect he had stated:

*Holy water stoups were generally hollowed out of the porch walls, and frequently built in niches on either side of the external arch, as at Bury St. Edmund's; all stoups for hallowed water should be placed outside [Pugin's emphasis] the building.<sup>20</sup>*

There was another stoup in the tower base wall inner face for the use of those entering via the west door on ceremonial occasions.

### **Construction**

The problem in using Pugin's model three design for the extensions was that it was for a church substantially larger than St John's. The Hobart architect Frederick Thomas (1817–1885), who had been given custody of the models by Bishop Willson and had drawn up plans from them, was charged with adapting parts of the model.



*The east elevation with Thomas' reduced-scale chancel and sacristy derived from Pugin's model three design; below, (Image: Brian Andrews)*

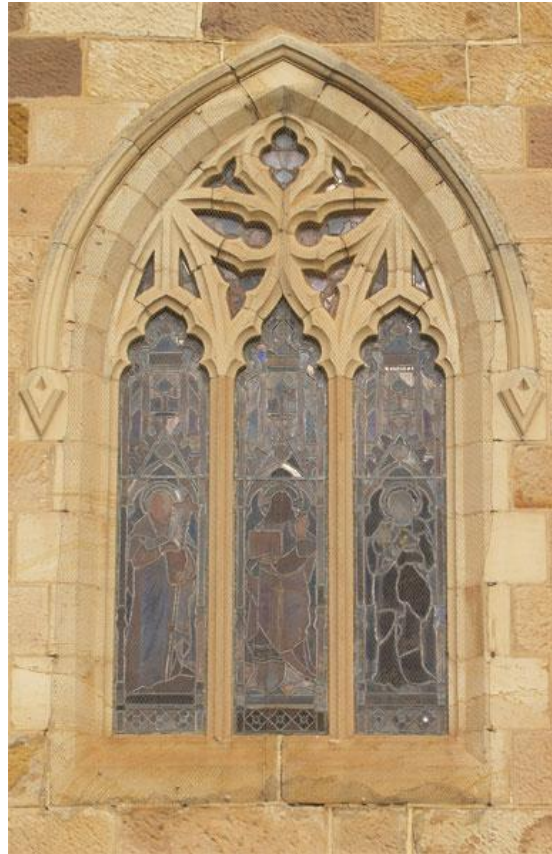
Thomas had been sentenced to transportation to New South Wales in 1834 for swindling. He was further sentenced in 1842 to fifteen years in a penal settlement for stealing and arrived in Hobart Town in February 1843. While still on probation he was assigned as an unqualified draftsman and clerk to the Public Works Department on 1 July 1847, then was later promoted to Senior Draftsman and eventually

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<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*, p. 320.

Clerk of Works. He evidently had the right to private practice, for Willson entrusted Pugin's models to him.<sup>21</sup>

That Thomas was no Pugin is evident from the results. Goodridge's church, with new diagonal buttressing to the corners, was retained as the nave. Thomas tacked on a single-bay chancel that was a reduced-scale version of that on the model. Because it was smaller, there was no room for Pugin's three-light east window, so Thomas took what appears to have been the model's transitional Flowing Decorated/Perpendicular chancel south-east window and built it into the chancel east wall. The tracery in this window has some affinity with that in the chancel east wall of Pugin's Jesus Chapel, Pontefract, West Yorkshire.



*The chancel east window (Image: Brian Andrews)*

The ungainly trussed rafter roof for the chancel, with collar ties just above the wall plate level, was almost certainly a Thomas touch. Certainly his was the awkward four-centred chancel arch, necessary because, for the width of the opening, a normal two-centred arch as in the model would have risen above the height of the nave east wall.

Fitting a reduced-size rood screen extracted from the model across the chancel arch proved beyond Thomas's competence and he substituted conventional communion rails.<sup>22</sup> He did, however, install sedilia

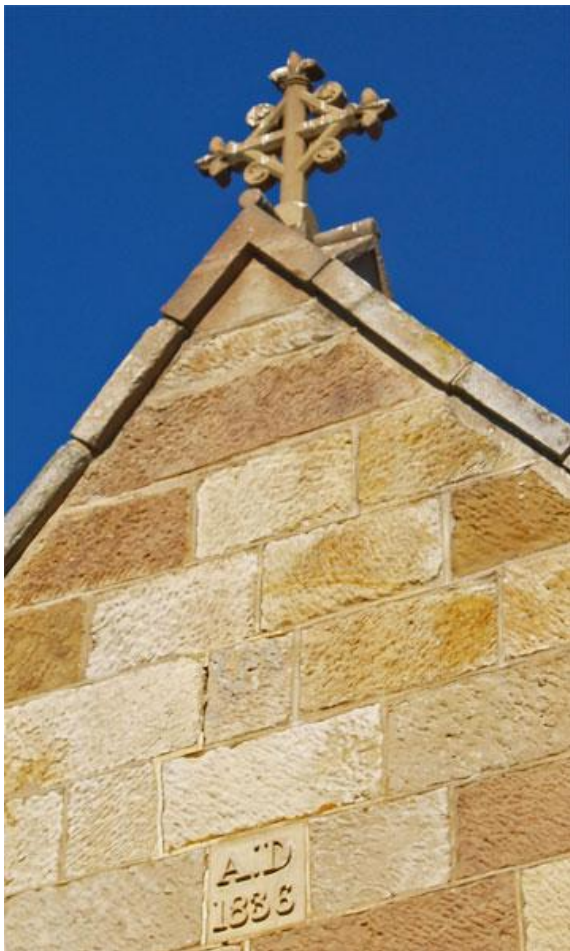
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<sup>21</sup> Thomas' biographical details are largely drawn from E. Graeme Robertson, *Early Buildings of Southern Tasmania*, 2 vols, Georgian House, Melbourne, 1970, vol. 1, p. 19.

<sup>22</sup> Henry Hunter was placing rood screens in his Tasmanian churches, for example, St John's, Glenorchy, at exactly the same time, so leaving out the rood screen in Richmond was not a case of ecclesiological preference on Fr Dunne's part. He had completed St Patrick's, Colebrook, including a rood screen, just one year earlier. It is conceivable that the details of Thomas' communion rails came from the bottom section of the model three rood screen.

and a piscina in the chancel south wall and added what is almost certainly a scaled-down version of the model three sacristy against the chancel north wall.

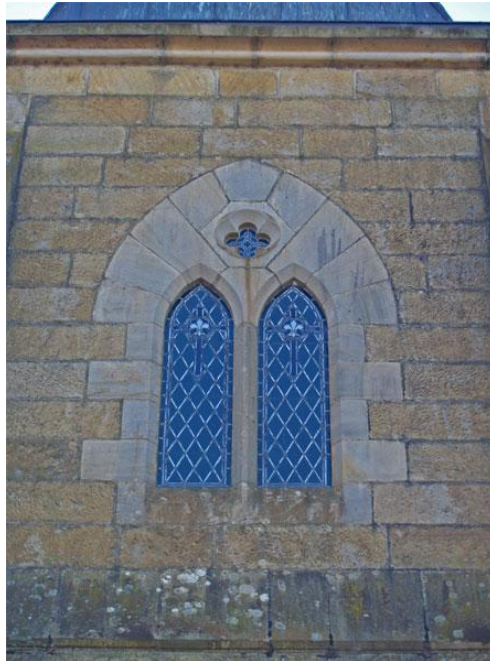
It is interesting to note that, as for the other two Pugin designs for Bishop Willson, the sacristy had—uncharacteristically—no external door. This may perhaps be due to the generally bleak picture of the state of Tasmanian society that had been conveyed to Willson after his nomination as first Bishop of Hobart Town, likely by Fr (later Bishop) William Bernard Ullathorne OSB who had experience of Tasmania dating from the 1830s.



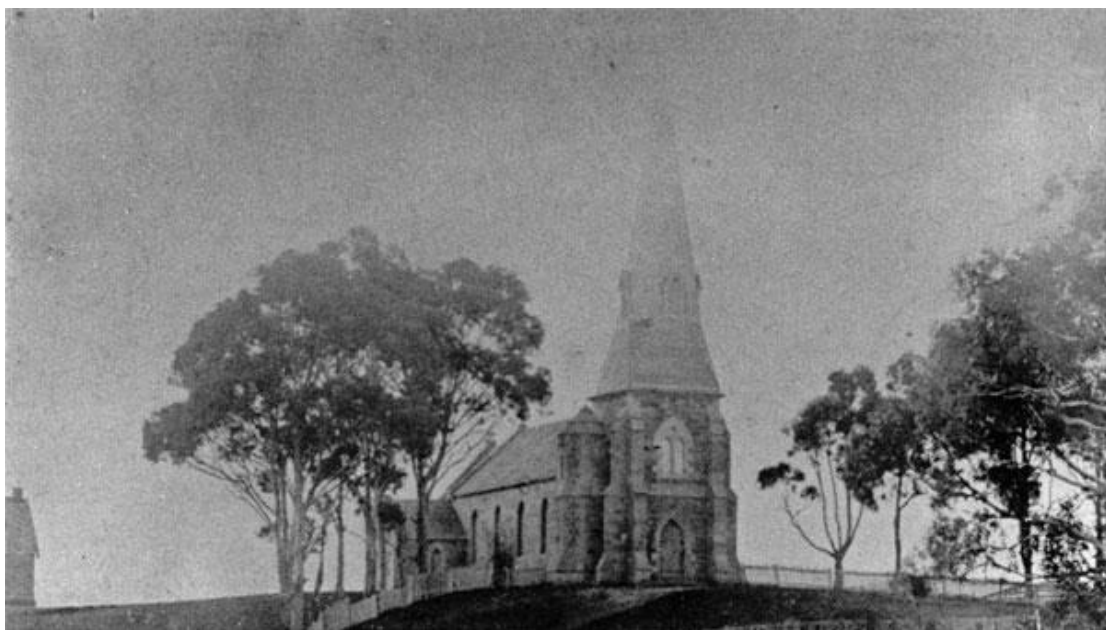
*At left, the chancel east gable cross, copied from a stone exemplar; at right, the nave east gable cross, also copied from exemplar stonework. Note the steeper slope of the chancel roof, a compromise by Thomas between the chancel roof slope on Pugin's model and the shallow pitch of Goodridge's Gothic nave roof (Images: Brian Andrews)*

Goodridge's nave roof had, as previously mentioned, a shallower pitch than later Gothic Revival buildings. In implementing a reduced version of the third model chancel Thomas could not make its roof pitch as steep as the model's because it would have resulted in the chancel side walls being too low. His compromise is evident in the differing slopes of the nave and chancel roofs. On the eastern apex of both roofs he placed copies of exemplar gable crosses as he had done for St Paul's, Oatlands. The nave gable saddle stones, copings, kneelers and skew corbel stones were also copied from the model.

The tower and spire presented an even greater challenge. Thomas crudely solved the problem of the disparity in size by simply guillotining the belfry stage and shortening the lowest one, but in his ignorance left the spire at its original size. The result was comical to say the least, with a massive spire perched like a dunce's cap on the squat vestigial tower, whose lowest buttress set-offs were virtually at ground level. He inserted one of the two-light plate tracery lights from the omitted belfry stage into the west face of the tower upper stage.



*A belfry light on Pugin's model three which Thomas inserted into the upper stage of his truncated tower (Image: Brian Andrews)*



*An early image of the enlarged church with its 'dunce's cap' spire (Image: Richmond Parish)*

These illiterate efforts of Thomas, exemplified by the bizarre sui generis dripstone terminations to the chancel window and west door must surely have confirmed Willson in his 1854 choice of the young Henry Hunter to design his future churches.

Pugin never made his spires longer than their supporting towers. Sometimes they were shorter, but in his classic steeples the spire was the same height as the tower. Given the measured height of the Richmond tower as truncated by Thomas and the proportions of the tower and spire, measured from old photographs, it is possible to calculate the height of the Thomas steeple and also the original Pugin steeple on model three, assuming it was of classic proportions.<sup>23</sup> They are as follows:

Thomas steeple                      84 ft      25.6 m

Pugin model three steeple      110 ft      33.5 m

Thomas had reduced Pugin's tower height by 26 ft (7.9 metres) to produce his steeple with its 'dunce's cap'.

On the tower inner face Thomas built an opening, again with an awkward four-centre arch like the chancel arch, so as to make the tower upper stage into a gallery, projecting a wooden extension into the nave.



*Thomas' tower gallery with Goodridge's original nave west door beneath it (Image: Brian Andrews)*

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<sup>23</sup> The calculated figure for the Pugin steeple is its minimum height. If the tower was higher than the spire then the overall steeple height would have been greater. However, all indications are that the model three steeple would have had classic proportions.

What a transformation of a Pugin design! Pugin had a well-documented detestation of galleries in churches. Writing to his patron the Earl of Shrewsbury concerning the latter's suggestion to place a gallery in his masterpiece St Giles', Cheadle, he exclaimed: 'Mercy I entreat. Pray my dear Lord Shrewsbury do not mar this great & good work by such a Protestantism as a west gallery. All the sublime effect of the tower arch will be lost.'<sup>24</sup>

On 15 February 1859 the considerably enlarged church was re-opened with High Mass celebrated by Bishop Willson.

### Subsequent history

By 1880 the spire was reported to have developed a dangerous lean.<sup>25</sup> It was a wooden structure of indeterminate cladding. Whether it fell down or was dismantled is not known, but it was replaced in 1893 by a much shorter spire.



*A turn of the twentieth century photo of the Alexander North spire which replaced the original in 1893 (Image: Richmond Parish collection)*

Designed by the eminent Launceston Arts and Crafts architect Alexander North,<sup>26</sup> this squat slate-covered spire had bands of darker imbricated slate and four over-scale lucarnes, a charming composition

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<sup>24</sup> Pugin to Shrewsbury, 9 March 1842, in Margaret Belcher, *The Collected letters of A.W.N. Pugin*, vol. 1: 1830 to 1842, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, pp. 328–9.

<sup>25</sup> Handwritten text on the back of a historical photograph in the Richmond Parish collection.

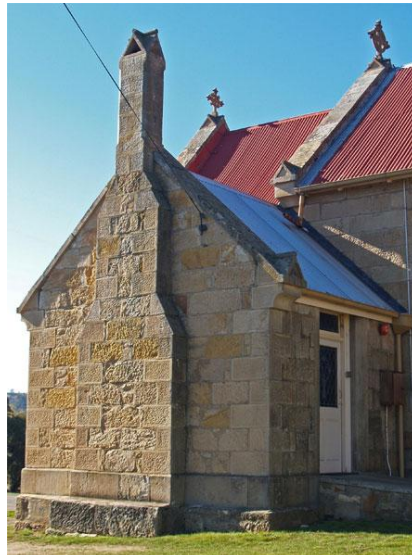
<sup>26</sup> After Henry Hunter, who had a virtual monopoly on Tasmanian Catholic church commissions from 1854, departed for Brisbane in 1888, North did much church work including: Star of the Sea, Burnie; Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, Ross; Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, Mangana; St Canice, Glengarry; and the eastern half of The Apostles, Launceston.

topped off by a foliated iron cross. It was an intelligent match for the proportions of the Thomas tower below. In time, North's spire had also seriously deteriorated and it was replaced in 1972 by a copper-clad version of the original model three spire, designed by Hobart architect Rod Cooper but reduced in size to better match the tower height. It is capped by the North cross.



*The 1972 spire (Image: Brian Andrews)*

In 1928–29 there was a major renovation of the building.<sup>27</sup> Although much of this concerned the furnishings, works were carried out on the structure, including repair and re-pointing of the stonework, installation of a wooden ceiling replacing the plaster one, remediation of the chancel floor and the cutting of a door in the west wall of the sacristy replacing the original two windows.<sup>28</sup>



*The 1859 sacristy showing the doorway inserted during the 1928 renovations, replacing the paired lancet windows of the original design (Image: Brian Andrews)*

<sup>27</sup> A comprehensive account of these works is given in 'Ceremony at Richmond: Beautiful Additions and Decorations Blessed. *The Catholic Standard*, 2 May 1929, pp. 8–9, 12.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 9, 12.