

An early 1890s view of the church (Archdiocese of Hobart Archives)

YOU ARE PERHAPS WONDERING

why such an ambitious building stands on its dramatic hillside site above the little village of Colebrook. In 1853, when construction of a Catholic church was being considered, the growing settlement, situated on one of two roads linking Hobart and Launceston, seemed destined to become an important centre in southern Tasmania. But that never eventuated.



An 1845 portrait of Pugin by John Rogers Herbert RA in its Pugin-designed frame (Palace of Westminster)

You may have already admired the harmonious proportions of this building's elegant yet pared back interior, and that is no wonder. For its 1843 designer was Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812–1852), an amazingly prolific creative genius and the supreme English designer of the early-Victorian era.

ST PATRICK'S CHURCH COLEBROOK (1855–57)

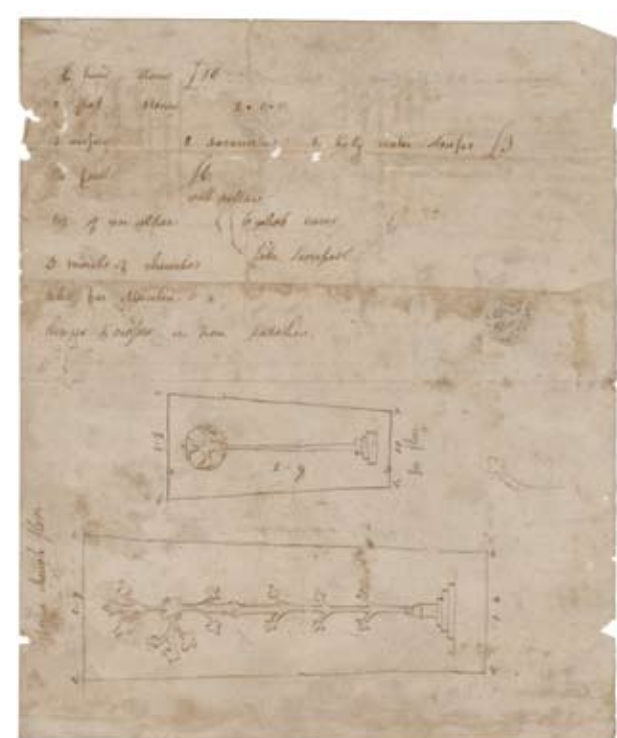
In a tragically short working life Pugin conjured up over a hundred buildings and untold thousands of designs for metalwork, furniture, ceramics, textiles, wallpaper, stained glass, jewellery, book illustrations and flat decoration. He is best known for a series of books which irrevocably altered the course of nineteenth-century architecture and design.

Pugin's inexhaustible creativity was fuelled by a passionately-held belief that the moral, social and spiritual condition of his time could only be improved through a complete revival of the physical and religious fabric of medieval England. And so St Patrick's, Colebrook, in its plan, composition, detail and liturgical furnishings, is a scholarly yet totally original evocation of an English village church of circa 1320.

Pugin's vision to resurrect the physical and spiritual life of the medieval English church was only fully shared by a handful of his close friends. One of them was Robert William Willson (1794–1866), priest in charge of the Nottingham Catholic mission, whose unremitting labours on behalf of the sick and the needy regardless of creed had earned him the respect of all the townspeople.



An 1847 headstone brought back to Tasmania



Initial checklist of exemplar and other items, including church models, to be made for Bishop Willson by George Myers from Pugin's designs, 1843 (Myers Family Trust)

In 1842 Willson's noble-hearted benevolence made him the ideal choice as first Bishop of Hobart Town, heading a poor Catholic flock—over half of them convicts—scattered across Van Diemen's Land (later re-named Tasmania). When Pugin first learnt of Willson's appointment as bishop he exclaimed with great energy, "only think, the right thing will find its way at the antipodes"! Here was an opportunity to work towards their shared vision for a better society.

Pugin and Willson worked hand-in-hand towards realising their vision. The faithful of Van Diemen's Land would be baptised in a Pugin font and attend mass celebrated in a Pugin-designed and furnished church by a priest wearing Pugin vestments and using Pugin altar vessels. Then at life's end they would be buried in the shadow of a Pugin churchyard cross, their final resting place marked by a Pugin headstone.

Churches were to be built from three perfect little scale models brought out by Willson in 1844. They had been designed by Pugin and constructed in England by craftsmen in the employ of George Myers, his favoured builder. St Patrick's is in fact copied from one of those models, with some of the more complex carved details copied from full-size limestone exemplars made by Myers' men.

This is a building of the utmost importance. Its unique design is the most radical of Pugin's essays in the provision of cheap commodious churches for poor clients. In terms of structural and decorative elaboration it lies at one end of the spectrum of all his church designs. At the other end you find St Giles', Cheadle, Staffordshire, widely regarded as England's finest nineteenth-century church.

Miraculously, St Patrick's still retains its beautiful cedar rood screen across the chancel arch, an essential furnishing in Pugin's view and one of only seven of his screens in Catholic churches to have survived in situ. It was carved by the builder Patrick Lynch and its 1847 Pugin-designed figure was carved from White Pine and polychromed by George Myers' craftsmen in London.

Pugin's Australian legacy is all around us. You can probably visualise a building with pointed arches to the doors and windows—most likely a church—near where you live. The greatest influence on why it was built in this style, called Gothic, was undoubtedly Pugin's writings.

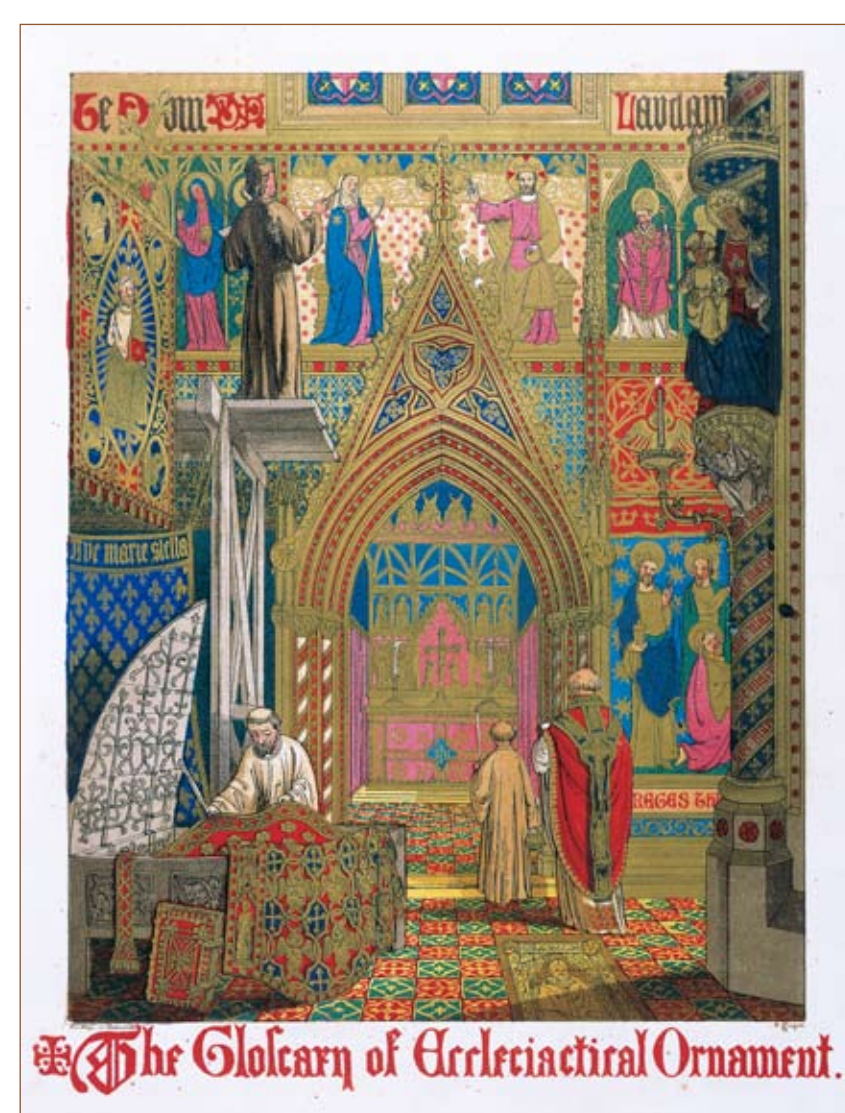
His dream of achieving a better, more just, society may have faltered, but the exquisitely beautiful designs he created have enriched our antipodean culture.



St Giles', Cheadle, Staffordshire (John Maidment)



The Colebrook cedar rood screen with its 1847 polychromed figure of Christ carved in White Pine by George Myers' craftsmen in London (Brian Andrews)



The half-title plate from Pugin's highly influential Glossary of Ecclesiastical Ornament and Costume, 1844, encapsulating his vision for church architecture and furnishing



Portrait of Bishop Willson by John Rogers Herbert RA, c.1854, the frame designed by Pugin (Oscott College, Birmingham)

This panel was supplied by the Pugin Foundation, a non-profit charitable organisation whose principal object is to assist in the conservation of Pugin's Australian heritage. For more information visit www.puginfoundation.org

