

CATHOLIC CHURCH OF OUR BLESSED LADY & ST THOMAS

HERITAGE OPEN DAY



OUTLINE HISTORY OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN ENGLAND

The Christian faith was first brought to this country by the Romans and there was a flourishing Christian community here at the beginning of the third century.

However, invasions by the pagan Anglo-Saxons during the fifth and sixth centuries and the Roman departure from Britain sharply decreased contact between Britain and Continental Europe. During these troubled times monasteries and churches were pillaged, but the Christian religion continued to thrive.

At the end of the sixth and through the seventh century, England was re-converted by the monks sent to England under the leadership of St Augustine, by Pope Gregory the Great in 597. Ethelbert, the king of Kent who was married to a Christian Frankish princess met with Augustine and out of this came the grant of a place in Canterbury in which they could live and had permission to preach. Soon there were many converts and old churches began to be restored and new ones built. After a year Ethelbert himself became Christian. Augustine was consecrated Bishop and later Archbishop in Canterbury. The church was thus judicially bonded to the Apostolic See of Rome.



Pope Gregory the Great

During this time of mission, Rome pursued greater unity with the local church in Britain, particularly on the question of dating Easter. A series of synods were held to resolve differences, culminating with the Synod of Whitby in 664 which formalised customs according to the See of Rome. The designation "English Church" (*Ecclesia Anglicana* in Latin) was made, but always in the sense of the term as indicating that it was part of the one Catholic Church in communion with the Pope that was localised in England and after the Synod of Whitby in 664, there was no doctrinal difference between the faith of the English and the rest of Catholic Christendom. This bond between the Catholic Church in England and the Apostolic See remained in effect for nearly a thousand years until the sixteenth century. By this time, England was dotted with monasteries, churches and abbeys, while church ceremonies were carried out with great splendour.



This life came to an end with the Reformation of the sixteenth century. The English Reformation during Henry VIII's reign was set against a broader backcloth of the movement known as the Reformation under the leadership of Martin Luther in Germany which swept across Europe, culminating in the breakup between those who remained loyal to Rome and Catholic Christianity and those who rejected Rome and embraced a form of Protestantism. These ideas anticipated much of what was eventually to happen during the coming decades in England: the rejection of papal authority, the abolition of religious orders, the sweeping away of pilgrimages and relics.

Henry VIII

By the time Henry VIII wanted his divorce from Catherine of Aragon, this great movement was well established in Germany. Having failed to obtain a divorce from the pope, Henry summoned a Parliament in November 1529 to garner support, benefiting strongly from an anti-clerical mood of the Commons. In December 1530, the whole clergy was indicted of praemunire (charged with having exercised an unlawful jurisdiction). Two months later Henry pardoned them in return for a huge fine and the recognition of the king 'as far as the law of Christ allows supreme head of the Church in England'. Events culminated in 1534 with the Act of Supremacy which transferred to the king as 'Supreme Head of the Church of England' all ecclesiastical dues formerly sent to the pope. Between 1536 and 1540 the monasteries were dissolved. The religious were dispersed, their buildings dismantled and their property sold.

Henry VIII died in 1547 and left three children: Edward, aged nine, who succeeded him as king, Mary, who was thirty-two, and Elizabeth, who was fourteen. They were divided by their religion and that division was to profoundly affect the following decades as Henry's children succeeded to the throne and took the country in a different direction. Although Henry separated England from the Papacy and did away with monastic life, he wished to maintain Catholic ways, including the Mass. From 1547-53 the door was opened to Protestantism by his son Edward VI. During the reign of Queen Mary, England was again restored to the Catholic fold. She was succeeded in 1558 by her sister Elizabeth who wished to establish a middle way between orthodox Catholicism and Continental Protestantism, the Anglican way, designed to embrace as many of her subjects as possible.

The Elizabethan government was at first lenient with those who still practised the old religion. In 1570, however, the Pope ex-communicated Elizabeth and forbade her subjects to obey her, giving the government a chance to attack Catholics on political grounds as disloyal Englishmen. From then on persecution of the Catholics was stepped up and for over two centuries the English Catholics remained officially a proscribed people, eliminated from public office and universities. This exclusion was not reversed until the nineteenth century.



Example of a priest hole (Baddesley Clinton, Warwickshire)

In practice the persecution of the Catholics was carried out haphazardly over the years. The key to the survival of Catholicism in the country was the Catholicism of so many of the gentry. A Catholic landowner encouraged his Catholic tenants and provided in his house a centre for Catholic worship, as well as a home and a hiding place for the priest. Even though in some areas the Catholics enjoyed almost complete freedom they were always regarded with hatred and suspicion by their fellow countrymen, and could never hope to attain to any position of distinction in the state. This state of affairs lasted till 1829 when the Catholic Emancipation Act gave Catholics official freedom once more, but did not immediately wipe out the suspicions of centuries.

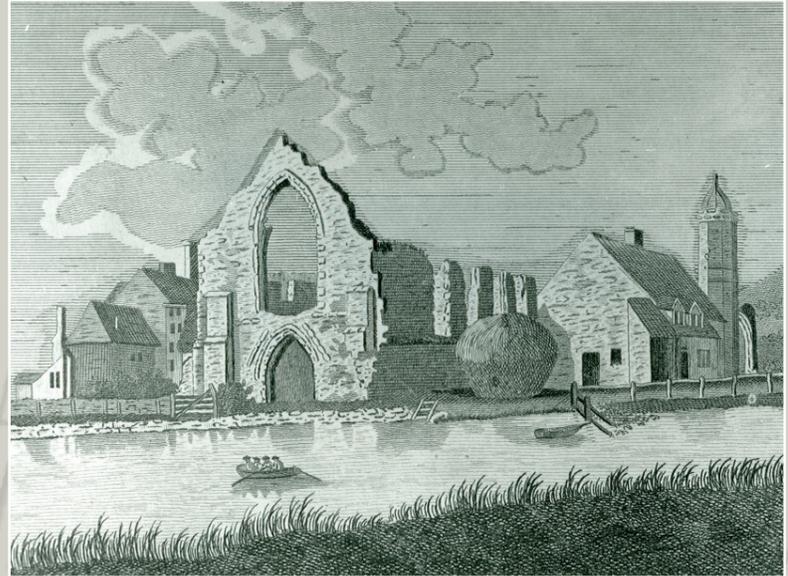
The English Catholics, who laid the foundations for the living Catholic Church known today, were led by prelates such as Nicholas Wiseman and John Henry Newman, priests such as Dominic Bareri and George Spencer and laymen such as Lord Shrewsbury, A W N Pugin and Ambrose Phillipps de Lisle. In 1850, the English Hierarchy was restored with Cardinal Wiseman at its head as Archbishop of Westminster.

CATHOLIC HISTORY OF DUDLEY

Before the establishment of a Priory in Dudley about 1160 the Catholic Churches of St Thomas and St Edmund served the people of Dudley and its surroundings.

In the mid twelfth century, the Priory was founded by Gervase Paganel, Lord of Dudley, "for the good of his father's soul chiefly", but also his own and his family's. It was a Cluniac house, dedicated to St James, and a branch of Much Wenlock Abbey, Shropshire.

The Priory was given, by Gervase, control over the Churches of St Edmund and St Thomas in Dudley as well as those in Northfield, Sedgley, Inkpen and Bradfield (Berks) while many of his friends gave control of other churches to the monks of the Priory. These possessions of the Priory were confirmed in 1182 by Pope Lucius III's Bull of Confirmation to Everard the then Prior. Though the Priory in Dudley was never a large one, probably containing only three or four monks, its influence was great on church life through its possessions. All profits from the many churches and chapels subject to the Priory belonged to the Priory and therefore the parish clergy were often in need.

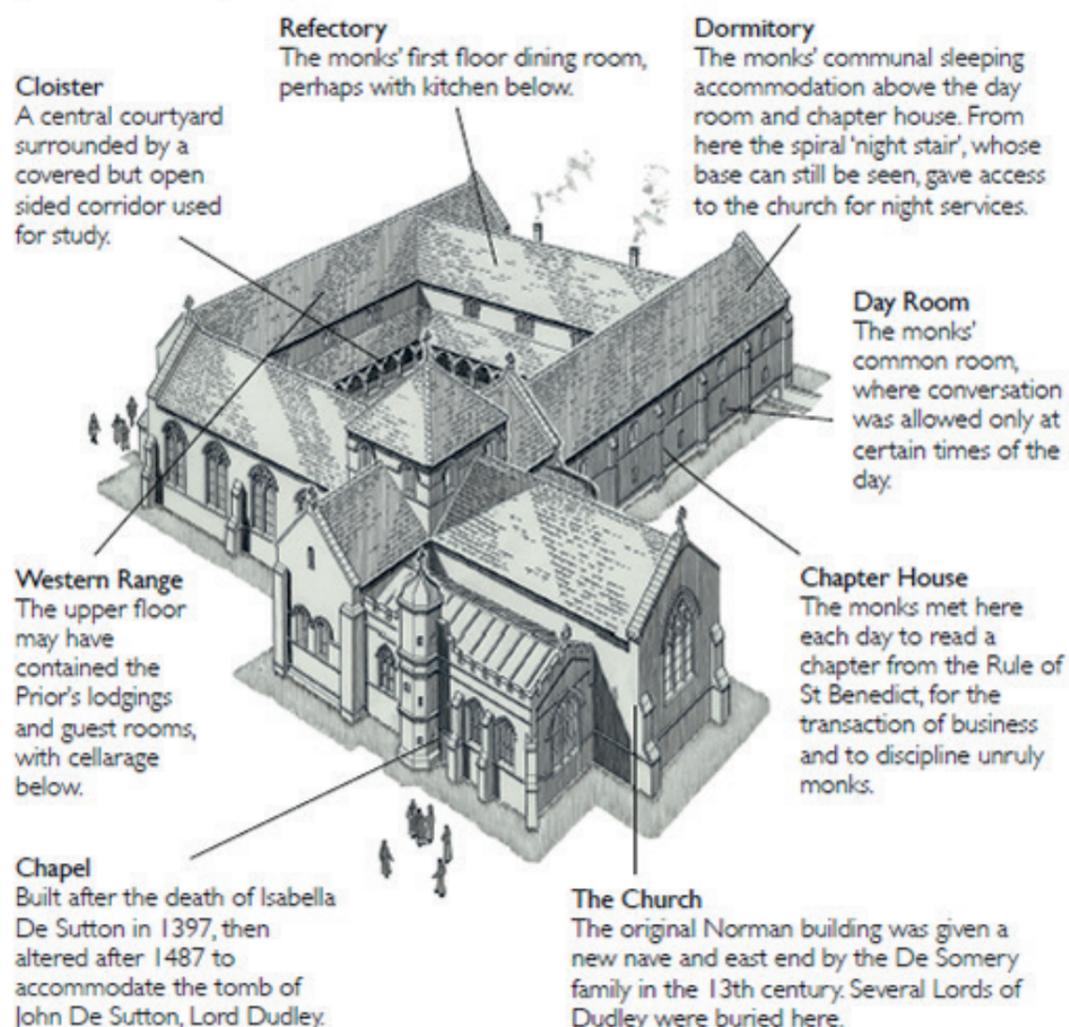


By 1580 the Priory was a desolate place. In 1770, a tanner took up residence, followed a few years later by a thread manufacturer. When Priory Hall was being built in 1825 the main drive to the house was cut through the ruins obliterating portions of them. The ruins became the property of the Corporation of Dudley in 1926. They have been conserved and are preserved as a scheduled ancient monument.

The Priory housed a small community of Cluniac monks, an order originating at Cluny in Burgundy which was famed for its opulent observance of church ritual. Cluniac monks were often aristocrats and most manual labour was carried out by servants. The monks' day

centred around eight church services.

An imaginative reconstruction of the Priory in the 1530s, just before it was closed by Henry VIII. It is based on the surviving ruins, which are made up of several periods of building, representing the patronage of successive Lords of Dudley.



The original Priory buildings comprised transepts, eastern apses, choir and apsidal presbytery and also the eastern range which included a chapter house, the day room and a dormitory overhead. The remaining walls enclosing the wooden-roofed cloister were built about 1200 and the 13th century saw the completion of the Priory Church and buildings.

The Dudley Priory shared the fate of the other monasteries during the 16th century. In 1535, Cromwell, the King's Minister, ordered the Prior of Dudley to repair to him immediately, but the monastery was not dissolved until 1540. The Priory and its lands were given to Sir John Dudley of Sussex, Duke of Northumberland, who already had the Castle in his possession.



Fr George Ignatius Spencer

After the Reformation, the Catholic history of Dudley is very sparse until the reawakening of the 19th century. The revival of the Catholic life in Dudley was due to the zeal of the illustrious convert Fr George Ignatius Spencer.

After his ordination in Rome in 1832, Fr Spencer was sent to Walsall and served as an assistant priest for a few months until the building of a Church in West Bromwich, to the cost of which he personally contributed £2,000. When the Church was opened there shortly afterwards, Fr Spencer was given charge of it.

In 1833 Fr Spencer began his work in Dudley. Mass was first celebrated in a warehouse in Chapel Street. Fr Spencer used to walk from West Bromwich on the previous evening and after hearing Confessions would spend the night on the bare floor of the sacristy wrapped in his cloak until a room was procured for his use.

When this was no longer available, Fr Spencer hired a Methodist Chapel for the weekly offering of the Holy Sacrifice.

All this time, he was busy trying to procure a site for the building of a Catholic Church in Dudley. In 1837 land was bought for this purpose by William Fletcher, nailmaster of Dudley, on behalf of Fr Spencer and Bishop Walsh. To assist with raising funds for the building of a church Fr Spencer went to London on a begging mission. Among the many of his influential friends whom he visited was the Duchess of Kent. Tradition has it that the Duchess contributed to the cost of the church here.

The Church was designed by the famous architect A W N Pugin, one of the lay leaders of the Catholic revival, and was built at a total cost of £3,165, which included the cost of vestments, ornaments and stained glass windows in the Sanctuary and Lady Chapel. The Church was consecrated by Bishop Walsh, assisted by Bishop Wiseman, on Easter Tuesday March 29th 1842.

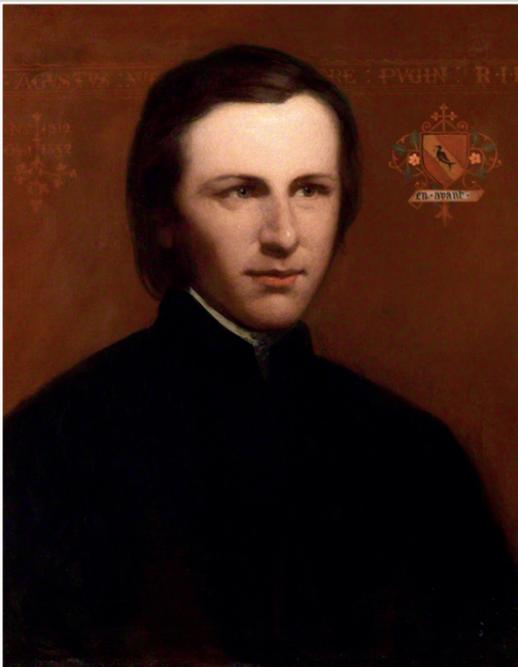


Right: Bentley's map of 1839 which indicates 'Catholic chapel'

PUGIN AND THE GOTHIC REVIVAL

August Welby Northmore Pugin (1812-1852) was an English architect, designer, artist and critic who is principally remembered for his pioneering role in the Gothic Revival style of architecture. His work culminated in designing the interior of the Palace of Westminster and its iconic clock tower housing Big Ben.

Pugin was the only son of the French émigré Charles Pugin and Catherine Welby. He was educated in his father's drawing office, a powerhouse of research into the architectural sources of the Gothic Revival, where his brilliant draughtsmanship developed. He then passed straight into the world of theatre, stage design and furniture manufacture.



A W N Pugin

The loss of his first wife and his father and a bankruptcy sobered him but not his enthusiasms, and his conversion to Catholicism in 1835 gave him a new *raison d'être*, which was to be a church architect. He declared *'I feel perfectly convinced that the Roman Catholic Church is the only true one in which the grand and sublime style of church architecture can ever be restored'*. He found the visual arts of his day lacking in 'truth' and 'life'. In architecture a 'grand' and 'sublime' style could only be restored by the Catholic Church. He almost single-handedly prevailed upon not only the Catholics, but also Anglicans to build churches only in the Gothic style and according to rigid formulae which he laid down, banishing the classical style from Catholic church architecture.

Combined with the support of key patrons, architectural publication and journalism gave Pugin the means to dominate Catholic architectural practice from 1837.



16th Earl of Shrewsbury

Pugin's most significant Catholic patronage links were made in 1837, first meeting Bishop Walsh and Fr Spencer. Later, he met John Talbot, the 16th Earl of Shrewsbury and Waterford (1791-1852) who was the acknowledged lay leader of English Catholicism and proved to be Pugin's greatest patron, not only at Alton Towers, but for church commissions throughout the Midlands. Pugin quickly added contacts and friendships with the Hardmans (metalwork manufacturers of Birmingham) and Ambrose Phillipps in Leicestershire, all laymen with specific views on how the Catholic Church in England should be organised.

By 1838, Pugin became architect by appointment to the Catholic Revival in the large Midland Vicariate presided over by Bishop Walsh. His success was astonishing: from 1838 onwards only in very exceptional circumstances were churches to be in any other style than the Puginesque Gothic.

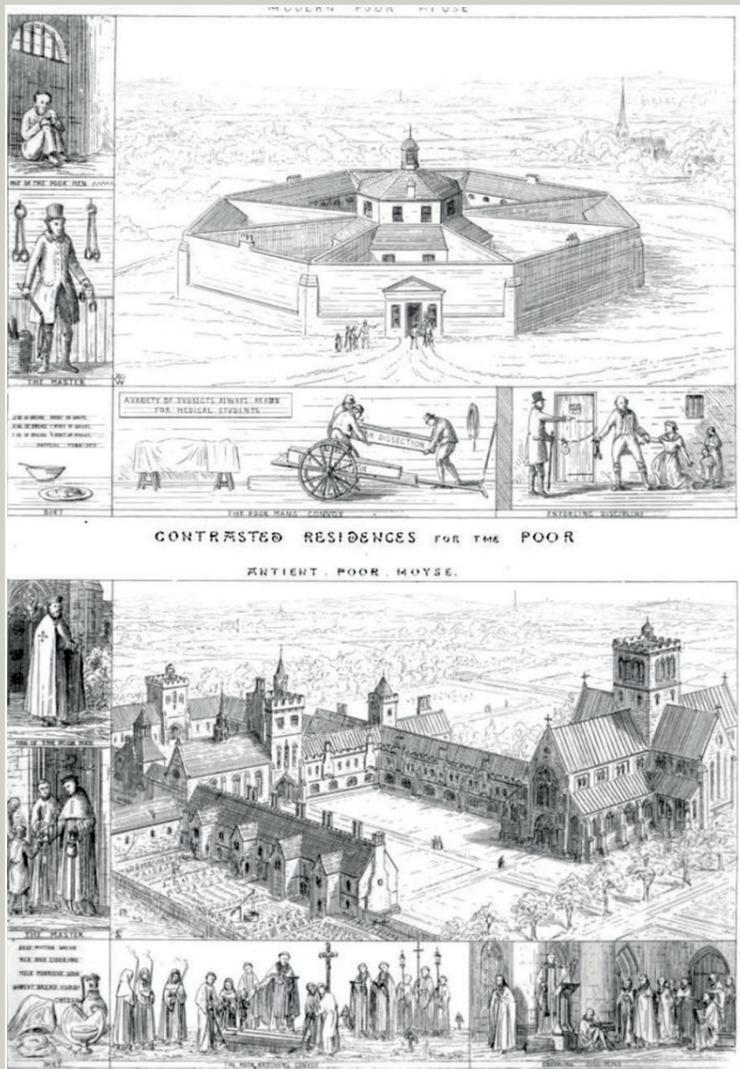
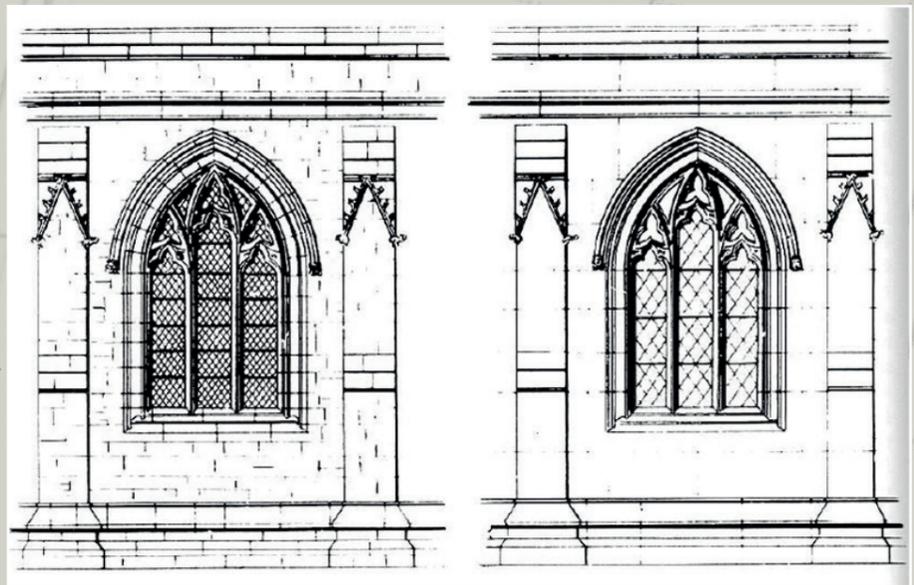


Plate from *Contrasts*

In 1836, Pugin published his *Contrasts or a parallel between the noble edifices of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and similar buildings of the present day*. It argued for the revival of medieval Gothic style and 'a return to the faith and the social structures of the Middle Ages'. In one example (left), Pugin contrasted a medieval monastic foundation where monks fed and clothed the needy and grew food in the gardens and gave the dead a decent burial with a panopticon workhouse where the poor were beaten, half-starved and sent off after death for dissection. Classicism seemed to him to be the language of paganism and especially of Utilitarianism for which he felt a profound disgust.

In his *True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture* (1841) he defended the merits of Gothic. First of all he emphasised the national argument: Renaissance architecture belonged to Italy. Then there were practical arguments, such as the fact that for a wet climate a steep roof was considered advantageous. Above all there were religious arguments. Gothic was deemed to be the ecclesiastical style for the true Catholic Church: it is chiefly verticality, Pugin argued, that expresses the Christian concern with upwardness. A Classical church symbolises worldliness.

Within medieval architecture there were a number of styles from which one could choose (identified by Thomas Rickman (1776-1841) and still used today): Early English, Decorated and Perpendicular. Pugin made ample use of Early English. It was the simplest Gothic style and generally looked at as a more economical version of Gothic, for it did not require tracery for the windows. Because of its narrow, single-light windows it was often called the Lancet style.



Good and bad stonework from *True Principles*

Other tenets identified in *True Principles* included examples of good and bad stonework for a Gothic building: irregular coursing and window surrounds (right) are to be preferred to the large, even blocks as might be seen in a Classical building.

The most conspicuous result of the change of outlook was the revival in churches of open wooden roofs, which during the Classical period had been disguised by plaster ceilings.

Into the short span of his career, Pugin crammed the design and most of the execution of over one hundred buildings. The great majority of them are churches. In most cases the story is of a complicated struggle between Pugin and his patrons. Pugin died suddenly on 14 September 1852; he was only 40 years old. At the time of his death, it was generally agreed that his collapse was the result of exhaustion and overwork. The eulogy in the *Ecclesiologist* paid tribute to 'the most eminent and original architectural genius of his time'; *The Builder* recorded its opinion that in his prodigious output 'he overdid it'.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF OUR BLESSED LADY AND ST THOMAS OF CANTERBURY

An early and economically-built Gothic Revival design by A W N Pugin. It was built 1839-40 and underwent a major reordering in the 1960s. The building is listed Grade II.

The mission was established from West Bromwich by the Hon Fr George Ignatius Spencer in 1835. Initially he celebrated Mass in a disused warehouse before hiring a Methodist chapel in King Street. In 1837 William Fletcher, a nailmaster in Dudley, acting on behalf of Fr Spencer and Bishop Walsh, bought the present site from the Bourne family.

Pugin made the first designs for the church in 1837. The foundation stone was laid in the second half of 1839 and the church was opened on 29 December 1840, when Dr Wiseman preached. The church was cheap (£3,165 including vestments, fittings and decoration) but was considered by *The Tablet* 'a perfect specimen of old English parochial architecture'.

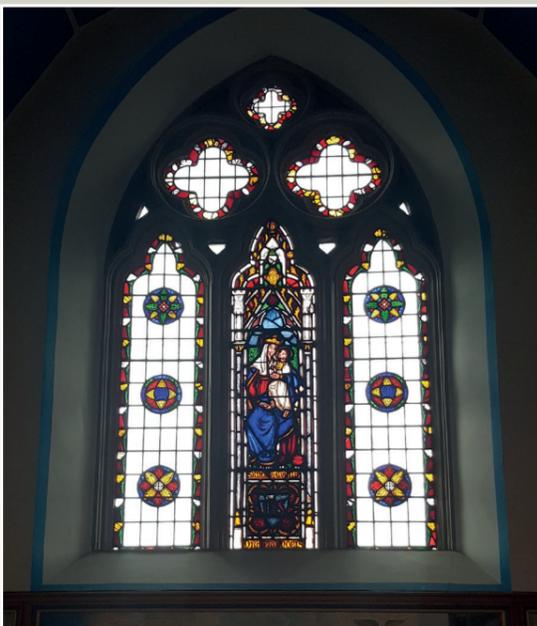


Early twentieth century photograph of east end (Diocesan archive)

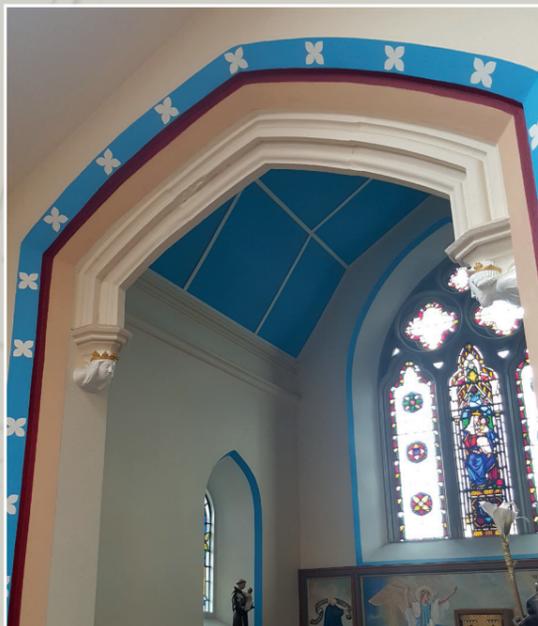
It was the first Pugin church to be opened with a rood screen (a feature which he considered essential but which caused a great rift between him and the Church in the later 1840s). Pugin described the church in Present State, dwelling as usual on the furnishings, but his earlier comment to Ambrose Phillipps, that 'Dudley is a compleat facsimile of one of the old English parish churches and nobody seems to know how to use it' anticipated disputes that he was to have with the clergy. Despite this, and early criticism of its rood screen (later removed), Pugin attended the consecration on Easter Tuesday 1842.

It is a large church, with a five-bay nave with clerestory, lean-to aisles and a single-bay sanctuary and Lady Chapel. The church is built of sandstone. Its stonework reflects that illustrated in his True Principles, demonstrating good and bad stonework, favouring irregular coursing as opposed to large, even blocks.

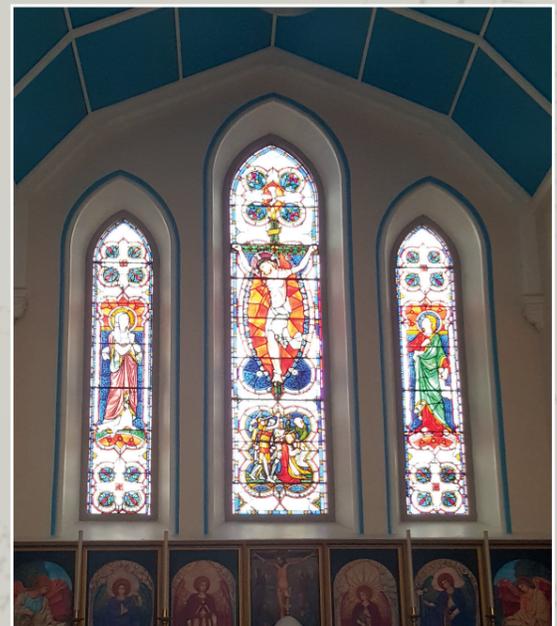
The style is largely Early English and extensive use is made of lancet windows. Pugin's building has an aisled nave and a chancel that is somewhat lower, since he insisted that all parts of the church should be structurally differentiated. He also provided a southeast sacristy and northeast chapel. The clerestory consists of small lancet windows, one per bay. Pugin allowed himself a light mixing of styles in that the north chapel east window is Decorated (use of tracery detail) and the arch to north chapel is Perpendicular (use of Tudor arch).



North chapel east window, showing tracery in Decorated style. Stained glass is designed by Pugin and made by Warrington, c. 1840.



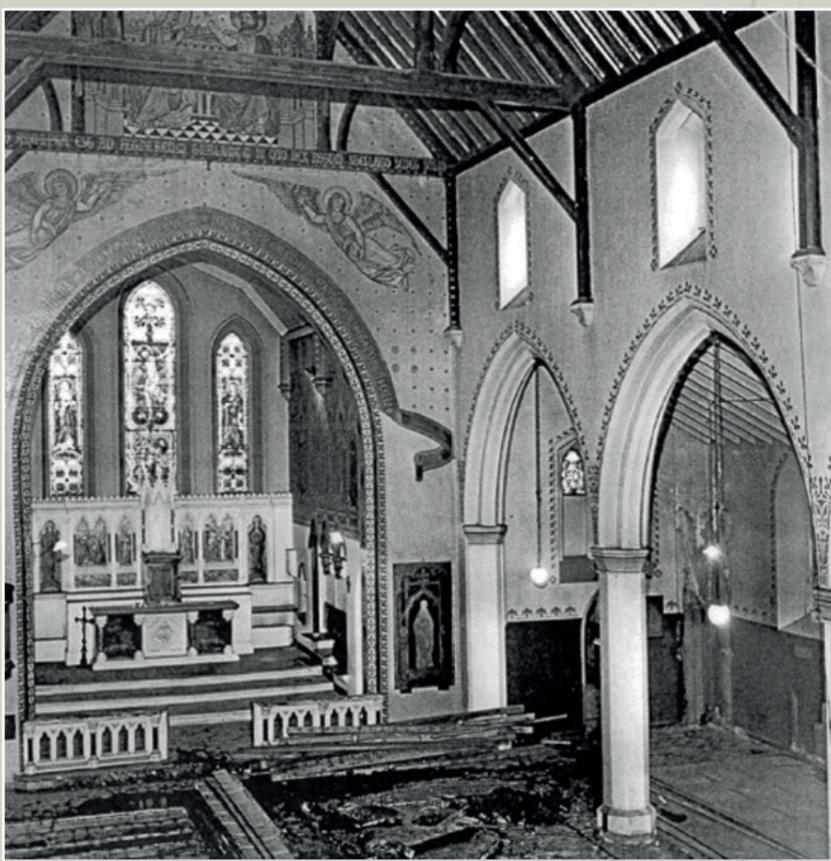
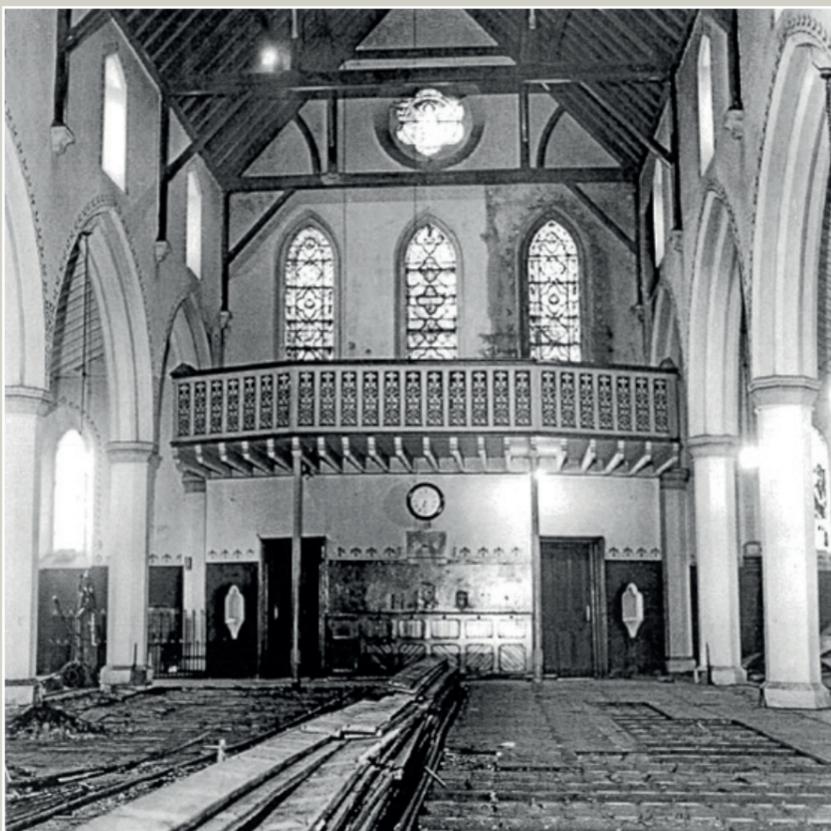
Arch leading to north chapel, adopting Perpendicular Gothic style.



Sanctuary east window, with Hardman's stained glass.

The interior is plastered. The nave is separated from the aisles by a five-bay arcade of double chamfered arches and fairly slender octagonal piers. The north chapel east window is by Pugin and made by Warrington, c. 1840 and depicts the Virgin and Child. The three lights forming the east window in the sanctuary are by Hardman's and were fitted in 1862.

Pugin's glass, made by William Warrington, in the east window was transferred to the west end when the present east windows were installed in 1862 (the transferred glass has now been lost). Alterations took place in 1875 and a new high altar was installed in 1887.



In the early 1960s plans were formulated to 'modernise' (Catholic Building Review) the building when the open roof structure was covered by a ceiling, the choir gallery removed, the original sacristy replaced by a southeast chapel, access from the chancel to the side chapels created, and an external narthex built across the west end along with sacristies and confessionals on the south of the building. This was probably the time when the octagonal bellcote on the west gable was removed and also the stained glass of the west windows. The utilitarian clear glass skylights over the aisles were probably also installed at this time. The Victorian decorations were painted over and the reredos removed, with only the font surviving. Some stained glass by Warrington, Wailes and Hardman has been reset.

Photographs prior to 1960s renovations showing original decoration, gallery at west end and open roof.

The pulpit panels have been painted with the Crucifixion flanked by St John and St Mary and a seven panel reredos has been created with the Crucifixion flanked by angelic figures: this work was done in 2014 by Burmese artist, Win Tin.

Acknowledgements:

R Hill, God's Architect (2008); R O'Donnell, The Pugins and The Catholic Midlands (2002); J F Cleary, Church of Our Lady and St Thomas of Canterbury Dudley (1965), Dixon and Muthesius, Victorian Architecture (2001)

Ground Floor

MEMORIAL TOWER