

Pugin Society

e-newsletter

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Stanbrook Abbey

Sarah Houle

Great-great-granddaughter of Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin

I came across these photos/postcards and thought members might be interested in what the interior of the Stanbrook Abbey chapel looked like before the reordering. Edward Pugin and Peter Paul Pugin designed the interior in 1878 and John Hardman Powell the stained glass windows which are still there.

The Chapel was reordered in 1971 and recreated with a very plain design and a lot of whitewash. I find it hard to think why the nuns would want to get rid of it all but they get very excited over new ideas and of course Vatican II.

My aunt Dame Monica Watts (1888 – 1970) was a nun there for over 60 years from 1908-1970 and we would visit her behind the grids in the parlour rooms.

Sadly I do not remember the Chapel in its former glory but the faithful were allowed to attend Mass and Benediction in a side chapel next to the Sanctuary and behind the wrought iron screens. Hearing the nuns singing in their treble voices was very atmospheric.

It is now an expensive hotel at which we have stayed, perhaps in Monica's cell. It specialises in weddings and conferences, which you can find on the Web. They have done the alterations very sympathetically to the old part.



Today the abbey is a hotel and part of the Hand Picked Group. Their website includes a brief history of the building which is reproduced below.

Stanbrook Abbey has a long and significant history, having been home to an order of Benedictine nuns for over 150 years prior to becoming the country house hotel it is today. The original Stanbrook Hall, of which Bride's Manor is all that remains, was built for its owner, Richard Case, in 1755. Stanbrook Hall was later purchased on behalf of the Second English Benedictine Congregation of Nuns who went on to reside at the property from 1838 to 2009.

The site was expanded by architect Charles Day in 1838 and later by three sons of the great Augustus Welby Pugin, who designed the Palace of Westminster. The Pugin family were chosen to carry out these works due to their use of Victorian gothic revival, which fit well with the Catholic style of buildings. Over the years the Pugin sons designed the church, cloisters, chapel and several additional abbey buildings.

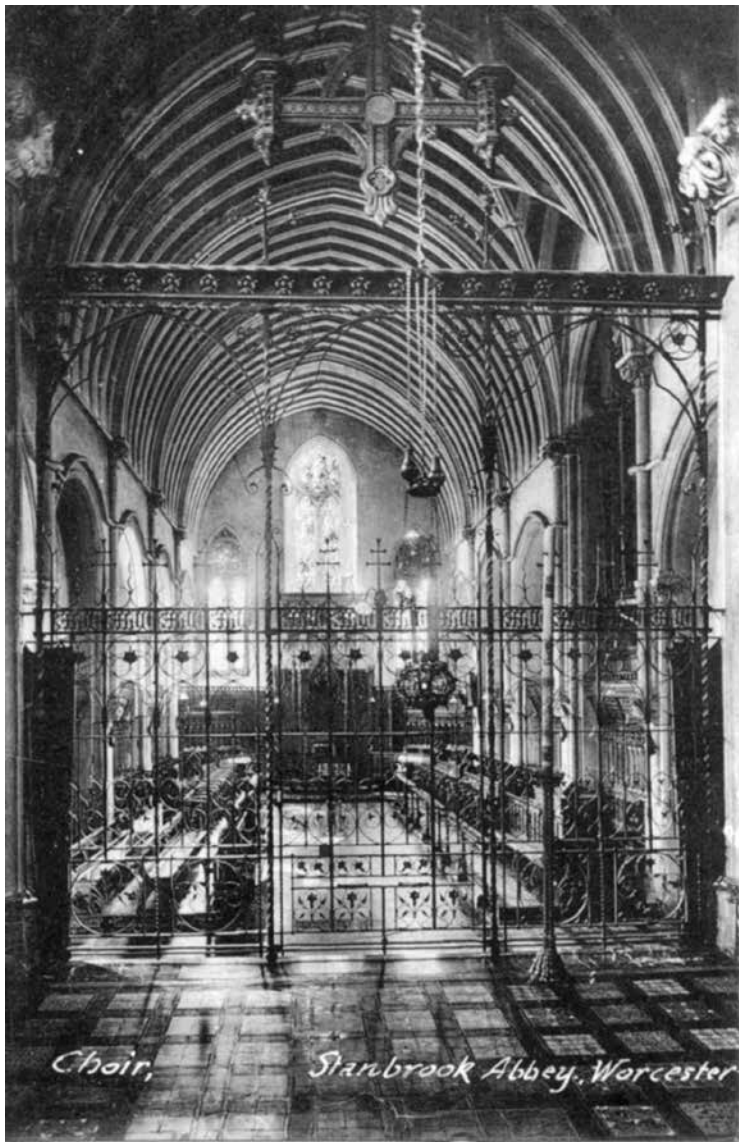
The Callow Great Hall, the former church of the abbey, was consecrated in 1871 and with its high vaulted ceiling and carefully designed stained glass windows, it is a wonderful example of the dramatic Pugin style. Evidence of the nun's dedication can be found on the floors of the pews where hours of kneeling in daily worship has created significant grooves. The stunning East Rose Window was designed by John Hardman, and depicts Our Lady of Consolation protecting Benedictine nuns. All the original floor tiles are from Minton Ltd., another notable example of a Minton floor lies within the United States Capitol building in Washington DC.

Just behind the former west entrance to the Callow Great Hall, is the Abbey's 40 metre bell tower. Those who are feeling particularly adventurous can climb the 140 steps to the top for stunning views to the Malvern Hills and surrounding countryside.

The Refectory, now a unique dining and events space, was formerly the nun's refectory, where they would gather to eat their meals. This room features oak fittings carved by Robert 'Mousey' Thompson, famous for carving mice into every piece of furniture he made.

As part of the nun's self-sufficient way of life, Stanbrook Abbey Press was created, and was one of the oldest printing presses in England. Established in 1876, it is the only known private press that was working from the 19th into the 21st century and garnered a fine international





Choir, Stanbrook Abbey, Worcester



Church and Monastery, South East, Stanbrook Abbey, Worcester



reputation. The books issued were predominantly religious texts but they also published short works which were famous for being impeccably printed and embellished with calligraphy. Dame Laurentia, later Lady Abbess in 1931, counted playwright George Bernard Shaw and Director of The Fitzwilliam Museum, Sir Sydney Cockerell, among her correspondents. Their relationship has been made into a successful play called 'The Best of Friends' by Hugh Whitmore.

After the main abbey buildings were completed the St Anne's Hall became a huge library storage room. The current Abbess of the new Stanbrook Abbey believes that around half a million ecclesiastical texts were stored in this and other storage rooms in the property. One such room remains intact in what is now the Library Bar.

The church was deconsecrated in 2009 when the few remaining nuns relocated to North Yorkshire, where a brand new Stanbrook Abbey had been built. In 2015, the new owners re-opened the original Stanbrook Abbey as a hotel prior to Hand Picked Hotels adding the property to its collection in 2017.

Visiting Pugin Cathedrals & Churches on-line

Jim Thunder

(a member in the USA and a Pugin descendant)

A few weeks ago, I realized that I could try to “attend” Mass with my wife Ann at Pugin-designed cathedrals/churches. It would allow us to see at least some of the church—the sanctuary— and with an event going on for which it was built. Some of these churches don't have virtual tours, so we can use the pandemic's video Masses to visit the interior.

One has to distinguish between online Masses that are recorded and those that can only be seen live. You also have to be careful about time—whether it is UK time or Eastern Time.

These are the 4 cathedrals where Ann and I have “attended”:

St Barnabas Cathedral, Nottingham: 5pm ET, Sundays. - North Circus Street, Nottingham, England
(churchservices.tv)

St Mary's Cathedral, Newcastle: Cathedral Church of St Mary (stmaryscathedral.org.uk) 11.30am
on Sunday

St Aidan's Cathedral, Enniscorthy, Ireland (with Our Father in Irish; and an Irish pipe for music)

St Chad's Cathedral - Birmingham - Roman Catholic

Others:

There are some 30 or 40 parish churches in UK, Ireland and Australia. A good list of them could be on the Pugin Society webpage or the wiki page for Pugin.

You can go to individual church websites or you can check something called ChurchTV or Churchservices TV

Editor's note: Church TV is an organization that provides on-line transmission for any church that enters into an agreement and installs the necessary video and sound equipment. The list of churches available is extensive. If there is no service taking place the camera still depicts the inside of the church unless it has been disabled. For further details look at <https://www.churchservices.tv>

God as Architect

Fr Simon Heans

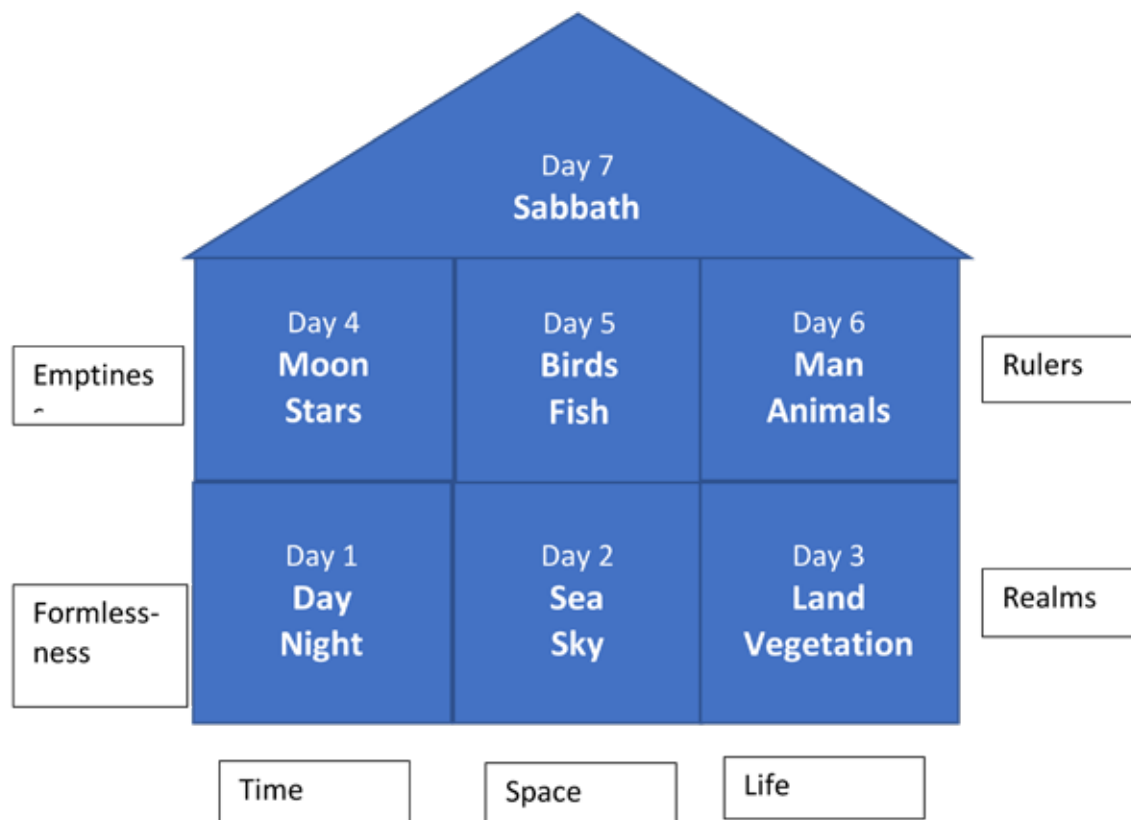
No member of this Society, I am sure, would want to deny that religious faith, whether one has it oneself or not, has been the inspiration of fine architecture. Michael Alexander reminded us in the last newsletter of the importance to Pugin of his Catholicism, and Rosemary Hill's biography declares him to have been, though perhaps not without a hint of irony, 'God's Architect'. My intention in this article is to examine the subject of God as architect.

The Genesis account of creation has been interpreted in many ways ranging from the literalistic (creation in six twenty-four-hour days) to the mythological (one of several Near Eastern creation myths from the first millennium BC) with plenty of positions lying between these two extremes. Professor Scott Hahn in his book *A Father Who Keeps His Promises*, maintains that the quasi-scientific and mythical interpretations 'involve a subtle kind of ventriloquism... the ancient text is forced to address modern problems by putting words into Moses' mouth.' What he proposes instead is a liturgical interpretation. Hahn outlines his view in the form of the diagram below:

He points out that the cosmos 'in the beginning' was a chaos; it was 'without form and void' (Genesis 1.2). In the terms of the diagram, it is characterized by 'Formlessness' and 'Emptiness'. Reading along the first or bottom row of the house, we follow the acts of creation during the first three days. Hahn calls what was created on each day, 'Realms'. Looking at the row below the house, we see that they are, respectively, 'Time', 'Space' and 'Life'. The next three days of creation (4-6) were when these 'Realms' were populated with what Hahn calls 'Rulers'. Thus, the astral bodies were created to rule the heavens, birds and fish to rule the sky and sea, and man and animals to rule the land and vegetation.

Architecture provides the literary framework for the Genesis creation narrative according to Hahn. 'Creation', he writes, 'is a big construction project.' But it is not just the building of a house that is described here as we can see from the title of the roof. It represents the Sabbath, the Day of Rest, which God 'blessed and hallowed' (Genesis 2.2-3). And that makes clear its purpose, indeed the ultimate purpose of the whole of creation. For this building is not so much a house as a temple, a place of worship, where the human creation, and through it, the whole of creation, can share in the blessedness and holiness of God.

In support of this liturgical reading of Genesis 1 and 2, Hahn cites the instructions given to Moses when he erected the Tabernacle at Sinai (Exodus 25 -31) and to Solomon when he built the Temple in Jerusalem (1 Kings



Scott Hahn, *A Father Who Keeps His Promises*, (1998), p. 44.

5-9). These parallels with the first chapters of Genesis show, in Hahn's words, 'how each shrine was designed and built - as a microcosm - to commemorate and reenact Creation.' And he concludes that 'God's erection and dedication of a cosmic temple for his royal-priestly people' would have been what Jewish readers naturally read as the primary sense of the Creation account'.

Hahn's interpretation is helpful in two ways, I think. First, because it gives us a different approach to that old canard, 'the conflict between science and religion' pitting, in this case, 'creationists' against 'evolutionists'. On Hahn's reading, Genesis obviously agrees with science in respect of the what of creation (Hahn's 'Realms' and 'Rulers' are ontologically comprehensive) while being agnostic about the how. That is the remit of modern science (or, as it was in Moses' day, ancient mythology) not chapters one and two of Genesis. Following Hahn, we can say that what those chapters do propose, is an answer to the why question, of why there is a cosmos at all, or why there is something rather than nothing.

It is helpful, secondly, because it gives us a way of addressing what Rosemary Hill, following A.N. Wilson, calls 'the God question' in relation to Pugin's work. To my knowledge, Pugin wrote nothing about God as architect, but we certainly can say that the question of God - his quest for God - was intimately bound up with his thoughts about architecture. Christabel Powell in her Durham Ph.D. thesis (available to read online) argues persuasively that his liturgical reading in cathedral libraries, notably Salisbury's, decisively influenced his architectural opinions, while Gerard Hyland shows in Pugin and Puginism that Pugin was so preoccupied by questions of liturgy that when his liturgical views changed the design of his churches did too. In other words, we could see him as a latter-day Moses (or a contemporary Solomon) intent on creating microcosmic replicas of the macrocosm of God's creation as revealed in Genesis 1 and 2. Gothic, I would suggest, was chiefly important to him because it orientated architecture - and not just church buildings - towards worship, which meant for him as a Catholic, what it did also, *mutatis mutandis*, for Moses and Solomon, viz, the offering of sacrifice to Almighty God. On that basis, I think we should speak of Pugin, without even a hint of irony, as 'God's architect'!

Remember that this is your newsletter and that it devoted to contributions from members. To submit material you don't have to be some great academic, though if you are an academic your input will still be welcome. The main test is that what you have to say will be of interest to others. If you are interested in it then there is a pretty good chance that others will be as well. So send your material to jpelliott@btinternet.com