

Pugin Society

e-newsletter

Issue 20

March/April 2022

A Treatise on Chancel Screens and Rood Lofts

Fr Simon Heans

This is a 'fervorino', or exhortation, on the Treatise, by Father Simon Heans, Chaplain to the Shrine Church of St Augustine's, Ramsgate. Father Simon comes up with a vigorous and lively account of A.W. Pugin's important work of 1851 and writes:

Have you read it? Perhaps not, because Rosemary Hill tells us that 'it is one of his least read works.' (*God's Architect*, p.459). Below I offer you six reasons why you should read it:

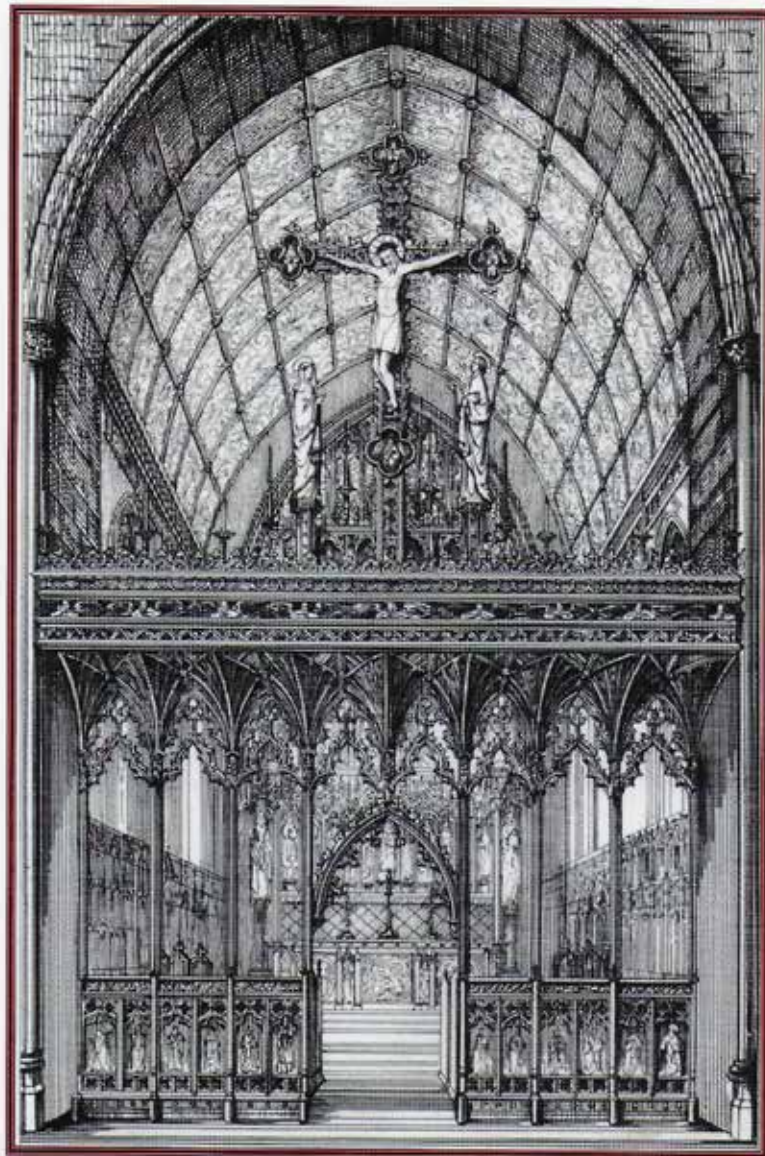
1. It is full of beautiful line-drawings, lithographically reproduced. The late nineteenth-century architect and artist, Paul Waterhouse, puts it much better than I could: 'No appreciative draughtsman can fail to admire the latitude and power with which delicate tracery, fine carvings, mouldings, and figures are indicated by the master hand that has travelled laboriously, but with exceeding rapidity, over the drawings before us.' He's right!
2. It is a work of scholarship, objective and without parti pris or bias, which, in the last analysis, vitiates *Contrasts*. Pugin has done his homework. As well as the drawings, he quotes from contemporary sources such as churchwardens' accounts as he narrates the vicissitudes of his screens. He has also done his fieldwork because he had personally visited many of the churches he writes about. And, thanks to the internet, we too can visit them. I myself have spent happy hours googling, asking "I wonder if that rood screen is still standing?" Some still are. I am hoping to make a list of them and perhaps there are other Society members who might be interested in joining me in what would, I think, be a rewarding assignment.
3. The text is very entertaining. The portraits of the four 'Ambonoclasts', as Pugin terms destroyers of screens, are extremely lively and show Pugin at the height of his literary powers. Pugin links the accounts of The Pagan Ambonoclast and The Revolutionary Ambonoclast in a single narrative which ends with the latter executing the former and then himself meeting a grisly end imprisoned in the chancel the screen of which he was trying to burn down! Pugin could have been a writer of penny dreadfuls or, in our own times, 'soaps'. To use another contemporary literary analogy, the portrait of The Modern Ambonoclast is right up there with the best of *Private Eye* satire. Newman, Faber and Mrs. Bowden (and perhaps others) who were Pugin's antagonists at the beginning of the screen controversy are 'several old women of both sexes'. *The Rambler* journalists who polemicized against Pugin on this issue for three years are also expertly skewered: 'they profited by the occasion to increase the sale of a periodical. But this may be mere calumny; and indeed it is very probably a case of pure development' – a reference to Newman's *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*.
4. The *Treatise* gives us good grounds for defending Pugin against Newman's charge of 'Puginism'. The charge is outlined in a letter to Ambrose Phillipps de Lisle during Pugin's confrontation with Faber over rood screens at Cotton, in Staffordshire: 'But he has the great fault of a man of genius, as well

The e-newsletter is edited, designed and typeset by Dr John Elliott
Copy editing is undertaken by Catriona Blaker

All material for future editions, and comments on the current edition, should be sent to
jpelliott@btinternet.com

A TREATISE
ON
CHANCEL SCREENS
AND
ROOD LOFTS

Their Antiquity, Use and Symbolic Signification



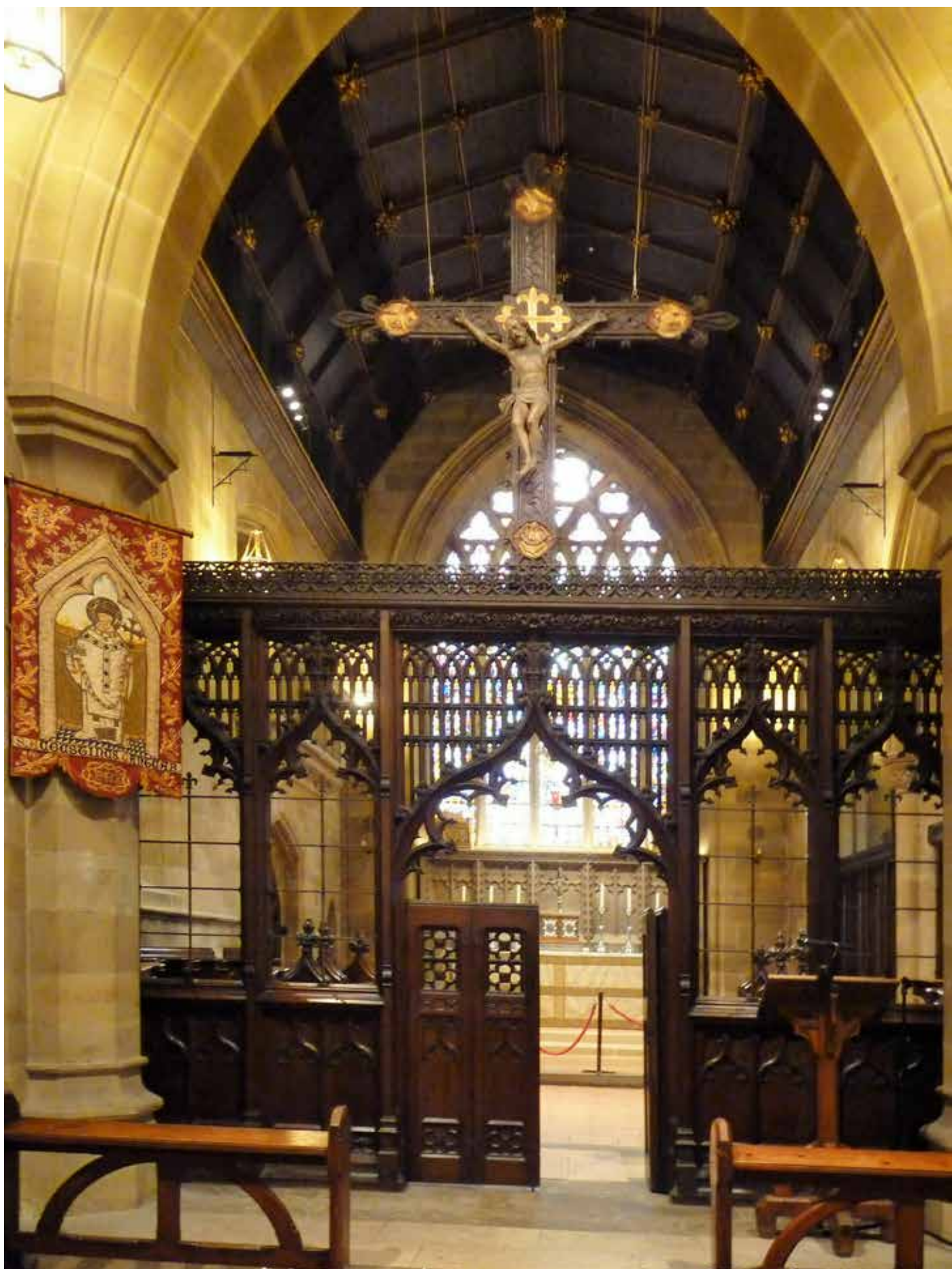
AUGUSTUS WELBY PUGIN

Front cover of the modern reprint of *A Treatise*.

as the merit. He is intolerant, and, if I might use a stronger word, a bigot. He sees nothing good in any school of Christian art except that of which he is himself so great an ornament. The Canons of Gothic architecture are to him points of faith, and everyone is a heretic who would venture to question them.'

But the *Treatise* gives the lie to this claim. Pugin writes about screens from all periods of Christian history, even praising the one in the Sistine Chapel. He occasionally uses the phrase ‘debased style’ to refer to Baroque examples, but he is far from condemning them. He includes drawings of the ancient screens of St Neret and Achilles in Rome which are certainly not Gothic in style. There are also two drawings devoted to the screen and altar at Antwerp cathedral installed in the seventeenth century, not to mention a page showing eighteenth-century screens found in four French churches. Dr Roderick O’Donnell, in the Introduction to the modern reprint by Gracewing Publishing of the *Treatise*, expresses his surprise at the catholicity of taste exhibited by Pugin: ‘Here, Pugin – of all people – also turns out to be the first to investigate post-Reformation Catholic church architecture’. But this is not a surprise unless we start from Newman’s jaundiced opinion of Pugin.

5. We are all in Dr Gerard Hyland’s debt for the magnificent gazetteers he has produced of the works of Augustus and Edward. He has also offered us a theory of Augustus’ church building and liturgical career which proposes a tri-partite division, focused on the figure of Daniel Rock, sometime chaplain to the Earl of Shrewsbury and a learned advocate for the Use of Sarum. (See *True Principles*, Spring 2012, *The Architectural Works of A.W.N. Pugin* pp.239-47 but most fully in *Beyond ‘Puginism’*). I was persuaded by it until reading the *Treatise* and then finding this comment on it in *Beyond ‘Puginism’*. Dr Hyland writes: ‘after the Council of Trent screens had been removed from most Continental Catholic churches, just as they had been in most Anglican churches after the Reformation.’ As to the truth of the latter, Pugin opens his chapter On Screens in England thus: ‘There is no country in Christendom where so many screens are still standing, as in England.’ (page 65) He then backs that statement up with reference to the many screens that survived the activities of the Calvinist ambonoclasts. Regarding the claim about screens on the Continent, chapters two to six of the *Treatise* are its refutation. Dr Hyland wants us to believe that screens were part of the ‘Sarum-compliance’ programme of ecclesiology inspired by Rock, and that Pugin’s advocacy of screens was therefore about restoring a medieval piece of furniture that had been abandoned everywhere, especially in the post-Tridentine Church. But I think Pugin demonstrates that screens were not a relic of medievalism but were regarded as being very much part of what was needed for the celebration of the Tridentine liturgy. That was certainly the view of St Charles Borromeo, whose opinion on the subject is quoted by Pugin on page 21 of the *Treatise*. Dr O’Donnell reminds us that Borromeo was the bishop whom Pugin’s ‘opponents liked to point to as the model Counter-Reformation bishop.’ If screens were incompatible with the Mass of Trent, would not Borromeo have said so? Was ‘Sarum-compliance’ really the issue at stake in the screens controversy? Dr Hyland maintains that Pugin was moving beyond ‘Puginism’ in the period 1848 to 1851 and refers to certain features of St Augustine’s (other than the chancel screen!) to substantiate the claim. But that would have been news to Newman, who coined the word at the beginning of this period and campaigned against the phenomenon it named throughout those years. So my fifth reason for urging you to read the *Treatise* is to stimulate a debate about the shape and direction of Pugin’s career, in relation to these issues, as presented by Dr Hyland.
6. The final reason I think you should read the *Treatise* is that it is a prophetic work. In my first contribution to the e-newsletter, I expressed some scepticism about the claim made by the late David Watkin that Pugin was a proto-modernist. Reading the *Treatise* has reinforced that scepticism; in fact it has convinced me that if there is a nineteenth century precedent for ecclesiological modernism it is rather to be looked for among his opponents, the Oratorians. In the first chapter of the *Treatise* Pugin writes: ‘We have now to contend for the great principles of Catholic antiquity - tradition and reverence against modern development and display.’ He then explains what he means by the latter: ‘It will be shown in this work that the idea of room-worship, and the all-seeing principles, is a perfect novelty.’ The Oratorians were propagandists for a new departure in church design which had before been associated only with Calvinists, Pagans and Revolutionaries, and definitely not with Catholic episcopal authority, viz., that churches should be built without screens. Pugin’s Oratorian opponents knew perfectly well that screens were not inconsistent with Tridentine rubrical requirements. Those rubrics did not inspire their full-frontal assault on Pugin; that originated rather in the customs or ‘use’ of St Philip Neri and the liturgy of the *Chiesa Nuova*. Their ecclesiology was based on the ministry of St Philip with its sacred concerts (oratorios) and preaching during Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. Dr Hyland does not fail to note how ironic it is that the first Forty Hours devotion in England was held at St George’s Southwark, screen and all. So chancel screens did not interfere with this Oratorian devotion! And yet there was no letup in Newman’s campaign against screens. Who was really the bigot, I wonder? ‘Room worship and the all-seeing principles’ are what I would call ‘Oratorianism’. I would also say that modernist and post-modernist ecclesiology is its logical consequence. Just google photos of the interior of the Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King, Liverpool if you are in any doubt. And of course that is just the most egregious example; there are many others. As for ‘room worship’ consult



Pugin's fine rood screen at St Augustine's Ramsgate, now returned to its rightful position. Photo, Pugin Society.

the website of Brentwood Cathedral and have a look at the extension built by Watkin's favourite architect Quinlan Terry. What one sees is a large room with tables – one of them serving as the altar – and chairs - one of which is for the bishop. Pugin writes about the screens controversy: 'It is not a struggle for taste or ornament' – so aesthetic differences over Gothic and Classical are irrelevant to him – 'but a contention for vital principles.' And with this next sentence Pugin, in my opinion, speaks with a prophetic voice: 'There is a most intimate connection between the externals of religion and the faith itself; and it is scarcely possible to preserve the interior faith in the doctrine of the holy eucharist if all exterior reverence and respect is to be abolished' (*Treatise* page 3). It seems to me that modernist and post-modernist ecclesiology has made a considerable contribution to doing just that, with exactly the result Pugin predicted.

So, read the *Treatise* for the beauty of Pugin's drawings; for the objectivity of his historical scholarship; for the imaginative power with which he brings architectural history to life; for evidence that Pugin was not a 'bigot', intolerant and unappreciative of styles other than Gothic; for its importance in assessing the whole of Pugin's career; and for the prophetic character of his critique of Oratorianism.

Explaining why the *Treatise* is not much read, Rosemary Hill describes it as, 'Involving itself in an always obscure and almost opaque controversy.' I hope I have said enough to convince you that for me at least the screens controversy was neither, and that the *Treatise* should not be left unread, especially by members of the Pugin Society!

NOTE The *Treatise* can be read in its entirety on line through www.gutenberg.org or bought as a paperback reprint from Gracewing Publishing.
First editions occasionally appear, but they are costly.

The Original Ladye Altar from St Marie's Church, Rugby

Nick Beveridge

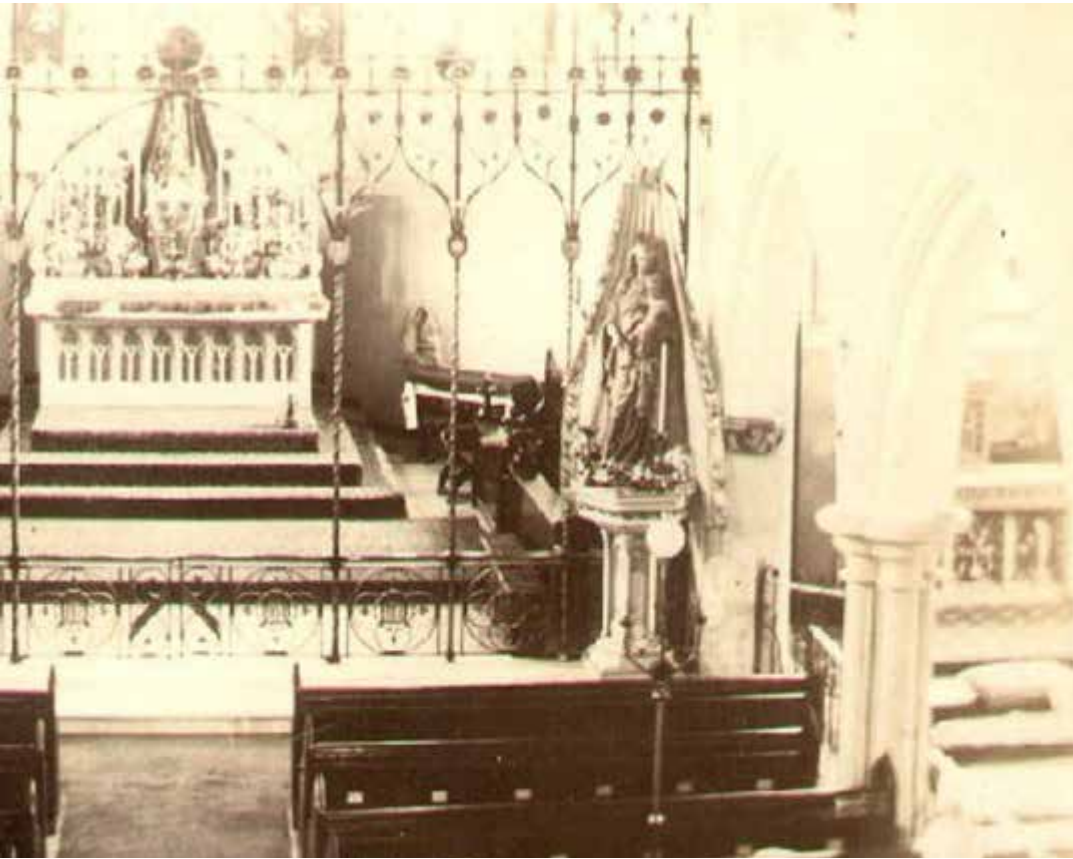
New Zealand member Nick Beveridge turns detective and tracks an A.W.N. Pugin Ladye altar to its present whereabouts.

St Marie's, Rugby, was designed in by A.W.N. Pugin in 1845-6 for Captain J. H. Washington Hibbert of Bilton Grange and opened on 8 September 1847.¹ Built in the Decorated style of the early 14th century, the church consisted of a buttressed nave with saddleback west tower and a three-bay north aisle with porch. The chancel was off-centre to the nave, supposedly to allow those in the north aisle to see the altar in the sanctuary.² The north aisle was gabled and terminated in a Ladye Chapel/Hibbert Chantry abutting a sacristy to the north of the chancel.³

The original north aisle, porch and sacristy were demolished to make way for EW Pugin's large basilican plan extension of 1863-64, in which the original nave and chancel forms the south aisle and Hibbert Chapel (containing the original high altar); the original porch was rebuilt off the new north aisle.⁴

From 1897-1908, the church was enriched, especially with new altars and chancel decorations and furnishings. An early photograph of the interior shows Augustus Pugin's original high altar from the first church in the new sanctuary (see next page).

'It seems that it was brought here until the present grandiose work was planned to celebrate the Jubilee year, 1897, by Boultons of Cheltenham, to designs by T. R. Donnelly of Coventry.'⁵ Interestingly, the photo also shows that the Pugin Ladye altar had been repositioned in the original chancel, now the south aisle. The Pugin high altar was returned to its original position in 1897 but the front was later destroyed by a crib fire, after which it was reconstructed with five panels of traceried arcades instead of the original eight.⁶



Pre-1897 photograph of the interior of St Marie's (Rugby Library)

The fate of the Ladye altar was however elusive as it was evidently not incorporated into the new extension, there being another one in the new north aisle. It seems that it (the mensa at least) found a new home in the Church of St Alban-on-the-Moors, Cardiff, which was built for the Institute of Charity (Rosminians). This church was designed by F.R. Bates, A.R.I.B.A., of Newport in 'the purest perpendicular style' and completed



Ladye altar in St Alban-on-the Moors, Cardiff

in 1911.⁷ However, ‘the Lady [*sic*] altar came from St Marie’s Rugby (also a Rosminian church from around 1860), and is attributed to A.W.N. Pugin...’⁸

With the theme of the Annunciation and including representations of the Madonna Lily,⁹ the central panel is not unlike the illustration on the title page of the 1849 edition of Pugin’s *Floriated Ornament* but with the monogram MR (*Maria Regina*) instead of AWP on the vase.

It is unclear what happened to the original reredos of the altar but the two panels of the current one (not shown) echo the tracery arcade on the front of the current St Marie’s Pugin high altar mensa. Worth noting also are the floor tiles which (apart from the separate ‘A’ and the ‘M’ tiles at either side of the pavement near the altar) are identical to those in the Blessed Sacrament Chapel in St George’s Cathedral, Southwark, opened in 1848.

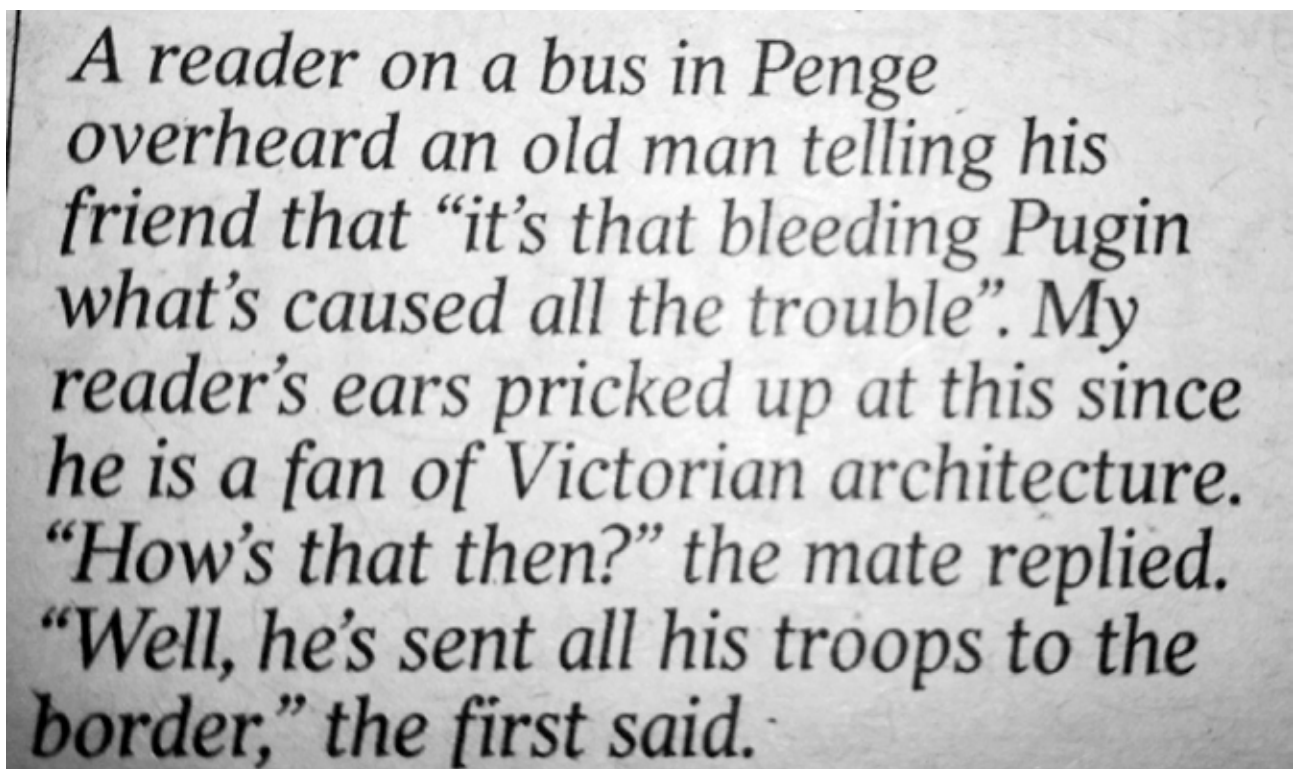
I haven’t been able to find Pugin’s original design for the Ladye altar, but I have found an earlier version of it for the ‘Altar of our Blefsed [*sic*] Ladye’ in his now destroyed St Marie’s, Liverpool, of 1844.¹⁰

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Fr Sebastian Jones C.O. for an image of the Lady altar in the Cardiff Oratory Church of St Alban-on-the-Moors and to Catriona Blaker for her help with this article.

Notes

- 1 Roderick O’Donnell, *The Pugins and the Catholic Midlands*, 2002, p. 109
- 2 Taking Stock, Catholic Churches of England and Wales: St Marie’s Church, Rugby (<https://taking-stock.org.uk/building/rugby-st-marie/>)
- 3 Brian Andrews, *St Marie’s Church, Rugby*, Pugin Foundation Newsletter, No. 83, p. 7
- 4 G. J. Hyland, *The Architectural Works of A.W.N. Pugin*, 2014, p. 76
- 5 Taking Stock, op. cit.
- 6 Derek and Lucy Thackray, *A Brief History of St Marie’s Church 1844 to 1896*, 1987, p.13
- 7 Who also designed a stone and marble pulpit carved by Boultons which replaced the 1864 pulpit in 1932 in St Marie’s (Taking Stock, op. cit.)
- 8 Taking Stock, Catholic Churches of England and Wales: St Alban-on-the -Moors, Cardiff (<https://taking-stock.org.uk/building/cardiff-st-alban-on-the-moors/>)
- 9 Also called Annunciation lily, symbolic of purity ([collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/madonna-lily](https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/madonna-lily))
- 10 Alexandra Wedgwood, *Catalogue of the Drawings Collection of the Royal Institute of British Architects: The Pugin Family*, 1977, fig. 78



A reader on a bus in Penge overheard an old man telling his friend that “it’s that bleeding Pugin what’s caused all the trouble”. My reader’s ears pricked up at this since he is a fan of Victorian architecture. “How’s that then?” the mate replied. “Well, he’s sent all his troops to the border,” the first said.

From *The Times* 12 February 2022