A Note on the Provenance of the Oscott College Organ Case

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Introduction

No documentary evidence is known to exist linking Pugin with the design of the Oscott College, Birmingham, organ case. This instrument was built by L. and S. Parsons of Bloomsbury, London, for £800,[1] and was given by John Hardman, the Birmingham industrialist whom Pugin had met in the first half of 1837.[2] The two men were to become lifelong friends, Hardman's business manufacturing Pugin's metalwork and—from 1845—his stained glass designs.

A detail of the Oscott College organ case (Image: Brian Andrews)

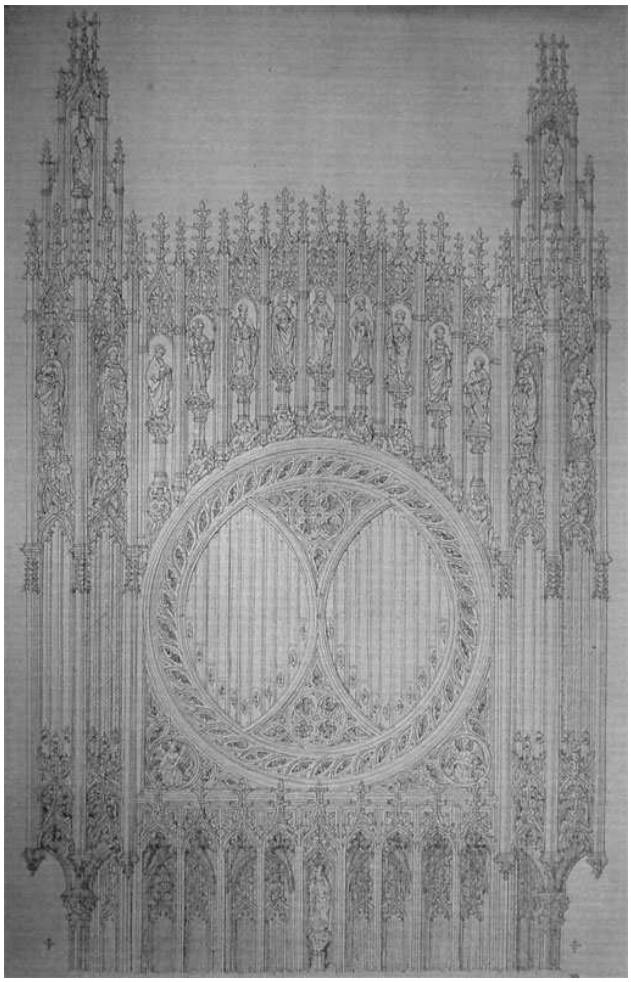
The extensive material held in the Oscott Archives relating to the construction and furnishing of the College has—apparently—no record of the organ's purchase, which

[1] J. Connelly, 'The Oscott organ, 1837–1937, *The Oscotian*, 1937, p. 86.
[2] The first mention of Hardman in Pugin's diaries is dated 29 May 1837: 'Dined at Mr Hardman's'. See Pugin's diary for 1837, National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, Pressmark 86 MM 56, L5158 1969.

is understandable given that it was a gift from Hardman.[3] Likewise, Pugin's diaries for 1837 and 1838 have no mention of it. Perhaps Pugin made the design for Hardman at no cost, an occasional practice of his, just as he gifted furnishings to some of his buildings.[4] The organ was certainly in place for the consecration of the chapel on 29 May 1838 when it was noted in a newspaper report as 'pealing forth its harmonious sounds'.[5]

Design lineage

It is asserted here that Pugin developed the Oscott organ case design from an organ illustrated at f.41 in his 1834 ideal scheme for 'St Marie's College'.[6]



The organ illustrated in Pugin's 1834 ideal scheme for St Marie's College

[3] Pugin's involvement with Oscott, an account that draws heavily on the Oscott Archives material, is documented in Roderick O'Donnell, 'Pugin at Oscott', in Judith F. Champ (ed.), *Oscott College 1838–1988: A volume of commemorative essays*, Oscott, 1988, pp. 45–66.

[4] The design of all his close friend Bishop Willson's requisites for Van Diemen's Land at no cost is a notable example.

[5] *The Freeman's Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser* (Dublin), 9 June 1838, p. 4, c. 3.

[6] See 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, pp. 147–52.

The analysis given below to link the two designs and place the attribution of the Oscott case to Pugin beyond reasonable doubt will examine the probability of the two designs coming from different hands. To this end I will compare the principal elements on the Oscott College organ case (**1**) with those on the organ in the St Marie's College ideal scheme (**2**) and with those on contemporary English organs having Gothic cases (**3**).

Analysis

The correlation between the Oscott organ principal elements and those in the ideal scheme (or elements known to be in Pugin's design repertoire where such elements are not in the ideal scheme) is evaluated. In addition the probability that the elements could come from another source, based on the likely occurrence of such elements, in the same position with the same form, on contemporary English Gothic organ cases is evaluated.

Where the probability of concurrence approaches zero a conservative value of one in twenty (i.e. 0.05) is assigned. The cumulative probability of the Oscott case having a common design source with the ideal scheme case, as well as it having a design source other than that for the ideal scheme is then obtained by multiplying the individual probabilities together.

Element Correlation Table

Oscott College Organ Case Element	Correlation between 1 and 2	Correlation between 1 and 3
A. Oculus for central display pipes	1.0	0.05
B. Trefoil cresting to oculus	1.0	0.05
C. Niches over top of oculus	1.0	0.05
D. trefoil heads to niches and gablets	0.5	0.5
E. Ogee form to trefoil heads and gablets	1.0	0.5
F. Pinnacles, diagonally set, between niches	1.0	0.5
G. Square section towers to flanking pipes	1.0	0.5
H. Flanking towers set diagonally	1.0	0.5
I. Flanking towers capped by gablets	1.0	0.5
J. Pinnacles, diagonally set, between gablets	1.0	0.5
Cumulative Probabilities	**0.5**	**9.8×10^{-7}**

Notes on elements

A. The St Marie's ideal scheme has further elaboration within the oculus.

B. Although not on the ideal scheme, this formed part of Pugin's design repertoire and was used on monstrances. His uptake of this element may have post-dated the ideal scheme design.

C. The ‘niches’ on the Oscott case are too shallow to contain figures, but have the precise form of actual statue niches. The Oscott case is much smaller than the ideal scheme and less elaborate.
D. Some of the gablets on the ideal scheme have trefoil heads, some don’t.
I. the Oscott flanking towers are essentially those of the ideal scheme, but with the ideal scheme superstructure higher than the top of the adjacent niche gablets omitted.

Conclusions

1. The probability that the Oscott College organ case and the ideal scheme organ case had a common design source is at least 50%.
2. The probability that the Oscott case had a different design source from that of the ideal scheme case is on the order of one million to one against.
3. The probability that the common design source for the two cases was Pugin, as opposed to someone who had access to the ideal scheme drawings, is extremely high. The St Marie’s College ideal scheme was Pugin’s property, passing to his widow Jane upon his death and then remaining with her until her death in 1909.[7]
4. The virtually perfect correlation between the elements on the Oscott and ideal scheme cases rules out the possibility of any other designer creating the Oscott case by working—unwittingly—in Pugin’s manner. Even if such a person had included elements **D** through **J**, the unique combination of elements **A** to **C** would still have made such a likelihood no more than at best a 1 in 8,000 probability.
5. I therefore conclude that the Oscott College organ case was designed by Pugin.

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[7] See Robert Dell, ‘Who was the Architect of the Houses of Parliament? New Light on an Old Controversy’, *Burlington Magazine*, vol. VII, 1909, pp. 403–20.