

Pugin Foundation

St Alphonsus' Church, Barntown, Ireland

Brian Andrews

Introduction

Many of Pugin's churches in England and Ireland came about as a result of the generosity of the Talbot family, and St Alphonsus', Barntown, in County Wexford is no exception.



St Alphonsus, Barntown, from the north-west (Image: Brian Andrews)

John Hyacinth Talbot MP of Talbot Hall, New Ross, County Wexford, had met Pugin at Alton Towers, Staffordshire, the seat of his nephew John Talbot, 16th Earl of Shrewsbury, in July 1839 and this was to become a fruitful source for Pugin's Irish commissions.¹

For many years prior to the 1840s the Catholics in the vicinity of the Three Rocks at Barntown, Co. Wexford, had worshipped in 'what was no more than a shelter in a barn-like structure in the village'.² Fr Patrick Murphy, Parish Priest of Glynn, whose responsibilities included the Barntown community, determined to provide his flock with a permanent church and started fund-raising in earnest in 1842. Murphy, a man of some influence within the Diocese of Ferns, was friendly with the Talbot family, using this connection 'to maximum

¹ Roderick O'Donnell, 'The Pugins in Ireland', *A.W.N. Pugin, Master of Gothic Revival*, Yale University Press, New Haven. 1995, p. 142.

² Tom & Teresa Wickham, 'St Alphonsus Church Barntown', *Journal of the Taghmon Historical Society*, no. 4, 2001, n.p.

advantage in obtaining assistance in the building of his church'.³ Through John Hyacinth Talbot he obtained the services of Pugin to design the church.

The Design

For his Barntown composition Pugin chose a type based on the medieval Church of St Michael, Long Stanton, Cambridgeshire. This was a model much admired amongst those seeking to revive the small English village church type in the first, archaeologically-based, phase of the Gothic Revival around the early 1840s. Pugin would use this form with its pent-roofed aisles and distinctive west front surmounted by a double bellcote for three churches, one each in England, Australia and Ireland, namely, St Andrew's, Cambridge (1841), St Charles Borromeo's, Ryde (1842), and St Alphonsus', Barntown (1844).



From the left: the Long Stanton, Cambridge, Ryde and Barntown facades

For his Cambridge and Ryde designs Pugin supported the bellcote by a local thickening of the nave west wall, whereas at Barntown he more closely followed the Long Stanton exemplar by using a pair of substantial buttresses. In this latter case his most interesting solution to transferring the bellcote load stresses to the ground was via local thickening which extended down from the bellcote via what were in effect embedded 'flying buttresses', leaving between them an arched 'recess' within which were placed the three-light west window and the west door.

Unlike the Long Stanton church, the nave and aisles of which were covered with a single pitched roof, Pugin's three essays all had their aisles separately expressed externally by separate pent roofs.

Whereas the English and Australian designs were for small churches on a par with their Long Stanton exemplar, Barntown was writ large. It consisted of a five-bay nave and two-bay chancel, the whole covered by a single roof. Pugin would have intended a wooden rood screen to mark the internal division between nave and chancel. The aisles extended the length of the building. The easternmost two bays of the south aisle were intended for a chapel, separated from the chancel and aisle spaces by parclose screens, as was the penultimate bay of the north aisle.

There was a west door for ceremonial usage, such as processions and the visit of a bishop, and a south porch for congregational use. The sacristy was set against the easternmost two

³ *ibid.*

bays of the north side, with its own external entrance via a shouldered arch door set in a pent-roof porch.

The church was in a severe late thirteenth-century style with minimal structural and decorative embellishment.

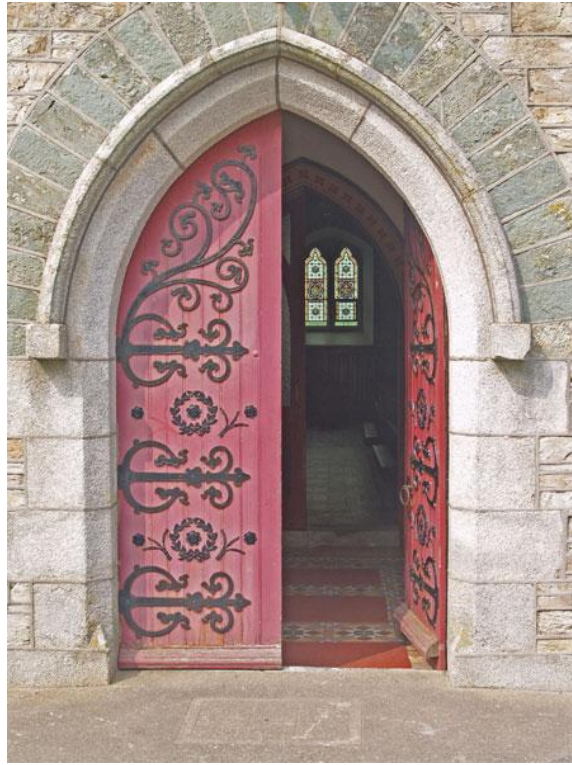
Angle buttresses against the chancel east wall in the plane of the nave arcade effectively book-ended those on the façade, which latter as previously mentioned also supported the bellcote. The only other buttressing was to the south porch. Dripstone mouldings were used over the east and west windows and the porch door, but not the remaining windows which were punched into the wall planes in a manner pre-figuring one of the key characteristics of the later High Victorian Gothic.



The south porch (Image: Brian Andrews)

There were paired trefoil-headed windows in the aisles, a three-light window with traceried head in the nave west wall and a large five-light window with Geometrical Decorated tracery in the chancel east wall. Beyond this, detail elaboration was confined to splendidly elaborate wrought iron hinges and strapwork to the west and south doors.

The totality of this stringent approach to the overall design gave it a tough character in keeping with actual Irish medieval architecture.



Wrought iron work to the porch door (Image: Brian Andrews)



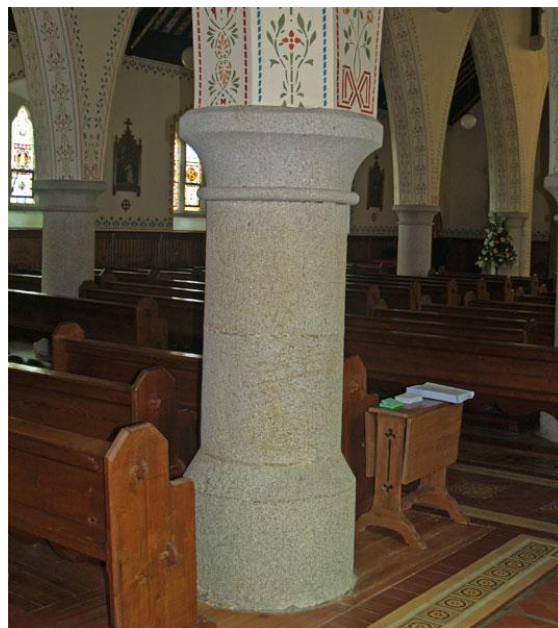
The tough character of the Barntown design (Image: Brian Andrews)

Pugin crowned the nave west gable with one of his more muscular bellcotes. It had two openings for bells, the space above being pierced by a quatrefoil, a composition which he would use again in his slightly later design for the little Anglican Church of St Lawrence, Tubney.



The bellcote (Image: Brian Andrews)

The nave arcade was supported by short sturdy piers having elemental capitals and bases, the only moulding to the nave arches being a simple chamfer.



A nave pier with is very simple capital and base (Image: Brian Andrews)

The nave roof was again a simple form consisting of scissor trusses resting on wall posts supported by plain corbels, and the aisle roofs were merely lean-to structures.



Nave roof trusses (Image: Brian Andrews)

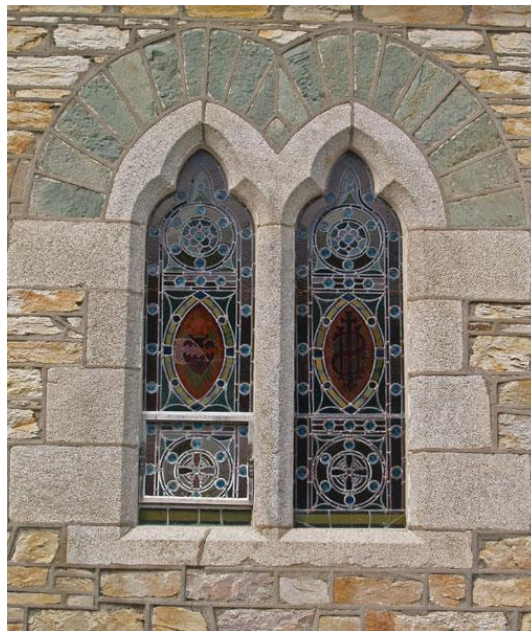
The net effect of the simplicity of Pugin's design elements—nave piers, arch mouldings, roof trusses, no separate structural expression of the chancel—was to impart to the interior a feeling of uncluttered spaciousness, something which he had equally achieved in his slightly earlier design used by Bishop Willson for St Patrick's Church, Colebrook, Tasmania.

Construction

Fundraising for the church got under way in 1842 and the foundation stone was laid in July 1844.⁴ As for so many of Pugin's Irish buildings, Richard Pierce of Wexford was the clerk of works.⁵ That Pugin's trust in Pierce was well placed is evident in the high constructional quality of his work inter alia at St Peter's College Chapel, Wexford, St Michael's, Gorey, St Aidan's Cathedral, Enniscorthy, St Mary's, Tagoat, and of course St Alphonsus', Barntown. Indeed, Pugin regarded Pierce's involvement in his Irish work as virtually a pre-requisite to undertaking designs, as is shown in the following extract from his June 1840 letter to Fr Thomas O'Sullivan of Killarney regarding the possibility of designing a cathedral there:

I could not undertake your church without a person whom I should approve being constantly on the spot ... Mr Pierce of Wexford must be employed to see the work properly carried out and for which service he will agree to a proper remuneration with the parties.⁶

Rubble stone for the walls was carted by local people from a quarry at Newtown while the granite for the dressed work was from Carlow.⁷ The varied colouration of the rubble stone with tough dressed granite set into it has imparted to the Barntown church a variety of texture and a delicate polychromy which contributes greatly to the pleasant articulation of an otherwise severe exterior.



Colour and texture in the Barntown walls (Image: Brian Andrews)

⁴ Diocese of Ferns, *Churches of the Diocese of Ferns: Symbols of a Living Faith*, Booklink, Ireland, p. 77.

⁵ Barry O'Leary, 'Richard Pierce: architect and acolyte of the Gothic Revival', in Michael McCarthy & Karina O'Neill (eds), *Studies in the Gothic Revival* Four Courts Press, Dublin, 2008, p. 169.

⁶ Pugin to O'Sullivan, 29 June 1840, quoted in O'Leary, op. cit., p. 170. Fr Thomas O'Sullivan was a curate in Killarney under Dr Cornelius Egan, Bishop of Kerry, there (*The Catholic Directory and Annual Register, for the Year 1839*, London, 1839, p. 135).

⁷ Wickham, 'Barntown', op. cit.

Fr Murphy's detailed financial records for the construction of the church have survived and it is interesting to see the amounts expended.⁸ These may be summarized as follows:

Exterior (walls)	£767-12-7
Exterior (roof & windows)	£495-12-5
Extras (gutters, chimney tops)	£9-8-4
Interior	£255-7-7
Movable furniture	£104-10-10½

The interior costs included items such as plastering, staining of the roof and all fixed timber, tiles and fixed furnishings. These latter included holy water fonts, a piscina (illustrated below) of granite, and the 'Altar of the Blessed Virgin'.



The now disused granite piscina, clearly put to a novel use in recent times (Image: Brian Andrews)

Missing from Fr Murphy's list of fixed furnishings was the main altar, simply because it was not an incurred cost, having been one of several donations to the new church by its benefactor John Hyacinth Talbot.⁹

The altar was designed by Pugin and carved in Caen stone. The front consisted of a series of panels with bas-relief carved figures set into them, a type widely used by him.¹⁰

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁰ For example, in Alton, Cadogan Street, Cheadle, The Grange, Kenilworth, Oscott, Ramsgate, Salisbury, Ware and Woolwich.



Pugin's altar. The tabernacle and the Caen stone and marble reredos are not by Pugin, dating from 1899. (Image: Brian Andrews)

The iconography and detailing of the figures are typical of Pugin. A row of angels holding shields bearing the Sacred Monogram flank, from left: St John the Evangelist; a Sedes Sapientiae, or seated Virgin and Child; and St Anne teaching the young Virgin the scriptures. (Note that the altar has been crudely re-painted.) This latter, as Pugin would have well known, was a popular devotional subject in the later Middle Ages.



St Anne with the Virgin (Image: Brian Andrews)

Fr Murphy's list of movable furnishings included a sacring bell at a cost of £2-10-0, a rather more spartan one than the general run of Pugin's sacring bell designs. This and several other items were provided by Hardmans at Murphy's request, their order being filled on 30 August 1848 and received safely by mid October of that year.¹¹



The spartan sacring bell (Image: Brian Andrews)

John Hyacinth Talbot's other major gift to St Alphonsus' Church was the five-light chancel east window. Hardmans recorded the order for the window in their first Glass Day Book, 1847, f.27, Feb. 26, as follows: 'A Window of .../.../5 lights with 3 Figures & Quarries/Stained Borders &c &c/13' 4" x 1' 6 1/2"/.../15 pieces of Tracery for do.'¹² The charge for the window, paid by Talbot, was £97.¹³

The principal subjects of the window are set in the three central lights under canopies and consist of God the Father flanked by an Annunciation scene comprising the Archangel Gabriel and the Virgin Mary. Below the figure of God the Father is a Marian symbol, a lily in a vase, entwined by a scroll bearing Gabriel's salutation to Mary: 'Ave Maria Gratia Plena Dominus Tecum' (Hail Mary full of grace the Lord is with thee).¹⁴

The greater part of the window's area is taken up with simple silver-stained quarries having alternating fleurs de lis and roses, being further traditional Marian symbols, and the tracery lights have floriated decoration. It is clear that costs were carefully minimized, and this

¹¹ In a letter to Hardman dated 15 August 1848 Pugin detailed items requested by Fr Murphy, whom he described as a 'most dependable and excellent person', and included a sketch of the type of bell he wanted made. Pugin to Hardman, 15 August 1848, with accompanying footnote, in Margaret Belcher, *The Collected Letters of A.W.N. Pugin*, volume 3: 1846 to 1848, OUP, Oxford, 2009, p. 569.

¹² Stanley A. Shepherd, *The Stained Glass of A.W.N. Pugin*, Spire Books Ltd, Reading, 2009, p. 385.

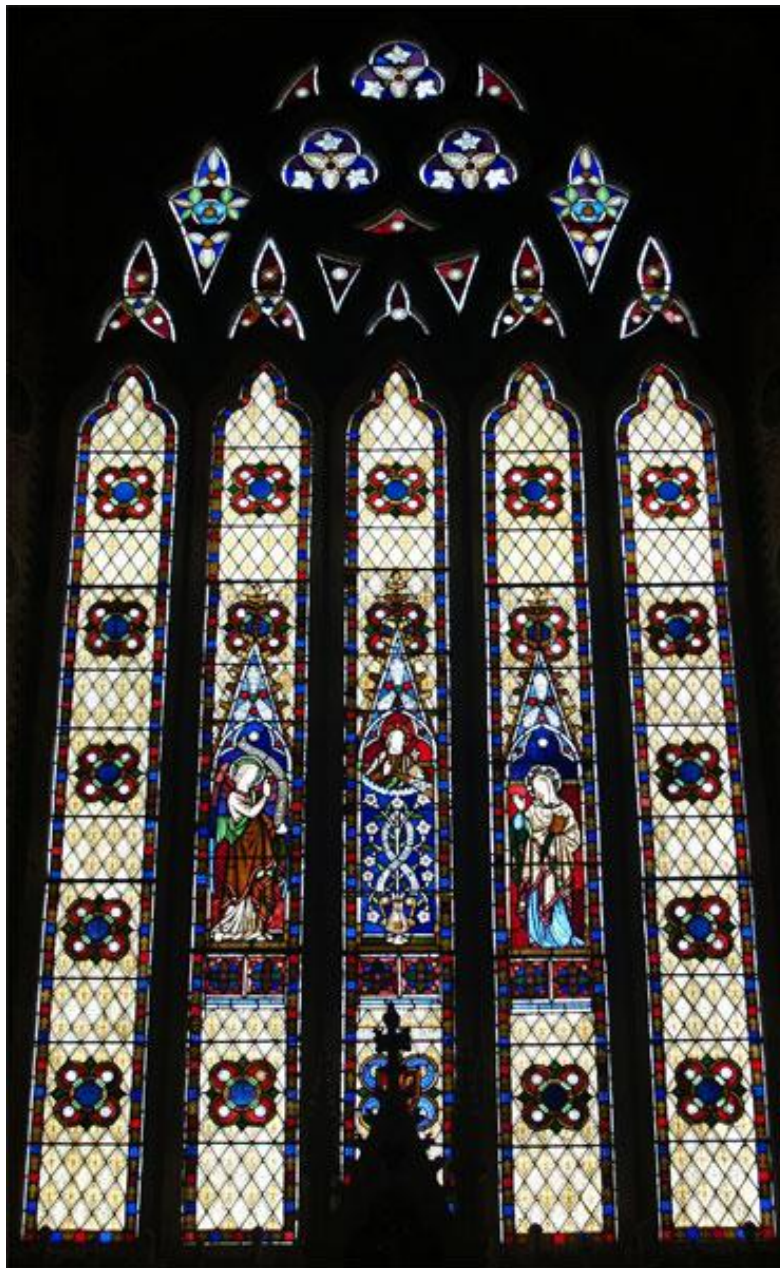
¹³ Margaret Belcher, *The Collected Letters of A.W.N. Pugin*, volume 3 1846 to 1848, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2009, p. 204, n. 7.

¹⁴ Luke 1:28. The word 'Mary' is an interpolation.

becomes apparent in correspondence relating to the window's production. In a revealing letter to Pugin dated 14 October 1847 Talbot wrote:

You have the exact dimensions &c. of this window from Pierce. You promised me it should be Simple and My D^r fellow as Cheap as you Can—first for my Pocket, and Secondly for Good Example for Simplicity & Cheapness to encourage others and above all with Expedition as he is badly off for it right Now—Put the Talbot arms in it—in Some way as it is but right to Mark our faith hereafter, to our descendants.¹⁵

Pugin did indeed include the Talbot arms, in the quatrefoil near the base of the central light (obscured by the top of the high altar in our illustration below).



The chancel east window (Image: Brian Andrews)

¹⁵ Belcher, loc. cit.

The window is unusual in having the two subjects of the Annunciation scene separated by an intervening light. The reason for the presence of God the Father in the central light is given by John Hardman Powell to Hardman in a letter likely written late in 1847. He says that Pugin intends putting ‘the Eternal Father’ there ‘or he says it will be miserable’.¹⁶ Clearly, the central light design up to this point had only included the lily, vase and scroll, all related to the Annunciation but making for a weak central light composition. It ought to be noted that the amended subject is not arbitrary, for proceeding from the right hand of God the Father is the Holy Spirit in the form of a Dove, its trajectory directed at the Virgin, as can be seen in the enlarged central section of the window below. Thus the central light becomes an integral element of the scene, graphically depicting a further passage in St Luke’s narrative of the Annunciation where Gabriel says ‘The Holy Spirit shall come upon thee and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee’.¹⁷

There appears to be a further exercise in cost-cutting in the window’s production. Pugin had dispatched the cartoons for the Barntown window to Hardman on 14 December 1847. Then on 20 December he wrote to Hardman saying: ‘I have just got your Letter. cut as much as you like out of the barn town window. all the *upper part of canopies*—can be left out Easily.’¹⁸



Chancel east window detail (Image: Brian Andrews)

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Luke 1:35.

¹⁸ Pugin to Hardman, 20 December 1847, in Belcher, *op. cit.*, p. 358.

This is precisely what was done. A comparison with the Annunciation window delivered to St Mary's, Creswell, Staffordshire, and manufactured from the same cartoons as for the Barntown Annunciation lights, reveals that the original canopies were over twice the height of the truncated Barntown ones.¹⁹

St Alphonsus' Church, Barntown, was solemnly dedicated on 8 December 1851 and it has—thankfully—remained structurally unaltered ever since.

Acknowledgement

I wish to acknowledge the permission of Tom and Teresa Wickham to draw extensively upon their fine paper, 'St Alphonsus' Church Barntown', published in the *Journal of the Taghmon Historical Society*, no. 4, 2001.

¹⁹ See Shepherd, *op. cit.*, Plate 10.31 and pp. 339–40.