

## Pugin Foundation

### St Michael the Archangel's Church, Gorey, Ireland

Brian Andrews

#### Introduction

Pugin's involvement in Ireland spans much of his mature career, from early designs of 1838—Bree, Ramsgrange, Wexford—sharing some of the details of his first English churches, to his great 1845 scheme for St Patrick's College, Maynooth, incomplete at the time of his death in 1852.<sup>1</sup> St Michael's, Gorey, designed in 1839, also shares some details of his early works but is the first of his Irish designs to incorporate identifiably Irish motifs.



*St Michael's Gorey, from the south west (Image: Brian Andrews)*

#### Background

When Pugin started designing churches for English clients in 1837 he could already draw for inspiration upon an unrivalled fund of knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary of English medieval architecture. It was the fruit of extensive travel and study that had started when he was at the tender age of six in the company of his

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, never completed according to his designs, the chapel, its most notable element, being added later by J.J. McCarthy.

father, the architectural illustrator Auguste Charles Pugin.<sup>2</sup> Such was not the case for his knowledge of the distinctive aspects of Irish medieval architecture. Before he executed the Gorey design he had been to Ireland on just two occasions. In June 1838 he spent a total of six days in Dublin and in the south-east, where he had visited Wexford and Waterford.<sup>3</sup> Then in May of the following year he had been in Dublin and the south-east for a further five days.<sup>4</sup> This was sufficient for him to experience some salient details of Irish architecture but not, as we shall see, enough for him to use them with the same certain knowledge of their historical context as he could with his English designs.

The town of Gorey lies near the coast just over midway from Dublin to Wexford in Ireland's south-east. For many decades before the present church was built local Catholics had worshipped in a modest thatched chapel some distance out of the town in what is now St Michael's cemetery.<sup>5</sup> It was the generosity of Sir Thomas Esmonde, one of a handful of Catholic gentry in the Ireland of the time, in securing land on the outskirts of Gorey in 1836 and then donating it to the Church that made the building of a worthy place of worship at last possible.<sup>6</sup>

With a suitable plot of land obtained, Sir Thomas and his friend Canon Patrick Synnott, Parish Priest of Gorey, approached Bishop James Keating who gave 'enthusiastic approval for the building of the new St. Michael's'.<sup>7</sup> Now Keating was a close friend of Daniel O'Connell, the Liberator, and it is interesting to speculate whether it was through this connection that Sir Thomas was to gain the services of Pugin as architect.

Pugin was a very close friend of Fr (later Bishop) Robert William Willson and would in due course design all Willson's buildings and requisites for the new Diocese of Hobart Town. Willson, when in charge of the Catholic mission in Nottingham, held a licence for a 'private lunatic asylum for Catholics in his house'.<sup>8</sup> On one occasion 'Mr. John O'Connell, brother of the great Dan, of immortal memory, was placed in his house; and the "Liberator" became an intimate friend of Mr. Willson in consequence of his frequent visits to Nottingham, Mrs. O'Connell residing there at times for six months without intermission'.<sup>9</sup> This would have been 1836.<sup>10</sup>

It is conceivable that Pugin called in to Gorey during his May 1839 visit to Ireland, as his travels from Dublin to Wexford and Enniscorthy would have had him in the

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<sup>2</sup> Volume of MS notes for an uncompleted autobiography by Pugin, in 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, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup> Pugin's diary for 1838, National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, Pressmark 86 MM 57, L5159 1969.

<sup>4</sup> Pugin's diary for 1839, National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, Pressmark 86 MM 58, L5160 1969.

<sup>5</sup> Walter Forde (ed.), *St Michael's Church, Gorey, 1839-1989*, St Michael's Parish, Gorey, 1989, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Kelsh, "*Personal Recollections of the Right Reverend Robert William Willson D.D. (First Bishop of Hobart Town), with a Portrait of His Lordship, and an Introduction on the State of Religion in Tasmania, Prior to the year 1844*", Hobart, 1882, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Correspondence between Willson and O'Connell, Archdiocese of Hobart Archives, CA.6/WIL.440, 441 and 442.

vicinity. Be that as it may, his diary entry for 22 June 1839 recorded ‘Sent off drawings to Gorey.’<sup>11</sup> Additional drawings were despatched on 19 August 1840.<sup>12</sup>

### The Design

Pugin’s drawings were for a large cruciform building in the Romanesque style, that is, the round-arched style of architecture that was based more or less on Roman art. It had gradually developed and prevailed across Europe from about 600 until the advent of Gothic, with its pointed arch repertoire, around 1200. Pugin only adopted the Romanesque on three occasions, all early in his career; in his 1837 design for St James’, Reading, for the crypt below his Gothic St Chad’s Cathedral, Birmingham, designed in 1839, and at Gorey.

St Michael’s would be the first of six designs by Pugin for large cruciform churches with a crossing tower and spire.<sup>13</sup> The frontispiece to Pugin’s *Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture*, 1843, showcasing twenty five of his designs in a wonderfully romantic montage, depicted St Michael’s with a spire atop its crossing tower. But in this drawing Pugin had chosen not to show some of his actual buildings, perhaps no longer happy with these earlier efforts, and he may equally have chosen to show a spire on St Michael’s because it made for a more impressive composition. However, the church as opened in 1843 had its tower capped with battlements.<sup>14</sup>

St Michael’s was a big building by comparison with actual Irish medieval Romanesque churches. These were very small compared with their English counterparts, measuring typically a mere eighteen metres or so in overall length.<sup>15</sup> Pugin’s design was closer in size to the transitional Romanesque/Gothic monastic churches of the first Irish Cistercian foundations.<sup>16</sup> It had a seven-bay aisled and clerestoried nave, two-bay transepts and an apsidal chancel. In this latter regard it was more aligned with English Romanesque precedent, Irish examples typically having square east ends. (Pugin’s only other Romanesque essays—St James, Reading, and the crypt of St Chad’s Cathedral, Birmingham—also had apsidal chancels.)

The sturdy crossing tower was crowned with stepped battlements, a distinctive characteristic of later medieval Irish churches. It was claimed during the sermon at St Michael’s blessing and dedication in May 1843 that Pugin had been considerably influenced by the ruins of Dunbrody Abbey near New Ross.<sup>17</sup> While this is certainly possible, even given the limited extent of Pugin’s travels in Ireland prior to mid 1839, it seems perhaps more likely that some of Pugin’s Gorey inspiration may have come

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<sup>11</sup> Pugin’s diary for 1839, op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> Pugin’s diary for 1840, National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, Pressmark 86 MM 59, L5161 1969.

<sup>13</sup> The others, with their design dates, were: Mount St Bernard’s Priory Church (1840), only partly completed to Pugin’s design; the second design for St Barnabas’ Church (later Cathedral), Nottingham (1841); St Mary’s Cathedral, Killarney (1842); St Aidan’s Cathedral, Enniscorthy (1843); and an unexecuted design for Ratcliffe College Chapel (1843). He also developed an unexecuted scheme in 1839 for St George’s (later Cathedral), Southwark, a cruciform church with crossing tower but no spire, and an unexecuted design for Downside Priory Church (1839), again cruciform but with a trinity of spires.

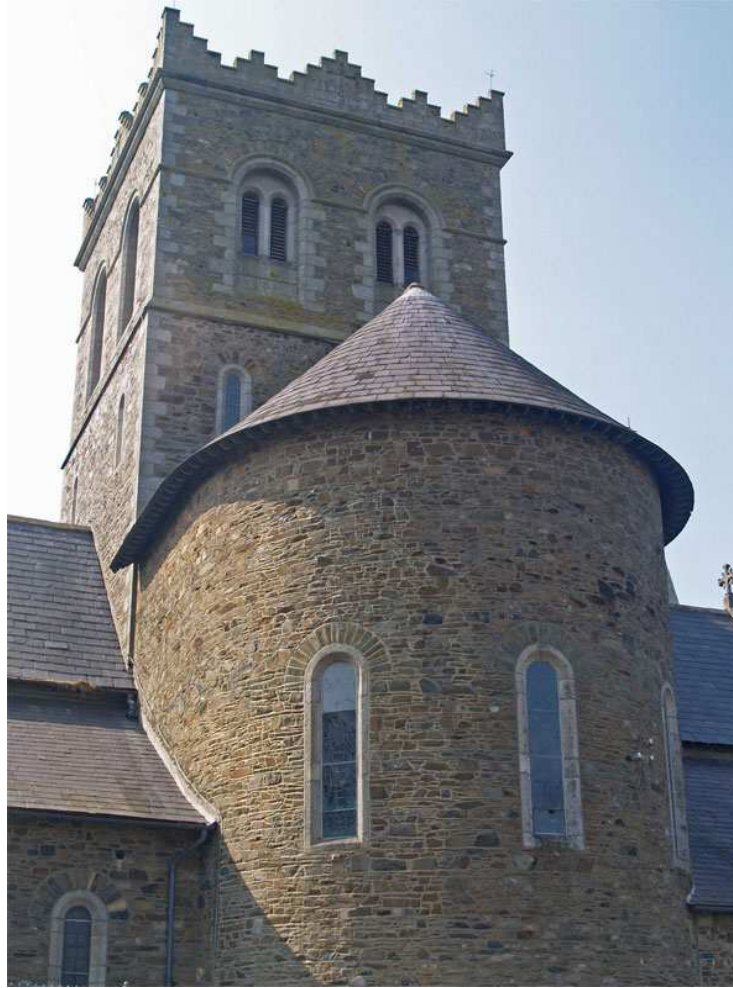
<sup>14</sup> Perhaps this was the subject of Pugin’s August 1840 drawings.

<sup>15</sup> Harold G. Leask, *Irish Churches and Monastic Buildings*, (3 vols), vol. I: The First Phases and the Romanesque, Dundalgan Press, Dundalk, 1977.

<sup>16</sup> Leask, op. cit., vol. II: Gothic Architecture to A.D. 1400.

<sup>17</sup> Forde, op. cit., p. 70.

from the ruins of another medieval Cistercian foundation, Tintern Abbey, County Wexford. We shall see later that Pugin had a reason to have been in the vicinity of Tintern, and the form of the stepped battlements on Gorey's tower was certainly much closer to those on the Tintern crossing tower. With his then minimal experience of Irish medieval architecture, Pugin could not have known that stepped battlements had only been introduced into Ireland in the fourteenth century, long after the cessation of Romanesque construction.<sup>18</sup>



*South east elevation showing apsidal chancel (Image: Brian Andrews)*

The other distinctively Irish feature of the Gorey church was a round tower with conical roof at the north-west corner of the north transept, forming part of the most innovative and appealing aspect of Pugin's overall design, namely, the access way to the crossing tower top stage. Stairs within the round tower led up to a walkway along the western edge of the north transept roof. The walkway was protected by a parapet sitting on a run of massive corbels and it connected with an attractive corbelled round turret clasping the crossing tower's north-west corner. Stairs within this latter reached to the tower's belfry stage. Pugin's round tower was cylindrical rather than tapered

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<sup>18</sup> Indeed, this was only definitely established in the mid twentieth century. See Leask, *op. cit.*, vol. II, pp. 134–5.

like early Irish round towers, and its elegant roof with concave sides was perhaps more reminiscent of such details on the churches he would have seen during his 1838 travels in Central Europe than of the straight tapers of Irish towers.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, it added significantly to the Irishness of the composition.



*Corbelled walkway on the north transept west wall giving access from the round tower stairwell to the clasping circular stairwell on the crossing tower north west corner (Image: Brian Andrews)*

The windows and doorways had plain splays, the façade doors and oculus window as well as the tower belfry stage openings having simple dripstone mouldings. In the case of the nave west door and the belfry openings the mouldings were continued as a string course; for the principal door as far as the pilaster-like clasping buttresses at the corners of the nave west front, and for the belfry lights encircling the tower.

One other design detail of the exterior is worthy of comment, namely the form of the gable copings and their kneelers. Here, the coping stones had a curved upper face and the lowest section of the coping kicked out horizontally where it formed part of the kneeler. The supporting corbel was several courses below this. This form would appear to place Gorey—despite its 1839 design date—firmly amongst Pugin’s first group of church designs, a detail which it shares with his designs for Bree, Ramsgrange and St Peter’s College, Wexford, as well as for Reading, Keighley,

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<sup>19</sup> Pugin’s diary for 1838, National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, Pressmark 86 MM 57, L5159 1969.

Solihull, Dudley, Macclesfield and Uttoxeter, all designed in 1837–8.<sup>20</sup> We will deal with Gorey’s pedigree in due course. His mature—and more sophisticated—treatment of this detail had flat-topped coping stones often terminating in a gablet, with the corbel generally directly below the kneeler.<sup>21</sup>



*Pugin’s treatment of coping stones and kneelers at Gorey (left) compared with his more mature treatment at St Mary’s, Tagoat (right) (Image: Brian Andrews)*

### **Construction**

The foundation stone of St Michael’s was laid on 12 August 1839.<sup>22</sup> The clerk of works was the Wexford builder Richard Pierce who would be involved in the construction of a number of Pugin’s Irish buildings and who was already at work on St Peter’s College Chapel, Wexford.<sup>23</sup>

Pierce was in receipt of working drawings for the church, which had been despatched by Pugin on 22 June 1839.<sup>24</sup> The drawings were accompanied by a letter which sheds much interesting light on the provenance of the building’s design repertoire and its construction.<sup>25</sup> The sort of detailed instruction given to Pierce was not necessary in England, for there Pugin had already found in George Myers a builder who could

<sup>20</sup> The lower ends of the gable copings at Bree and Uttoxeter do not kick out horizontally, but are in other respects the same as the rest of the group.

<sup>21</sup> Pugin must have been aware of the superior nature of the later treatment because—interestingly—in illustrating the Southport and Keighley churches in his May 1841 *Dublin Review* article ‘On the Present State of Ecclesiastical Architecture in England’, he drew them with the later coping treatment rather than the earlier type that had actually been used on the buildings.

<sup>22</sup> Walter Forde, *St. Michael’s Church, Gorey, 1839–1989*, Gorey, 1989, p. 11.

<sup>23</sup> See Roderick O’Donnell, ‘The Pugins in Ireland’, in Paul Atterbury (ed.), *A.W.N. Pugin, Master of Gothic Revival*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1995, pp. 137–159.

<sup>24</sup> Pugin’s diary for 1839, op. cit.

<sup>25</sup> The letter is reproduced in facsimile in Forde, op. cit., pp. 76–7.

implement both the letter and the spirit of his designs. Myers would prove to be his favoured builder. Because the content is so revealing, the relevant parts are reproduced below (with Pugin's spelling):

*'as the roof over nave is precisely the same in framing and scantling as one which I Last sent you I have not drawn it out to a Large scale.  
the pillars and arches are also the same as Father Barden's church of which you have the working drawings for This church.  
The arches jambs splayed jambs of windows & pillars &c. are all brick.  
The capitals bases external jambs of windows & doors are of cut stone as also the weathering of the 2 buttresses at the west end & Coping & cross of gable.  
[Here, Pugin inserts a thumbnail sketch of the required window external jambs treatment] The doors are to be put together Like those of St Peter's Wexford.  
The steps of sanctuary may be wood—also the pillars supporting ribs of groining.  
all the woodwork of roofs to be dressed excepting over sanctuary where there is a plaister ceiling.  
The cross on the west gable is the same as that I have drawn for Father Bardens church.  
The whole church will be plaistered inside & joints struck to imitate stone ...'*

A number of important conclusions can be drawn from this. Firstly, by this stage Pugin had already designed another large aisled Romanesque church for an Irish client, the execution of which he had placed in Pierce's hands. These plans were both detailed and complete. Secondly, the plans—never used except for details at Gorey—were for a church at Tintern, where at that time Fr Andrew Barden was parish priest.<sup>26</sup>



*Nave arcade capital and base* (Images: Brian Andrews)

Thirdly, details from the Wexford chapel were also to be followed, showing again that Pugin was prepared to replicate details from his other Irish church plans, a practice not resorted to in his English work. This is a significant *modus operandi* which can explain, for example, why the roof trusses, wall posts and corbels in St James', Ramsgrange, are the same as those in St Peter's College Chapel, Wexford.

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<sup>26</sup> He was so listed in contemporary directories according to Margaret Belcher, *The Collected Letters of A.W.N. Pugin*, volume 1 1830–1842, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001, p. 119.

Fourthly, Pugin was here resorting to ‘untruthful’ practices—a plaster ceiling in the apse in imitation of stone vaulting and joints struck in plaster ‘to imitate stone’—that would be condemned in his later writings:

*‘We should never make a building erected to God appear better than it really is by artificial means. These are showy worldly expedients, adapted only for those who live by splendid deception, such as theatricals, mountebanks, quacks, and the like. Nothing can be more execrable than making a church appear rich and beautiful in the eyes of men, but full of trick and falsehood, which cannot escape the all-searching eye of God, to whom all churches should be built, and not to man.’<sup>27</sup>*



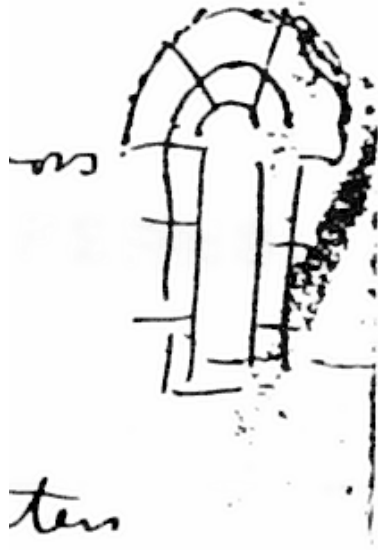
*Interior looking east (Image: Brian Andrews)*

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<sup>27</sup> A. Welby Pugin, *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture*, John Weale, London, 1841, pp. 52–3.



His window sketch is also useful in showing how his intentions were not always followed in Ireland by Pierce the way they were in England by Myers. The sketch showed the arch made up of several stones, and the stones making up the vertical faces keyed back into the surrounding wall. In fact, this was only followed for the belfry lights, all others having a single stone for the arch and no keying into the surrounding random rubble walling.



*Pugin's sketch for the builder, Richard Pierce, illustrating stone arrangement for windows (left) (Source: Forde, pp. 76–7) and a typical clerestory window as constructed (right) (Image: Brian Andrews)*

The church walls were constructed from random rubble stone quarried thereabouts at Clonsilla, Gorey Hill and Ballyscartan, while the granite for the nave columns was quarried in County Wicklow.<sup>28</sup> St Michael's Church was dedicated on 1 May 1843. Pugin's diary records a visit to Gorey on 11 June 1842, apparently the only time he saw the building under construction.<sup>29</sup>

### **Furnishings**

Little remains by way of Pugin furnishings, but a splendid baptismal font does, even if it has apparently spent around a century and a half out of doors alongside the sacristy. Its strong simple interpenetrating geometric forms bring to mind the font he designed for St Mary's, Brewood, Staffordshire, c.1844. This font was replaced by one purchased in Belgium by St Michael's benefactor Stephen Ram, probably in 1858.<sup>30</sup> In turn it too was ousted and it now stands in the grounds of the Gorey presbytery.

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<sup>28</sup> Forde, op. cit., p. 11.

<sup>29</sup> Pugin's diary for 1842, National Art Library, Victorian and Albert Museum, Pressmark 86 MM 61, L5163 1969

<sup>30</sup> Forde, op. cit., p. 12.



*Pugin-designed baptismal font, long banished from the church to stand outside the sacristy (Image: Brian Andrews)*

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