

Mr Pugin the Bigot

Brian Andrews

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There are a mere handful of iconic structures in the world which are universally recognisable and instantly identifiable with a particular country—like the Eiffel Tower, the Sydney Opera House, St. Peter's Basilica, the Taj Mahal, and the Palace of Westminster, seat of the British Houses of Parliament.

The Palace of Westminster is the pre-eminent national symbol of England and is arguably England's greatest nineteenth-century building. It is filled with richly magnificent furnishings, all designed with consummate brilliance and all in the Gothic style which was seen at the time to epitomise England's architectural genius, the Gothic idiom extending right down to the clock on the Prime Minister's desk and even the door keys. This vast program of design—several thousand individual drawings—was incredibly accomplished in just a few short years by a giant of nineteenth-century architecture and design Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812–1852).

A mere bare recital of the events and achievements which packed Pugin's short life cannot convey the significance of the fundamental impact he made on the course of architecture and design, but it will provide a small insight into the fiery creativity of this nineteenth-century genius.

At the age of fifteen he designed furniture for Windsor Castle and was employed by Rundell and Bridge, the royal goldsmiths. At seventeen he was employed by the English Opera House where he designed sets for several productions. At the same age he had his own business designing and making furniture and decorative details which failed after two years. He married at twenty, the first of three marriages.

At twenty three he published his first book on architecture and the decorative arts, to be followed by a further ten which would revolutionise thinking in architecture and the decorative arts, thinking upon which great designers like William Morris and major movements like the Arts and Crafts would later both depend and build. At the same age he ghosted two entries in the competition for the Palace of Westminster, one of them by Charles Barry winning the competition. He would pour out thousands of drawings for it over the next seventeen years.

At twenty five he began a career as an independent architect and designed well over a hundred buildings in the ensuing thirteen years. Many of his churches were revolutionary in their use of colour and decoration in a way that had not been known in England for over three hundred years. To furnish these buildings he helped found metalworking, stained glass and textile firms which would re-establish manufacturing and decorative skills that had been lost for centuries. For these and other firms he produced uncountable thousands of designs for objects which are now so highly prized for their intrinsic excellence and their significance in the development of nineteenth century design that a number form valued components of the collections of such august institutions as the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum. At just forty, completely worn out in mind and body, he died.

Pugin's work and achievements in England and Ireland are well known and have been extensively documented, particularly over the past thirty years, culminating in a major exhibition, *Pugin: A Gothic Passion*, at the V&A in 1994, a subset of which travelled to New York in 1995. Over the period during which Pugin's English and Irish work was being researched and documented, there was an apparent disregard of a brief but—for us—significant line in Pugin's first biography by his colleague and contemporary Benjamin Ferrey which said that, 'he also designed many churches for Australia, and the other colonies.'

The truth which I have discovered lying behind this comment is that outside Britain and Ireland Australia possesses the only collection of Pugin-designed buildings and objects in the entire world, and the overwhelming majority of this heritage is here in Tasmania, in communities right across the island.

We are the fortunate inheritors of this marvellous collection because of the fact that the first Catholic Bishop of Hobart Town, Robert William Willson (1794–1866) was a very close friend of Pugin. Whilst Willson was in charge of the Catholic mission in Nottingham Pugin designed St. Barnabas church—later Cathedral—for him, at the time the largest Catholic church to be built in England since the Reformation. Willson was chosen for Hobart because of his outstanding record of social reform, a record so significant that the entire town corporation of Nottingham petitioned for him not to be removed from their midst. The choice was vindicated, for Willson was subsequently influential in having Norfolk Island closed and he was consulted by the Colonial governments of Tasmania, Victoria and New South Wales on matters relating to the scientific—and more humane—treatment of the mentally ill.

Willson was consecrated Bishop in 1842. His regalia, designed by Pugin, included his pastoral staff, the gift of his friend the Earl of Shrewsbury—a munificent patron of Pugin’s works, and his ring and precious mitre, gifts of Thomas Close and his wife. Close was a prominent Nottingham magistrate and a Protestant, a measure of the universal esteem in which Willson was held in an age not renowned for religious tolerance.

Willson was going to minister to a poor community at the bottom rung of Tasmanian society, so Pugin designed for him, at no charge, all the furnishings needed to set up a complete diocese, something he was never to do for any English or Irish client. These objects were generally different from the ones to be seen in England, less elaborate and less expensive, but not lacking in the superb line and proportion which marked Pugin out as a master designer. As such they represent an internationally significant component of Pugin’s oeuvre, complementing that to be found in Britain. Many objects were exemplars meant to be copied in Tasmania.

In February 1844 Willson set out for Australia on the 500 ton barque *Bella Marina*, which was loaded to the gunwales with carved exemplar stonework, metalwork, textiles and much more, including three exquisite highly detailed scale models of churches designed by Pugin for copying in Tasmania. Models rather than drawings were provided because it was felt that the necessary skills might not be available in Van Diemen’s Land to work from architectural drawings.

All three church models were copied. The first was used to construct St. Paul’s, Oatlands, in 1850–51, a perfect evocation of the Puginian ideal for the revival of a small medieval village church, miraculously still complete with its Pugin-designed rood screen. Some crudity of detail is the inevitable result of having to copy from a model in which smaller components were just too little to provide accurate information. The second model was used in 1855–57 for St. Patrick’s, Colebrook, a building of international significance being literally unique amongst all Pugin’s work and an extreme example of his approach to the design of cheap commodious churches. It too retains its Pugin rood screen. Parts of the third model were used in 1859 for additions to the 1836 Church of St. John the Evangelist, Richmond.

These churches doubtless appear unexceptional to us, even commonplace, and so it is now, for we see such buildings—albeit not always with such assured proportions—across the length and breadth of Australia. This in itself is a measure of Pugin’s success, for before his works, commencing in the late 1830s, such buildings had not been built for three hundred years. Archaeologically accurate buildings like St. Paul’s and St. Patrick’s were the vanguard of a movement which would dominate church architecture for over a century.

Willson returned to England in 1847 and 1854, each time purchasing more exquisite Pugin-designed furnishings and objects. One chalice tells us much about Pugin and Willson’s taste. In May 1847 Willson was given a chalice by Pope Pius IX. A typical Classical vessel for its time, it was abhorrent to Willson who took it back to England where Pugin made a new Gothic design. The Papal chalice was melted down, some extra silver added and an inscription engraved on the base of the new Gothic chalice ‘+ Gift

of His Holiness Pius the IXth to Robert William + Bishop of Hobart Town + Rome + May + Mdcxcxlvii'. Well it sort of was—at least most of the silver! We shall return to this chalice later.

On the same visit to England, Willson received from Pugin a unique gift which is a permanent and beautiful reminder to us of the strength of their friendship and the close alignment of their beliefs and taste. It was a stained glass window of the Annunciation which bears the remarkable entreaty 'Orate pro bono statu Augusti Welby de Pugin' (Pray for the good estate of Augustus Welby de Pugin).

So Pugin, the now universally acknowledged genius, has a very special place in the chronicle of the early days of the Catholic Church in Tasmania through our saintly first Bishop William Willson.

In his own time his contribution to architecture and design was generally held in the highest regard. Single-handed he provided all the designs for the Medieval Court at the Great Exhibition of 1851 and the band of craftspeople he had gathered around him produced the exhibits for what was widely held to be the best and most popular section of that monumental event. Likewise he was one of the key group responsible for the establishment of what was to become known as the Victoria and Albert Museum, the premier decorative arts museum in the world. However, when I say that he was generally held in the highest regard, there are just three exceptions.

The first of these was John Ruskin, the famous contemporary art critic, whose virulent anti-Catholicism prevented him from acknowledging anything of good in Pugin. His most celebrated, intemperate and poisonous outburst occurred in an appendix to the first edition of his work *The Stones of Venice*. At least this passage was removed, perhaps through shame, in later editions.

The second was John Moore Capes, convert editor of the liberal Catholic journal, *The Rambler*, who from its inception in 1848 waged a sarcastic and particularly hurtful campaign against Pugin and his Gothic cause, all the more devastating because Pugin was already suffering severely from the brace of physical and mental illnesses which would lead to his untimely death in 1852. Increasingly outspoken, Capes reverted to Anglicanism in 1870, finally returning to the fold in 1882 some seven years before his death. Pugin was deeply wounded by *The Rambler's* campaign whose bullets were being fired by Capes, but whose ammunition was not a little fashioned by the third figure, Capes' friend, the gentle and scholarly John Henry Newman.

In a famous and oft-quoted passage from an 1848 letter to Pugin's close friend Ambrose March Phillipps de Lisle, Newman remarked:

Mr Pugin is a man of genius; I have the greatest admiration of his talents, and willingly acknowledge that Catholics owe him a great debt for what he has done in the revival of Gothic architecture among us. His zeal, his minute diligence, his resources, his invention, his imagination, his sagacity in research, are all of the highest order. It is impossible that any one, not scientifically qualified to judge of his merits, can feel a profounder reverence than I do, for a gift which it has pleased the Author of all Truth and Beauty to endow him. But he has the great fault of a man of genius, as well 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.

The term bigot is strong stuff, carrying with it for most of us, I would suggest, baggage connotations of intolerance, narrowness and blind irrationality. Even the Oxford Shorter English Dictionary associates the word with terms like 'obstinacy', 'blind attachment', 'intolerance' and 'unreasoned'.

Let us look at Pugin's motivation for using the Gothic style, and also his character, to see how this label stands up and to see if Newman was not cracking—or perhaps smashing—a small and fragile walnut with a huge steam-driven sledgehammer.

Pugin was a passionate Catholic convert with all the idealism that goes with it. His immersion in the architecture and art of medieval Catholic Europe, coupled with a sincere conviction that this period of history had created a society with vastly more justice, faith, devotion and social concern when compared with that of nineteenth-century England, led him to reason that there was a correlation between the faith of the period and its external artistic, architectural and liturgical expression. There can be no doubt of the absolute sincerity of this conviction of his, and that he had been led to it through a reasoned, if in hindsight logically flawed, and extraordinarily detailed investigation. It was this perceived correlation which dictated his career, his social and his personal practices. From this premise he reasoned that the revival of medieval art, architecture and liturgy would be pivotal in the rekindling of Catholic faith in England and in its conversion. Nothing less than this was his ultimate goal.

Let us listen to Pugin to get a little of the grasp of the immense passion which drove his advocacy of the plenitude of medieval religious and artistic practice.

And the reason that Catholicism does not produce such glorious piles as in days of old, that it does not number a crowd of devout architects, painters, sculptors, and cunning workmen within its pale, as formerly, is purely owing to the decay of faith and the lightness with which even the majority of Christians regard their religion.

If the mass of the Catholics of the nineteenth century possessed the same zeal, devotion, reverence and fear of God as those of the thirteenth, the Madeleine would never have arisen for the performances of the same worship as generated the stupendous vaults and towers of Notre Dame; but the latter was the spontaneous creation of the faith, raised by zeal and devotion—the former a cold adaptation of a heathen temple, erected by infidel architects to the purposes of a Christian church. Revive the true Catholic faith and devotion and the flaunting chapel, with all its glare and finery, will soon be deserted for the solemn recesses of the ancient piles, where men can pour forth their supplications in retirement and devotion, content to penetrate the veil of the sanctuary with the eyes of faith, and feel that they are scarcely worthy to kneel on the pavement of that temple where their God deigns to dwell. Restore the old reverence, and gladly will men welcome the old things—arch and aisle, and pillar and chancel, and screen, and worship as their fathers worshipped, who now sleep in Christ; and the green bough will twine in the tracery, and the tapers sparkle round the rood, and surpliced clerks sing in chancel stalls, whilst the saints shrine bright in the mullioned lights—*venit hora et nunc est*—when the old glory of the sanctuary will be restored and solemnity revived with returning faith.

... architecture is the barometer of faith; it is not the arch, the pinnacle, the pillar, that profiteth, but the spirit which produces them; and the revival or decline of true Ecclesiastical architecture is commensurate with that of the true faith. It is for these reasons that we labour for its restoration and not as a mere abstract question of art.

Note these last words. When Pugin was arguing for the Gothic, it was not just a style amongst many possible for a church—as his opponents believed—it was fundamental to the realisation of a religious outcome, namely the revival of faith and the conversion of England, in which process he saw himself as just a small and humble servant of God's providential plans. No wonder he could be viewed as unreasonable. But haven't all those been, down the last two millennia, who have been prepared to sacrifice everything, even life itself, for their beloved faith?

Listen to Pugin again.

An Englishman needs not controversial writings to lead him to the faith of his fathers; it is written on the wall, on the window, on the pavement, by the highway. Let him but look at the tombs of those who occupy the most honourable position in the history of this country,—the devout, the noble, the valiant, and the wise,—and he will behold

them with clasped hands invoking the saints of Holy Church, whilst the legend round the slabs begs the prayers of the passers-by for their soul's repose.

In short, Catholicism is so interwoven with everything sacred, honourable, or glorious in England, that three centuries of puritanism, indifference, and infidelity, have not been able effectually to separate it.

Can a man of soul look on the cross-crowned spire, and listen to the chime of distant bells, or stand beneath the lofty vault of cathedral choir, or gaze on long and lessening aisles, or kneel by ancient tomb, and yet protest against aught but that monstrous and unnatural system that has mutilated their beauty and marred their fair design?

England is, indeed, awakening to a sense of her ancient dignity; she begins to appreciate the just merits of the past, and to work eagerly for the future. The last few years must, or ought to have, worked a great change in the feelings of English Catholics towards the Anglican churchmen; and it is evident that, if it be Gods' will that the departed glories are to be restored, it will be effected rather by rebuilding the ruined walls of Zion than by demolishing the poor remains that are left.

Pugin's sub-text here, astounding for its time, was nothing less than the corporate reunion of the Anglican church, a cause for which he and his friends Ambrose March Phillipps de Lisle and the Earl of Shrewsbury worked tirelessly through their contacts with the Oxford men. And whilst they did not deprecate individual conversions, theirs was a nobler and greater, if ultimately futile, cause. What a contrast with the contemporary rejoicings of the *Tablet* in every Anglican setback and doctrinal dissension, and that publication's triumphalist listing of conversions. A measure of Pugin's sincere love for Anglicans was his use of the term 'separated brethren' for them, over a century before the ecumenical overtures of Vatican II. Here was no narrow-minded bigot.

Pugin's aspirations were converted into practical reality in his many churches. For his time, as an architect, he had an unrivalled understanding of the liturgical functioning of an English medieval church, and even the smallest of his churches, such as his Tasmanian ones, were fully outfitted 'as forming a complete Catholic church for the due celebration of the divine office and administration of the sacraments, both as regards architecture and furniture,' including piscina, sedilia, rood screen and Easter sepulchre.

And what of Pugin's character? Let his only pupil, later son-in-law John Hardman Powell, who lived under his roof at Ramsgate from 1844 until Pugin's death in 1852, testify to his practical and deeply held faith, to his natural good humour and to his unreserved charity, hardly the hallmarks of a bigot. Pugin had a chapel in the house he built for himself on the cliff-tops at Ramsgate, and he built a complete church next door, which after his death would become a Benedictine Abbey church.

On his first day at Ramsgate Hardman Powell noted:

At eight the Chapel bell rang for Compline, which was solemnly recited by Pugin in Cassock and Surplice, followed by the De Profundis, but too rapidly for a stranger to respond to readily. At nine supper in the brightest of Kitchens; the eldest daughter Anne, an elegant maiden was present and Miss Greaves, a family friend, who had kindly taken care of the children after their mother's death. Rice pudding, Bread and Cheese, Celery and Water, was the simple fare, Pugin with Times in hand commenting on the news of the day.

In the morning, bell at eight for prayers; Pater, Ave, Credo, Litany, short and quick, "no time for distractions". The Chapel though small was complete for Mass, with organ in Sacristy ... the windows were filled with Stained Glass, St. George, St. Augustine, St. Edmund, St. Cuthbert, with the Family beneath, holding petitions. Though simple,

everything was of the best, Oak, Cedar, Encaustic tiles, and a small stove always burning in cold weather: “most people pray better when warm”.

Pugin gave in Charity “with both hands” on the principle that life was too short for “chasing up only deserving cases” and “everybody must take their chance of being done at times”, in fact he literally gave away his boots more than once and walked home without. At offertories he never counted but took a handful of silver from his pocket. During the famine in Ireland, he sent all he could get together and influenced others to do the same. Shipwrecked foreign sailors were taken into special care, lodgings found, doctor, and sustenance. At that time there was no seamen’s hospital at Ramsgate so Pugin went and by his influence got one organised. Once a barque, full of poor Bremen Emigrants struck on the Goodwin Sands and were towed into the Harbour after great suffering. Finding eighty of them were Catholics he wrote to London for a German Priest and turned the Cartoon room into a Temporary Chapel where they went to confession heard Mass and received Communion. The Blessings they invoked on leaving were a real happiness.

Pugin set himself to illustrate “True Principles” in the Household life. Reverence, order, simplicity, Holy Mass in the Chapel whenever he could get a priest friend to stay, then plenty of work, good food and exercise, the Church Festivals being holidays in both senses. ... After the Church was built he enjoyed going into the choir as Cantor and singing the Mass from his big Gregorian books at the lectern, giving his most sonorous notes at the Credo and his daughter Annie accompanying on the organ over the cloister.

Thus, the testimony of one who knew his daily routine and character traits intimately.

It has been said that we are judged by the company we keep. So let us see to what extent the so-called bigoted views of Pugin aligned with those of his close friend, the noble William Willson, about whom it has been remarked by the eminent British historian Philip Hughes that he was ‘undoubtedly a great man, that rare figure indeed in our modern [Catholic] history, who has exercised a real influence upon the public social development of his time’. Hughes also noted that Willson was the striking exception to Manning’s judgment that ‘in all the great English humanitarian activity of the early nineteenth century there was no Catholic name’.

Pugin and Willson clearly shared a practical social conscience, and—like Pugin—Willson was accepted by all men of goodwill for his absolute lack of religious bigotry. Thus the Nottingham Corporation, all Protestants, could state in their 1842 testimonial begging that Willson not be taken from their midst to Van Diemen’s Land, that his ‘clerical influence, and excellent character, give him an extraordinary personal influence over the classes of the community where such influence is particularly important.’

But what of Pugin’s views on the Gothic, was Willson also hostage to this supposed bigotry? It is in fact very clear through Willson’s actions and his writings that he fully espoused the Puginian viewpoint.

Willson acquired a medieval chalice and paten as well as an early sixteenth-century Sarum Use missal in 1847, not, I would suggest, as antiquarian niceties but as tangible connections with a period in whose philosophy and values he passionately believed. He fully intended to use the Missal in the expectation that the medieval English Sarum Use would be reinstated. When he returned to England for the last time in 1865 it was not his splendid personal chalice—now a Tasmanian Catholic treasure—which he took with him, but the medieval chalice.

His view on the Gothic was succinctly set out in a letter to his friend Bishop Goold of Melbourne just prior to the latter’s trip to England in 1851. Willson remarked:

I hope you will return a full length middle-age man—I am sure we can produce more real Catholic feeling either in buildings, Church furniture, &c &c in the good old style of

our forefathers, than in the modern taste, and fanciful notions, I mean for the same money.

The depth of his own attachment to the Gothic idea and its faith connection was demonstrated in his paying for the refurbishing of the chancel of St. Joseph's, his pro-cathedral, in 1856 and in a manner which made it the most complete expression of the Puginian Gothic ideal outside of Britain.

And then there is the Papal chalice, remade from a Classical Roman vessel into a splendid Gothic object through the complete alignment of Willson's and Pugin's views on the purpose of the Gothic Revival. If Mr Pugin was a bigot, then surely Bishop Willson was too. I don't believe that either man was. Do you?

