

Pugin Foundation

St James' Church, Ramsgrange, Ireland

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Introduction

St James', Ramsgrange, County Wexford, is amongst Pugin's least well known churches. Over the years its authorship has been questioned, assessments ranging from key parts of the building probably being not by Pugin to its simply being derived by another hand from his St Peter's College Chapel, Wexford.¹ Dr Roderick O'Donnell in his 1995 essay, 'The Pugins in Ireland',² cited documentary evidence to prove that the Ramsgrange church was by Pugin. It is the purpose of this note to prove from the internal evidence of the building's fabric that Pugin had to be the designer and to show that it was not copied from St Peter's College Chapel.



St James', Ramsgrange, from the south-west (Image: Brian Andrews)

¹ See, for example, Phoebe Stanton, *Pugin*, Thames & Hudson, London, pp. 37, 198, and [Diocese of Ferns], *Churches of the Diocese of Ferns: Symbols of a Living Faith*, Booklink, Ireland, 2004, p. 117.

² 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. 141–3.

Ramsgrange is a small village situated on the east side of Wexford Harbour in the south-west corner of County Wexford. In 1838 it was part of the Parish of The Hook, of which Fr George Murphy was parish priest.³ Fr Murphy had been able to obtain in that year plans for a church in Ramsgrange. The circumstances were reported in the *Catholic Directory*: 'J. (Hyacinth) Talbot Esq., MP, had the kindness to procure from Mr. Pugin a plan of a church at Bree which is now in a state of forwardness and will be completed next summer' and 'to him the Revd. George Murphy and his parishioners are indebted for the plan of the church of St James at Ramsgrange'.⁴ The Talbot connection with Pugin came from his being related to Pugin's great patron John Talbot, sixteenth Earl of Shrewsbury, and was to influence a significant proportion of Pugin's Irish commissions.

The Design

This large church, in a thirteenth-century idiom, consisted of a rectangular plan encompassing a nave and chancel in one space with no separate external articulation of the chancel. In this regard it was like several contemporary but much smaller churches of Pugin's, including St Mary's, Uttoxeter, and St Augustine's, Solihull, both also designed in 1838.⁵ The nave was six bays long and the chancel was one bay in length, that bay being longer than the nave ones. There was a central west steeple, at least one side porch, and a large sacristy against the chancel north wall. Each nave bay was lit by a tall lancet window and the chancel east wall had a trinity of lancets. The tower likewise had narrow lancet lights and the belfry stage openings had what was in effect a two-light plate tracery configuration comprising lancets surmounted by an oculus. There were statue niches to the tower west face and the porches. Internally, the church had an open timber roof to the nave and a ribbed wood and plaster ceiling to the chancel, its profile following that of the curved arch braces of the nave trusses.

It is most probable that the design included a broach spire surmounting the tower, but this was never built. In this regard Pugin was to write in 1841:

A tower to be complete should be terminated by a spire: every tower during the finest periods of pointed architecture either was, or was intended, to be so finished; a spire is in fact an ornamental covering to a tower; a flat roof is contrary to every principle of the style, and it was not till the decline of the art that they were adopted. The vertical principle, emblematic of the resurrection, is a leading characteristic of Christian architecture, and this is nowhere so conspicuous or striking as in the majestic spires of the middle ages.⁶

Let us now examine the building's component parts to prove their Pugin origin and to show that the church was not derived from St Peter's College Chapel, Wexford.

³ *The Catholic Directory and Annual Register, for the Year 1839*, Simpkins and Marshall, London, 1839, p. 130. This large parish was divided in 1863 into two separate parishes, one being Ramsgrange with Duncannon as its curacy. Ramsgrange was further divided in 1972, with Duncannon being constituted as a separate parish (*Churches of the Diocese of Ferns*, op. cit., p. 70).

⁴ Quoted in O'Donnell, op. cit., pp. 141, 156. The Assumption, Bree, was opened in 1839.

⁵ Pugin designed other churches with externally undifferentiated chancels earlier and later than the abovementioned examples, but with more complex plan forms, including St Marie's, Derby (1837), and St Alphonsus', Barntown (1844).

⁶ [Pugin], 'Present State', op. cit., pp. 317-8.



North-west elevation (Image: Brian Andrews)

The nave roof trusses consist of an arch-braced collar tie with curved braces, the arches landing on wall plates comprising attached columns with moulded capitals and bases terminating in carved corbels having thirteenth-century stiff leaf foliage. Between the trusses were two levels of curved wind braces in the plane of the purlins. This is precisely the form of the Wexford roof, but there is a reason other than copying. Documentary evidence shows that Pugin re-used elements from other of his Irish designs in his works there. Thus, for some elements in St Michael's, Gorey, he directed the Wexford builder Richard Pierce to earlier designs for which Pierce had the drawings. Relevant excerpts from the letter of 22 June 1839 to Pierce which accompanied the Gorey plans are as follows (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 doors are to be put together Like those of St Peter's Wexford.
...The cross on the west gable is the same as that I have drawn for Father Bardens church.⁷*

The church for Fr Barden that Pugin referred to was intended for Tintern parish but never constructed.

⁷ Pugin to Pierce, 22 June 1839, reproduced in facsimile in Walter Forde, *St. Michael's Church, Gorey, 1839–1989*, Gorey, 1989, pp. 76–7.



Interior looking east (Image: Brian Andrews)

We can conclude that either Pugin himself recycled the roof details in the drawings for Ramsgrange or that Pierce was the Ramsgrange church builder and was following instructions from Pugin analogous to those provided for Gorey. Note too that there are no other common elements between the Ramsgrange and Wexford churches. That Pierce was prepared to work on buildings so removed from Wexford town is shown by his possession of the Tintern drawings.

The differing, more elaborate, treatment of the chancel roof is a textbook example of Pugin's concept of propriety, which he defined as follows: '*the external and internal appearance of an edifice should be illustrative of, and in accordance with, the purpose for which it is destined*'.⁸ For churches this meant that the chancel should be the most highly elaborated part of the building because it was, in Pugin's view, 'the most sacred part of the edifice'.⁹ Such a treatment was not to be found in contemporary Irish churches.

The triple lancet windows in the chancel east wall display a subtle refinement of proportions to be found in medieval thirteenth-century work and in Pugin's own designs,¹⁰ but again not in Irish churches designed in the 1830s, namely, that the central light is slightly wider than the flanking ones.

We turn now to the exterior of the church. The precise forms of the gable copings and their kneelers on the porches and sacristy are specific to Pugin and indeed to his earliest designs, being found on his Irish churches at Bree, Gorey, Ramsgrange and Wexford, as well as at Reading, Keighley, Solihull, Dudley, Macclesfield and Uttoxeter in England. Also characteristic of these early details is that the supporting corbels are at least one course below the kneeler.¹¹



South porch (Image: Brian Andrews)

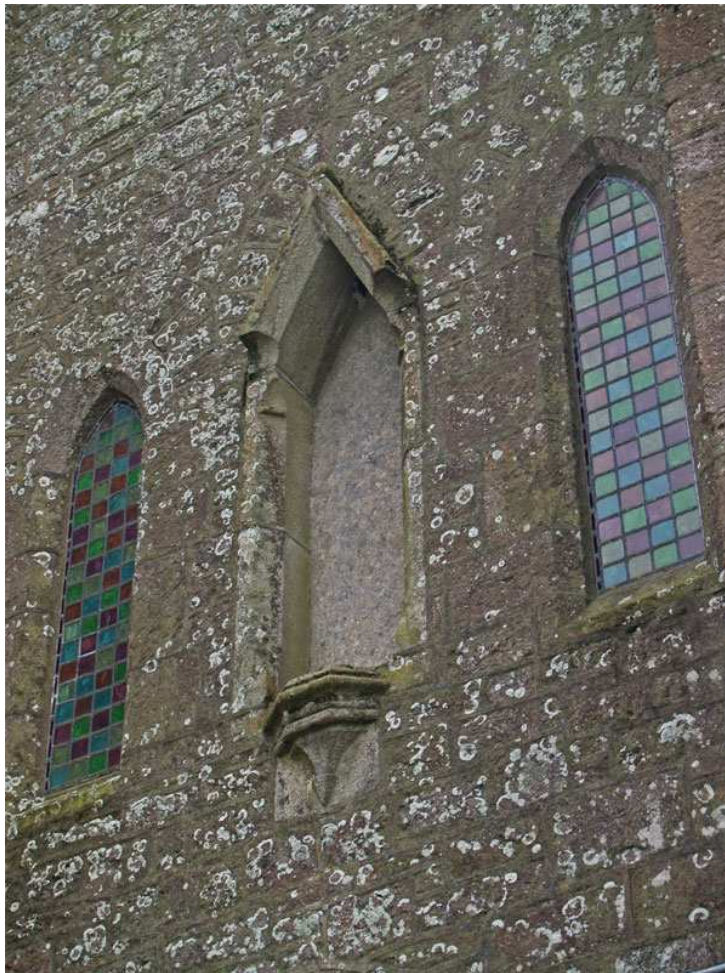
⁸ Pugin, *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture*, John Weale, London, 1841, p. 50.

⁹ Present State, op. cit., p. 330.

¹⁰ For example in his chancel east window of St Francis Xavier's, Berrima, designed in 1842.

¹¹ 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. For details of both types see *Friends Newsletter*, no. 13, August 2007, pp. 4–5.

We note other sophisticated details on this building that were only within the knowledge and competence of Pugin at that time, particularly mouldings. The chamfer to the sides of the statue niche on the tower is a good example, being quintessentially thirteenth century. The upper end has a fillet moulding at the transition to the chamfer stop and the lower end terminates in a pyramidal stop. This is a world away from the naïve Gothick of contemporary Irish architects and builders,¹² pointing to Pugin's magisterial grasp of the grammar and vocabulary of medieval architecture.



Statue niche on tower west face (Image: Brian Andrews)

The west door mouldings are another example. The form of the moulding profile was one widely used by Pugin for his simpler buildings and is to be found inter alia at Berrima, Oatlands and Ryde on the Early English parts of those churches. Also of note are the sophisticated stops to the bases of the mouldings, again utterly unknown in other Irish work of the period. Pugin's use of a Y-shaped central support to divide this, the principal door, is a far cry from its frequent use as window tracery in contemporary Irish Gothick churches.

¹² See, for example, *Churches of the Diocese of Ferns*, op. cit.



Blocked-up west door in tower (Image: Brian Andrews)

Construction

Work began on 25 July 1838 and progressed slowly, being completed except for the steeple in 1843.¹³ The tower was not constructed until 1870 and the spire never erected.¹⁴ Instead, the tower was terminated by an ungainly flat capping with ludicrously under-scale spikes at the corners, underscoring by their evidently inferior hand the authenticity of the tower itself as having been erected from Pugin's original drawings.¹⁵

Later changes

It is now not possible to envisage Pugin's chancel arrangement and furnishings because all has been swept away since the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s. Severe damp problems have led to the nave and chancel exterior wall surfaces along with their buttresses being coated with cement render,

¹³ *Churches of the Diocese of Ferns*, op. cit., p. 117.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ It is fair to say that we can dismiss the possibility of an Irish architect in 1870 deliberately emulating Pugin's tough rendered-down thirteenth-century style and its vocabulary to design this tower.

obliterating the small-scale articulation of the random rubble wall plane. Apparently for the same reason much of the interior has been faced with sheeting.

The west door has been blocked up and converted into a window, and the south porch has become a shrine, its door also blocked up and made into a window.

Conclusion

Despite the abovementioned changes St James', Ramsgrange, remains a significant, if largely overlooked, early example of Pugin's efforts at creating a cheap capacious church.
