Pugin Foundation

St Stephen's Church, Brisbane, Queensland

Brian Andrews

Introduction

St Stephen's Church is a building whose stylistic and planning roots can be traced to the ideals and impact of the Englishman John Bede Polding OSB, first Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, and of the great English early-Victorian architect, designer and theorist Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin (1812–1852).

St Stephen's from the south-east, July 2006 (Image: Stephen Kerin)

John Bede Polding OSB (1794–1877), a Benedictine monk, formerly of Downside Priory, Somerset, was the pioneering Catholic bishop in Australia and, from 1842, Archbishop of Sydney and founder of the Australian Catholic hierarchy. His attitude towards church architecture and furnishing, allied to his belief in the importance of beauty, dignity and reverence in the setting and performance of the liturgy, was quintessentially Benedictine.[1] This attitude can be seen in his choice of the fashionable Bath architect Henry Edmund Goodridge to furnish the plans for small churches that he brought out to Australia in 1835.[2] Goodridge had previously designed Gothick monastic buildings for Downside, a project in which Polding had

[1] Benedictine monastic houses throughout history have been distinguished in this regard. St Benedict, in his sixth-century Rule, enjoined his monks when intoning the psalms and antiphons to do so 'with humility, gravity and reverence'. (Justin McCann (ed. & tr.), *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, Burns, Oates & Washbourne, London, 1952, p. 109.)

[2] Eleanor Joan Kerr, Designing a Colonial Church: Church building in New South Wales 1788–1888, PhD, University of York, Institute of Advanced Architectural Studies, 1977, vol. 1, pp. 151–63.

been involved.[3]

Polding's consistent motivation for seeking only the best for his churches was well captured by his Vicar-General, Henry Gregory Gregory OSB, in a c.1850 report to the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda,[4] when he wrote:

> As regards the style of [church] building also, we may without boasting congratulate ourselves. The Archbishop has expended considerable pains and anxiety on this point; not only because churches built with propriety and good taste, formed upon, though with no servile adherence to models of acknowledged authority, are eventually the cheapest, but because in a new community unhappily but too much engrossed in material pursuits, it is of no inconsiderable importance, in its due place, to present even to men's senses, the forms and suggestions of other beauties and more lasting interests.[5]

In June 1841 Polding landed in England on his first trip home from Australia. Pugin was riding the crest of a wave of approbation, building churches with stunning interiors filled with colour and imagery the likes of which had not been seen since the Reformation. Polding was to experience this bold assertion of the power and magnetism of emancipated English Catholicism within days of his arrival when he attended the dedication of Pugin's St Chad's Cathedral, Birmingham, on 20 June in the company of a great gathering of prelates. The conviction of its architecture, the glowing colour of its painted and stencilled surfaces, its genuine medieval pulpit, statues and fittings, its splendid stone altar and reredos under an elaborate canopy and especially the glorious rood screen would have stood in stark contrast to Goodridge's romantic sham at Downside which had been his former inspiration and to the feeble boxes of local architects in Sydney. Polding would have another opportunity to admire this radical new building when, on 27 October 1842, he consecrated Robert William Willson there as first Bishop of Hobart Town. Doubtless Willson would have told Polding of the great church of St Barnabas, the largest Catholic church in England since the Reformation, which he was in the course of building to Pugin's designs in Nottingham.

But perhaps the greatest stimulus for Polding to approach Pugin seeking designs for Australian buildings would have come from contact with his brethren at his old home Downside Priory. The community was in possession of a marvellous design prepared by Pugin for a vast new monastery in the Early English style on a scale surpassing a great many English medieval abbeys. The monastic buildings were arranged around four large courtyards and included a huge cruciform church with a trinity of spires. Surely, the psychological impact of Pugin's visionary scheme on the Downside monks and on Polding must have been immense.

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[3] These and other ecclesiastical buildings designed by Goodridge were in an idiom termed 'Gothick', denoting a superficial application of Gothic elements and details without the framework of archaeological and ecclesiological understanding of medieval churches that would be later successfully championed by Pugin.

[4] The then Roman Congregation that directed and promoted the Catholic faith in missionary territories throughout the world. Australia was at that time deemed to be a missionary territory.

[5] Henry Norbert Birt, *Benedictine Pioneers in Australia*, 2 vols, Herbert & Daniel, London, 1911, vol. II, p. 172.

On 10 December 1842, a month after Polding set sail from Liverpool, Pugin's diary recorded delivery of drawings for Sydney to Fr Thomas Paulinus Heptonstall OSB, Polding's London agent.[6]

Pugin's 1842 package of designs for Archbishop Polding included: a temporary free-standing bell tower for St Mary's Cathedral, Sydney, along with major extensions destined ultimately to replace that ungainly Gothick building; a school; and at least five designs for churches ranging in size and elaboration from small two-compartment buildings with nave areas less than 93 square metres to a spired triple-gabled structure with a nave and aisles area of over 370 square metres.

None of these churches were simply copies of Pugin's previous English or Irish designs. All were structured and equipped in accordance with his architectural, ecclesiological and singular liturgical stance, the latter predicated upon his hope that the late medieval English Sarum Use would one day prevail in the Catholic churches of England and its colonies.[7] All, therefore, had a bellcote or a spire, an antipodean north porch,[8] a separately expressed chancel, differentiated from the remainder of the structure by a greater degree of elaboration for reasons of propriety, sedilia, a piscina, an Easter sepulchre, a rood screen and—even in the smallest—a west door to cater for processions and for solemn occasions such as the visit of a bishop.

All three small village church designs provided by Pugin were related to building types that he had produced in England during the preceding five years. The facade of St John the Baptist's Hospital Chapel, Alton (1840), was akin to that of the design which Polding used just once for the Church of St Stephen in Brisbane (1847–50). The little aisled church of St Andrew, Cambridge (1841–43) and its sister church of St Charles Borromeo's, Ryde, built as late as 1857, were both developed from the medieval church of St Andrew at Long Stanton, Cambridgeshire. Pugin's St Marie's, Southport (1837–40), had its close antipodean counterpart in a design which was used twice between 1848 and 1849, for St Augustine of Hippo's, Balmain and St Francis Xavier's, Berrima, and whose principal dimensions and composition would provide the basis for a crude essay, St Gregory's church, Queanbeyan.

These three designs were for buildings of very much the same size and complexity as ones already well within the constructional capabilities of contemporary colonial architects. So why did Polding obtain them from Pugin? The answer again lies in Polding's awakening to the taste and impact of the full-blown Gothic Revival, not just in architectural terms, but in the provision of an appropriate and comprehensive setting for a re-vivified liturgy, an aspiration very much evident in Polding's own plans for his Benedictine monastic community attached to St Mary's Cathedral. Not only were these little churches archaeologically correct in every detail, as well as in their plan form, composition and massing, but they also had a comprehensive set of

[6] Pugin's diary for 1842, National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, Pressmark 86 MM 61, L5163 1969.

[7] The Use of Sarum was a late medieval variant, in minor details, of the Roman Rite, the manner of regulating the public worship of the church that prevailed throughout Western Christendom. It originated in Salisbury Cathedral and spread throughout southern England as well as Ireland and Scotland.

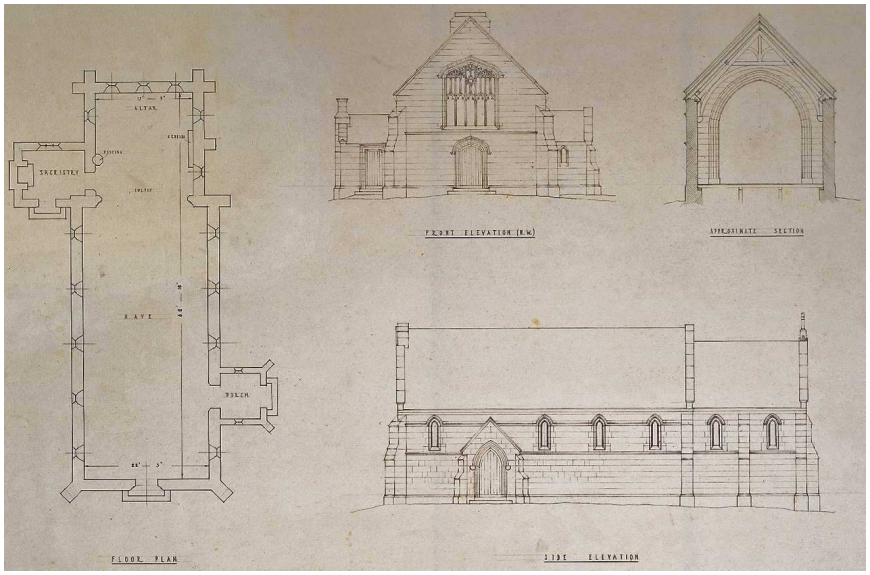
[8] Except for St Stephen's, with its south porch, as will be discussed later.

liturgical furnishings, treated by Pugin in his 1841 *Dublin Review* article, 'On the Present State of Ecclesiastical Architecture in England', as essential in 'forming a complete Catholic parish church for the due celebration of the divine office and administration of the sacraments, both as regards architectural arrangement and furniture'.[9]

The Design

The St Stephen's plans were for a small two-compartment church, a building type that was by far Pugin's most widely employed, numbering at least fifteen in a range of styles and proportions, designed over the period from 1837 to 1845 for clients in England, Ireland and Australia.[10] Most had bellcotes, generally standing on the nave west gable.[11]

The design used for St Stephen's consisted of a five-bay nave with south porch, a relatively deep two-bay separately expressed chancel with a rood screen across the chancel arch,[12] and a sacristy tucked into the north-east angle between the nave and chancel. The accompanying plans are reproduced from part of a set of measured drawings of the building done in 1926 by Walter Kerrison, a final year architectural student at the then Brisbane Technical College.[13]



Walter Kerrison's measured drawings (Private collection courtesy Russell Kerrison)

[9] [A. Welby Pugin], 'On the Present State of Ecclesiastical Architecture in England', *Dublin Review*, vol. X, May 1841, p. 312.

[10] Roughly in chronological order of design they included: St James', Reading; St Marie's on the Sands, Southport; St Anne's, Keighley; The Assumption, Bree; St Hilda's, Whitby; Holy Trinity, Radford; St John's Hospital Chapel, Alton; Our Lady & St Wilfrid's, Warwick Bridge; St Augustine of England's, Kenilworth; Jesus Chapel, Ackworth Grange, Pontefract; St Francis Xavier's, Berrima (same plans as St Augustine of Hippo's, Balmain); St Stephen's, Brisbane; St Anne's Chapel, Stone; St Paul's, Oatlands; St Lawrence's, Tubney.

[11] But that for St Anne's, Keighley, stood on the nave east gable.

[12] The existence of the screen is confirmed by the building contractor Alexander Goold's account dated 1 July 1851, which includes 'Roodscreen £9 - 10 - 0'. (Account appended to Bishop Davis to Colonial Secretary, 9 July 1851.)

[13] The absence of the bellcote from these drawings will be explained later in the essay..

Generally Pugin's designs were mirror-reversed for the antipodes, the congregational entrance porch being on the north side of the nave. There is no compelling reason to believe that the Brisbane church plans were so configured because the building was constructed on a site with clear space to its north and south and there would have been no practical need to reverse the entrance. As always in Pugin's churches there was a western entrance for solemn occasions such as the visit of a bishop and for processions, and the chancel was equipped with sedilia and a piscina in the chancel south wall.

St Stephen's was not much larger that the Berrima design, mainly differing in having a five-bay rather than a four-bay nave, which gave it roughly nineteen percent more capacity. Apart from this, the key dimensions of the two churches were identical, or almost so, as the accompanying table demonstrates.

Key Dimensions of St Francis Xavier's, Berrima, and St Stephen's, Brisbane

Dimensions are given in feet and inches. They are the nominal values and are measured inside the buildings.

Building	**Nave Area** (sq. ft)	**Nave Length**	**Nave Width**	**Nave Bay Length**	**Chancel Length**	**Chancel Width**
Berrima	880	40' 0"	22' 0"	10' 0"	20' 0"	17' 0"
Brisbane	1045	47' 6"	22' 0"	9' 6"	18' 0"	17' 0"

Despite their similarity in size the Berrima and Brisbane designs were quite different in character. While St Francis Xavier's was a pure essay in the Early English idiom of around the mid thirteenth century, St Stephen's was an amalgam of Early English and Perpendicular. This admixture of stylistic periods was occasionally used by Pugin in England, particularly near the start of his architectural career. Thus in 1839 he designed a Norman crypt for St Chad's Cathedral, Birmingham, with the detail elements of the building proper being in the Geometrical Decorated idiom. Here, the suggestion was of organic growth over many centuries. One might interpret this as part of a more widely expressed Pugin claim—expressed through his design genius—for the re-appropriation of the whole of English medieval history for a resurgent English Catholicism newly freed from centuries of persecution and legal disability.[14]

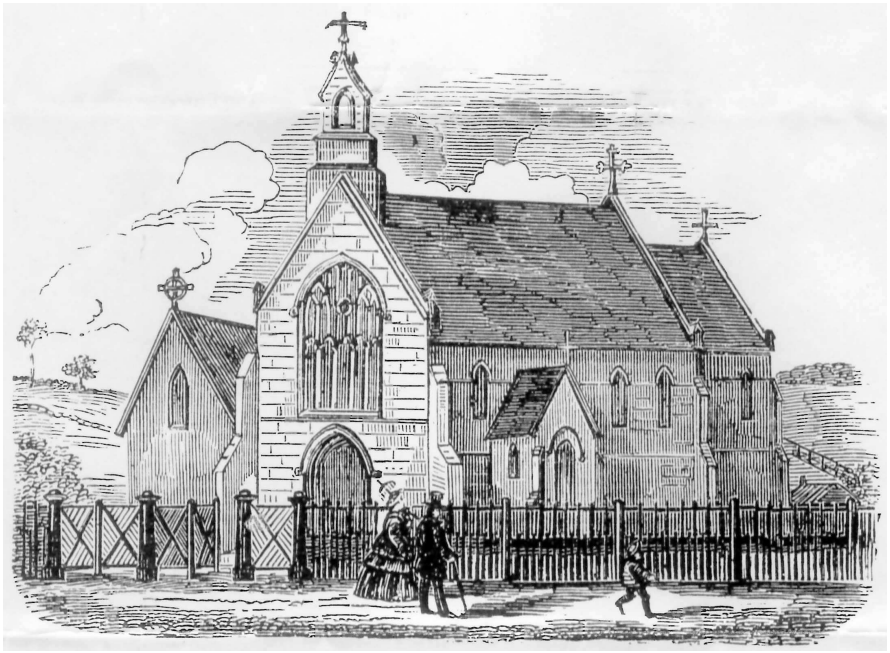
Likewise his 1838 designs for St Marie's on the Sands, Southport, St Anne's, Keighley, and St Augustine's, Solihull, used two styles; an earlier and visually simpler style for the nave and a later and more complex one for the chancel.[15] Whilst this too might be suggestive of organic growth it was also a powerful visual means of expressing one of Pugin's key theories, namely, that of propriety, whereby '*the external and internal appearance of an edifice should be illustrative of, and in*

[14] This is dealt with in an analysis of the architecture of Pugin's Mount St Bernard Abbey, Leicestershire, in Brian Andrews, 'The Significance of Architectural Style at Mount St Bernard Abbey', *True Principles: The voice of the Pugin Society*, Vol. 2, No. 5, Summer 2003, pp. 38–40.
[15] Southport and Keighley had an Early English nave with a Decorated chancel. Solihull had an Early English nave with a Perpendicular chancel.

accordance with, the purpose for which it is designed'.[16] In Pugin's view, therefore, the chancel should have a greater degree of decorative and structural elaboration because it was the more solemn or sacred part of the edifice. It is also worth bearing in mind in this regard Pugin's dictum on the first page of his most influential work, *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture*, that: 'In pure architecture the smallest detail should *have a meaning or serve a purpose*'.[17]

Such a stylistic arrangement—earlier nave with later chancel—was the norm for half of Pugin's Australian church designs for Archbishop Polding of Sydney and Bishop Willson of Hobart Town, namely, those used for Ryde, Parramatta and Broadway in New South Wales, and for Oatlands and extensions to Richmond in Tasmania. All had Early English naves and Decorated chancels. St Stephen's, Brisbane, also a hybrid, cannot have been thus to express propriety because it was all Early English except for the façade which was Perpendicular. Pugin had such an unrivalled command of the grammar and vocabulary of Gothic that such use of stylistic diversity could never be a question of ignorance. No, even at the antipodes, the long pedigree of English Catholicism would find concrete expression in the forms of its churches.

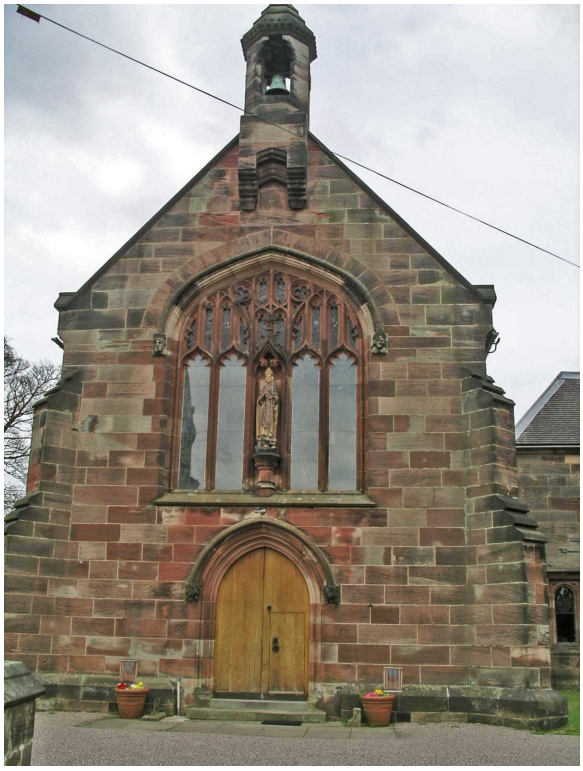
The north and south walls of the nave were pierced by lancets with moulded splays, one to each bay,[18] their dripstone mouldings continuing as a string course the full length of the walls. A second, strong, string course under-girded the sills of these windows. There were angle buttresses in the plane of the nave east wall, while the porch and nave façade corners had diagonal buttressing.



An early sketch of St Stephen's Church. Note, the gabled structure to its left is not part of the building.

[16] A. Welby Pugin, *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture*, John Weale, London, 1841, p. 50.
[17] ibid., p. 1.
[18] Except for the second bay from the west end on the south side where the porch was located.

The west front composition, with its diagonal buttressing, bellcote and five-light Perpendicular window, was strongly reminiscent of the façade that Pugin had designed for the Chapel of St John the Baptist's Hospital, Alton, Staffordshire, in 1839.



The façade of St John's Hospital Chapel, Alton (Image: Nicholas Callinan)

But there was a singular touch that seems to have been one of the fruits of a sketching tour that Pugin made of the Scottish Lowlands in October 1842, during which, on the 20th of that month, he had visited the ruins of Melrose Abbey.[19] This was some seven weeks before he despatched the package of plans for Archbishop Polding.[20] The remnants of the five-light tracery in the chancel east window at Melrose have an unusual cusped lozenge in the central light (see overleaf). Pugin, whose design details were not infrequently inspired by medieval work that he had recently studied and sketched, inserted such a lozenge in the central light of the west window for the plans used at Brisbane (see overleaf). Indeed, the whole of the west window tracery design is evidently a simplified version of the Melrose window.

The chancel was strengthened by angle buttresses, including one in its south wall marking the junction of the two chancel bays. Lancet windows with dripstone mouldings lit the north and south sides of the easternmost bay, the south wall having a strong string course as for the nave.

[19] Pugin's diary for 1842, op. cit.
[20] ibid. The plans were despatched on 10 December 1842.

Left: The chancel east window, Melrose Abbey; right: St Stephen's interior looking west (Image: Stephen Kerin)

For his chancel east wall composition, Pugin again looked back to a previous arrangement, in this case the Early English St Wilfrid's Church, Hulme, Manchester, design of 1839. In both designs a trinity of lancets, the central one being slightly taller,[21] were surmounted by a traceried wheel window. The wheel had a moulded surround, the dripstone mouldings of the lancets were tied together with a string course extending between the buttresses, and the whole composition was tied together at the lancets' sill level by a strong string course.

Left: St Wilfrid's, Hulme, from the north-east (Image: Brian Andrews)*; right: St Stephen's east end* (Image: Stephen Kerin)

It seems highly likely that the form of this traceried wheel window was yet another fruit of Pugin's sketching tour of the Scottish Lowlands in October 1842. On the same day, 20 October, that he visited Melrose Abbey he also went to Jedburgh and Dryburgh Abbeys.[22] The Jedburgh Abbey church west front has a wheel window in its gable of similar form to that which he included in the design used for St Stephen's.

[21] A typical Pugin elegant compositional touch
[22] Pugin's diary for 1842, op. cit..

There is a near identical wheel window to the Jedburgh one in the Dryburgh refectory west gable. Because of the much smaller size of the Brisbane wheel Pugin evidently reduced the segments from twelve to eight and left out the small circle to be found at the centre of the Jedburgh/Dryburgh wheels.

The little sacristy against the chancel north wall had a west door, paired lancets in the east wall and a typical Pugin chimney abutting its north wall.

Although the bulk of the design was Early English the pitch of the roof was dictated by the building's Perpendicular façade, so it was shallower that that which Pugin habitually employed for purely Early English designs.[23] Internally, this shallower pitch had an impact on the nave trusses. They were of the arch-braced collar tie and king post type so widely used by Pugin, but because of the roof geometry the arch was a continuous curve that landed on the corbels supporting the wall posts (see illustration previous page). Again, because of the shallow roof pitch the moulded chancel arch was barely pointed, being nearly semi-circular in form.

The church had the usual fittings, including sedilia with level seats in the chancel south wall,[24] a piscina to the east of the sedilia and holy water stoups in the porch east and west walls.[25]

Construction

During the middle years of the 1840s the embryonic Catholic community of Moreton Bay (later Brisbane) had been worshipping in a temporary chapel, the old Government store, in Elizabeth Street.[26] Then, on 25 April 1847, Archbishop Polding's vicar-general, Fr Henry Gregory Gregory OSB, petitioned the New South Wales Colonial Secretary for aid to support a resident priest, Fr James Hanly, and to erect a proposed permanent church in Brisbane.[27] He included 'a list of Two Hundred and Twenty Six individuals who have signified their intention to attend Divine Service in the above mentioned church …'[28] On 8 June Executive Council gave its approval for aid towards a priest and a church.[29] Gregory then submitted to the Colonial Secretary 'the Plans, Elevation, and Specification of the Church intended to be erected at Brisbane, the estimated Cost of which is One Thousand pounds',[30] the Pugin design, aid for which was granted on 27 August, conditional upon the sum expended not exceeding £1,000.[31]

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[23] And so it was in medieval work. Indeed, where Early English churches underwent partial rebuilds in the Perpendicular style, sometimes attended by a lowering of the roof pitch, the impress of the original steeper-pitched Early English roof can occasionally be seen in the stonework of the abutting wall.
[24] None Pugin's Australian church designs had stepped sedilia. Nevertheless, they were furnished for the Use of Sarum as evidenced by Easter Sepulchres in several of them as constructed.
[25] A discussion on these fittings is given in the downloadable essay: Brian Andrews, *St Francis Xavier's Church, Berrima, New South Wales*, at www.puginfoundation.org/buildings/
[26] Denis W. Martin, *The Foundation of the Catholic Church in Queensland*, Church Archivists' Press, Virginia, Queensland, 1998, pp. 49–54.
[27] Gregory to Colonial Secretary, 25 April 1847, John Oxley Memorial Library, Brisbane.
[28] ibid.
[29] Executive Council to Gregory, 22 June 1847, John Oxley Memorial Library, Brisbane.
[30] Gregory to Colonial Secretary, 5 August 1847, John Oxley Memorial Library, Brisbane.
[31] Executive Council to Gregory, 24 September 1847, John Oxley Memorial Library, Brisbane.

The building contractor selected for the construction of the church was Alexander Goold. Stone was quarried from the banks of the Brisbane River some distance upstream at Goodna. Work had begun by January 1849, the *Moreton Bay Courier* announcing that: 'The workmen are employed in excavating the foundation and the stones for that purpose are on the ground. Lime is being burned—a dam is formed in a part of the excavation for making mortar and there is every indication of activity on the part of those who have the management.'[32] Indeed there was, for Goold submitted his first account amounting to £600-11-0 in June, covering excavation for the foundations, laying of the foundations, construction of walls to part of their height and production of a substantial quantity of dressed stonework for the plinth, string courses, doors, windows and so on.[33]

Goold's next account, for work up until mid January 1850, covered building the walls to the level of the roof, the balance of the dressed stonework, the three gables, west window and the main roof framed and erected. The cost was £600.[34] Work proceeded apace and the first Mass was said in the building—complete but for a few internal fittings—on 12 May 1850.[35] A few days prior to this, Captain J.C. Wickham, the Brisbane Police Magistrate, reporting on the condition of the church to the Colonial Secretary, remarked that: 'The building is entirely of stone, and as far as I can judge, is very well built. Moreover, it is a very handsome edifice and highly creditable to all parties concerned with its erection.'[36]

Goold's third and final account for £516 covered shingling and lining the roofs, cornices, plastering of the sacristy and porch, erection of the belfry and installation of the bell, floors, skirting, doors, steps, glazing, painting, seats, the altar and rood screen, as well as fencing the grounds and superintendence of the works.[37] The total cost of the church was therefore £1,716-11-0.

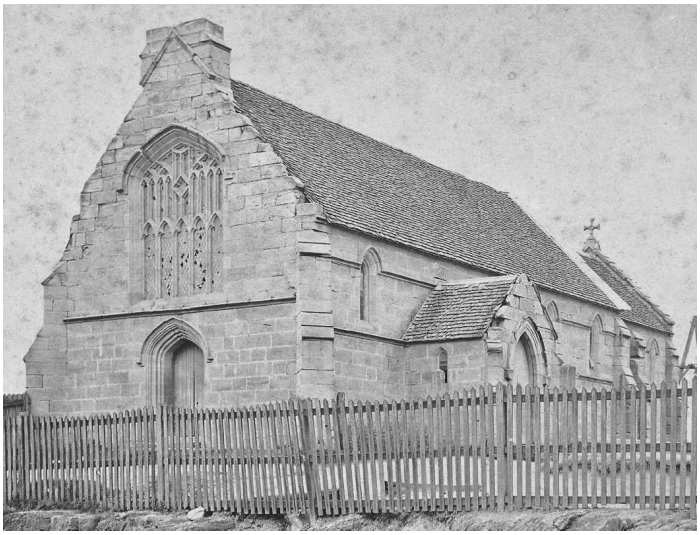
Subsequent history

In choosing to take stone from the Goodna quarry Alexander Goold had unwittingly selected material of appallingly poor quality. Within less than twenty years the gable copings to the nave and porch had disintegrated and the bellcote had been dismantled (see overleaf). The remaining dressed stone followed suit, with the tracery in the west and east windows being replaced by crude wooden replicas. String courses, door and window mouldings, dripstones and buttress set-offs steadily crumbled away, making the church appear as if it had been attacked with a blowtorch (see overleaf).

Aside from its deteriorating fabric St Stephen's was to suffer further indignities over the ensuing century. Having served as a humble little cathedral church for the new Diocese of Brisbane from 1861 until 1874, in which latter year the first stage of the adjacent St Stephen's Cathedral was completed, it became redundant. It was variously used as a school, offices, a storeroom, a sale room for missals and hymnals, and a

[32] *Morton Bay Courier*, 20 January 1849, quoted in Martin, op. cit., p. 84.
[33] Goold's account, appended to McEncroe to Colonial Secretary, 23 July 1849, John Oxley Memorial Library, Brisbane.
[34] Copy of Goold's second account, appended to Gregory to Colonial Secretary, 1 March 1850, John Oxley Memorial Library, Brisbane.
[35] The event announced in the *Moreton Bay Courier*, 11 May, 1850, quoted in Martin, op. cit., p. 95.
[36] Wickham to Colonial Secretary, 8 May 1850, John Oxley Memorial Library, Brisbane.
[37] Copy of Goold's third account, appended to Davis to Colonial Secretary, 9 July 1851, John Oxley Memorial Library, Brisbane.

choir practice room. Then it was largely disused. Over the period bits were tacked on and removed, and three large rectangular openings were cut through the nave north and south walls.



Severe deterioration of the St Stephen's Church, Brisbane, stonework already apparent in the late 1860s (Private collection)

A December 1996 view of St Stephen's façade showing the crude wooden replacement tracery in the west window (Image: Brian Andrews)

By 1997 urgent conservation work became necessary to stabilise the structure. From then until the end of 1998 a $1.5 million restoration of the fabric was undertaken by the Brisbane architectural form of Robin Gibson and Partners, led by Colin Christ.

Amongst the more prominent external features of the restored building are the new hardwood shingle roof, of the kind that had been used originally, much replacement dressed stonework and a new bellcote astride the nave west gable. The design of the latter was developed from very poor quality image evidence of the original, informed by the Pugin bellcotes on St Francis Xavier's, Berrima, and St Paul's, Oatlands.

The restored St Stephen's, July 2006 (Image: Stephen Kerin)

Now known as St Stephen's Chapel, the building houses a shrine to Blessed Mary MacKillop (1842–1909), co-founder of the Australian Sisters of St Joseph.