

Pugin Foundation

St Charles Borromeo's Church, Ryde, New South Wales

Brian Andrews

Introduction

St Charles Borromeo's 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).

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 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

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.

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.

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.

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

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.

north porch, 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, completed as late as 1857 in the then countryside some 10 km—as the crow flies—north-west of the heart of Sydney,⁸ were both developed from the much admired 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 small church 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 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

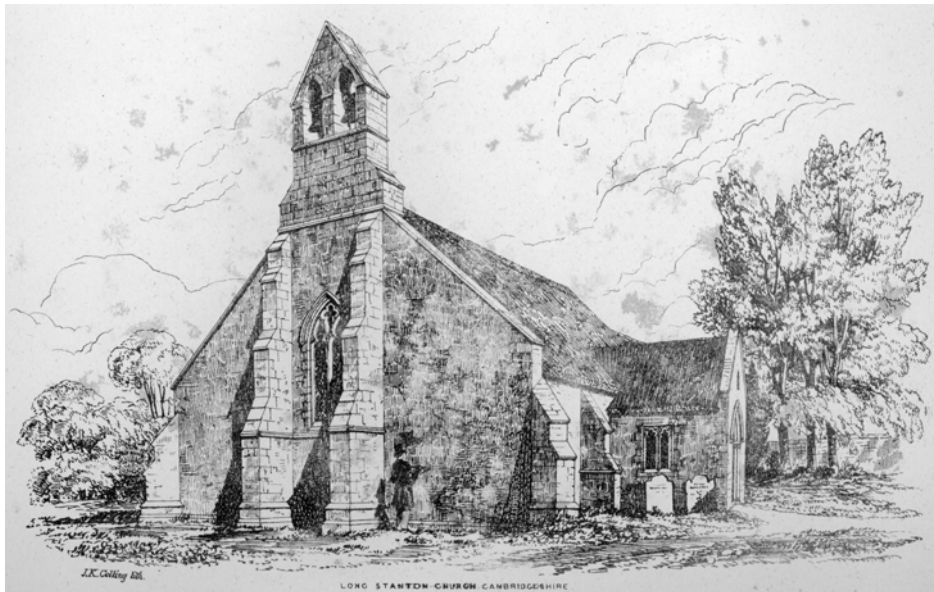
The plans were for a beautifully composed and proportioned small aisled church having a nave and aisles area of 119 square metres, the nave west gable being surmounted by a bellcote. This was the third of four Pugin essays with this general format, starting with St Andrew's, Cambridge,¹⁰ and St Winefride's, Shepshed,

⁸ The Sydney metropolitan area now extends a good 40 km beyond Ryde.

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

¹⁰ For details of St Andrew's see Roderick O'Donnell, '“... blink [him] by silence”? The Cambridge Camden Society and A.W.N. Pugin', in Christopher Webster and John Elliott (eds), *'A Church as it Should be': The Cambridge Camden Society and its Influence*, Shaun Tyas, Donington, 2000, pp. 107–12. The church was dismantled in 1902 and moved to St Ives, Huntingdonshire, where it was re-erected, with the addition of a clerestory, as Sacred Heart Church. St Andrew's had been superseded by Archibald Dunn and Edward Hansom's noble 1890 Church of Our Lady and the English Martyrs.

Leicestershire,¹¹ both designed in early 1842, and finishing with St Alphonsus', Barntown, County Wexford, designed in 1844. All were developed from the form of the Early English St Michael's, Long Stanton, Cambridgeshire, of c.1230.



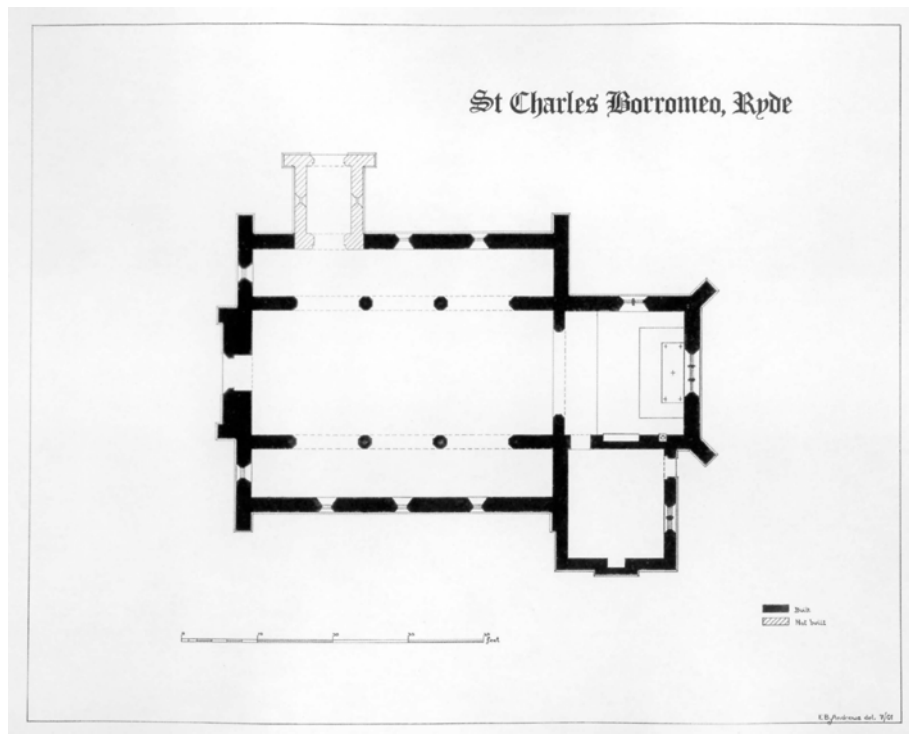
St Michael's, Long Stanton, Cambridgeshire (Raphael and J. Arthur Brandon, *Parish Churches*, W. Kent & Co., London, 1858, vol. 1, facing p. 41)

Of these four designs, the one used at Ryde was most faithful in its plan form (see overleaf) and composition to the Long Stanton inspiration, yet it was no mere copy. The aisled nave was effectively four bays long, consisting of a three-bay arcade between two stub half-length bays to the east and west, the latter formed by solid nave walls, thereby forming alcoves at the aisle east ends for side altars. There was the usual antipodean north porch and a sacristy was tucked into the south east angle of the nave and chancel. The nave arcade had simple chamfered arches supported on cylindrical piers with cushion capitals, the east and west ends of the arcade terminating in engaged half columns.

Like Long Stanton, but unlike the other three designs in this idiom where the nave and chancel were under the one roof,¹² the Ryde chancel was separately expressed externally, despite the nave and chancel being of equal width, their north and south walls being of equal height and their roofs being of equal in pitch. This was achieved by extending the nave east wall to just beyond the roof line and capping it with gable coping and a cross. Unlike Long Stanton where the nave and aisles were under a single roof, the Ryde aisles were separately pent roofed. At the west end of the nave there was a substantial buttressed thickening of the wall, rising in two set-off stages to a tall and particularly elegant double bellcote. This was surmounted by a typical Pugin stone cross moline, as were the chancel and nave east gables.

¹¹ St Winefride's, one of the simplest and least expensive of all Pugin's churches, was closed in the 1920s in favour of a larger replacement in Shepshed. It remains structurally intact and in sympathetic private hands.

¹² In these Pugin separately expressed the chancel internally by the use of a rood screen and parclose screens.



The ground plan (Brian Andrews)

Pugin had inserted a west door into this plan to cater for formal occasions such as the visit of a bishop and for processions, something lacking in the Long Stanton exemplar. With this facility along with the sacristy the Ryde design represented the practical and liturgical perfecting of a specific medieval type to correspond with Pugin's vision for the contemporary English Catholic Church and, by extension, the Catholic Church in England's Colonial possessions.

Before leaving our discussion of the Ryde plan it should be noted that the plan here illustrated is partly conjectural, an inevitable result of the major changes wrought on the building in the 1930s. It has been developed using field measurements, a c.1912 interior photograph and an outline drawing of the original building published in an article appearing in the Australian journal *Building* for January 1935 about the large church which substantially replaced the Pugin original. The conjectural parts are: the size and details of the north porch; details of the sacristy chimney and exterior door; and the details of the sedilia, piscina and steps in the chancel. Conjectural details are largely based on Pugin's other Australian church designs of 1842, namely, Berrima/Balmain, Brisbane, Parramatta and Broadway, and also his 1843 design used for St Paul's, Oatlands. The porch is a copy of that at Berrima, whose nave bay length of 10 feet (3 metres) corresponds with that at Ryde.

The style of the Ryde nave and aisles was Early English but its chancel and sacristy were in the Flowing Decorated idiom for reasons of propriety. In *True Principles* Pugin had referred to the principle of propriety, stating: 'what I mean by propriety is this, *that the external and internal appearance of an edifice should be illustrative of,*

and in accordance with, the purpose for which it is destined'.¹³ For him this meant that the chancel of a church, being the more solemn or sacred part of the building, should always have a greater degree of structural and decorative elaboration. In most of his Australian church designs he achieved this by making the bulk of the building Early English, with its simpler detail vocabulary,¹⁴ and the chancel—generally—in a Flowing Decorated idiom, with stone tracery in the windows.¹⁵ Thus at Ryde the nave and aisle windows were plain lancets, the sacristy window consisted of paired trefoil-headed lights under a square head, the chancel east window was of three lights with reticulated tracery and its north window was a pair of trefoil-headed lights.

To conclude our discussion of this delightful design we note that, like Long Stanton, the Ryde nave had a trussed rafter roof. More generally, even for his smallest churches, Pugin preferred to use fully developed trusses whose pitch corresponded with that of the nave bays.¹⁶

Construction

The area now known as the Sydney suburb of Ryde was the third area of European settlement in the Colony of New South Wales, dating back to 1792.¹⁷ Efforts in the early 1840s to provide a permanent place of worship for Catholics in the district did not bear fruit, and it was not until July 1849, when Daniel McMahon donated land east of the village of Ryde for a church, that plans could be revived.¹⁸

Archbishop Polding provided drawings for a small church to be called St Joseph's, one of the set furnished by Pugin in 1842, and works got under way late in 1851, the chosen contractor being John Crotty, a local builder and stonemason.¹⁹ On Monday 8 December Polding, accompanied by his coadjutor Bishop Charles Henry Davis OSB, attended the site to set out the foundations. *The Freeman's Journal* reported that: 'Several Catholics of the neighbourhood attended with spades, &c., to assist the Venerable Prelate in the Godly undertaking, and in the course of two or three hours the ground was fully prepared for the mason.'²⁰ On Sunday 4 January 1852 Bishop Davis returned and laid the foundation stone 'with the usual ceremonies so imposing and instructive'.²¹

Work on the building proved slow. By mid 1854 this had amounted to just the laying of the foundations, erection of several of the lower courses of the walls and buttresses, and dressing of some stone for columns, jambs and reveals, at a cost of £1,215-11-8.²²

¹³ A. Welby Pugin, *The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture*, John Weale, London, 1841, p. 50.

¹⁴ And hence easier and cheaper to construct in colonial conditions.

¹⁵ The Australian exceptions are St Francis Xavier's, Berrima/St Augustine of Hippo's, Balmain, which design is entirely Early English, and St Patrick's, Colebrook, which is Flowing Decorated. In both cases propriety is expressed by subtly greater elaboration of chancel elements.

¹⁶ Other Pugin trussed rafter roofs are to be found at St Peter's, Marlow (1845); St Marie's, Rugby (1845); and St Osmund's, Salisbury (1847).

¹⁷ Margaret Farlow, *A History of Catholicism in the Ryde District: The early years*, Ryde, 1999, p. 3.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, pp. 15–16.

¹⁹ John Crotty is buried in the Ryde churchyard near the church he built.

²⁰ *The Freeman's Journal*, 11 December 1851, p. 11.

²¹ *The Freeman's Journal*, 4 January 1852, p. 10.

²² Letter Bishop Davis to Colonial Secretary, 8 May 1854, Colonial Secretary's Correspondence Received 54/4053, filed with 57/3141, SRNSW 4/3362. Margaret Farlow, *op. cit.*, attributes the slowdown to the depopulation of the district occasioned by the discovery of gold near Bathurst in 1851.

In the light of the fact that the north porch was never constructed it is interesting to note that the list of work done included moulded jambs and reveals for the porch.²³

Building activity accelerated after the care of the Parish of Ryde was placed by Polding in the hands of the French Marist Fathers from 1 April 1856.²⁴ By April 1857 *The Sydney Morning Herald* could report that the stonework with the exception of the western gable was complete, adding that: 'It will when completed be a very neat building ...'.²⁵ In this report the church was referred to as St Charles', indicating that its re-naming as St Charles Borromeo's Church had been done by Polding in honour of his much-loved coadjutor Charles Henry Davis who had died on 17 May 1854.

Work completed between mid 1854 and July 1857 had amounted to £1,325-0-0½, bringing the building to near completion. A report to the Colonial Secretary's office seeking the balance of a government grant towards the erection of the church stated:

The masonry of the walls are completed in a substantial and Workmanlike manner, including dwarf flank, clearstory end and gable walls, Bell Turret and stone crofs,s

The Carpenters are erecting the roof timbers, & laying the plates for the flooring joists –

The Battens for slating and Six thousand Countys slates are on the premi fs,s²⁶

St Charles' church was dedicated on Sunday 8 December 1857. *The Freeman's Journal* in its report of the day remarked that: 'it is, indeed, the neatest and prettiest country church which we have seen, and is a most fitting specimen of the handy-work of that creature whom God made to "his own likeness" in a lovely district where He has himself exhibited so much of the beautiful in His own works'.²⁷ Pugin would surely have approved of such sentiments.

²³ So the decision to omit it must postdate 1854.

²⁴ Farlow, op. cit., p. 25.

²⁵ *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 April 1857, quoted in Farlow, op. cit., p. 26.

²⁶ Colonial Architects Correspondence re Roman Catholic Church, Ryde 1857, SRNSW 2/647.

²⁷ *The Freeman's Journal*, Saturday 14 November 1857, p. 2.



St Charles Borromeo's, Ryde, c.1870 (Private collection, courtesy Margaret Farlow)

Less than fifty years later the building needed extensive repairs due to the ravages of white ants which had badly damaged the floors and the pulpit. A new concrete floor was laid and the interior wall surfaces, still in their rough state, received their intended coat of plaster.²⁸ The church was re-dedicated on 28 June 1903.



The interior looking east, c.1912 (Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Hazlewood Collection, ON165/147)

Enlargement

A significant alteration to the proportions and appearance of the building occurred between 1903 and 1912 when a three-bay nun's chapel in a crude Gothic idiom was constructed in rock-faced sandstone against the chancel north wall. By this time the need for an entrance porch had clearly been felt (the designed north porch having

²⁸ *The Catholic Press*, 2 July 1903, p. 25.

never been constructed), so one was added to the west front and the two-light window displaced from the chancel north wall by the construction of the nun's choir was inserted in the west wall of the new gabled porch. This would be the first of many re-arrangements of the elements of the original church.

These additions were dwarfed by a major enlargement project for the building in 1934, increasing its seating capacity from 250 to 600. The Ryde church was about to suffer the same fate of mutilation as many of Pugin's small English churches, such as those at Southport, Uttoxeter, Keighley and Solihull, when the district and its population far outgrew the needs and expectations of its founders.

At first it was intended to demolish the existing building, but the Sydney architects Messrs Fowel and McConnel, backed by the then Parish Priest Fr Edward Gell, son of the Bathurst architect Edward Gell, decided upon a radical plan that would enable Pugin's beautiful west front to be preserved while re-cycling all of the remainder of the original church into the new one. In their account of the project the architects explained the rationale for the new building:

The design of [the enlarged 1934] St Charles', Ryde, was inspired by the delightful little old church across which the new church has been built ... The old church had a very beautiful West End ... By placing the axis of the new church across that of the old, this façade was preserved in its entirety as a side porch.²⁹

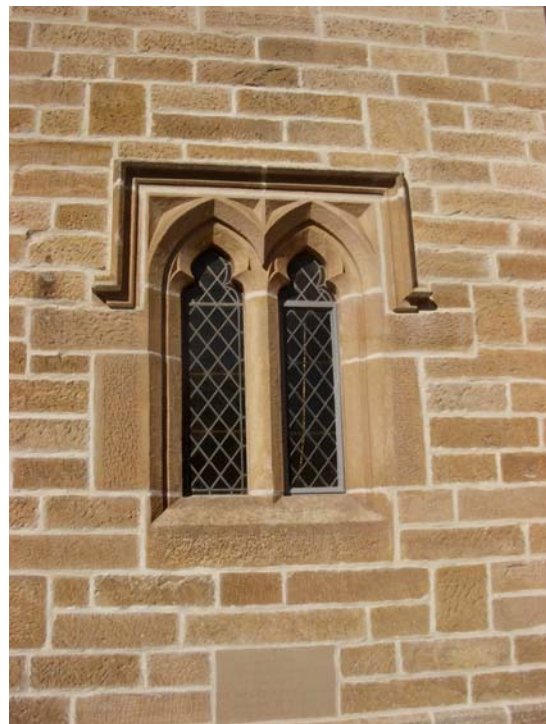
They stated that this approach had preserved 'some of the features, the character and all of the materials of the old church ... at a cost which was certainly no more than that of the proposed brick church'.³⁰ Most of the external stonework for the new aisled clerestoried church was obtained by splitting the old stone in halves, thus doubling the available quantity, and then facing the new interior with cream brick. All the old aisle windows were re-used, along with new copies, and the old three-light chancel east window was inserted into the centre of the new apse. Similarly, the nave arcades were recycled and copies added to produce the extended length of the new nave, the span of each bay being also increased by the addition of extra stones to the arch voussoirs. The old chancel was largely used to make the new front porch and the old two-light square-headed sacristy window was inserted into its liturgical south wall.

²⁹ 'A Tale of Two Churches: St Anne's Shrine, Bondi, and St Charles', Ryde', *Building*, 12 January 1935, pp. 21–27.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 25.



St Charles Borromeo's, June 2006 (Image: Jude Andrews)



Left: The chancel east window from old St Charles' in the apse of the present church; right: The former sacristy window now in the porch liturgical south wall of the present church (Images: Jude Andrews)

Thus the building has remained. Pugin's little village church is still there, it's just that most of it is now distributed throughout its 1934 replacement.

Furnishings

None of the original furnishings survive in the present enlarged church, but photographic evidence suggests that at least two of the elements in the Pugin church as constructed were most probably derived from detail in the 1842 working drawings. These were the main altar and a pair of bracket pedestals with statues on either side of the chancel east window.

Just as the original altar in Pugin's St Francis Xavier's, Berrima, seems to have been derived from typical Pugin sketchy details contained in the working drawings, this appears also to have been the case at Ryde. A c.1912 photograph of the interior (see overleaf) reveals an altar with two particular details that I want to relate to another Pugin work. At the top of the reredos is a cresting consisting of fleurs de lis alternating large and small in size. A more singular detail is the front face of the gradine in the form of a zig-zag trail of blind triangular trefoils. Interestingly, both details were to be found on the old altar in Pugin's Alton Castle chapel (see overleaf) The form of the reredos cresting is rare but that of the gradine is particularly so, the Alton and Ryde examples being the only ones I have ever identified. The probability of unrelated authorship seems therefore to be most unlikely.



A detail of the altar in St Charles Borromeo's, Ryde, c.1912 (Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Hazlewood Collection, ON165/147)



The altar, Alton Castle chapel, Staffs., (after an illustration in an undated booklet, St John's Preparatory School, Alton Castle, circa early 1960s)

The same argument must surely also apply to the statues on their brackets. In several of Pugin's chancel illustrations in his May 1841 and February 1842 *Dublin Review* articles 'On the Present State of Ecclesiastical Architecture in England',³¹ statues in niches flank the east window in precisely the same position as the Ryde bracketed statues. He illustrated them for St Giles', Cheadle, St John's Hospital Chapel, Alton, St Alban's, Macclesfield, and St George's Cathedral, Southwark, although they were only constructed at Cheadle and Alton. The statues on simple wooden brackets at Ryde would have been an affordable approximation to the detail on the drawings.

It is worth mentioning that such a positioning of statues niches/brackets on chancel east walls is practically non-existent in other Australian Catholic churches, with one telling exception. The noble Decorated Church of St John the Baptist, Clifton Hill, in Melbourne's inner north-east has such statue niches.

³¹ [A. Welby Pugin], 'On the Present State of Ecclesiastical Architecture in England', *Dublin Review*, vol. X, May 1841, pp. 301–48 and vol. XII, February 1842, pp. 80–183).



The interior, looking east, St John the Baptist's, Clifton Hill, by John Bun Denny
(Image: Brian Andrews)

It was designed c.1876 by John Bun Denny (1810–92), Pugin's one-time clerk of works for the erection of St Giles', Cheadle. As the *Morning Post* had put it in 1846:

It may be added, in completing a notice of this building [St Giles'], that the designs of Mr. Pugin were ably seconded by the skill of Mr. Denny, resident master of works at Alton Towers, whose admiration of the Gothic style of architecture, and acquaintance with its minutest details, has made the erection of this building a labour of love. The smith and carpenters' work connected with it were also executed by the resident artizans of the village, under his superintendence; it being the wish of the Earl of Shrewsbury that all of his dependents should as much as possible be benefited by the efforts of his munificence.³²

Small wonder that Denny added such details to his singularly Puginesque church.

³² Quoted in the pamphlet, *Lord Shrewsbury's New Church of St. Giles in Staffordshire: being a Description of the Edifice and an Account of the Consecration and Opening*, by the editor of *Dolman's Magazine*, Charles Dolman, London, 1846, p. 13.