

Victoria County History of Cumbria Project: Draft paper on Gothic Revival in Victorian Church Architecture

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Gothic Revival in the Victorian Period and its Meaning in Ecclesiastical Architecture

Introduction

There has been a Gothic Revival in all periods of architecture after the Dissolution in the mid sixteenth century to the design of the new Bishop Edward King Chapel, one of the RIBA Sterling Shortlist entries for 2013.¹ The term ‘Gothic Revival’ refers to England’s medieval past from the architecture of the first Gothic building, Edward the Confessor’s Westminster Abbey of 1065, to the second phase of the ‘Perpendicular’ style between 1500 and 1525. We refer to architectural styles as a convenient way of recognising a pattern of familiar design features that allow us to place a church as belonging to a particular period and to fix a date, or at least a date range, on it. That is not the case with Gothic Revival: in the first case it is not a style, but a representation or approximation of medieval styles and a Renaissance view of history, reflecting changing attitudes to politics and religion over time.² For that reason it is more appropriate to refer to Gothic Revival rather than to Gothic Architecture.

Analysis of church architecture began in the seventeenth century with antiquarians reporting on attitudes to medieval buildings and styles recorded in literary sources and, the commonly held views of a particular historical period,³ eventually leading to the Sublime, Romantic and Picturesque movements of the eighteenth century that had little in common with architects. This is understandable as Roman Catholicism was regarded as medieval and had not been practised in England from the Dissolution until Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829, severely limiting the available sources of information.⁴ The ecclesiologists of the nineteenth century by comparison analysed the architectural detail of churches in order to compare the Gothic of earlier periods

¹ <http://ribasterlingprize.architecture.com> [accessed on 23.09.2013].

² A. Buchanan, ‘Interpretations of Medieval Architecture, c.1550-1750’, in: *Gothic Architecture and its Meanings 1550-1830*, M. Hall, (Reading, 2002), 27.

³ Buchanan, *Interpretations of Medieval Architecture*, 27.

⁴ R. Hill, ‘The ivy’d ruins of forlorn Grace Dieu’: Catholics, Romantics and late Georgian Gothic’, in M. Hall, *Gothic Architecture and its Meanings 1550-1830*, (Reading, 2002), 159.

with that of A.W.N. Pugin, Gilbert Scott and others to inform an attempt to build churches that looked authentically like medieval architecture, although replication of original detailing is rare.⁵

In the Middle Ages, churches were powerful symbols of religious beliefs and practices that were entirely Catholic.⁶ After the Dissolution the church took on a very different appearance: rood screens were removed; medieval wall paintings were either destroyed or covered over; chantry chapels lost their spiritual meaning once the altars had been removed and fixed pews were installed for exclusive use by individual families.⁷

Unlike the Catholics and Anglicans, the non-conformist churches rarely embraced Gothic and when they did, it was usually confined to the inclusion of medieval style windows in the external elevations. Otherwise, their churches were free from religious imagery and without the need to be oriented on a West-East axis. For this reason, a discussion on the design of non-conformist churches does not form part of this paper.

The Victorian Period

Gothic Revival had its roots in the first half of the nineteenth century and from the 1840s influenced the different styles of ecclesiastical architecture to the end of the nineteenth century.⁸

Table 1: Categories of Gothic Architecture⁹

Architectural Style	Approximate Date¹	Alternative References
Transitional period: Romanesque ² to Early English	1075-1199	² Norman
Early English	1200-1299	First Pointed
Transitional Period: Early English to Decorated	1275-1299	
Decorated	1300-1399	Second or Middle Pointed. Also, French Early Second Pointed
Transitional Period: Decorated to Perpendicular	1375-1399	
Perpendicular: First stage Second stage	1400-1499 1500-1525	Third Pointed
¹ The Approximate Dates vary between authors, but those stated above are a reasonable representation		

⁵ M. Hall, *Gothic Architecture and its Meanings 1550-1830*, (Reading, 2002), 7.

⁶ Buchanan, *Interpretations of Medieval Architecture*, 34.

⁷ Buchanan, *Interpretations of Medieval Architecture*, 34.

⁸ J. Price, *Sharpe, Paley and Austin: A Lancaster Architectural Practice 1836-1942*, (University of Lancaster, 1998), 39.

⁹ Based on J. H Parker, *An Introduction to the Study of Gothic Architecture* (1861).

There were three categories of pointed Gothic referred to during the Victorian Revival of the original medieval style (Table 1) as well as overlapping transitional periods, recognising that the timing of architectural development varied across England.

Victorian church building was a direct consequence of a period of unprecedented social, cultural and legislative change.¹⁰ During the 1820s and 1830s there was a gradual revival in Catholicism, although it was not until the 1850s that the church was sufficiently established to justify building Catholic churches, predominantly in rural communities.¹¹ The Catholic church received an upsurge in interest following publication of two books by Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin: ‘Contrasts’ [in Architecture] in 1836 followed by ‘The True Principles of Pointed or Christian Architecture’ in 1841. Pugin blamed the Protestants for the destruction of medieval architecture which he said had been designed by Catholics for followers of the Catholic faith.¹² The growth in the interest of Catholicism prompted a surge in architectural reform in the Anglican Church at a time when the Oxford Movement, (also known as the Tractarian Movement), was formed in 1833.¹³ The Movement was an organisation of High Church Anglicans that sought a renewal of Catholic or Roman Catholic thought and practice within the Church of England in opposition to the Protestant tendencies of the church and argued for the reinstatement of lost Christian traditions of faith and their inclusion into Anglican liturgy and theology.

Another influential group of Anglicans was the ecclesiological reform movement, the Cambridge Camden Society, formed in 1839. They published the *Ecclesiologist* in 1841 and brought the doctrine of the Oxford Movement and Pugin together adapting them to their own uses and aimed to instruct architects how to design in this style which was seen as the highest form of art.¹⁴ It is this combination which shaped English church architecture from the 1840s to the end of the century. They believed that Anglican churches should adopt Catholic liturgical principles with a change of emphasis from sermons to the Eucharist which had ceased to be understood in a Catholic sense. Ecclesiological influence on Anglican church building lasted throughout the Victorian period. This meant that chancels should have a distinct identity and be separate from the nave resulting in the focus of the interior being redirected from the pulpit to the altar. To maintain continuity with the medieval Catholic period, new churches should be designed in the historically correct and appropriate Gothic form. Early English was seen by Pugin to be

¹⁰ C. Brooks & A. Saint, *The Victorian Church: Architecture and Society*, (Manchester, 1995), 1.

¹¹ D. Avery, *Victorian & Edwardian Architecture*, (London, 2003), 44.

¹² Avery, *Victorian & Edwardian Architecture*, 45.

¹³ Brooks & Saint, *The Victorian Church*, 7.

¹⁴ Brooks & Saint, *The Victorian Church*, 7.

imperfect because it was experimental and not fully developed, a viewpoint endorsed by George Gilbert Scott; Perpendicular moreover was held to be decadent and connected to a decline in religious commitment.¹⁵ The Second Pointed or Decorated style was regarded as fully developed, highly sophisticated and was associated by Pugin to the period in England when Roman Catholic observance was at its peak.¹⁶

New churches were built, or existing churches altered and adapted, with porches and a vestry added and the chancel extended to incorporate a sanctuary and a choir; the altar was moved to the extreme east end of the chancel. The chancel was raised above the level of the nave and the pulpit relocated to the east side of the nave and the pews arranged to provide a central aisle. In Gothic architecture, elevations were dependent upon, and secondary to, the plan form.¹⁷

The initial church buildings built between 1820 and 1845 were based on the First and Third pointed styles.¹⁸ Between 1845 and 1870 the Second pointed style was adopted and a return to the First Pointed style (Early English) embracing naves that were wide and high, a narrower chancel which was even higher than the nave and, short lancet windows in plate tracery.¹⁹ The Early English style with its plainness and lack of decoration was seen to be more appropriate for the 1860s and 1870s depicting a strong, austere and robust character.²⁰

There is no shortage of churches in Westmorland and Cumberland designed in the Victorian Gothic Revival style. The earliest was St Cuthbert Roman Catholic Church at Burnfoot, Wigton, by Ignatius Bonomi in 1836-37 with 'Y' tracery from the Decorated period.²¹ The chancel was extended eastwards in 1857 incorporating five stepped lancets and westwards with a façade of shafted lancets. This was followed by Our Lady and St Wilfred Roman Catholic Church at Warwick Bridge by A.W.N. Pugin in 1840-41/29. The church comprised a nave with a bellcote, a chancel and sacristy. There are groups of three lancet windows at the west and east ends with the central lancet set to rise above the outer lancets. In the side elevations, narrow lancets alternate with large two light Decorated 'Y' tracery windows. Finally, two Catholic churches were designed by Pugin's son, E.W. Pugin: St Bega, Coach Road, Whitehaven in 1865-68 and, Our Lady of the Sacred Heart at Cleator Moor in 1869-72.²²

¹⁵ J.S. Curl, *Victorian Churches*, (London, 1995), 34.

¹⁶ Curl, *Victorian Churches*, 34.

¹⁷ Sharpe, *Paley and Austin: A Lancaster Architectural Practice*, 46.

¹⁸ Curl, *Victorian Churches*, 33.

¹⁹ Avery, *Victorian & Edwardian Architecture*, 48.

²⁰ Avery, *Victorian & Edwardian Architecture*, 49.

²¹ Hyde & Pevsner, *Cumbria*, 684.

²² Hyde & Pevsner, *Cumbria*, 278-9, 674.

The first Anglican church to follow the Gothic Revival was St Mary, Vicarage Road, Ambleside, designed by George Gilbert Scott in 1850-54 in Decorated style with geometric tracery.²³ Others followed:²⁴ All Saints, Kirkgate, Cockermouth in 1852-54 by Joseph Clarke in the Decorated style with geometric tracery; St Mary and St Bega church at St Bees, designed by William Butterfield, a prominent ecclesiologist, between 1855-58 with the chancel designed in the Early English style; Holy Trinity Chapel, Stile, Great Langdale rebuilt in 1857-58 by J.A. Cory; St Bridget at Brigham by William Butterfield in 1863-76; St Peter at Great Asby in 1865-66 by W. & J. Hay which had encaustic tiling in the chancel; St Nicholas, Lowther Street, Whitehaven, by C.J. Ferguson; and St John the Baptist Church at Skelsmergh, near Kendal by local architect, Joseph Bintley, in 1870-71.

That is not to say all the above churches have the same plan and elevational details but they do belong to the Victorian Gothic Revival. These are not the only examples and other churches in Cumbria can be added to the list as their importance is identified.

During the latter part of the third and the fourth quarters of the nineteenth century, the architecture developed into high Victorian church design where colour and particularly polychromatic banding in stone and brickwork were prominent. Architectural experimentation continued with a final shift to late Gothic Perpendicular, so that in just over a period of sixty years, Gothic Victorian Revival had turned full circle.

²³ Hyde & Pevsner, *Cumbria*, 98.

²⁴ The following examples are taken from Hyde & Pevsner, *Cumbria*.