

A walk around the church: following in Pugin's footsteps

On entering the church through the north-west door (1), and passing through the porch, turn left to see the stunning beauty and brightness of the building and its stained glass windows. Commissioned by Revd Haigh, and designed by the architect Charles Hansom, the influence of Pugin is clearly stamped upon the fabric of the building, which is in the early 14th-century English Gothic, the mature style of Pugin.

There is an uninterrupted line of vision along the central aisle of the nave (2) to the chancel (14) leading to the 5-light east window (17), designed by Pugin and made in the local Hardman studios.

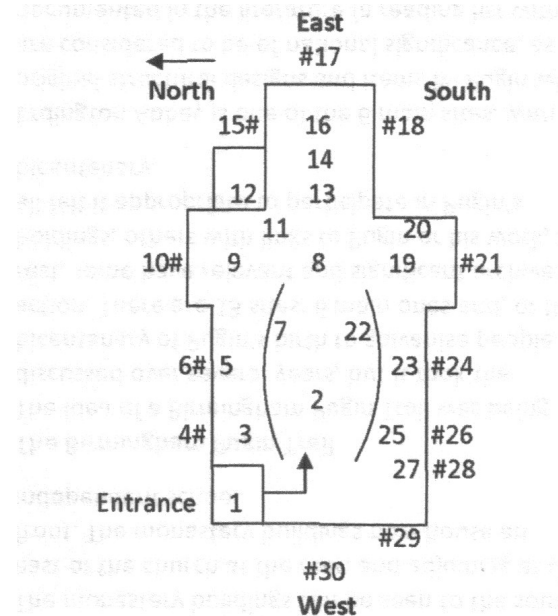
A sense of mystery hides behind the two main rows of piers with their pointed arches (7,22), which are remarkably similar to earlier churches designed by Pugin. The side aisles (3,25) can be explored, taking in the Stations of the Cross, the Confessionals (5,23), and some of the stained glass windows (4,6,24,26).

The church is laid out in cruciform style, and at each end of the short transept (crossing) is a chapel. The transept (8) can be approached by walking along the north aisle (3). The north transept chapel (9,10) has the pulpit (11) nearby. To the north-east of the pulpit is the chapel of St Alphonsus (12), which contains fine wooden wall panelling.

Changing liturgical fashion led to alterations, and Hansom's original rood screen, which divided the nave (2) from the chancel (14), was removed, and the hanging crucifix is all that survives. The reredos of the high altar (16), with its crocketed pinnacles and soaring exposition throne, intrudes into the east window, blocking part of the lower section.

This high altar dates from 1897, when it replaced Haigh's original and simpler scheme. At that time the Benedictine monks were at Erdington (1876-1922) and the new reredos, displaying Benedictine saints, was added in 1897 to mark the 1300th anniversary of St Augustine's mission to Kent in 597.

**Simplified layout of church
(not to scale)
Showing some of the features and fittings**



indicates some of the windows

On each side of the chancel (14) is a row of windows (15,18) with statues in-between. The original sanctuary lamps were designed by Pugin and made by Hardmans.

At this vantage point, by turning around, the large magnificent west window (30) can be seen at the end of the central aisle. Designed by Pugin, with 6-lights and tracery, and made by Hardmans, its sparkle can be attributed to Pugin's significant use of white glass, which lets in more light.

Walking across to the south transept chapel (19), with its fine windows (21), this was originally designed as the Blessed Sacrament (BS) chapel, following Pugin's principles. After the re-ordering of 1897, when the new high altar was installed (16), the original BS chapel altar was to become the forward altar (13), under the chancel arch, enabling the priest to face the congregation during communion. The chapel was renamed St Joseph's chapel (19). The splendid altar nearby (20), known as the Lady Altar, dates from 1947.

Continuing down the south aisle (25), near the west end a small chapel and its windows (27, 28) can be seen through secure railings. The west wall of the south aisle has its own west window (29). Alongside is the great west window (30) which can now be viewed in more detail.

Metalwork

The original collection of church plate was commissioned by Revd Haigh, designed by Pugin and made at the Hardman studios. The original orders can be seen in the order books dating from 1848, in the extensive Hardman Archive housed in the city's central library (by appointment). The collection of plate is considered to be of national significance.

Vestments

Thomas Garner (1839-1906), a renowned Gothic Revival architect, designed some of the Erdington vestments (c1898). They were embroidered by the Sisters of the Poor Child Jesus in the convent workshops in Southam, Warks. They are good examples of the fine work of these nuns, who developed their skills using designs by Pugin.

It may be possible to see selected items from the plate and vestment collections by appointment, or during special services.

A brief history

The church was built in 1848-50 as the Catholic parish church for Erdington, then a village on the outskirts of Birmingham. The architect was Charles Hansom (1817-1888), commissioned by the Revd. Daniel Henry Haigh (1819-1879), a scholar and antiquarian who used some of his inherited fortune to build and furnish the church. A former Anglican priest, Haigh became a Catholic in 1847, was ordained a year later, spent all of his active ministry at Erdington, and is buried in St. Joseph's chapel.

Bishop Ullathorne was the Vicar Apostolic of the Central District in 1848 and, unlike Thomas Walsh his predecessor, favoured Charles Hansom as an architect, having once said: 'Anything that Pugin can do, Mr Hansom can do better'.

Pugin's Influence

Pugin was the driving force behind the Gothic Revival which became increasingly popular during the 19th century. Many architects were following in Pugin's footsteps (and even getting work at Pugin's expense – as many were cheaper!).

Pugin had mixed feelings about the use of his designs by others, but concluded that:

“the movement progresses and the right sort of thing becomes general & that is the real point”.

It was in this spirit that Pugin was willing to design furnishings and fittings for Charles Hansom and Daniel Haigh at Erdington, and for other Hansom churches too. Indeed, such was the quality of Pugin's work at Erdington that the ensemble of fittings around the original high altar was displayed in the Medieval Court at the Great Exhibition of 1851, in the specially erected Crystal Palace in Hyde Park. This exhibition gave the Gothic Revival a huge boost, but for which Pugin received little credit in subsequent years.

A walk through the churchyard

The grounds are now smaller than the original as some land had been sold. The main area of the churchyard is to the rear, and surrounds the north and west sides of the church. Hansom's broach-spire is placed at the north-west corner of the building, which reflects Pugin's later preference for asymmetrically-placed towers and spires.

An unusual feature of the abbey is a ring of eight bells, blessed in a special ceremony in 1878 – a rare occurrence in a Catholic church at that time, as bells were illegal in Catholic churches until 1926.

Although Erdington began as a parish church it was, from 1876 to 1922, the home of a community of Benedictine monks for whom monastic buildings were added by A.E. Dempster in 1880 and later, in 1896-8, by Harry Haigh (nephew of the founder). Their priory was raised to the rank of an Abbey in 1896. The back of the monastery buildings can be seen to the south east of the church, and the front alongside the east end. The monastery buildings now house an independent school.

The Birmingham Pugin Trail

The idea of a Birmingham Pugin Trail had been discussed some years ago, but it took the bicentenary of Pugin's birth (1/3/2012) to galvanise people into action and identify 13 sites with Pugin's original work or relevant links. Erdington Abbey is one of the 6 main sites. Further information with a reading list is available.

Three generations of Pugins contributed to the buildings and life of the city. The preparatory work and first edition of the Trail, launched on 1/3/2012, are seen as the starting point for developing 'Pugin's Birmingham'.

Copies of the Trail leaflet may still be available from the Trail sites, libraries or tourist offices. Further information, links, and downloads are also available from the Birmingham Heritage Forum leaflet and website:

www.birminghamheritage.org.uk/pugin.html

ERDINGTON ABBEY:

Church of St Thomas & St Edmund of Canterbury



With a focus on the work of:



Augustus Welby Pugin

**1st March 1812 –
14th September 1852**