



Historic England

19th- and 20th-Century Roman Catholic Churches

Introductions to Heritage Assets



Summary

Historic England's Introductions to Heritage Assets (IHAs) are accessible, authoritative, illustrated summaries of what we know about specific types of archaeological site, building, landscape or marine asset. Typically they deal with subjects which lack such a summary. This can either be where the literature is dauntingly voluminous, or alternatively where little has been written. Most often it is the latter, and many IHAs bring understanding of site or building types which are neglected or little understood. Many of these are what might be thought of as 'new heritage', that is they date from after the Second World War.

For over two hundred years after the Act of Uniformity (1559) outward observance of the Roman Catholic faith was illegal in England. The building of public places of worship did not resume until the end of the 18th century, gathering pace after Catholic Emancipation (1829) and the restoration of the hierarchy (1850). The 20th century saw accelerated expansion. This is therefore a relatively modern building stock, with approximately two thirds of more than 3,000 churches dating from the 20th century, and from the 1950s and 1960s in particular. Although there are stylistic crossovers with Anglican and, to a lesser extent, Nonconformist church design, Catholic churches have a distinct character, driven in large part by liturgical function. The building type has evolved over the years to meet changing liturgical and other needs. Today, a decline in the number of priests and demographic and pastoral change means that many Catholic churches face an uncertain future.

This guidance note has been written by Andrew Derrick and edited by Deborah Mays and Linda Monckton.

It is one of several guidance documents that can be accessed at [HistoricEngland.org.uk/listing/selection-criteria/listing-selection/ihas-buildings/](https://www.historicengland.org.uk/listing/selection-criteria/listing-selection/ihas-buildings/)

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Front cover

The interior of St Monica, Bootle, Merseyside, by F X Velarde (1936), described by Sir Nikolaus Pevsner as 'epoch-making'.

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Introduction

The medieval parish churches which are such a feature of the English landscape were built for Christian worship according to the Latin (that is, the Roman Catholic) rite. That ceased to be the case at the time of the Reformation, and while a handful of medieval churches have returned to Catholic use, the vast majority of Catholic churches in use today were built in the 19th and 20th centuries. This is therefore a building stock of relatively recent date, the scale and significance of which has often been overlooked.

The Roman Catholic Church is the world's largest Christian church, with an estimated 1.285 billion members, or one in six people. It is governed by the Pope, through the Roman Curia. Despite the popular perception of the Church as a monolithic and centralised organisation, power and administration are mainly devolved to the local level, authority residing with the diocesan bishop. Places of public worship are controlled by, and belong to, the diocese in which they are located, except when they are owned by one of the religious orders. In addition to a church, each parish may have a presbytery (priest's house), a parish hall, a school or a convent, usually attached to or near the church. The church is the centre of practising Catholics' spiritual life and religious observance, the place where they attend Mass and receive other sacraments.

There are over 3,000 Catholic parish churches and chapels in England, mainly in urban and suburban areas; there are relatively few rural examples, but those that survive are often amongst the oldest and most important. Nearly all of these churches have been visited under the *Taking Stock* programme, an architectural and historical review of Catholic churches in England undertaken by Historic England in partnership with the dioceses.

This introduction to Heritage Assets for Roman Catholic churches concerns public places of parish worship. It does not consider private or institutional chapels, or those attached to convents and monasteries (for the last of these a [separate introduction](#) is available).

1 Historical Background

1.1 Reformation to 1790

The Catholic Mass became illegal in England in 1559, under Queen Elizabeth I's Act of Uniformity. Thereafter Catholic observance became a furtive and dangerous affair, with heavy penalties levied on those, known as recusants, who refused to attend Anglican church services. The seeds of a new underground church were planted with the foundation in 1568 of the College at Douai in Flanders (now northern France), from which missionary priests were trained and sent out to sympathetic safe houses in England. Many of these priests were to meet death by hanging, drawing and quartering in the Elizabethan period.

While the penal laws remained on the statute books, violent persecution diminished under the Stuarts, although Catholic hopes for improvement were not helped by the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, which prompted further executions and suspicion. In the later Stuart period, the situation was made more complicated by the open or private Catholic faith of some monarchs, and by their Catholic marriages. James II was openly Catholic. On his accession in 1685 the penal laws were suspended, ecclesiastical hierarchy restored, and the country divided into four Districts, each led by a Vicar Apostolic (bishop to missionary territories).

These developments were nipped in the bud by James II's flight in 1688 and the accession of William III, ushering in the Glorious or Protestant Revolution. The penal laws were re-established, and practising as a priest made punishable with life imprisonment (the last priest to be so punished being in 1767). The laity was



Figure 1

Torture of the Derbyshire priest Ralph Sherwin at the Tower of London in 1580, as depicted in stained glass of 1931-2 by Hardman of Birmingham at A W N Pugin's St Mary, Derby. Sherwin is one of Forty Catholic martyrs of the Reformation canonised by Pope Paul VI in 1970.

prevented from buying new land, barred from the professions, army and universities and forbidden to own a horse worth more than £5. Catholic activity declined, and open displays of Catholic allegiance were seldom seen. A notable exception being in central London, where public worship took place unhindered in chapels attached to the embassies of foreign Catholic monarchies.

1.2 Relief Acts to Emancipation

In 1776 the Government approached Richard Challoner, Vicar Apostolic for London, for help in recruiting Catholics to fight in the American

War of Independence. In exchange for this the government set up a committee of laymen to consider a relaxation of the penal laws. A Catholic Relief Act brought before Parliament in 1778 allowed Catholics to buy and inherit land and protected clergy from prosecution for fulfilling their priestly role, but made no specific provision for church building. The Act prompted a fierce backlash, culminating in the Gordon Riots of 1780, when many Catholic properties were sacked.

The Second Catholic Relief Act of 1791 allowed Catholics, subject to the swearing of an oath of loyalty to the monarch, to practice their religion without fear of prosecution, and this included the building of churches. However bells and steeples were not permitted, and as a rule church buildings of the early post-Relief Act years were architecturally understated. However, confidence grew in the 1820s, culminating with the passing of the Catholic Emancipation Act in 1829, when most of the remaining barriers of penal times were removed.

1.3 Restoration of the Catholic hierarchy

In 1850, Pope Pius IX restored the Catholic hierarchy in England and Wales, with the creation of thirteen new dioceses, each headed by a diocesan bishop. At this time there was a considerable under-provision of churches to cater for the growing, mainly industrial and working class Catholic population. The census of 1851 recorded just over 250,000 attending Sunday Mass out of an estimated Catholic population of over 600,000. Many of these were recent Irish immigrants, escaping the privations of the Great Famine (1845-52).

The second half of the 19th century saw an enormous building programme, focusing primarily on schools, with churches following as funds permitted. Many buildings served as dual purpose school-chapels until a permanent church could be built. Between 1875 and 1900 the number of churches and chapels grew by a third to about 1,500, and the estimated number of priests

serving the missions (as they were known) from 2,000 to 3,000. At the start of the 20th century, the estimated Catholic population had risen to 1.5m, or 4.6% of the general population of England and Wales. Catholic culture was strong, introverted, and in some areas clannish in character; Catholics had their own schools, their own social clubs and were firmly discouraged from marrying outside the faith.

1.4 20th century growth

The present Catholic parish system did not come into effect until 1908, when England ceased to be mission territory directly answerable to Rome and became instead subject to the Church's normal system of canon law. This formally took effect in 1917.

There were an estimated 1.7m Catholics by 1911, rising to 2.4m (5.7% of the population) by 1941. Numbers were greatest in the industrial Catholic heartlands, especially Lancashire, County Durham, the West Midlands and London. While the main Catholic centres remained in the urban areas, there was increasing growth in the suburbs. Except in Durham and Lancashire there was very little rural presence, although travelling missions were increasingly established to sow the seeds of future rural parishes. Numbers were boosted by conversions, including the artist Eric Gill and the writers G K Chesterton, Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh. Such conversions helped to break down some people's perception of English Catholicism as a foreign body administering to a working class and largely Irish population.

The growing sense of Catholic progress and triumphalism was underlined by a series of landmark events, including the consecration of Westminster Cathedral (Fig 2) in 1910 and the start of Lutyens' great new cathedral in Liverpool in 1933 (Fig 3). However, the onset of the Second World War put the brake on building work at Liverpool and elsewhere, as resources were directed towards the war effort.



Figure 2 (top)
Westminster Cathedral, built in 1895-1903 from designs by J F Bentley. The mother church of Roman Catholics in England and Wales, and described by the architect Norman Shaw at the time of opening as ‘the finest church that has been built for centuries’. The programme of mosaic enrichment continues to this day.

Figure 3 (bottom)
Contemporary postcard showing Edwin Lutyens’ extraordinary, unrealised design for Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral. It would have dwarfed Giles Gilbert Scott’s Anglican Cathedral, and encapsulates Catholic confidence and triumphalism in the interwar years. Only the crypt was completed.

After the war, it took a while for expansion to resume; building restrictions and austerity meant that church and school building did not pick up again until the 1950s. The Education Act of 1944 engendered a boom in school building, and in the 1950s and 1960s this went hand in hand with church building, serving the expanding new towns, suburbs and housing estates. More Catholic churches were built in these decades than in any other decade before or since.

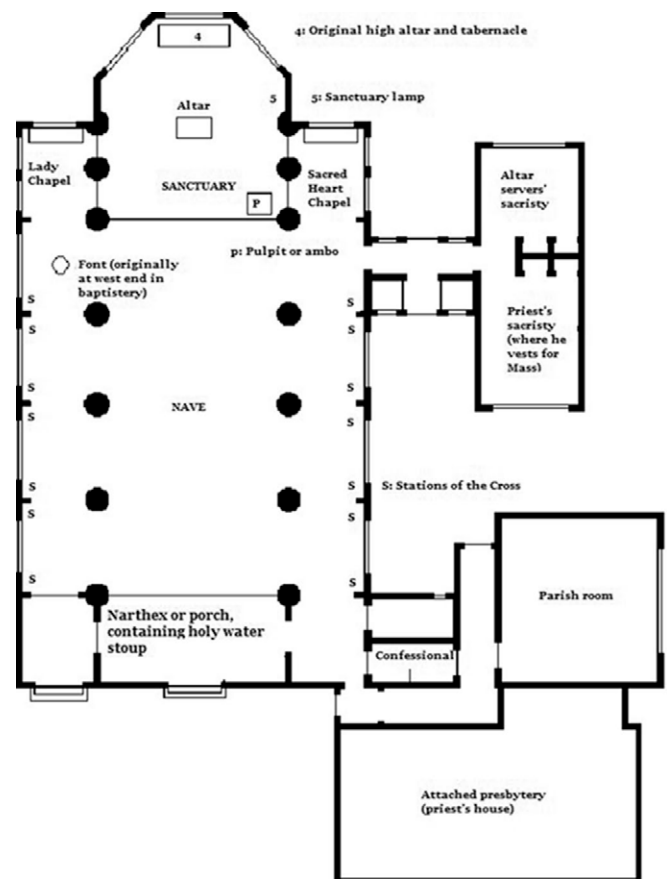
1.5 The Second Vatican Council and beyond

The Second Vatican Council (or Vatican II) was opened by Pope John XXIII in October 1962 and closed under Pope Paul VI in December 1965. The Council had a profound impact on Catholics, how they saw themselves and how they were seen by other Christian denominations and the wider world. The triumphalism of the pre-war years was left behind, and Christian unity increasingly promoted. Ecumenical collaboration at the local level increased significantly. The outward form of the liturgy was changed, with Mass said in the vernacular tongue rather than Latin, within reordered sanctuaries. Some parishioners found these changes traumatic, while others embraced the spirit of renewal. Initially at least numbers attending Mass held up, and in 1971 the number of priests reached an all-time high of 7,500.

However, momentum was not maintained, and the last decades of the 20th century saw a sharp decline. Various explanations have been advanced for this; some (secularism, consumerism) affected all major Christian denominations, others (widespread rejection of authority, especially on matters relating to human sexual relationships) more specific to the Catholic Church. The breakup of formerly solid working class Catholic communities was particularly marked in the north of England, where traditional manufacturing industries were breaking down. There was a decline in the number of priests, from the high water mark of 1971, to 5,600 in 2001. Fewer priests meant fewer churches, with nearly 600 closures between 1961 and 2001. However, this decline has to some extent been offset by Catholic immigration from Eastern Europe and elsewhere, and by a continuing, though smaller, influx of converts, reacting to the Church of England's decision to allow female ordination.

2 Chronology and Development of the Building Type

The main focus of Catholic worship is the Mass, in which the sacrament of the Eucharist (Holy Communion) is celebrated. The Catholic Church teaches that during the Mass, through the action of the priest, the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ ('transubstantiation'). The Blessed Sacrament (consecrated communion wafers) is reserved in the tabernacle, located on or near the altar, alongside which a flame burns (the sanctuary lamp). Other features traditionally characteristic of Catholic churches are side chapels and images dedicated to saints, particularly the Virgin Mary, timber confessionals (often replaced today by 'reconciliation rooms') and Stations of the Cross, fourteen carved representations of the day of Christ's crucifixion used as an aid to devotion, especially in Lent. The whole of the church is regarded as a sacred space, used for private prayer as well as for communal worship. Its use for secular purposes is discouraged.



2.1 Liturgy and architecture: The Counter-Reformation model

Changes in architectural fashion apart, the basic form for Catholic churches did not change significantly from the mid-16th century until the 1960s. The model was established by St Charles Borromeo in his *Instructions on Ecclesiastical Building* (1577), written fourteen years after the

Figure 4
E W Pugin's St Austin, Stafford (1861-2) is a not untypical pre-Vatican II church plan, of longitudinal form, with the main focus on the high altar in the sanctuary.

Council of Trent was convened in response to the Protestant Reformation. Figure 4 shows a not untypical pre-Vatican II English Catholic church plan. It is a Latin cross plan, with long nave, side aisles, and a short sanctuary with side chapels. The building is entered from a narthex or porch at the west end, where Catholics bless themselves at the holy water stoup before entering the main body of the church. Inside, the visual focus is the sanctuary, with a high altar at the east end (in this case supplemented since Vatican II by a forward altar). The tabernacle is placed upon the former high altar or in its position; Catholics genuflect (kneel) when passing in front of this. An ambo or lectern doubling up as a pulpit is also placed in the sanctuary, for readings and sermons. The baptismal font is located in the north aisle near the sanctuary, but was originally placed in a baptistery at the west end. The aisles were (and are) used for processions as well as for additional seating; Stations of the Cross are mounted on their walls. Sacristies (where clergy and servers vest for Mass) and the presbytery (the priest's house) are linked to the church.

2.2 1790-1829: Emergence from the shadows

At first the Counter-Reformation model did not apply in England, since Catholic church building was forbidden. When this was finally revived after 1791, it usually took a low-key form, with churches sometimes hidden away behind the priest's house so as to remain discreet (Fig 5). They were often similar in architectural character to Nonconformist meeting houses of the time, with single-cell, occasionally galleried interiors. Many are in rural locations, on or close to the estates of landowners who had maintained the Catholic faith during the penal years.

Increasing confidence from about 1820 led to large town churches being built in greater number. Many were classical, such as SS Peter and Paul, Wolverhampton, built in 1826-8 as a memorial to John Milner, Vicar Apostolic of the Midland District. Despite the style of his memorial, Milner was a scholar with a special interest in

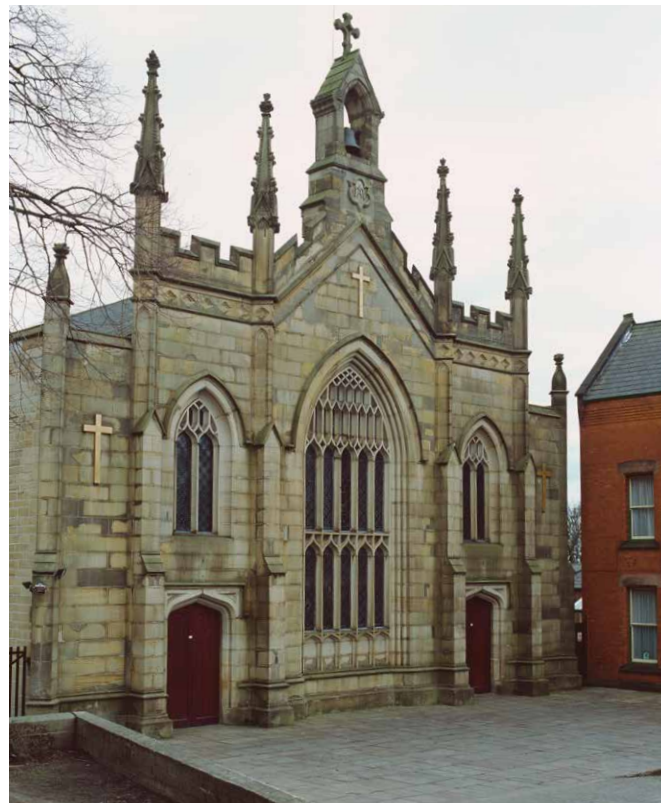


Figure 5 (top)

St Benet, Netherton, Merseyside, built in 1793 and now in the care of the Historic Chapels Trust. The church is discreetly located behind the priest's house, with no outward sign of its purpose. The bell on the gable is a later addition; bells and steeples were forbidden under the terms of the second Catholic Relief Act.

Figure 6 (bottom)

Battle of the Styles 1: The church of St Mary, Wigan, Lancashire (now Greater Manchester), built in 1818-19 and served by secular clergy.

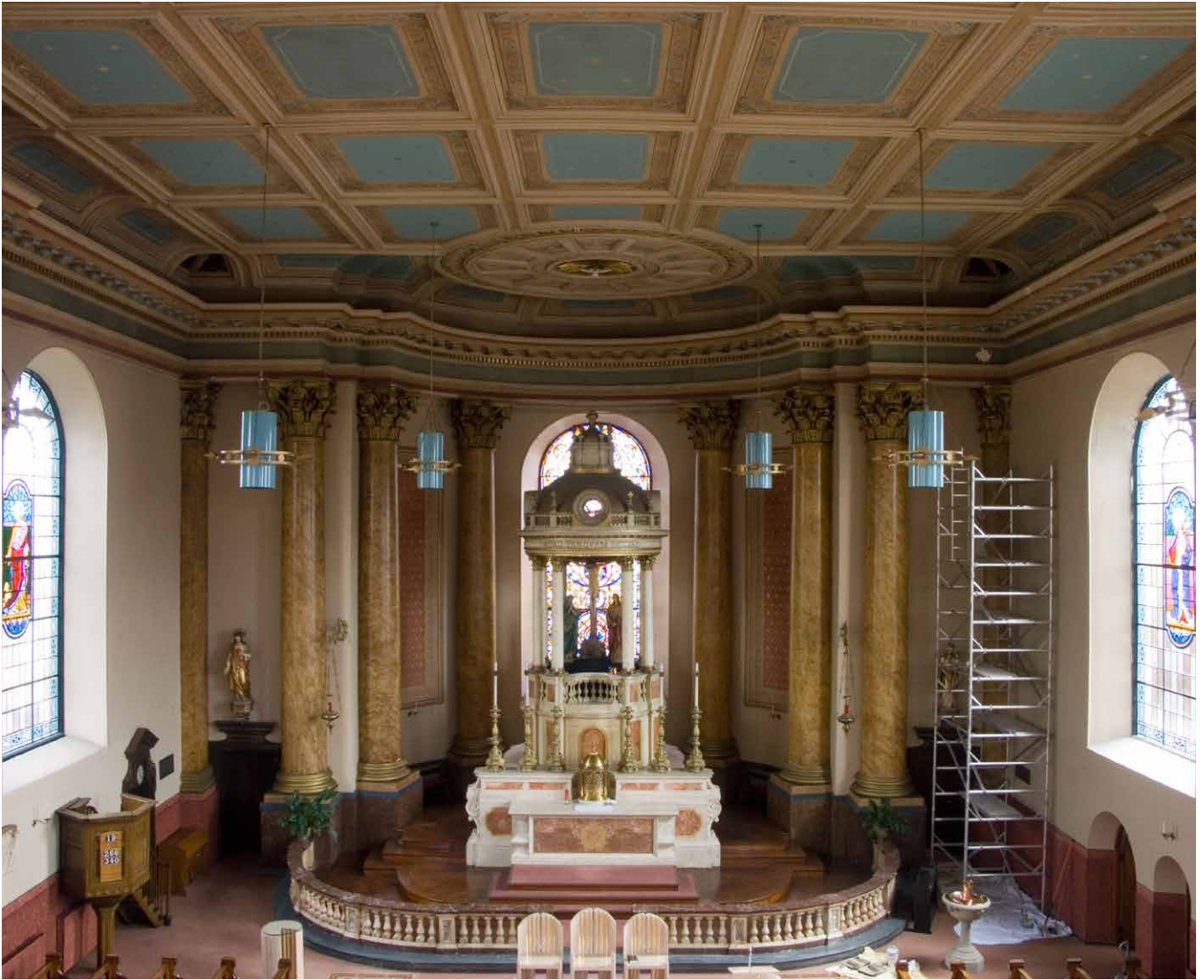


Figure 7
 Battle of the Styles 2: The classical church of St John at Wigan, built in the same year only yards from St Mary's,

and served by Jesuit priests. The baldacchino over the high altar is a later addition.

medieval architecture; the antiquary John Carter built him a Gothic chapel at Winchester. This was a time of architectural eclecticism, as illustrated by two churches built only yards apart in Wigan: the classical St John's and the Gothic St Mary's (Figs 6 and 7). A 'battle of the styles' was being fought, not just over the design of churches, but also civic and institutional buildings.

2.3 The triumph of Gothic

In 1835, A W N Pugin, the great polemicist of the Gothic revival, became a Catholic. Regarding the classical churches of the preceding decades

as architectural 'paganism', Pugin sought a return to medieval forms, both architecturally and liturgically. Where he had a wealthy and sympathetic patron, as at St Giles, Cheadle (Fig 8), Pugin was able to produce some of the most complete and sublime designs of the Gothic revival. Too often however, his relations with his adopted church were bedevilled by the failure of clergy – and budgets – to match his aspirations. Tensions came to the fore in the so-called Rood Screen Controversy, where pitched against him was John Henry Newman, also a Catholic convert, but one more in tune with Roman culture and the legacy of the Counter-Reformation.



Figure 8
The gorgeous Gothic polychromy of St Giles, Cheadle, Staffordshire, built in 1842-5 from designs by A W N Pugin, largely at the expense

of Pugin's patron John Talbot, sixteenth Earl of Shrewsbury. For the brilliant, troubled Pugin, St Giles' was 'my consolation in all afflictions'.

More pragmatic Gothic architects than Pugin – such as his son E W Pugin, M E Hadfield and J A Hansom – sought to find a middle way, combining post-Reformation plan forms with medieval detailing; Hansom's St Walburge, Preston, built for the Jesuits in 1850 (Fig 9) has been described as a Counter-Reformation church in Gothic form. The 1857 English translation of Borromeo's *Instructions* by the architect-priest G J Wigley was part of this attempt to reconcile Counter-Reformation norms with Gothic forms.

The long chancels, choir stalls and rood screens associated with High Anglican churches of the Gothic revival are largely absent in Catholic churches. These typically have wide and short chancels (with choirs and organ usually in a western gallery), no screen, and maximised views towards the high altar. The altar was often integral with a tall carved reredos against the east wall, with statues in niches around a central tabernacle throne. In order to accommodate such reredoses, and to reduce glare (see Fig 9), east windows were raised or dispensed with. These characteristics, along with the near universal provision of side altars in larger churches, lend late-19th and early-20th-century Catholic churches their distinctive character, and are well illustrated in the work of Pugin & Pugin, successor practice to E W Pugin.

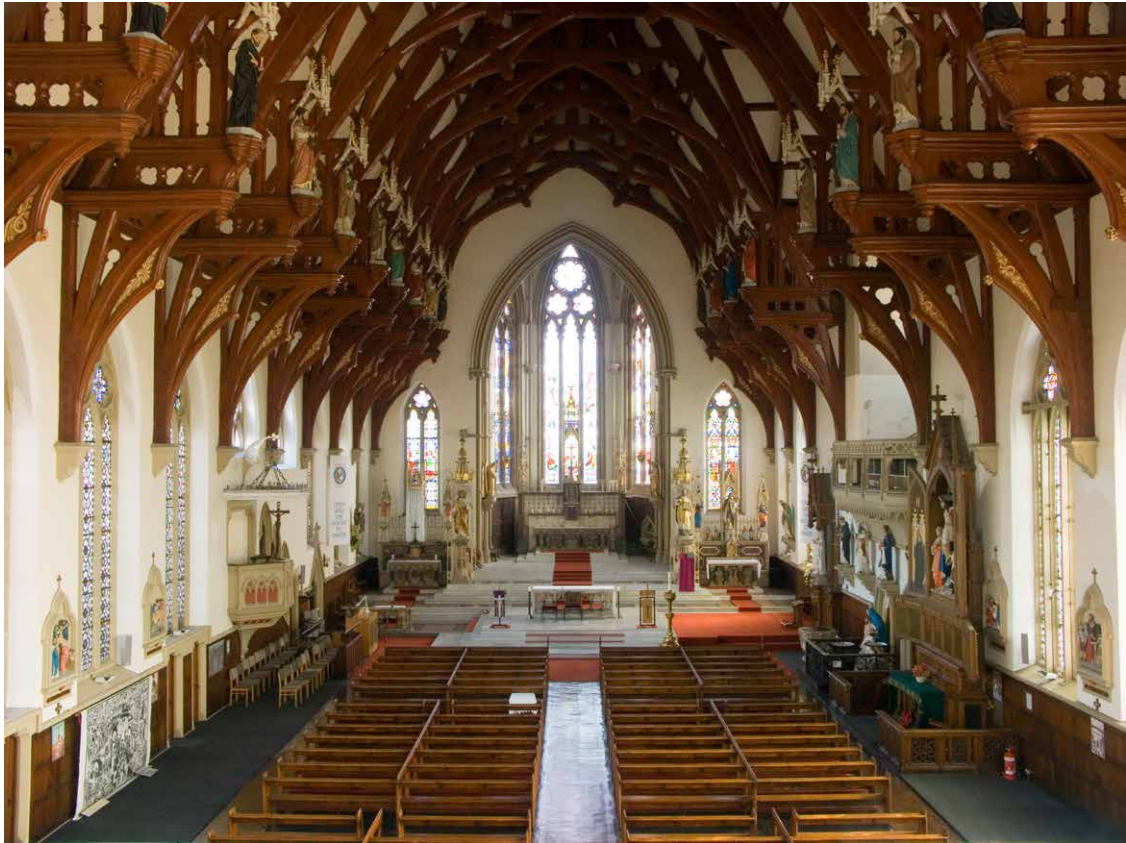


Figure 9 (top)
'A Counter-Reformation church in Gothic form'; J A Hansom's St Walburge, Preston, Lancashire (1850), designed to maximise the view towards the sanctuary.

Figure 10 (bottom)
Gothic survival: Christ the King, Plymouth, Devon opened in 1962, one year after the death of its architect Sir Giles Gilbert Scott and in the opening year of Vatican II.

The Gothic revival was continued into the 20th century by F A Walters, maintaining the refined late Gothic style of G F Bodley and his followers. Working in the same arts and crafts-influenced Gothic vein as Walters, but less prolifically, Giles Gilbert Scott produced a series of beautifully detailed, inventive and original designs, starting with the Annunciation, Portsmouth, in 1906. At the other end of his career, Christ the King, Plymouth (completed in 1962, Fig 10) illustrates the persistence of Gothic on the eve of the Second Vatican Council.

2.4 Italian, Byzantine, Romanesque and basilican models

While Gothic dominated for most of the second half of the 19th century, classical Italianate forms were also adopted as a deliberate contrast to Anglican churches, and as a demonstration of Roman affiliation, not least by the Oratorian congregation (in Birmingham and London). At the end of the century the Yorkshire-Irish architect John Kelly designed a series of Italianate churches with landmark bell towers and lofty classical interiors.

A return to simpler and purer models was a recurring theme of the 20th century, and what became known as the Liturgical Movement.



Figure 11
Basilican brick: the style of T H B Scott's Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception and St Joseph, Waltham Cross, Hertfordshire (1931) was typical of many parish

churches of the interwar period, providing dignified and functional designs on a modest budget.

Variations on early Christian, basilican and modern Romanesque themes came to dominate church design. These were often advanced for reasons of economy, since more than Gothic these styles allowed for later enrichment and additions (such as bell towers or baptisteries) as funds permitted. Most influential was J F Bentley's Westminster Cathedral (Fig 2), where the Byzantine style was chosen by Cardinal Vaughan partly for reasons of economy, but also to contrast with the Gothic of nearby Westminster Abbey, and to hark back to the early Christian imperialism of the age of Justinian. All this chimed both with the triumphalist nature of pre-Vatican II English Catholicism while also nodding to the developing insights of the Liturgical Movement.

A principal concern of the Liturgical Movement was the placing of the altar physically and symbolically at the centre of worship. The altar was increasingly treated as a detached structure, with a ciborium, baldacchino or a suspended canopy over. Giles Gilbert Scott's St Alphege, Bath (1925), exemplifies this thinking, its design inspired by the early Christian church of Santa Maria in Cosmedin, Rome. Basilican churches were also built in large number by the architect-priest Benedict Williamson, his collaborator T H B Scott (Fig 11), and W C Mangan of Preston.

The Manchester partnership of E Bower Norris and F M Reynolds resulted in over a dozen churches, notably St Dunstan, Moston (1935-6, Romanesque), and St Willibrord, Clayton (1937-8, Byzantine). Norris had earlier been in partnership with Oswald Hill, with whom he designed Rochdale's answer to Westminster Cathedral, St John the Baptist in Dowling Street. Norris later set up office in Stafford (Sandy & Norris), while Reynolds went into partnership in Manchester with William Scott (Reynolds & Scott). Both practices, and others such as the Bolton and Manchester-based firm of Greenhalgh & Williams continued to produce traditional, longitudinally planned basilican designs in quantity. Such churches were soundly built, fit for purpose and often designs of some quality, with good furnishings.

2.5 Catholic Arts and Crafts

A number of medieval-type guilds were established in the 20th century to raise the standard of artworks and furnishings in Catholic churches. An early example was the Guild of St Gregory and St Luke, established in the 1890s, whose membership included J S Eastwood (architect of Leeds Cathedral) and J F Bentley. Later came the Guild of St Joseph and St Dominic, founded by Eric Gill at Ditchling, Sussex in 1921. In 1929, the Guild of Catholic Artists and Craftsmen was founded, becoming the Society of Catholic Artists in 1964. In the 1930s at Prinknash Abbey in Gloucestershire a group of artists



Figure 12
Adam Kossowski's reliquary of St Simon Stock at Aylesford Priory, Kent (1964). The priory returned to Carmelite use in 1949 and became a centre of pilgrimage. The creative hub established at Aylesford by Fr Malachy Lynch has been described as 'perhaps the fullest expression ever of the Catholic Arts and Crafts ideal'.

(including Geoffrey Webb and the sculptor Philip Lindsey Clark) joined with the monks to form the Company of St Joseph, similarly devoted to promoting Catholic art and craftsmanship. After 1949 Aylesford Priory in Kent became a creative hub, attracting artists such as Adam Kossowski (a Polish émigré, and survivor of the Soviet gulag, Fig.12), Philip Lindsey Clark, Michael Clark, and the glass maker Dom Charles Norris of Buckfast Abbey.

Other stained glass artists of the Arts and Crafts revival included Margaret Rope and the artists of Whitefriars and the Bromsgrove Guild. More commercially, the Birmingham firm of Hardman was active throughout the 20th century (finally

closing in 2008). Where affordable, marble and mosaic work were popular, following the lead of Westminster Cathedral. The Manchester mosaic firm of Ludwig Oppenheimer & Co. had a long association with Norris & Reynolds, while in the Birmingham area notable mosaic work was carried out by Gabriel Pippet, who belonged to a local dynasty of artists and designers (Fig.13).

However, commercial firms and ecclesiastical suppliers continued to provide the majority of church furnishings. Prominent among these were Vanpoules (London), Earley & Co. (Dublin), Alberti, Lupton & Co. Ltd (Manchester) and Hayes & Finch (Liverpool).



Figure 13
St Catherine of Alexandria, Droitwich, Worcestershire, designed by F B Peacock, and notable for its Byzantine-style mosaics by Gabriel Pippet (1921-33).

2.6 Experiments in contemporary design

On the Continent radical ideas were gaining currency in the interwar years, with innovative designs using modern forms and materials, often placing the altar in the midst of the people. England was more conservative, but two churches were notable for their liturgical innovation. First Martyrs, Bradford, was built in 1934-5 from designs by J H Langtry-Langton, and was the first centrally-planned Catholic church in England. The second church, St Peter, Gorleston (Norfolk), was Eric Gill's only building, completed in 1939. His altar was placed centrally, with seating for the congregation arranged on all sides. Both of these pioneering churches were architecturally fairly conservative – one neo-Romanesque, the other displaying arts and crafts Gothic influences. Conversely, F X Velarde's St Monica, Bootle, built about the same time, is more modern in its architectural design, but remains fairly conventional in its liturgical planning (Fig 14 and front cover).

In reality, continental Modernism had no significant impact on English Catholic church architecture before the Second World War. Perhaps the first sign of its arrival was the church and monastery complex of Christ the King, Cockfosters, NW London, built in 1940 by the Belgian monk and liturgist Dom Constantine Bosschaerts.

When church building picked up again after the Second World War, it was largely a matter of 'business as usual', with longitudinally planned churches with a large high altar at the east end, side altars, and a baptistery at the west end. Within these constraints there was some experimentation, influenced to some extent by the attitude of the bishop at the time. In Liverpool F X Velarde continued to produce innovative designs, while the London and Essex firm of Burles & Newton employed Modernistic forms and incorporated furnishings by contemporary artists. These and other architects were increasingly ready to use modern materials, driven in part by necessity. Laminated timber or



Figure 14
St Monica, Bootle, Merseyside, by F X Velarde (1936), described by Sir Nikolaus Pevsner as 'epoch-making' for its adoption of Modernistic forms increasingly familiar on the continent but, until then, not widely employed in England.

reinforced concrete frames became common, providing uninterrupted internal spans.

Among the first to break away from the traditional longitudinal plan was Gerard Goalen, whose Our Lady of Fatima, Harlow (Fig 16, designed in 1953-4 but built in 1958-60) is T-shaped on plan, with the sanctuary at the central crossing. The church has a reinforced concrete frame, allowing for large areas of *dalle de verre* (thick glass slabs set in resin) by Dom Charles Norris, an early use of this medium, which originated in France and was widely adopted in England.

Perhaps the turning point came in 1960, when several events were to transform thinking about liturgy and architecture in England. One was the publication of Peter Hammond's *Liturgy and Architecture*, a powerful critique of modern English church design, which the

author contrasted unfavourably with that on the Continent. The second was the publication of Frederick Gibberd's design for the completion of Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral, a contemporary design with a central plan, which was compared favourably by Hammond and others with Basil Spence's longitudinally-planned cathedral at Coventry. 1960 also saw the completion of Maguire & Murray's Anglican church of St Paul, Bow Common, centrally planned around a freestanding altar. Robert Maguire was a Catholic, Keith Murray an Anglican; their church had a considerable influence on both Catholic and Anglican church design.

2.7 After the Second Vatican Council

The central theme of the first document of the Second Vatican Council, the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (1963), was a desire for a more conscious and active participation of the faithful in the liturgy. Following this, in 1967, the *Instruction on the Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery* issued new regulations which allowed for the placing of the tabernacle in places other than on the altar, thus allowing the priest to say Mass while facing the congregation. This had significant implications for the design and layout of churches, the new emphasis on communality and intimacy leading to widespread rejection of the traditional longitudinal plan. Gibberd's cathedral at Liverpool (Fig 15), which opened in 1967, is often cited as the most significant manifestation of the new order, but its circular plan had practical drawbacks and was not widely followed; fan-shaped arrangements were more popular, sometimes with raked seating. Nearly all existing churches were reordered, typically involving the introduction of a forward altar, removal or adaptation of the old high altar, removal of communion rails and nave pulpits and the relocation of the font to the sanctuary area.

New churches by architects such as Gillespie, Kidd & Coia, Gerard Goalen, Francis Pollen, Desmond Williams and Austin Winkley combined contemporary design and construction methods with the 'noble simplicity' desired by Vatican II.

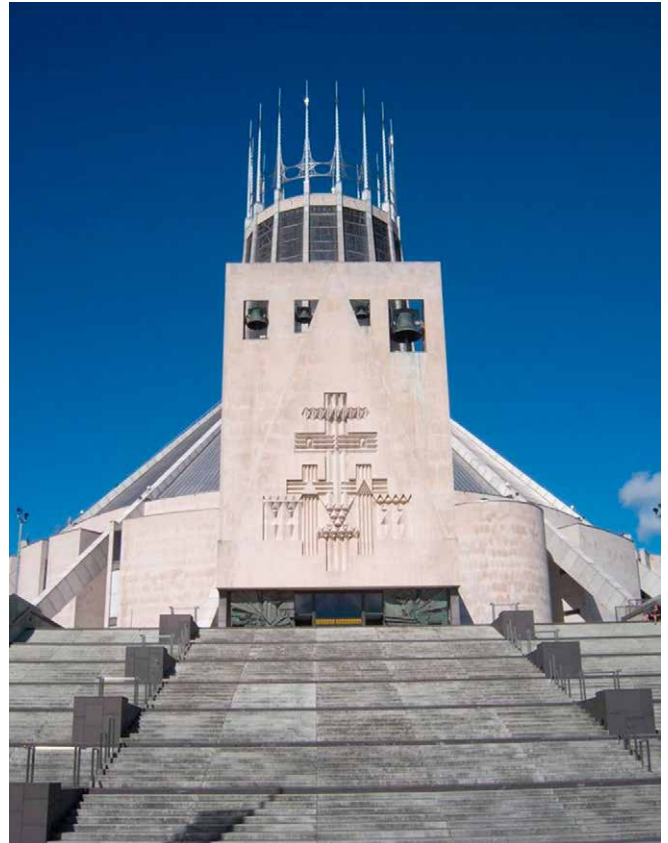


Figure 15
Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral of Christ the King, built to a central plan from designs by Frederick Gibberd in 1962-7. Its embrace of modernity and rejection of the triumphalism (and cost) of Lutyens' pre-war design, illustrates the transformation of the Catholic landscape in the wake of the Second Vatican Council.

Many designs explored the expressive potential of reinforced concrete (Figs 16 and 17), or of folded concrete roofs reflecting the symbolism of the tent, of a pilgrim church on the move. Architects tended to be closely involved in the design and location of the key liturgical fixtures and fittings (altar, font, ambo), which were usually made from matching materials (most commonly stone or marble), denoting their liturgical equivalence. Percy Thomas Partnership's concrete Brutalist cathedral at Clifton (Fig 18, opened 1973) is perhaps the most notable expression of post-Vatican II monumentality and permanence, following a fully considered liturgical programme.

Where the budget was tighter, smaller, dual-purpose structures allowed for a greater degree of intimacy, as well as cost savings. Cheap and



Figure 16 (top)

Gerard Goalen's Our Lady of Fatima, Harlow, Essex, 1958-60, with a T-shaped plan and a reinforced concrete frame which allowed for an extensive display of dazzling glass by Dom. Charles Norris. Present at the opening was Frederick Gibberd, then architect to Harlow New Town; the design influenced his competition-winning entry for Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral.

Figure 17 (bottom)

Richard Gilbert Scott's Our Lady Help of Christians, Kitts Green, Birmingham (1966-7) is, like Goalen's design at Harlow, on a T-plan and contains large areas of coloured glass. Scott's aim was to imbue the church with the sense of Gothic found in his father Sir Giles Gilbert Scott's works, but using a modern idiom.

flexible, these often served new housing estates, usually with a folding screen to close off the sanctuary area. Externally, there was little about the appearance of such buildings to denote their religious function, a conscious decision as well as an expediency. The design and build churches of Lanners of Wakefield, often square or polygonal on plan and with laminated timber frames, also provided modestly-sized, economical churches which could be built quickly.

Church building tailed off considerably from the 1980s and 90s. Where buildings aspired towards more than design and build functionalism, they tended to reflect the stylistic free-for-all which accompanied the breakdown of the dominance of architectural Modernism. Most notable is Quinlan Terry's rebuilt cathedral at Brentwood (opened 1991), a confident and thoroughgoing essay in classicism. More within the Catholic mainstream, Anthony Delarue's Corpus Christi, Tring (1998-9) revives the basilican model, one of the recurring themes of Catholic church design in the 20th century.



Figure 18
Clifton Cathedral, Bristol, a concrete Brutalist design by the Percy Thomas Partnership (1970-73). Perhaps the most consistent and successful example in England of

the rigorous application of modern liturgical principles to church design.

3 Associations

Urban and suburban parish churches are, along with schools (with which they are often co-located) the most visible outward sign of the 19th and 20th-century Catholic revival in England. As a rule churches were built with diocesan and bank loans and with ‘the pennies of the faithful’; wealthy donors were a relative rarity. Traditionally, churches were not consecrated until all outstanding debts were paid off.

Churches are often sited in disadvantaged locations, more central ones being usually unaffordable (and sometimes, in the 19th century at least, unavailable on account of local anti-Catholic prejudice). They were often built cheaply, with a view to later addition and enrichment, which in part explains the widespread adoption of architectural models other than Gothic. They tend to occupy large sites, having been acquired wherever possible with a view to establishing a parish ‘complex’ of church, presbytery (usually attached to the church), parish hall and sometimes a school or convent. Attached burial grounds are unusual, at least in urban and suburban areas, a consequence of the various burial acts of the 19th century, which required burial in edge-of-town public cemeteries. Rather than a churchyard, the modern setting of most Catholic churches is a car park.

Until relatively recently Catholic churches tended to be designed by architects from within the fold, some well-known outside Catholic circles, many less so. The networks of architects and patronage were complex. There were family dynasties (Pugin, Scott, Hadfield, Scoles, Goldie) and regional and diocesan networks (centred on prolific and interconnected practices such as Sandy & Norris, Norris & Reynolds and Reynolds & Scott). Some of these architects did little or no work for other denominations, or for the Catholic Church outside their own regions or dioceses.

Even in the post-Vatican II decades, Catholic architects tended to dominate church building practice, but the relative dearth of building today has largely broken these networks.

The 19th and 20th-century Catholic revival in England sought to make reconnections with its medieval past, to undo the perceived rupture brought about by the Reformation. A few medieval churches were returned to Catholic use, notably St Etheldreda, Ely Place (Holborn, London). There was a revival of medieval places of pilgrimage, such as Walsingham (Norfolk) and Aylesford (Kent) and new shrines were established on the site of, or close to, medieval abbeys and shrines, such as Padley, Derbyshire. The cult of saints was, and remains, a focus of Catholic devotion; every church has the relics of a saint set into its consecrated altar. The English Catholic martyrs of the Reformation period, notably saints Thomas More and John Fisher, figure widely in church dedications. Churches in new suburbs and estates have also commemorated modern saints, St Bernadette of Lourdes being a popular dedication and, more recently, figures such as St Maximilian Kolbe, martyr of Auschwitz.

19th and 20th-century Catholic churches display many mainstream features of church design in England, from the Gothic revival of the 19th century to the Modernism of the 20th. Fittings and furnishings, murals, metalwork, stained

glass windows and other church furnishings can be seen in relation to the usually better-known Anglican work of the same period. However, the buildings, their furnishings and their settings

need to be understood on their own terms as the products of a distinct, and distinctive, culture, history and mode of worship.

4 Change and the Future

There is no reliable figure for the number of Catholic churches in England, but there are well over 3,000. About two thirds date from the 20th century, and by far the greatest proportion of those were built in the 1950s and 1960s. Just under 25% of Catholic churches are listed, most of them (nearly 90%) Grade II.

Very few churches, including listed ones, have escaped significant change in recent decades. Pre-Vatican II churches have nearly all had a forward altar introduced, either supplementing or replacing the original high altar. Communion rails and nave pulpits have been removed and baptisteries closed. Confessionals have been removed or turned into unofficial storage areas. Along with prosaic matters such as heating and lighting, much of the work of diocesan Historic Churches Committees today is concerned with 'reordering the reordering', mitigating the impact of unsympathetic post-Vatican II changes.

What has not taken place is the widespread removal of pews and the introduction of non-worship activities, a common feature in the reordering of Anglican and Nonconformist places of worship in recent years. This is a reflection of the Catholic sense of sacred space, which means that (usually) a separate parish hall is available for non-worship activities.

Generally, Catholic churches are well maintained. However, this is an increasingly aged building stock and where grant money is unavailable, repair and maintenance costs are largely met from within the local church. Catholic parishes are not generally able to reach out to the wider

community for support in the way that those responsible for a medieval parish church may.

More than this, the future sustainability of Catholic churches, historic and otherwise, depends on the availability of priests. Since the high water mark of 1971, there has been a steep decline in vocations, and while there are signs that this has bottomed out, dioceses are planning for a future with fewer clergy. There is also a continuing decline in the numbers attending Mass. Precise figures are elusive and not always reliable, but by one independent measure, the total had fallen to 858,800 by 2012 (21.1% of the Catholic population). Fewer priests and declining congregations means fewer churches.

The decline has been particularly acute in former Catholic strongholds in the north of England, where the Catholic population has often moved away from centres such as Liverpool and Preston. Unlike the Church of England, where church closure is initiated at parish level, in the Catholic Church this comes from the bishop, after local consultation. Procedures for closing churches no longer required for ecclesiastical purposes are set out in Canon Law, and for listed churches in the *Directory on the Ecclesiastical Exemption*.

5 Further Reading

The most comprehensive general account of Catholic church building in England remains Bryan Little's *Catholic Churches since 1623* (1966). This covers the period from the building of Inigo Jones's chapel at St James's Palace up to the Second Vatican Council. For a more general readership, Christopher Martin's *A Glimpse of Heaven: Catholic Churches of England and Wales* (2009) is a celebration of a hundred churches in England and Wales, richly illustrated with photographs by Alex Ramsay (some of which are also used here).

Little's book was written at the time of the Second Vatican Council. A longer perspective on that period of upheaval is given in Robert Proctor's *Building the Modern Church: Roman Catholic Church Architecture in Britain, 1955-75* (2014).

Denis Evinson's, *Catholic Churches of London* (1998) is a comprehensive account of buildings in the capital, while the 'Pevsner' *Buildings of England* volumes, especially the more recent revisions, usually include entries on churches of note.

A W N Pugin apart, few Catholic architects have their own biographers, although some have entries in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. The most recent biographer of Pugin is Rosemary Hill, *God's Architect; Pugin and the Building of Romantic Britain* (2007). The [Pugin Society website](#) has useful gazetteers of the work of A W N and E W Pugin.

Current official guidance on the construction, design and management of church buildings is published by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales in *Consecrated for Worship: A Directory on Church Building* (2006). It is available online [here](#). The Bishops' Conference has also issued a *Directory on the Ecclesiastical Exemption from Listed Building Control*, available online [here](#).

The Tablet, established in 1840, remains the main Catholic journal of record. Its [archive](#) is available online, and is a useful source of information relating to the opening of new churches and the adornment of existing ones, particularly in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Finally, a history and architectural description of each of the churches visited in the course of the *Taking Stock* programme is available online [here](#).

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