

The Architecture of SS Patrick and Brigid, Clane

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The post-famine period saw a boom in Catholic church building across Ireland. County Kildare, as home to Maynooth College (1795; 1845) and Clongowes Wood College (1814), was at the forefront of Catholic religious revival in 19th century Ireland. SS Patrick and Brigid (1876-1884)¹ was one of several churches in the county built by rural congregations in the new Gothic Revival style, such as Donaghstown (1860-63), Allen (1868), Prosperous (1869). As early as the 1860s there had been an idea of building a new chapel in the village, as parishioner Thomas M. Donellan had included in his will of 1866 '£200 in trust for the purpose of assisting to build a new chapel at Clane'.² The original Catholic chapel in Clane of 1805³ was of a vernacular type, internally T-shaped in plan, that had been built across Ireland after the relaxing of the penal laws in the late eighteenth century. The construction of the new church, directly behind the site of the old, took place under the stewardship of the Rev. Patrick Turner,⁴ an energetic priest of the parish and a champion of tenant rights. His Latin-inscribed white marble monument, inside the church, records his death just five years after its completion.⁵

The Gothic style of the church contrasts with the almost exactly contemporary Church of Ireland church of St Michael's and All Angels at Millicent commissioned by Thomas Cooke Trench from architect James Franklin Fuller, which harnessed the Hiberno-Romanesque style, then increasingly seen as Ireland's 'national style'.⁶ The Catholic clergy, on the other hand, were still in thrall to the legacy of the English Gothic Revival architect, A.W. N. Pugin, whose inspiration was largely derived from English and French medieval churches. In its form and layout, the new church of SS Patrick and Brigid was firmly in the church style formulated by Pugin in the 1830s. The young Pugin's fiery printed polemics had castigated the desecrations of the English Protestant Reformation, attacked the fake Georgian Gothic of his own day, and condemned the pagan classical style commonly employed by his contemporaries.⁷

¹ 'St. Patrick's and St. Brigid's Church', *Freeman's Journal*, 11 September 1876, p. 6; 'The New Catholic church at Clane', *The Kildare Observer*, 05 July 1884, p. 5; Seamus Cullen.net.

https://seamuscullen.net/clane_church.html. Accessed 05 Feb. 2020.

² 'Rolls Court', *Dublin Evening Post*, 14 July 1870, p. 3.

³ Seamus Cullen, 'Fr. Turner and the building of the Church of St. Patrick & St. Bridget, Clane'. Seamus Cullen.net. https://seamuscullen.net/clane_church.html. Accessed 05 Feb. 2020.

⁴ Seamus Cullen.net. https://seamuscullen.net/clane_church.html. Accessed 05 Feb. 2020.

⁵ Turner had been president of the local branch of Parnell's National League, founded after the suppression of the Land League, and was a passionate adversary of what he termed 'felonious landlordism'. He defined this in a letter to William Gladstone as 'unscrupulous, irresponsible power, inspired, guided, and energized by the worst passions of human nature'. See 'Clane National League', *Kildare Observer*, 31 October 1885, p. 5; 'Death of the Rev. Father Turner, p. p., Clane' *Kildare Observer*, 16 March 1889, p. 4; 'The Kilmurry Evictions', *Kildare Observer*, 17 June 1882, p. 3.

⁶ A term used in a report on its opening. See 'Consecration of Saint Michael's Church, Clane.' *Kildare Observer*, 6th October 1883, p. 3.

⁷ See A. W. N. Pugin, *Contrasts, or, A parallel between the noble edifices of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and similar buildings of the present day etc* (Aldbury: Printed for the author, and published by him at St. Marie's Grange, 1836); A. W. N. Pugin, *The true principles of pointed or Christian architecture* (London: J. Weale, 1841).

Like many members of his profession, William Hague, the architect of SS Patrick and Brigid, was a follower of Pugin. A prolific designer of Catholic churches, he was the son of a Cavan builder and spent four years learning his profession in the office of the pre-eminent architect Charles Barry, most famous for his design (with A.W.N Pugin) of the Houses of Parliament in Westminster.⁸ The influence of Pugin was felt strongly in County Kildare due to his design for St Patrick's College Maynooth during the 1840s. Hague (taking over from J. J. McCarthy) ultimately completed the interior of the college chapel there – perhaps the greatest ecclesiastical achievement of the Gothic Revival in Ireland.

SS Patrick and Brigid is of a type that first appeared in Ireland in two churches of Pugin's own design: Tagoat, Co. Wexford, of 1843-48, Barnstown, Co. Wexford, of 1844-1851.⁹ Based on medieval English predecessors their size, dimensions and style formed a popular model for Irish architects to follow. Unlike the rubble and plaster T-plan churches of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, these new parish churches were sturdy, trimmed in cut stone, and had open roofed, aisled interiors. The architectural detailing at Clane is in a style termed by nineteenth-century historians (the first to classify the phases of medieval Gothic architecture) as Early Decorated, prevalent in 14th century churches; more enriched than the very simple Early English of the 12th and 13th centuries, and more restrained than the flamboyant or Perpendicular styles of the fifteenth; it was Pugin's preferred style. It is simplest in the W end and along the aisles where the paired trefoil-headed lancets merge seamlessly with the walls. Whereas the architects of the late Georgian Board of First Fruit churches did not hesitate to construct their window surrounds in timber, for Pugin and his acolytes a return to stone was an imperative part of their mission for truthfulness and structural integrity. The large geometric rose window on the west end comprises a ring of eight cinque-foiled circles, all set under a pointed relieving arch – an idea borrowed from Rheim Cathedral in France.¹⁰ A more complicated design, in a similar geometric style, features in the east window. Only up-close does one appreciate the difference between the smooth finish of the trim (in one of Ireland's finest materials: the silvery Edenderry limestone, used on the façade of the central block of Castletown House), where every feature is chamfered to create soft shadows; in contrast the subtle hammer-dressed texture of the snecked walls is in local blue-grey limestone.¹¹ All this is neatly formulated and highly controlled work.

The exterior, covered with slates brought from Bangor, had been completed by 1882 and that September a bazaar was held in the village to raise funds for the interior work.¹² The interior dimensions are 125 ft in length and 55ft in width, while the height to the apex of the roof is 60ft, the latter thought by the journalist of the *Kildare Observer* (with some satisfaction) to be about 10ft higher than the nave of the average Irish chapel.¹³ The columns of the arcade have bases of bluish/grey limestone (probably local), shafts of bright-toned granite, and richly moulded bell capitals of Edenderry limestone. The job required skilled workmen and the Dublin carpenters, Daniel Toomey and Michael Fanning, may have been brought in to complete the complicated pitch pine

⁸ See Ann Martha Rowan, *Dictionary of Irish Architects 1720-1940*.

<https://www.dia.ie/architects/view/2322/HAGUE%2C+WILLIAM+%5B2%5D>. Accessed 15 January 2021.

⁹ For dates, see the entries for these churches in Ann Martha Rowan, *The Dictionary of Irish Architects*. dia.ie.

¹⁰ Andrew Tierney, *The Buildings of Ireland: Central Leinster* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), p. 239.

¹¹ Seamus Cullen gives Marmions Quarry as the source of the local stone.

http://seamuscullen.net/clane_church.html

¹² 'Bazaar and Fancy Fair in Clane', *Kildare Observer*, 30 September 1882, p. 5. The bazaar included swings and hobby horses, a shooting gallery, roulette table, brass and string bands, magic lantern shows, fireworks and a ball with dancing until the early hours.

¹³ 'The New Catholic church at Clane', *The Kildare Observer*, 05 July 1884, p. 5.

roof.¹⁴ The fine timber pews, of 'polished pine' were also designed by Hague. In addition, there was a crypt. 'The skill of the architect' remarked the *Kildare Observer* 'is illustrated by the way in which he took advantage of an incline in the ground by constructing a large crypt adjacent to the high altar, and this will, it may be stated, be utilised as the burying place of the priests of the church.'¹⁵

In describing the quality of the interior, the journalist for the *Kildare Observer* remarked that it would 'meet with the commendation of such fastidious personages as Oscar Wilde and [Edward] Burne-Jones.'¹⁶ Wilde had been tutored at Oxford by the great art critic John Ruskin (a champion of the Pre-Raphaelite Burne-Jones), who had in turn had been influenced by the writings of Pugin. The reference is hard to square with the austere walls of SS Patrick and Brigid today. It may be that, in common with many other Catholic churches of this period, there was originally some painted scheme of ornamentation that was later swept away.¹⁷ The interior of Maynooth College chapel is the best example of the kind of rich finish Pugin had advocated and which Hague was capable of producing in conjunction with the best craftsmen and artists. The Boys' Chapel at Clongowes (1905-12) designed by Pugin's son-in-law, George Ashlin, is another. Luxurious surface finishes had become a hall-mark of the revived Catholic church and Wilde, who appreciated any kind of aesthetic decadence, flirted with the Catholic faith throughout his life. He had once remarked that 'The Catholic Church is for saints and sinners alone. For respectable people, the Anglican Church will do.'¹⁸ In fact, local Protestant opposition to this kind of style was raised by the construction of the lavishly crafted Church of Ireland church at Millicent by Thomas Cooke Trench. Contemporary with SS Patrick and Brigid, the building was criticised in the Kildare Diocesan Synod as 'very handsome from a Catholic point of view, but....would give a good deal of annoyance owing to its decorations.'¹⁹ After its completion there were objections to confirmations taking place there as its rich figurative imagery of saints were said to have broken the second commandment. It was charged that the youth would be led into a 'sensuous form of adoration', allowing them become 'easy prey to the insidious efforts of members of the Church of Rome and their allies...'²⁰

The opening ceremony of SS Patrick and Brigid, on the 24th August 1884, was a big event in the locality and people paid high prices (as much as £1²¹ to reserve a seat in the chancel) to hear the Bishop of Galway preach.²² When the church was consecrated in 1884, it was still expected that the 160 ft tower and spire would be completed.²³ In the event, this work was never carried out due to cost²⁴ and the southwest corner of the aisle still retains the toothed stonework where the tower was intended to rise, as illustrated in *The Building News* in 1878 (**Fig. x**).²⁵ Funding for such 'extras' was often problematic and other church projects by William Hague included unfinished towers (such as Stradbally, Co. Laois (1893-6) and Rathvilly, Co. Carlow (1887)). Although the tower for Hague's Carmelite Church in Kildare was completed the project ran seriously over budget and the carving on the west end was left uncompleted.²⁶ The idea of an open archway through the ground floor of the

¹⁴ 'Assaults by the police', *Kildare Observer*, 12 April 1884, p. 5.

¹⁵ 'The New Catholic church at Clane', *The Kildare Observer*, 05 July 1884, p. 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁷ Tierney, *Central Leinster*, p. 47.

¹⁸ *Constantin-George Sandulescu, Rediscovering Oscar Wilde* (Colin Smythe, 1994), p. 389.

¹⁹ 'Kildare Diocesan Synod', *Kildare Observer*, 28 October 1882, p. 5.

²⁰ 'The Confirmations', *Dublin Daily Express*, 29 September 1886, p. 6.

²¹ The equivalent of three days wages for a skilled tradesman. See <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter/#currency-result>. Accessed 15 January 2021.

²² 'The Solemn Opening and Dedication of the New Church at Clane', *Kildare Observer*, 16 August, p. 4.

²³ 'The New Catholic church at Clane', *The Kildare Observer*, 05 July 1884, p. 5.

²⁴ Another £2500 was required. See Seamus Cullen's article: https://seamuscullen.net/clane_church.html.

²⁵ *The Building News*, 26 April 1878.

²⁶ Tierney, *Central Leinster*, p. 394.

tower (projected for Clane) was highly unusual and not found in any of Hague's other churches. Why was it included in the design? Probably, it was initially conceived as a bridge between the Presentation convent (built 1839) immediately to the south of the church and the choir loft in the west end of the nave, as can be seen in the drawing. In 1884 it was remarked that 'it is only complete so far as to form a temporary passage for the nuns going to the organ gallery of the chapel', suggesting that the first stage of the tower may have been built (and later taken down).²⁷

There were some important additions in later years. A raffle was held in January 1888 to raise funds for the altars.²⁸ They have shafts of Cork red limestone and green Connemara serpentine, which became common in post-Famine Irish churches due to the development of the Irish marble industry. The tall shafts of the central canopy in the main reredos are polished red granite. The short squat shafts below are probably Kilkenny or Galway black limestone. In 1891 the five-light east window was installed, with the three figures of the holy family flanked by St Patrick and St Brigid. It is by the firm of Lucien-Léopold Lobin of Tours in France, where the cathedral has some of the finest surviving medieval stained glass.

SS Patrick and Brigid remains a fine example of Victorian church building in Ireland. Its snecked stone walls, columnar arcades, and open timber roof, reflect the Victorian passion for high quality materials and structural integrity that would inform new directions in architecture in the following century.

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Fig. 1: A view of the exterior of SS Patrick and Brigid

Fig. 2: A view of the interior of SS Patrick and Brigid

Fig. 3: The church as originally conceived, with its tower and spire, as published in *The Building News* 26 April 1878. Reproduced courtesy of the Irish Architectural Archive.

²⁷ 'The New Catholic Church at Clane', *The Kildare Observer*, p. 5.

²⁸ 'New Church Clane', *Leinster Leader*, 31 December 1887, p. 1.