



THE  
ENGLISH  
COUNTRY  
CHURCH  
Donald Sinden

Based on the BBC series *Discovering English Churches*, 1979, presented by Donald Sinden:

Sinden lived for years in Kent where he indulged his passion for church architecture – “I always travel with my Betjeman and my Pevsner” - even presenting a BBC documentary, *Discovering English Churches*. His tastes were conservative and views forthright: “Very few churches have been built in the twentieth century,” he wrote, “and most of them are disasters.” His grandfather had been an architect and Sinden had dreamt of following him. [The Times –September 2014]

**DISCOVERING ENGLISH CHURCHES – St.Mark’s, Worsley**

Presented by *Donald Sinden* © BBC

First Broadcast on BBC 1 on Sunday 16 August 1981.

*(DS stands before the Albert Memorial)*

In 1861, Albert, prince consort to Queen Victoria, died and the distraught queen led the nation in mourning. During the following eleven years, a monument was raised here in Kensington Gardens, paid for by public subscription, and has become one of London’s best known landmarks. Depending on your taste, the Albert Memorial can be viewed either with affection or with horror; but by anyone’s standards, it is fantastic. A medieval shrine to some saint, feted to enormous proportions. The appeal of Gothic to the Victorian eye, especially for our public buildings, stemmed partly from the mistaken idea that the style had been invented and brought to perfection here in England. So it was seen as the ‘national style’. This was an age of rapid expansion, in industry and in territory, the pink blush of the English Empire was fast infecting the globe and on this wave of national self-confidence a Gothic style was carried high; and so this incredible edifice was a memorial not only to Prince Albert but to a revival of the Gothic style, the revitalised Church of England and the Empire.

But while missionaries spread the Faith to the four corners of the world, at home all was not well. The grimy suburbs thrown up by the Industrial Revolution were fast becoming strongholds of non-conformism, even atheism. “*The Church as it now stands, no human power can save it,*” said Thomas Arnold, famous headmaster of Rugby School. But an attempt was made. Backed by a million pound grant from Parliament, a surge of church building was launched to stem the rising tide of dissent.

*(DS standing by the canal in the village)*

This is **Worsley** (*sadly pronounced Wurzley-Ed.*) on the outskirts of Manchester – “*a God-forgotten place, its inhabitants much addicted to drink and to rude sports, their morals deplorably low, the whole district in a state of educational and religious destitution.*” Not my judgement I hasten to add but the words spoken by **Lord Francis Egerton** in 1837 when he came to live here, after taking over the Bridgewater estate on his father’s death. But even in 1837, Lord Francis’s description of its depraved inhabitants was probably something of an exaggeration. In fact, there were already four places of worship which served this area. They were, however, non-conformist, which is probably why **Lord Francis Egerton** discounted them. Anyway, he set about improving this lamentable condition by setting up Sunday Schools to teach the children who were probably already working in the Bridgewater mines and their workshops; and he also gave a site and the cash for building a grand new church - **St. Mark’s**.

*(Sinden now enters the church via the South door)*

Now there's a strange thing. Although the church was completed in **1846**, it was not built in some contemporary style that reflected the new age of technology that surrounded it; it was not even built in the established classical style in which all the major architects had been trained. This church, like most of those built in the reign of Queen Victoria, was a deliberate copy of a medieval Gothic church. In fact, **St. Mark's** here gives something of a practical lesson in the history of architecture spanning 300 years. The mouldings on the columns of the nave arcade are early English in style, their capitals are derived from the period and the window openings of the clerestory, as with the oak hammer beam roof above, are perpendicular in style.

*(DS speaks to the camera in the centre of the aisle)*

The church was completed in two years, a fraction of the time it would have taken medieval craftsmen to build a genuine Gothic church. Mechanisation had revolutionised the building industry and technology was providing architects with new materials and opportunities. Yet instead of working towards a new, original Victorian style, they chose to turn their eyes back to the world of the Middle Ages. A taste for picturesque Gothic decoration had already been acquired by the turn of the century but during the next 50 years it was given an intellectual and enthusiastic foundation that transformed the rather superficial into a vision of the Gothic world that permeated every corner of the arts. Ecclesiastical backing came from the Oxford, or Tractarian movement. It was formed in 1835 by a group of men who were appalled by the spiritually impoverished religious life of preceding years and sought to bring the character of Catholic doctrine and ritual back to the Church of England. A second group was formed three years later at Cambridge, called the Camden Society. Their aim was the accurate study of the structure, decoration and furnishings of Gothic churches. They also published a highly influential monthly magazine, the *Ecclesiologist*. With the coming together of liturgical reform and academic study of the history of religious art, the Gothic revival was born.

Perhaps the most important father of the revival was **Augustus Welby Pugin**. In 1836, he published an architectural pamphlet called 'CONTRASTS - or a parallel between the noble edifices of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries and similar buildings of the present day showing the current decay of taste, accompanied by an appropriate text. His argument was that since Britain's greatest buildings had been achieved when all held the Catholic faith, the only conceivable style was Gothic. Gothic was synonymous with Christianity whereas classical was intrinsically pagan. The theory that good men built good buildings is illustrated by pairs of etchings comparing the medieval world with that of the nineteenth century. The contrasts are exaggerated – the Catholic town, resplendent with its churches and abbeys, the modern town dominated by factories, the prison and the lunatic asylum.

*(DS stands inside St. Pancras station)*

Despite Pugin's ... it was not possible to just turn the clock back. The modern world, its technology and new materials, was here to stay. Iron frameworks had already been used in factory ... before the turn of the century and the age of the great engineers like Telford and Brunel had arrived. This magnificent single arch that spans the platforms of St. Pancras railway station was built in 1868. Stretching 243 feet, it was the widest single span yet to be constructed. But, paradoxically, this great achievement was hidden away behind a hotel whose majestic sweep and spiky detail give it the air of some medieval palace or cloth hall. Though the architect of this building had declared ten years earlier that metallic construction was the greatest development of our age, he found no direct expression in the appearance of architecture.

St. Pancras hotel was designed by **Sir George Gilbert Scott**, perhaps the most typical architect of the Gothic revival and certainly the most prolific. Scott was born in 1811 into the family of the Reverend Thomas Scott, the fourth of thirteen children. The Reverend was something of an amateur architect himself and, recognising his son's talent for drawing, guided him towards a career in architecture. By the 1830's, **Scott** was a practising architect, working in partnership with William Moffatt, an association that lasted eleven years before ending rather sourly. **Scott** had a long and varied career which gave us, among other splendid designs, the Albert Memorial. In many ways, it represents the high spot of Scott's career. It earned him his

knighthood and **Scott** said it was a building by which he would be judged as an architect. Scott's dedication to the Gothic style had begun some twenty years earlier in **1841** when he was deeply affected by the ideas of Pugin, the medievalist. One of the first products of his conversion was that church he designed for **Lord Francis Egerton at Worsley**.

*(DS walks along the centre aisle)*

When **Lord Francis Egerton** commissioned **Scott** to design his new church, **Scott** was then 33 years old and was still working in partnership with WB Moffatt. Until then, most of the buildings they had produced had been workhouses and asylums which had been established as a result of the Poor Law Act of 1834. This is Scott's first church of any note. By the 1840's the Gothic style was confirmed as the only true Christian architecture, thanks largely to the efforts of the Camden society. So there was never really any doubt about which style it should be built in. But there was, however, some debate between the architect and his patron or client, as the architects now prefer to call them, as to the exact plan of the church. Fortunately for us, some of the correspondence between **Scott** and **Lord Francis** still survives. Scott's letter of November 22<sup>nd</sup> **1843** outlines his first ideas for the church – a nave with one aisle and a low clerestory, a high roof, a south porch, a western tower and spire and a full-sized chancel with a private chapel adjoining. His preliminary sketch surprisingly well with the church as it was completed. **Lord Francis**, however, perhaps with an eye to economy, wanted to shorten the chancel and omit the family chapel altogether. This did not suit **Scott** at all. *"I regret I should much regret the shortening of the chancel and the omission of the side chapel"* he wrote rather politely in February of **1844**. However, **Lord Francis** persisted and the next month found **Scott** supplying two alternative sketches, with and without shortened chancel and side chapel, but strongly emphasising his preference for the former arrangement. Whether the chancel was shortened or what we see today represents Scott's original idea is difficult to tell.

*(DS stands at the chancel step and moves towards the Ellesmere chapel)*

To the south of the chancel lies the family chapel; so evidently **Scott** got his own way on that particular score. The chapel is separated from the chancel by a fine wrought iron screen, the work of Skidmore and company of whom **Scott** thought very highly. The design incorporates the leaves and flowers of the strawberry. You see, **Francis Egerton** had been created an earl and had taken the name of Ellesmere, so each of the uprights is decorated with a double E, for Ellesmere, and topped by an earl's coronet with eight pearls on high points and eight strawberry leaves. Over here is the tomb of the earl himself, his marble figure wearing the robes and insignia of the Order of the Knights of the Garter. As a young man, he was said to have been a *"handsome fella, fully alive to all the delights of society, from wine and women to sermons and soda water."* Hand in hand with the revival of the Gothic style came a revival in symbolism.

*(DS moves through the gates to the front of the altar and looks at the north side of the choir)*

The chancel in particular loaded with the kind of symbolism which, a generation earlier, would have been seen as shame-faced popery. Here the chalice of the Holy Communion is surrounded by the leaves of the palm, the symbol of peace. Below, the passion flower symbolises the Last Supper, its flowers made up of twelve petals for the twelve disciples and three stamens representing the three nails of the cross. The leaves and acorns of the oak tree are used as a symbol of steadfastness and, above them, a dove represents the Holy Spirit. The choir stalls are carved with shields bearing emblems of the Crucifixion – the crown of thorns, the Sacred Heart and pierced hands, and here the ladder, hammer and pincers. The high standard of this woodwork is a reminder of the revitalisation of craftsmanship that accompanied the Gothic revival. The magnificent Reredos is a memorial to the **Countess of Ellesmere**, the work of Italian artists and is made of alabaster inlaid with coloured marble.

*(DS now speaks to the camera from the chancel steps)*

Scott's career had really begun to take off by now and while **St. Mark's** was being built he was also working on the designs for a very prestigious project – the new Lutheran church of St.Nicholas in Hamburg – a church conceived on a cathedral scale. A lot of **Scott's** time was being spent in researching abroad in Germany and Belgium for this project and it seems likely that much of the supervision of the work here was left to his partner, Moffatt, and to the foreman of the works. We have no first-hand assessment of what Scott himself thought of the completed building. Although all the details are architecturally correct in themselves, for my money Scott still lacked the ease and freedom of expression to breath new life into the old forms. The label stops with their old medieval headdresses are accurate but inert copies. Much of the ornament seems disproportionate and superficial, as though it had been stuck on the tower like icing on a cake. It was a bold try but Scott was to do better (*13 years later with the church of All Souls, Haley Hill, Halifax –ed.*)



Paul R. Speakman – Ed. 2024