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# THE INTERIOR OF ST MARY MOORFIELDS

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St Mary Moorfields, built in 1817–1820 by the Architect John Newman as the main church of Catholic London and demolished in 1899, is described by E.W. Brayley in Britton and Pugin's *Illustrations of the Public Buildings of London*.<sup>1</sup> However a recently exhibited watercolour of 1900 by Alfred Parkinson records a more complex history<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 1).

Catholics were only granted freedom of worship in 1791, but there was nevertheless a Catholic bishop resident in London continuously from the 1740s, who used the chapel attached to the residence of the Sardinian ambassador off Lincoln's Inn Fields. There was also a Catholic chapel just outside the City, which, like the Sardinian, was a victim of the Gordon Riots in 1780. It was rebuilt on White Street with government compensation.<sup>3</sup> In 1817 the decision was taken to rebuild this on another site. Dr Poynter, the vicar apostolic of London, was persuaded, much against his natural timidity, to mark the opening attended by two bishops and forty-four priests with a triumphant pastoral letter and to treat this chapel as a recognisable 'pro-cathedral' (that is a church with the throne from which in theological terms he ruled and taught).<sup>4</sup>

The Catholic clergy left church-building to lay building committees, usually made up of the rich and merchant class, although the report of the opening of St Mary Moorfields in the *Orthodox Journal* says that it was funded by 'voluntary contributions and a great part by weekly subscriptions of the lower class of Catholics, particularly the

Irish'.<sup>5</sup> Although it was to be the chief church of Catholic London, its genesis is an example of the church-building and organisation confusingly dubbed 'Congregationalism' by the Catholic historian John Bossy, by which Catholics, like contemporary Nonconformists, organised themselves.<sup>6</sup>

St Mary Moorfields was a remarkably ambitious building on a prominent site bought from the Bridge House estate in the City.<sup>7</sup> With the site came the employment of the estate's surveyor John Newman as architect; he was not a Catholic and was 'to be assisted by a committee'.<sup>8</sup> The church was arranged like any other Anglican or dissenting proprietary chapel, with pews for rent, including a strangers' gallery at the west end where seats cost one shilling, and vaults to be let for burials. These gave trouble, and before the church was completed the architect was dismissed. Another source of dispute was the design of the portico. Its recessed pair of Corinthian columns *in antis* with pairs of flanking *antae*, derived from the internal bays of the Pantheon, was a Baroque device which Gibbs had used on the returns of St Martin-in-the-Fields. The pediment had a bas-relief of female figures of Faith and Piety at the foot of the cross.<sup>9</sup> The cost was £26,000 and the materials stuccoed brick and slate. Behind the church, and communicating with it, was a substantial three-storey house for the clergy, which cost £6,000.<sup>10</sup>

Newman built very quickly between August 1817 and November 1818 and, with the interior as yet unfinished, he was sent on a Continental tour.<sup>11</sup>



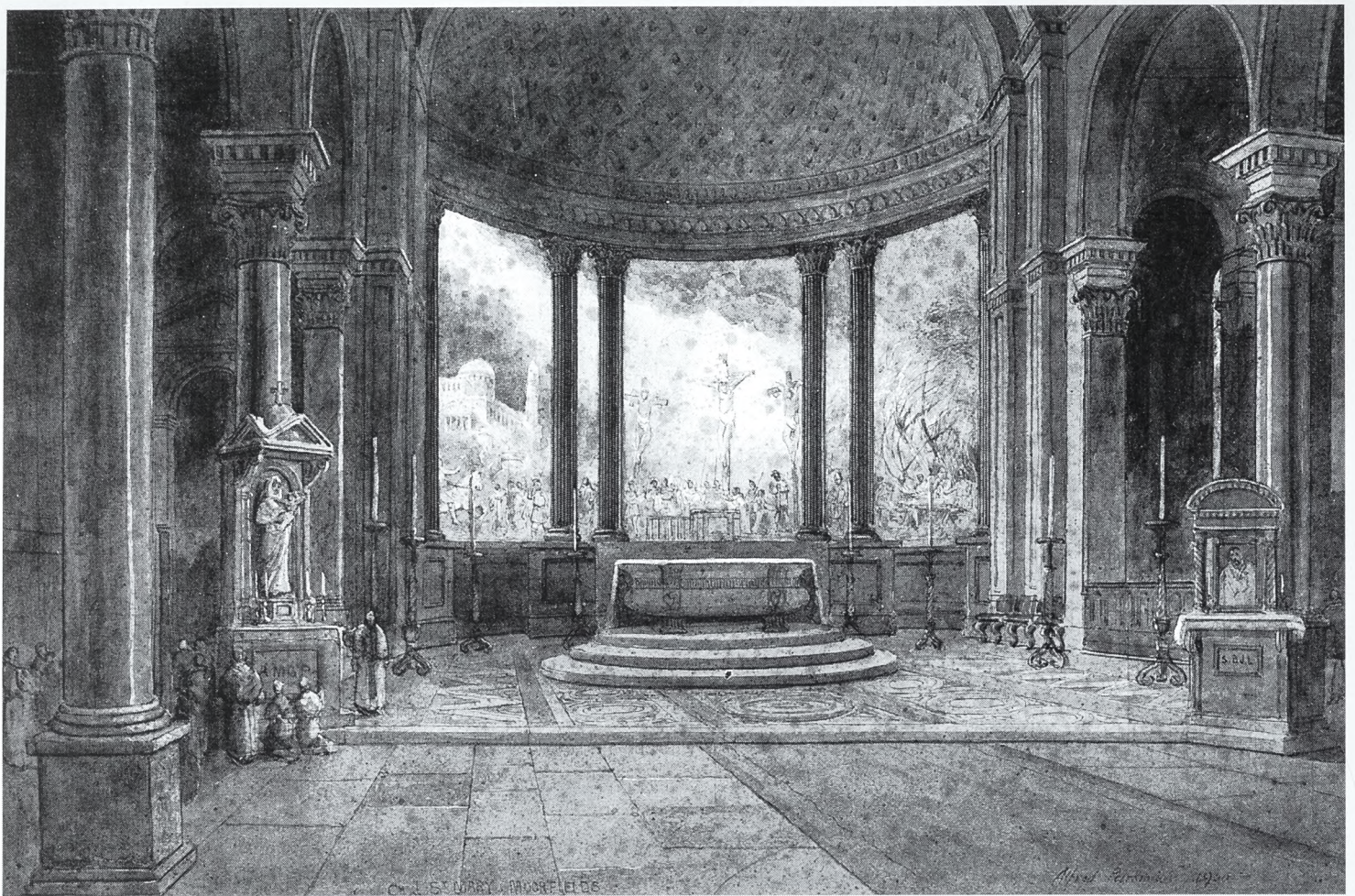


Figure 1. Alfred Parkinson, view of the interior of the apse, St. Mary, Moorfields, London. *Charles Plante Fine Arts.*

In Paris he studied the *transparente* or *lumière mystérieuse* devices in the *chapelle de calvaire* behind the high altar at St Roch and at the lady chapel at St Sulpice, which he consequently decided to incorporate into the scheme.<sup>12</sup> Here Newman was presumably influenced by Soane, who emphasised the importance of this baroque device in his lectures as well as in his buildings, rather than his own master Smirke.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps this was at the committee's suggestion, for part of its role was to evolve the internal decoration proposals; many came from private donors such as Lord Arundel for the painted decoration of the interior, the pulpit, and the columnar east end.<sup>14</sup> Another 'Catholic gentleman' offered to pay for the paint-

ings of the ceiling compartments and the panorama of the apse, which a Signor Aglio<sup>15</sup> executed in 1819–1820, and also secured the sculptor Signor Comolli of Milan for 'the columns, steps and the table that were designed to constitute the decorations of the altar'.<sup>16</sup> The interior was consequently highly dramatic. Agostino Aglio's enormous Crucifixion panorama had 55 figures and a crucifix 18 feet high, lit from the hidden light source (apparently a glazed roof light) set 15 feet behind the columns. Contemporary English Catholics would have expected a 'picture', usually of the Crucifixion, over their altars, but Catholic London had seen nothing so dramatic since the east end arrangement of the Queen's chapel at St James's Palace from



which they were ejected in 1688.<sup>17</sup> In front of the screen stood the marble altar ensemble by Comolli, at a cost of £1,000, a sarcophagus flanked by two angels supporting the mensa or altar table, with a large tabernacle above (omitted from the watercolour). The ensemble was flanked by six candlesticks prominent in the watercolour, in wood, not marble, by Gillows, the Catholic furniture makers (not by Italians). Pope Pius VII gave money and a chalice.<sup>18</sup> Although it served as the model for the Catholic church built in Brighton in 1835 by the local builder William Hallet (where the Prince Regent's wife Mrs Fitzhertbert is buried),<sup>19</sup> it had few other progeny in a world shortly to be revolutionised by Pugin, who denounced it as 'like a theatre . . . the product of a Protestant architect'.<sup>20</sup>

The opening of Pugin's Gothic St George's Southwark in 1848 finally gave Catholic London a cathedral. However, as the London Vicariate was split into two dioceses of Westminster and Southwark, Cardinal Wiseman, appointed Archbishop of Westminster in 1850, found himself without a cathedral. Given his Italianate tastes, it was appropriate that he should hit on St Mary Moorfields as his pro-cathedral.<sup>21</sup> The Catholic architect Charles Parker was employed to alter the sanctuary, remove the pews and galleries and install extra side altar shrines. The Tuscan piers were

altered to Corinthian columns.<sup>22</sup> Further Italianate redecoration took place in 1857–8.<sup>23</sup>

Apart from the *lumière mystérieuse* device, St Mary Moorfields was stylistically quite conservative: unlike the Catholic pro-cathedral in Dublin, it cannot claim to be a leading monument of the Greek Revival or of international neoclassicism. However, the 1852 refitting was much more up to date, an Italianate hotting up of the cold Greek Revival interior. By 1899 such Greek Revival style buildings were probably at the nadir of their popularity and the decision was taken to dispose of the church, its sale including a clause insisting on the demolition of the building.<sup>24</sup> Its passing was also illustrated but with pejorative references to the panorama in *The Builder*.<sup>25</sup> The watercolour is a palpable relic of the taste of the powerful continental preferences of the Catholic clergy who refused to be bullied by what one of them called 'Archbishop Pugins'.<sup>26</sup> A smaller church of St Mary Moorfields was opened on Eldon Street in 1903 which retains the now cut down altar and the columnar screen.<sup>27</sup> The magnificent candlesticks are now at Westminster Cathedral. There are conflicting reports on the fate of the panorama painting, which was on canvas, and must surely survive somewhere.<sup>28</sup>

## NOTES

1 J. Britton and A. C. Pugin, *Illustrations of the Public Buildings of London*, London, 1828, II, 5–10, 'The Roman Catholic Chapel Moorfields [by] E. W. Brayley FSA.'

2 London, private collection, exhibited, courtesy Charles Plante Fine Arts, at the Westminster Cathedral centenary exhibition *100 years of Art, Architecture and Treasures*, 1995.

3 R. O'Donnell, 'The architectural setting of Challoner's episcopate' in E. Duffy (ed.), *Challoner*

*and his church: a Catholic bishop in Georgian England*, London, 1981, 55–70.

4 William Poynter was Vicar Apostolic of the London District (1812–1827) under the title of bishop of Halia. Catholic bishops in England took such titles from sees 'in partibus infidelium' such as in North Africa or Asia and did not exercise their rights as ordinary bishops until the 'Restoration of the Hierarchy' in 1850; nor did they have cathedrals.

5 *The Orthodox Journal and Catholic Monthly*



- Intelligence* (later *The London and Dublin Orthodox Journal*), VIII, 168, 203, has the best contemporary account.
- 6 John Bossy, *The English Catholic Community, 1570–1850*, London, 1975, 337–54.
  - 7 *The Land and Building News*, 15 October 1855, 1167. The same estate was instrumental in providing the site for Pugin's Southwark Cathedral, for which Newman provided a design in 1838.
  - 8 *Orthodox Journal*, *loc.cit.* However the directing role of John Newman as architect is emphasised by Brayley, *loc.cit.*.
  - 9 *Orthodox Journal*, *loc.cit.*.
  - 10 Britton and Pugin, *loc.cit.*.
  - 11 *Idem.*
  - 12 *Idem.* The church of Saint-Roch, rue St Honoré, Paris, by Jacques Lemercier (1653–1660), continued by J-H Mansart (1701–1708), completed after 1719 by Robert de Cotte, with Jules-Robert de Cotte's facade (after 1736); and the lady chapel of the church of St Sulpice, by Charles de Wailly (1774).
  - 13 David Watkin, *Sir John Soane . . .*, Cambridge, 1996, 36, 214, 251, 277, 366, 598.
  - 14 *Orthodox Journal*, VIII, 168.
  - 15 Edward Croft-Murray *Decorative painting in England 1537–1837*, II, London, 1970, 161. Brayley implies that Newman was unaware of the appointment.
  - 16 Britton & Pugin, *op.cit.*, 6.
  - 17 H. M. Colvin (ed.), *History of the King's Works*, London 1976, v, 244–254, for the Queen's Chapel *ibid.*, 285–293, for James II's Whitehall chapel. The Kip engraving c.1688 of the interior of the chapel, boldly entitled in latin 'Prospectus interior Sacelli serenissima Maria Magnae Britanniae Regina Londini apud sanctum Jacobum' (The interior prospect of the chapel at St James's London of the most serene Mary Queen of Great Britain) is very rare; the copy at the Society of Antiquaries has the manuscript label 'to be sold at the Dutch glaziers house in Strandhope street' [Society of Antiquaries of London, Harley Collection, VI, Westminster, Whitehall . . .].
  - 18 John Brown and Timothy Dean *Westminster Cathedral, Building of Faith*, London, 1995.
  - 19 Brighton, St John the Baptist (1835), lengthened 1875 and interior recast by S. J. Nicholl, architect, 1887–8.
  - 20 *Catholic Magazine*, II, 1838, 332.
  - 21 For Wiseman's reaction against Pugin, see R. O'Donnell, 'The Architecture of the London Oratory Churches', in Michael Napier & Alistair Laing (eds.), *The London Oratory Centenary 1884–1984*, London 1984, 21–47.
  - 22 *Tablet*, 1852, 803.
  - 23 *Builder*, 1857, 619; *Building News*, 1858, 202.
  - 24 The sale of 'St Mary's Chapel, school and chapter house' on 19 July 1900 specified that the site be cleared by 25 December [London, Guildhall Library, SE 581.3, Sale Catalogues 1900, fol. 63].
  - 25 *Builder*, LXXV, 25 November 1899, illustration between pp. 488 and 490.
  - 26 The phrase surprisingly of Pugin's patron Dr Walsh [Canon E. Buscot, *History of Cotton College*, 1940, 143–4].
  - 27 Francis George Tull, *South from the Moor: the story of St Mary Moorfields*, Ashford, 1975.
  - 28 The two standing angels holding holy water stoups at St Patrick, Soho Square, are said to come from Moorfields.