

The Church of St Augustine and its Builders Anniversary Address 1991

by

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The Church of St Augustine, Kilburn, has always held a special place among Victorian buildings. No one with any feeling for architecture can remain entirely unmoved by its cathedral-like spaces, its thoroughly worked-out assemblage of parts, and its soaring vaults. It is a work of genius. Despite this, only a sympathetic eye will acknowledge a mastery of carved detail. Fairly, the church may be said to combine severity with learning in its architectural character. This closely matches the attitudes of its builders, the members of the building committee as well as their architect, John Loughborough Pearson. He designed the church in 1870, and it was built in stages, the eastern parts including the crossing going up in 1871-2, the nave in 1876-8, and the steeple in 1897. The final stone was fixed in the December of that year, just a few days before Pearson died. Less known than such contemporaries as Butterfield and Street, he remains the hero of many devotees of Victorian church architecture, largely because of what he achieved here. The church is nevertheless something more than an architectural triumph. It is a solid reminder of social attitudes which are now almost beyond recall.

I first visited St Augustine's in 1966 as a Victorian postscript to a course in which Sir John Summerson taught his students about British architecture between 1500 and 1830. First, we went to Butterfield's All Saints', Margaret Street, which Summerson had long beforehand epitomized as ruthlessly ugly, indeed as a calculated assault on late Georgian taste.¹ We went on to Street's St Mary Magdalene, Paddington, a church compactly massed around its striking steeple, but let down by mouldings which, Sir John thought, looked as though they had been squeezed from a toothpaste tube. Then we came to St Augustine's. Here was real invention, yet strictly set within the canon of medieval precedent, unlike the examples of Street's and Butterfield's work. Gone was their stridency. Taste was clearly in the ascendant again, but never merely good taste despite the lifeless carving.

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It was a sign of the times that taste and style should play so great a part in our thoughts. Today architectural history is different. Yet, a few weeks ago, when attending the Royal Archaeological Institute's Summer Meeting, I heard one participant say to another that he did not expect to go to the Ancient Monuments Society's Annual General Meeting because it was going to be held in some woeful Victorian monstrosity. Those words were, of course, intended especially for my ears, and in jest—though I notice that the speaker is not present this afternoon. At all events, beauty and ugliness are not the issues they once were, and Victorian architecture is widely, if not universally, admired today.

At the time of my first visit, 1966, the social and economic reasons for building were, of course, topical points of investigation, even though they were not as well understood as they are today. Why people commissioned buildings and for what purposes were important. Maybe this was because, in the 1960s, there was a need to question that awesome architectural myth 'form follows function', and the Brutalist architecture which was apparently springing from an acceptance of it.

So far as Functionalism was concerned, we imagined, incorrectly, that the galleries here at St Augustine's were an architectural feature designed for aesthetic effect, not use. The Victorians had littered their designs with all kinds of decorative and stylistic superfluties which were condemned in the radical circles of the 1950s and '60s. Yet, at the same time, these very features were coming to be increasingly loved by the aesthetically avant-garde.

Since that first visit of mine twenty-five years ago, architectural history has passed through several more phases. I wonder who remembers the need to discuss architecture in the context of semiology, that shooting star of the 1970s. Incidentally, I truly believed for a complete half hour that semiology meant doing things by halves—so much for a classical education. Since then we have had deconstructivism—and I am not sure that I understand that any better.

Having just achieved the rare distinction of actually finishing A.S. Byatt's Booker Prize novel *Possession*, I realise that the analysis, if not the re-creation, of the past requires the detailed investigation of all kinds of minutiae, from all types of sources. Even without semiology and deconstructivism, the past is properly open to interpretation from whatever angle suits each particular historian.

In truth I have nothing to say about semiology here. So far as deconstructivism or, more simply, an architectural analysis of this amazing church goes, I shall leave that to your own powers of observation this afternoon. It is enough to say that, in its make-up, the exterior of the church has elements of Byland Abbey, which Pearson had known since his youth, combined with elements of Peterborough Cathedral and the churches of Normandy, particularly St Etienne at Caen, which he had visited in the 1850s. Similarly, the interior has a variety of features taken eclectically from many other medieval churches which Pearson also knew well. The internal buttressing comes from Albi Cathedral, of which Pearson had photographs in his collection, but the double aisles are related to those of St Barbara at what was then called Kutenberg, which had been published in the *Builder*. For the rest, you can always turn to my book, and I do not wish to add anything more to my analysis there.² The story of this church is nevertheless worth telling in more detail.



Fig. 1

St Peter's Home, Kilburn: the chapel, photographed early in this century, showing the ornate reredos and some of the wall painting

First the architect: Pearson was born in 1817, the son of William Pearson (1772–1849). The father was a Durham topographical artist who had followed Thomas Girtin with some success, recording, among other things, the picturesquely decayed architecture of Haughmond, Lilleshall and Wenlock Abbeys.³ The son grew into a reticent man, so I believed when I undertook my research into his career twenty years ago. From the start, he could captivate people by his intelligence and willingness to learn. This is evident in his relationship with his mentor, the Reverend George Townsend, a canon and prebendary of Durham Cathedral who, significantly for Pearson's future, was a self-styled Tractarian. For a while, Pearson served as a superintendent in Townsend's Sunday school, and probably had been a pupil there too.

I was originally unaware of Pearson's early brilliance, and believed that it was hidden beneath a self-effacing exterior. Recently, however, I have discovered that it was this particular quality which immediately impressed itself on the artist Clement Burlison, who, long afterwards, recalled the future architect when he was aged seven:

There was a short, stout old gentleman came to live next door to us [in New Elvet, Durham]. He was an artist, Pearson, by name; he had a wife, daughter and son; they were highly respectable people who had been unfortunate in many ways. Mr. Pearson was one of the old school. . . . His pictures were very like nature, but a little hard and mechanical in appearance. His son [John Loughborough Pearson] and I were great friends. He was a sharp clever boy, fond of acting and reciting. My brother George, who was with [the architect] Mr. Bonomi at the time, got him into his office to study architecture. That boy is now an eminent man in his profession and a Royal Academician. . . .⁴

In later years Pearson's family said that it was William Pearson who arranged for his son to work for Bonomi, a natural enough assumption, but Burlison's explanation sounds rather more plausible.

So it came about that, starting at the age of thirteen, the young Pearson learnt architecture, finally leaving Ignatius Bonomi's office in 1842. He went to London and superintended the construction of Philip Hardwick's New Hall at Lincoln's Inn. In 1843 he began his independent career by designing a small chapel for George Townsend. This was in an East Riding parish where Nonconformity was making headway. Here, over the next few years, Pearson built up the sound beginnings of his practice and endeared himself to a small body of clients with Tractarian High Church views. Before the 1840s were out, he had so much work that he had had to take on an assistant, Arthur Ebdon Johnson (1821-95), an architect who had also been employed by Philip Hardwick. Johnson worked on Pearson's church at Weybridge in Surrey, but he took on other commitments of his own and was to emigrate to Australia in 1852. This at least gave Pearson a free hand to concentrate on his highly successful first London church, the now demolished Holy Trinity in Bessborough Gardens, Westminster. This provided a perfect setting for Tractarian worship fully in accordance with the Puginian ideals embraced by the Ecclesiological Society. Nevertheless, it was rapidly to look very old-fashioned when set against Butterfield's All Saints', Margaret Street, which was started only a year or so later.

Pearson's second London church, St Peter's, Vauxhall, followed about ten years after this. It was far more important stylistically, and also to this story. Its style embraced many of Ruskin's precepts, which became popular in the 1850s, and consequently was explicitly foreign in many of its details. More importantly, St Peter's was entirely vaulted from end to end, and thus broke new ground in the development of Victorian church building. Despite this impressive feature, it was notably cheap, costing a mere £8000. This resulted from omitting much decoration, indeed so much that its 'baldness and almost brutality' were noticed in the press. This was not the over-bearing Brutalism of the 1960s, but, rather, a stripping-down of Gothic in much the same way as such neo-classicists as Soane had stripped down classicism.

St Augustine's was again to have the vaulting which Pearson had begun to use with such assurance at St Peter's, although with far greater complexity. On the other hand, it was not to have the baldness, as you can see. Plenty of money was available. Yet it was not a very expensive church: its final cost, about £18,000 spread over twenty-five years, was under a half of what All Saints', Margaret Street, had cost after a decade of building works.

Far more links the two churches at Vauxhall and Kilburn than vaulting and stylistic comparisons. St Peter's, Vauxhall, was built for Robert Gregory, a benevolent High Churchman who endeavoured to ameliorate the terrible poverty of this part

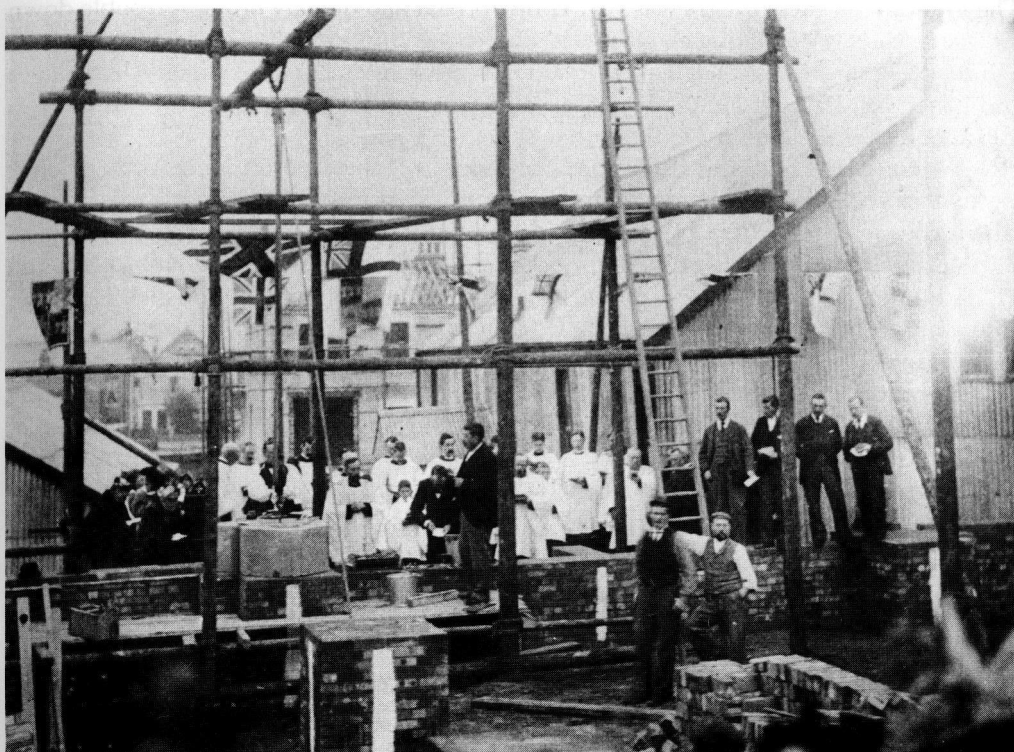


Fig. 2
We march, we march to Victory

of Lambeth by initiating a number of building works, with, once again, Pearson as the architect.

Following the closure of Vauxhall Gardens, noxious industries and slums had sprung up along the Thames and beneath the new railway arches. The prostitutes who had built up a successful trade in the Gardens could hardly support themselves now, let alone their unfortunate offspring. With Pearson's help, Gregory provided the physical solace of schools, which attempted to provide training and hence better prospects of employment for the local artisans, of a soup kitchen, which fed the desperately hungry, and an orphanage, which took in the numerous abandoned children. When the orphans grew up they might become pupil-teachers, just as some of their mothers were encouraged to do.

Helping Gregory in these projects were Benjamin Lancaster and his wife. He provided the money and management, she the inspiration. Mrs Lancaster founded a nursing order of sisters which she ran on the lines of a lay convent. The nursing sisters started as novices and took Holy Vows before going out into the world to nurse.

The founding of these orders was very controversial and quickly brought trouble down on their heads. People of greater piety than charity noticed that many of the sisters had started their professional lives in prostitution. Kinder souls called them Magdalenes and otherwise let well alone. Harsher souls wanted the wages of sin to be paid in full and raised a scandal for this purpose.

Worse, Mrs Lancaster also helped the children of these unfortunate women: 'Her method of receiving illegitimate children, sum down, no questions asked, entirely taken charge of for life, is facilitating vice' thundered a future Archbishop of Canterbury. Stern criticism was compounded by loose gossip. The children taken in 'no questions asked' were reputedly locked up in cages for some misdemeanours, according to the least charitable critics; in short, Charity wore a harsh mask within the confines of the home.

Despite its tribulations, so successful was St Peter's Home, as the Lancasters called their convent, that in 1867 it removed to larger premises in Mortimer Place, Kilburn. Here, the Lancasters bought a large house, formerly used by a Nonconformist missionary college. Pearson converted and enlarged it, with William Cubitt as contractor. The home sheltered the sick in four wards. As well as these wards, Pearson designed a handsome Italianate chapel for it, with frescoes, rather like those which you can see here, covering the walls (Fig. 1). Holy Eucharist was celebrated there for the first time early in 1870. That year the Lancasters purchased the neighbouring house and it was joined to the first and similarly converted. The gardens were laid out under Pearson's supervision, so welfare was served in all kinds of ways. By 1873 a hundred souls were sheltering there.

As for the novices, once trained, they went all over the world to nurse and spread the Word. Korea was a favoured land for their efforts, and remained so until war put a stop to it all in 1950. St Peter's Home itself continued until a flying bomb destroyed it in 1944. The torch then passed to a daughter house which had been established at Woking some sixty years beforehand, and this carried on the charitable works until the 1980s.

Whatever the face of charity, spirituality was served by the chapel at the new home. It was in the care of Father Richard Carr Kirkpatrick, who was the curate of Kilburn parish church. He provided the immediate cause of the building of the church in which you are now seated.

He was a Tractarian, like Gregory, the Lancasters and most of Pearson's other clients. When a new vicar of decidedly low church views was appointed to Kilburn church, it soon became clear that compromise between him and his curate was impossible. Kirkpatrick walked out with much of the congregation, certainly the wealthier part of it, and formed a new District with Tractarian ritual as its objective.

A building committee was immediately formed and this started to look for an architect. It considered Street, but felt that he was 'too much occupied to be able to give his personal attention'. Brooks and Withers were also on the agenda, but Benjamin Lancaster strongly recommended Pearson, who won the day. The committee asked for a church which would seat 1000 and cost no more than £10,000, exclusive of a steeple.

Planning started in June 1870, the site was procured in July, and all the main



Fig. 3
St Augustine's, Kilburn: the nave

features of the church had been agreed by December. It would cost rather more than anticipated, but would hold more people and could be built in stages. Benjamin Lancaster agreed to pay the extra cost personally. On 23 January 1871 Pearson wrote to his friend and fellow architect Gilbert Scott 'I am going to build a brick church at Kilburn and all groined but on an exciting new plan. It will have a gallery all round treated as a triforium and clerestory combined'.

At first the services were conducted in an iron church, but this was only a temporary expedient. In July came the ceremony of laying the foundation stone. Frederick, sixth Earl Beauchamp performed this symbolic act. He was a prominent Tractarian who had already helped to found Keble College, Oxford. The stone laid, Pearson, the members of the building committee and the building contractor—Colls and Son—paraded round the site, singing 'We march, we march to Victory' (Fig. 2).

The eastern parts rapidly went up at a cost of some £5300, and included the south transept and its morning chapel as well as the chancel. They were opened in June 1872. Fitting-out followed, with Thomas Nicholls doing much of the carving. By 1876, the committee was ready to build the nave. Colls's tender was too high, and in the end the work was undertaken by Messrs Booth instead. Lord Beauchamp laid a second foundation stone on 27 May, and in the November of the following year the nave was opened (Fig. 3).

Now the church could accommodate well over 1200, since it had been built with one more bay than the four originally planned. The galleries themselves could take 250, although the *Church Builder* had written that it was 'inclined to think the north transept of little congregational use, and the triforia of still less'. In fact the galleries were used by the convent sisters and their infant wards, all discreetly kept a distance. The division was not the only way in which the temptations of the flesh were reduced. The nave seating was itself divided down the middle, just as now, with one side devoted to the male congregation, the other to the female. I shall not ask you to re-order yourselves.

More decorative works followed, including the stone screen, which Pearson designed and Nicholls not only carved but also paid for (Fig. 4). In April 1888 Pearson wrote to the committee, saying:

'I am anxious that the decoration of the large plain brick surfaces of the walls inside the church should be proceeded with and in the way I contemplated in the first instance. It is also desirable that floors more worthy of the church should replace the present ones in the chancel and Sanctuary and that more painted glass be introduced in the clerestory windows, that the transept windows should also have painted glass and more especially should the large rose window at the West End and the lancets below be enriched in this manner . . .'

These works were then put into effect, Clayton and Bell doing the glass. Pearson designed the new marble floors in the Early Christian style which he had travelled to Rome in 1874 particularly to see at first hand. These were his personal gift to the church.

The painting was partly inspired by the same journey. Pearson had seen the frescoes at Assisi on his Italian journey and wanted a similar effect at Kilburn. The overall design is therefore his. Indeed, the Building Committee Minute Book says that in 1890 he was asked 'to provide the design to decorate the walls of the chapel'.



Fig. 4

St Augustine's, Kilburn: the chancel seen through the Nicholls screen

Although he provided a design scheme for all the walls, the chapel included, the detail must have been left to John Richard Clayton (1827–1913), who executed the wall paintings. The work continued from 1888 until 1893 at least. The painting of the north transept and part of the apse of the chapel was paid for by the Royal Academy. One consequence of the painting was that it necessitated the exchange of the original gas lighting for electric, thus ensuring that fumes would not spoil the gold ground.

With all the works completed in 1894, Pearson wrote, not for the first time, about the construction of the upper part of the tower and the spire. At last the committee were willing to countenance the work, even though the cost had risen from £3500 to around £6000 since it was first mooted. It was finally put in hand in March 1897, with John Shillitoe, the builder of Pearson's Truro Cathedral, as contractor.

The Lancasters never lived long enough to see all this finished, nor did Lord Beauchamp. But Gregory survived until 1911, and so did Kirkpatrick. He took part in the ceremony when the steeple was topped-out in December 1897. By all accounts, this was a remarkable event. Kirkpatrick, cassocked and surpliced, was hoisted up in a cradle to affix, symbolically, the pinnacle of his service to the Lord at the top of the spire. Pearson, weak and within days of death, was greatly cheered to hear that his masterpiece was at last complete, so the occasion was symbolic twice over.

That, then, is the story of how St Augustine's was built. None of this has the quality of romance which wins Booker Prizes, but I do not have the advantage of being the inventor of my source material. I hope you have found it a worthwhile attempt at re-creating the past, all the same. History should not be invention, and possibly it should not be re-creation either. But we do still have among us some of the buildings which figure in this story, and their origin is not just a story of bricks and mortar. These buildings certainly include the most pleasing ones aesthetically, though not all of the ones which were central to the lives I have described. Some of Gregory's school buildings survive at Vauxhall and so does the orphanage, but none is in its original use. St Peter's church has been re-ordered, and is also used as an art centre. Despite an attempt to drive a road through it in the 1960s, it is safe and protected by law. St Peter's Home has gone, as I have said, but St Augustine's is still here and still used, even though Tractarianism is in abeyance and re-ordering has brought a new altar to the nave. These architectural remains go some way towards verifying what I have told you. They give some indication of Pearson's genius, but they cannot bring Gregory, the Lancasters and Kirkpatrick to life, let alone the generations of nuns. They and the complex strands of Victorian society which motivated them and which they reacted against are all dead and beyond recapture.

As a postscript to this story, when Mrs Lancaster died in 1882, Benjamin Lancaster gave the money to build a new home for incurables at Woking in Surrey. Pearson designed its main buildings and they were completed in stages between 1885 and 1889 (Fig. 5). Known as St Peter's Convent, it also housed the remaining nuns after their London home was bombed and, indeed, until its recent closure. When I was finishing my research on Pearson twenty years ago, I was entertained by two of the last nuns and given lunch. After offering thanks for what we were about to receive, I tackled sad mash and sadder plaice, dried to a leathery hardness by weeks of standing in a warm oven, waiting for a visitor to the refectory table. The nuns



Fig. 5

St Peter's Convent,
Woking: the chapel,
Pearson's last design. A
baldachino was originally
planned like this one for
St Augustine's before the
reredos was executed
instead

were similarly distinguishable, a dying breed, pale and emaciated, shrouded in black veils, as dry, pallid and cheerless as their lives appeared to be to an outside observer.

No sign of their predecessors' existences was anywhere to be seen. To be precise, I had not gone to find evidence of this sort, for my purposes were those of an old-style architectural historian. My researches for a doctoral thesis were now all but complete. As I knew, it was for this convent, after Lancaster had died and already in the last year of his own life, that Pearson had designed a new chapel. It was to be a marvellous example of his abilities, unimpaired even in his eightieth year. As his last design, it was only built after his death, superintended by his architect son, Frank Loughborough Pearson. It is well worth a visit, so do go.

That was my objective. But, naturally, I looked at the few remaining nuns tending the old ladies and gentlemen lying quietly in the sun; I tried to imagine the younger ladies of pleasure who had tended the rather more sprightly gentlemen who went to Vauxhall Gardens, now all gone; I tried to imagine the very different Tractarian

passions which had also brought all these buildings into existence; I tried to imagine the nuns in Korea—were they pallid too, or did they, by contrast, live out of doors and have rosy cheeks?—but all that came to my mind was that in those days they spelt it Corea with a C.

NOTES

1. Summerson, J., 'William Butterfield', *Heavenly Mansions*, ch. 8, New York and London: W.W. Norton (1963).
2. Quiney, A.P., *John Loughborough Pearson*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press (1979). Nearly all the remainder of my sources are already credited here, and I shall not refer to them individually.
3. Tonkin, M., 'William and John Pearson, some mysteries solved', *The Old Water-Colour Society's Club*, 58 (1983), 27-40.
4. Burlison, C., *The early life of Clement Burlison, artist*, Durham: J.H. Veitch and Sons (1914), 18-20.