

IRISH GEORGIAN SOCIETY

Ireland's Architectural Heritage Society

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Presented by: Donough Cahill, Deputy Director IGS

An Bord Pleanála Oral Hearing, Midleton Park Hotel, Midleton, Co. Cork Re. Proposed alterations to St. Colman's Cathedral, Cobh, Co. Cork

I am here as a representative of the Irish Georgian Society, Ireland's Architectural Heritage Society. The Society is an independent charitable organisation with a membership of 2,700 whose interest in this planning application is concerned solely with conservation issues.

I wish to focus on these issues by briefly discussing the significance of St. Colman's cathedral and to then outline the Society concerns about the impact of the proposed works.

There are four great Gothic revival cathedrals in Ireland:

- 3 Catholic: Armagh, Killarney and St. Colman's cathedral
- 1 Church of Ireland: St. Finbar's in Cork

Killarney cathedral was radically altered in the early 1970's with the removal of the Victorian high altar and choir stalls and also the removal of plasterwork to expose stone walls underneath. Armagh cathedral was altered in the early 1980's with the partial destruction of marble, mosaic, stained glass and frescoe works designed by Ashlin.

Cork city and county share the two remaining unaltered great gothic revival cathedrals, St. Finbar's and St. Colman's. If permission is granted for this planing application, St. Finbar's in Cork city, designed by William Burges, would remain as the only one of the four great cathedrals to retain its architectural and decorative integrity intact.

In the Society's appeal to the Bord, we described the chancel as an outstanding example of High Victorian design by some of the leading ecclesiastical craftsmen of the period. Its marble high altar was designed by Ashlin and executed by Early and Powell; the windows, illustrating the life of Christ, were made by Hardman, an ecclesiastical specialist, and also by Cox and Buckley; the richly carved oak screens were produced in the Gothic style by Beakey; the mosaics at the high altar were created by the Venetian craftsman Ludwig Oppenheimer who also laid down the mosaics on the floor of the chancel; the altar rails were made by Pat John Scannell of Cork with the brass gates by Messrs. McLoughlin of Dublin.

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Collectively these elements comprise an ensemble of bespoke craftworks created by a range of skilled specialist workshops working under the overall guidance of the architect and client. They contribute to a masterwork of high Victorian Gothic revival design and craftsmanship which the proposed reordering would radically alter.

As proposed, the works would extend the sanctuary out into the nave thereby doubling its floor area. This would necessitate the removal of the marble altar rails and gates which would be partially relocated but with 50% of the rails going into storage. The mosaic panelling lying to the east of the rails would be partially covered by the extended sanctuary with the remaining panels removed into storage. The removal and relocation of further knotted mosaic work in the transepts would also be required. Significantly, the relocation westward of Oppenheimer's monogram is also proposed.

Collectively these invasive works would greatly diminish the integrity of the chancel which was laid out during much of the build period of the cathedral. In turn, these works would also compromise the integrity of the cathedral as a whole. There can be no justification of this from a conservation perspective.

Of very great concern is the vagueness of the methodology proposed for the removal and relocation of the mosaics. The consultants for this work have clearly stated that though the removal of mosaics from lime based mortars is a well established practice, the removal of mosaics from cement bases has proved unsuccessful. Other than adopting a cautious approach, what reason is there to expect that the removal of the mosaics in St. Colman's will be successful?

In summary, the Irish Georgian Society is of the opinion that the proposed reordering of St. Colman's cathedral would very significantly undermine the architectural and decorative integrity of the building and that such invasive works should not be granted planning permission.