

## St Patrick's (R C) Cathedral, Armagh



This is a most curious example of a very important building which changes architect, and architectural style, half way up the walls. The bottom half was designed in 1838, in the English Perpendicular Gothic style, by Thomas Duff of Newry; the top half designed in 1853, in the French Decorated Gothic style, by J. J. McCarthy of Dublin. And just to complicate matters, the interior decor, applied to the conflicting structures of these two architects, is in part to the 1904 designs of Ashlin & Coleman of Dublin, in part to the 1972 designs of McCormick, Tracey and Mullarkey of Londonderry.

The result, unsurprisingly, is a disappointing muddle, quite lacking in the unity and integrity to be expected in a building of such importance (though Father Coleman, in 1900, surprisingly, thought that "the whole structure ... shows a striking unity of design"). Of course many other cathedrals have grown and changed over long spans of years and changes of mastermind; but it makes an instructive contrast with its English counterpart, Westminster Cathedral, built to the designs of J F Bentley for Cardinal Vaughan between 1894 and 1903.

It is interesting that on 3 February, 1840, the Building Committee, "His Grace the Primate in the Chair, resolved unanimously that Mr. Duff be appointed our architect; and resolved, that Mr. Duff is to receive five per cent of the full amount expended on the building of the cathedral for his superintendence of the work, and that he will give the Committee one per cent as his subscription thereto". Galloway suggests that his success at the Roman Catholic cathedral of St Patrick and St Colman in Newry, dedicated in 1829, "probably led to the commission to design the cathedral at Armagh". Unlike his former partner, Thomas Jackson, Duff was himself a Roman Catholic. According to the 1905 Guide, in Duff's lifetime "34 feet of the walls were built for £26,000, Dr Crolly himself personally supervising the work with the assistance of several foremen".

The explanation for the original change of style is that building was interrupted in 1844 by famine and cholera; Duff himself died in 1848; it was only in 1853 that a new Building Committee settled with his widow for £100 cash down, and the return of all drawings and papers relating to the commission. Work under the new architect did not actually begin until 1854. McCarthy had attacked Duff's work in the Irish Catholic Magazine in 1847, but he was stuck with the ground-plan, as the walls had reached the tops of the aisle windows, but without tracery. "He completely changed the appearance of Duff's design by getting rid of the pinnacles on the buttresses, the battlemented

parapets on nave and aisles, and by making the pitch of the roof steeper" (Sheehy); also by introducing flowing tracery and numerous carved details. Maurice Craig comments, dryly, "Characteristically, he altered the style from Perpendicular to Decorated, so that the spectator must support the absurdity of "fourteenth-century" works standing on top of "sixteenth-century" (except for the tracery which was harmonised); but in most ways it is a very successful building". It was dedicated in 1873.

The sacristy, synod hall, grand entrance, gates and sacristan's lodge were built later (Galloway says, sexton's lodge and gateway in 1887, sacristy and synod hall between 1894 and 1897), to the designs of William Hague, and he was "engaged on the designs for the great rood screen behind the high altar when he died in March, 1899. Mr. Hague's work was taken up by Mr. McNamara of Dublin who subsequently superintended the designing and building of the rood screen, the beautiful Celtic tracery of the mosaic passages and floors, and the complex heating and ventilating system". Further very extensive interior work was undertaken between 1900 and 1905 for Archbishop Logue to the designs of Ashlin & Coleman of Dublin. The cathedral was re-consecrated in 1903. A great deal of this excellent work has been removed.

St Patrick's cathedral, with its twin spires, stands tall on its hill-top, successfully out-soaring its squatter Protestant rival on the opposite hill. It looks its best from a distance, approached over the drumlin country to south and west, reminiscent, when the light is right, of the twin spires of Chartres dominating the rolling plain of the Ile de France. Stephen Gwynn wrote of it in 1906: "Today Ireland is full of churches, all of them built within a hundred years - and almost every church, let it be clearly understood, is crowded to the limit of its capacity with worshippers. But here at Armagh is the greatest monument of all - planted as if in defiance so as to dominate the country round and outface that older building on the lesser summit: the costliest church that has been erected within living memory in Ireland; and not that only. **It is in good truth a monument not of generous wealth (like the two great cathedrals of Christ Church and St. Patrick's in Dublin) but of devoted poverty: the gift not of an individual but of a race, out of money won laboriously by the Catholic Irish at home and in the far ends of the world ...** So viewed, I question whether modern Christianity can show anything more glorious: yet in other aspects the new St. Patrick's Cathedral must sadden the beholder. The stone of which it is hewn, as the money that paid for the hewing, is Irish: but the ideas which shaped the fabric are pure Italian..."

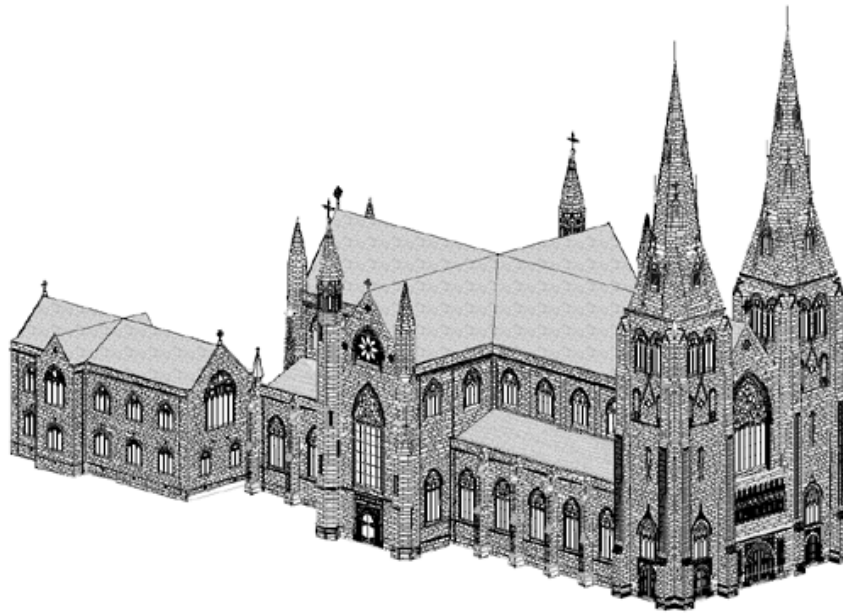
Externally, its best features are the twin broached spires, the great traceried seven-light west window, and the arcade with the eleven apostles above the central porch. **Internally, its best feature is now the very high hammer-beam roof with a winged angel at each angle. Formerly, it was the marvellous lacy and frothy high altar, screen pulpit and rails of white Caen stone, all the work of Ashlin & Coleman; but these were unhappily ripped out and simply discarded in the re-ordering after Vatican II: two of the beautifully-carved crockets stand on my window-ledge to this day, having been rescued from the dump by the late Kenneth Adams. This was justified at the time on the grounds that "the fine character of the interior was marred by the later introduction of screens, elaborate altar rails and pulpit": and what the architects set out to achieve was "a return to JJ McCarthy's original concept ... They recommended a simplification of the interior, which would also add a greater formality to ceremony".** If these were the objectives, few people think they have been successfully achieved. The new fittings already appear dated, and are utterly incongruous. "Neither the quality of the replacements nor the skill of the craftsmanship can disguise the total alienation of the new work from the spirit and meaning that was McCarthy's ecclesiological and architectural inspiration. In this setting, these modern intrusions appear dispassionate and irrelevant" (UAHS, 1992). Jeanne

Sheehy acidly records "the replacement ... of a fine late Gothic revival chancel with chunks of granite and a tabernacle that looks like a microwave". It is hard to divine why the church in Ireland has proved to be so much more insensitive in such matters than in most other countries.

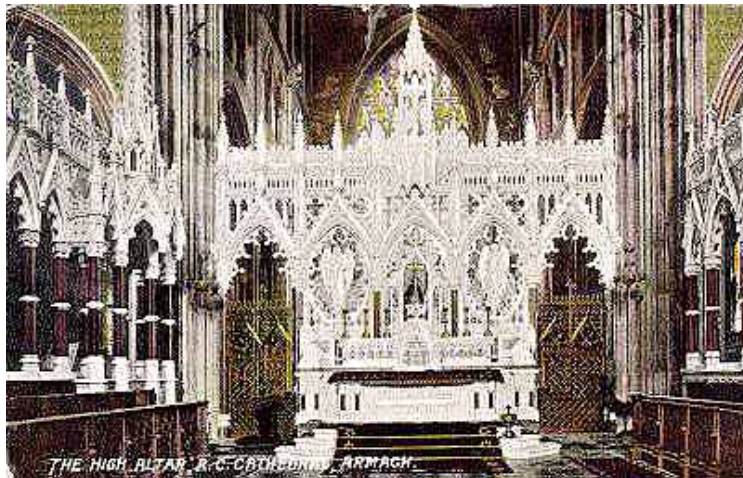
**Below is a description of St. Patrick's Cathedral by a visitor.**

"It has a very impressive situation and as a building is much more visually pleasing. Inside it was packed; I had wandered into Morning Mass. Once the gathered had begun to depart I started to look around the Cathedral which is beautifully decorated with mosaics on every surface (ceiling, walls, pillars, floor - everywhere!). The altar looks like a pagan sacrificial monument and seems hugely out of place in an otherwise fairly traditional church".





Drawing of St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Cathedral, Armagh.



The beautiful sanctuary of the Roman Catholic cathedral before it was destroyed in a so called restoration in the early 1980's. Some of the Italian marble was unceremoniously dumped!