

**Ordered Spaces, Separate Spheres:**  
Women and the Building of British Convents,  
1829-1939

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*I, Kate Jordan confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.*

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# Abstract

Over the last forty years, feminist discourses have made considerable impact on the way that we understand women's historical agency. Linda Nochlin's question, 'why have there been no great women artists' challenged assumptions about the way we consider women in art history and Amanda Vickery brought to the fore questions of women's authority within 'separate spheres' ideology. The paucity of research on women's historical contributions to architecture, however, is a gap that misrepresents their significant roles.

This thesis explores a hitherto overlooked group of buildings designed by and for women; nineteenth and twentieth century English convents. Many of these sites were built according to the rules of communities whose ministries extended beyond contemplative prayer and into the wider community, requiring spaces that allowed lay-women to live and work within the convent walls but without disrupting the real and imagined fabric of monastic traditions - spaces that were able to synthesise contemporary domestic, industrial and institutional architecture with the medieval cloister. The demanding specifications for these highly innovative and complex spaces were drawn up, overwhelmingly, by nuns.

While convents might be read as spaces which operated at the interstices between different architectures, I will argue they were instead conceived as sites that performed varying and contradictory functions simultaneously. To understand this paradox my reading draws on feminist theology, exploring in particular the question of women's role in mysticism. I suggest that the decline of mysticism as a formal theology and its retreat into the private sphere allowed it to be marshalled by women as an organising principal for constructing real and imaginary spaces - those which not only accommodated but actively embraced discordant ideologies.

The thesis makes a close reading of seven Roman Catholic religious communities, each representing different vocations and devotional cultures. In so doing the study explores not only women's localised roles in architecture but also in the emergence of an 'international' Catholic aesthetic.

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## List of Abbreviations

The Sisters of the Good Shepherd	<b>GSS</b>
The Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge	<b>OLC</b>
The Society of the Sacred Heart	<b>RCSJ</b>
The Religious Sisters of Mercy	<b>RSM</b>
The Society of the Holy Child Jesus	<b>SHCJ</b>
The Poor Servants of the Mother of God	<b>SM</b>
Society of Jesus (Jesuits)	<b>SJ</b>

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## PROLOGUE

St Mary's convent in Roehampton is an unprepossessing site: a late Victorian Gothic Revival building designed by a little known Roman Catholic architect, with a cumbersome care home appended, somewhat parasitically, in the 1980s. It has mastered the art of hiding in plain sight - unlike the stately convents of wealthy religious communities, it does not need high walls to protect its privacy. It renders itself unseen by virtue of its clumsy unloveliness.

Inside the sisters' residential building, little remains of its architecturally unassuming past. Some original doors, some decorative plaster cornicing and mouldings, a few simple stained-glass windows and some timber panelling remind the visitor that, despite the joyless interventions of fire regulations and health and safety requirements, this is a Victorian building.

Nothing of the space appears, to use the antiseptic language of conservation, to possess any 'architectural merit'. An oddly positioned, leaded window in a small room on the first floor, however, looks out over something unexpected - a huge, full height internal chapel complete with High Altar, columns and a vaulted ceiling. I ask my guide, Sister Joseph, why the window looks out onto the chapel and am told that the room we stand in was once the infirmary and that the window was designed so that the sick and

dying could be brought to it, to listen to Mass. Immediately it is clear to me that everything about this building has been constructed, adapted and maintained in the service of God. Even, I realise, its unloveliness is an expression of humble devotion.

As I prepare to leave, Sister Joseph asks if I would like to see a painting that has great meaning and importance to the sisters but that puzzles them. I am intrigued. We enter the tiny lift that takes us to the top of the building and walk a short way along the landing to where we find the picture, not mounted as I had expected but propped, self-effacingly, against a wall. I am both disappointed and a little surprised - it is an amateur oil painting of Mary Magdalene in modern (perhaps 1960s) attire, looking up in an attitude of supplication. Sr Joseph tells me that it was painted by the late Sr Mary Southworth, a prolific painter who produced works on a wide variety of subjects. This picture, however, is special - from time to time it is taken down into the chapel and the sisters spend time looking at it and thinking about what it means.

After I leave, I spend the afternoon thinking about the building I have just seen and how I am going to write about it but most of all I think about Sr Mary Southworth's painting of Mary Magdalene. I spend much of the following three years thinking about the painting.



## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION



**Figure 1** Penitents and sisters outside St Mary's Convent in Streatham. Source: Reproduced by permission of the Generalate of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God

*'For the exterior labour of poor hands derives  
all its value from our interior life'<sup>1</sup>*

Mother Magdalen Taylor SMG

---

<sup>1</sup> Rule and Constitutions 1892, SMG Archive ref II/C/6, Rule 71

This thesis began life as a broad exploration of the ways that women are and might be better represented in architectural history. The decision to use convents - buildings designed for the exclusive use of women - as sites for examining these questions arose out of a masters dissertation in architectural conservation, in which I made a close reading of the former St Marye's convent in Portslade, Sussex. I shortly discovered that very little had been published on this building type and that I would have to rely on convent archives in sourcing sufficient material to build a picture of their design, construction and use. This has had the decided advantage of ensuring that the emphasis of this study is placed firmly on women's voices as a counterpoint to the traditional narratives of religious architecture. I do not offer an objective picture of convent-building in this thesis - instead I illuminate one set of stories and in doing so, hope to cast reflected light on many others.

In recounting a history through the past and present voices of women who made convents, it has been important to listen to what they were saying - an objective which was, though seemingly obvious, initially hampered by my own assumptions and the ambitions of my research. Though I thought I was listening, with hindsight I can see that all too often I was interrupting and finishing sentences. What began as an uncomplicated feminist reading of architecture has gradually evolved into a more sensitive account of the space in which I have positioned theology at the heart of my analysis - an approach which understands the sisters own interpretation of their buildings and allows their voices to be louder than mine.

From the countless, as yet, untold narratives, I have chosen to focus on Roman Catholic convents in England built between 1829 (the beginning of Roman Catholic emancipation in England) and 1939 – a date that represents a hiatus not simply for Roman Catholics but for the rest of Europe and much of the world. Beyond this near universal watershed however, the post-war years saw a marked break with tradition in Roman Catholic worship. It is not a coincidence that the gradual changes that were being wrought by the the Liturgical Movement on the continent over the first half of the twentieth century, accelerated sharply after the war as the Vatican drew together previously hostile nations under a unified and unifying church. In addition, the changes in Britain implemented by the post-war welfare state radically altered the way that social care was administered by nuns. The increase of secular facilities and the growing demands by the state to regulate convent homes meant that fewer and fewer women relied on women's communities to offer refuge and residential care. Women's religious communities, thereafter, changed forever.

This is not to say, however, that religious life was static during the 'long century' under examination in this thesis. Between 1829 and 1939 Roman Catholicism underwent transformative changes which saw the restoration of the Catholic Hierarchy in England, the first Vatican Council in which Papal Infallibility and the Immaculate Conception were declared dogma, the institution of Canon Law and the germinal moments of the Liturgical Movement in Britain. All of these developments were reflected in the changing face of European culture and society: the sharp incline towards the golden age of convent building at the turn of the twentieth century followed by a slow de-

cline in religious life, closely mirrored the social, religious and political transformation of Britain.

While, I have focused my research on religious life between Catholic emancipation and the outbreak of the second World War, I have included a case study from the early 1950s in order to contextualise the picture of continuity and change, modernity and tradition that characterises convent building. In addition I have touched on post-war changes in social care and the effect that these had on the fabric of convents. Moreover, much of my research has been drawn from informally gathered oral histories which allow vital insights into the way these were spaces were constructed and inhabited.

Although this study concentrates on convent life in Britain it has been impossible to separate this from religious culture in Ireland and continental Europe. Due to the early missionary work of religious orders and congregations such as the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), by the nineteenth century Roman Catholicism was already a truly international institution. However, its heart was firmly located in Rome and though local and vernacular traditions were important, the Vatican exerted a powerful influence on all aspects of Catholic culture. All of the orders that I will be considering had international houses by the mid-twentieth century and most were founded in continental Europe. This meant that, though they retained many elements of their cultural roots (the Good Shepherds, Our Lady of Charity and Society of the Sacred Heart were founded in France and the Sisters of Mercy were founded in Ireland) they blended these with the Roman/International Catholic style and English tastes/devotional cultures. In this study, only the Poor Servants of the Mother of God and the Society of the Holy Child Jesus

were founded in England and, without a host Catholic culture, they provide valuable counterpoints to the other orders. Moreover, because of the global reach of Roman Catholicism, it has been necessary to consider whether practices in Britain had parallels elsewhere and I have, therefore, looked at two examples of building programmes from continental Europe: the mid-nineteenth century construction of the Good Shepherd Mother House in Angers, France and a building project in Rome by the Pious Disciples of the Divine Master, from the mid-twentieth century. The latter gives a valuable example of the way that changing Roman Catholic theology (in this case, the Liturgical Movement) impacted on the way women perceived themselves and their relationship to art and design.

The case studies that I have selected are drawn from 'active' rather than 'enclosed' communities. 'Active' or 'apostolic' sisterhoods are those in which the sisters' vocation includes work outside the convent. Women take 'simple' as opposed to 'solemn' vows and belong to sisterhoods or congregations rather than religious orders. Apostolic congregations made up the large part of women's religious communities (both Anglican and Roman Catholic) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and their provision of education, nursing and social care significantly augmented those provided by the state and secular philanthropy. The architecture of apostolic congregations differs from that of 'enclosed' or 'contemplative' religious orders in a number of ways. Enclosed orders do not require spaces within the convent for the accommodation of lay people. This enables orders such as the Benedictines, Carmelites and Cistercians to utilise traditional monastic plans (in fact, although the term 'monastery' widely refers to the architecture of male communities it is properly used to describe the residential

buildings of enclosed orders of both men and women). Apostolic convents, however, had to be designed to accommodate a range of functions and this evolved through processes of trial and error as communities calibrated their vocations, charisms and identities - the architecture of simple-vowed women is dynamic by virtue of necessity and thus offered greater opportunities for women to engage in design.<sup>2</sup>

The case studies that I have selected were chosen to represent diversity in the vocations and the demographic of active communities; three were founded in France, two in England and one in Ireland. I have chosen two congregations that specialised solely in laundry and needlework, two that had mixed apostolates (undertaking teaching, social work, laundry work and nursing) and two that were dedicated to teaching. The two orders which were dedicated to laundry work are both 'semi-enclosed' orders. Women belonging to such orders took simple vows but lived in enclosed 'monasteries'. The lay women who lived within the curtilage of the monastery did so in separate buildings. The architecture of these communities is highly complex as it is designed to separate different groups, often using the same space at the same time.

The distinction between 'simple' and 'solemn' vowed women is significant not only to the themes of this thesis but also to the women themselves. The term 'nun' which is popularly used to describe any women who have taken religious vows, actually refers specifically to women in enclosed orders.

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<sup>2</sup> The term 'charism' is relatively modern and has been used increasingly since the Second Vatican Council to describe the particular spirituality, mission and vocations of religious communities. Though it would not have been used by many of the women that I will be discussing it is a useful descriptive shorthand. For a full discussion of the term and usage see M.S. Thompson, "'Charism' or 'Deep Story'?: Toward a Clearer Understanding of the Growth of Women's Religious Life in Nineteenth-Century America", paper given at the History of Women Religious of Britain and Ireland Conference, Chicago, June 1998.

Apostolic or simple-vowed women are known as sisters. Because my study focuses on simple-vowed women, I broadly use the term 'sister' but where I discuss consecrated women generically, I employ the widely-used term, 'women religious'.

It is, unfortunately, beyond the scope of my research to examine parallels with Anglo-Catholic convents, particularly refuges and magdalene institutions (convents that were dedicated to reformation of former prostitutes), which significantly out-numbered their Roman Catholic counterparts in the nineteenth century. This is a study that deserves attention but, since a good deal has been written about nineteenth-century Anglican art and architecture, it would seem timely to focus on Roman Catholicism – not only is there an absence of secondary literature on modern Roman Catholic convent art (despite the fact that nuns were prolific artists and patrons) but there is extremely little on the artistic output of the English Roman Catholic Church, itself. This is a significant oversight which, I hope, this thesis will go some way to addressing.

A final caveat is that while I include a brief history of male and female convent and monastic architecture in the introduction, this thesis was not the place to make close comparisons with male communities. Such a study has yet to be undertaken by scholars in any field and is long overdue - in particular, questions concerning the significance of corporate identities in male and female communities of the same order remain unanswered. I have included some material on a double-house founded in 1935 in Cockfosters, North London by the Belgian community of male and female Olivetan Benedictines but the practical limits of my research mean that I have only yet been able to scratch the surface of this extraordinary community.

The case studies have been selected and presented with the intention of highlighting the two distinct elements in convent building of aesthetics and function and they are framed by an investigation of the ways that informal theologies were able to reconcile these elements. Whilst I suggest that all of the communities in this study broadly attempted this reconciliation, I have not sought an over-arching methodology to provide a universal account of it - rather, I have drawn from a range of critical and theoretical approaches to feminism, theology, religious and architectural histories which I have engaged selectively. I have structured the thesis so that each chapter addresses one aspect of convent architecture and community life, offering a broad-sweep account drawn from my wider research, as context to a closer reading of case studies drawn from the standing architecture, archives and the accounts offered by sisters.

### **Use of archives and primary sources**

My quest for primary source material has been, in and of itself, an important part of my learning curve and provided valuable insights into convent life. One of the great advantages of studying women religious is that most orders have well-organised archives, many of which offer access to external researchers and some which employ professional archivists. This was a feature of religious communities that puzzled me. What kind of material was being stored and catalogued and why was it so important? And, of most



relevance to me, given that convents were by their very nature, constitutionally private spaces, why would lay and even secular researchers be welcome? The answer to the former, as I discovered to my advantage, is that communities tend to keep records of all aspects of religious and cultural activities as well as business transactions and personal correspondence. In addition, some of the communities were producing documents which drew heavily on archive material to support the cause for beatification of their foundress which would be (and, in fact, in one case subsequently has been) presented to the Pope for consideration.

The answer to the question of access was more complicated but seemed, above all, to be motivated by the sisters desire for their work and spirituality to be taken to and understood by a wider audience. This followed a 1994 directive from the Vatican which urged members of religious communities to protect their patrimony and use it to promote their charism and the missions of the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>3</sup> Though there is some sensitivity about certain issues (generally those related to refuge work) the sisters have been generous and supportive - their interest in my research has not been censorious or suspicious but instead unobtrusive, courteous and driven by scholarly curiosity.

Over the four year period of my doctoral research, I have had (to greater and lesser degrees) access to the holdings of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, The Sisters of Mercy (the archives in Birmingham and London), The

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<sup>3</sup> 'ARCHIVE MATERIAL: The school of history, PONTIFICAL COMMISSION FOR THE CULTURAL PATRIMONY OF THE CHURCH Rome, April 10, 1994 [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_commissions/pcchc/documents/rc\\_com\\_pcchc\\_19940410\\_religious-families\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_commissions/pcchc/documents/rc_com_pcchc_19940410_religious-families_en.html). 'The nature of the material is differentiated from place to place according to the specific physiognomy of the individual communities - whether inserted in social centers with particular pastoral functions or situated in a cloistered environment of solitude. It must, however, always be inventoried, gathered, ordered, studied and made accessible to those who want to deepen archive research.'

Society of the Sacred Heart, The Good Shepherd Sisters (from the archives in Kent and also the central archive in Angers, France), The Sisters of Our Lady of Charity and the Poor Servants of the Mother of God (from the archives in Brentford and in Rome). This was augmented by material from other orders including the Dominicans and the Pious Disciples of the Divine Master.

The archives of the first five orders provided an overview of each community's work and culture and offered vital insights into areas of commonality and divergence. To build a detailed picture of the relationship between Roman Catholic women religious and their buildings and of daily convent life, however, I made a close examination over a period of four years of material held in the archive of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God.

Written archive material included letters (both within the community and between sisters and trades-people, solicitors, architects and clergy), diaries, annals, internally published biographies and autobiographies, necrologies (books of obituaries) hymns, poems and spiritual notebooks. In addition I was able to view architectural plans, leases, bills of quantities and legal documents. These helped me to gain insights not only into the way that life operated within the community but also into encounters and negotiations outside the convent.

Of particular importance were the collections of photographs held in all of the archives. These were the most sensitive items to which I was allowed access and some of which I have not been permitted to reproduce. This sensitivity related, as mentioned earlier, almost entirely to representations of women in convent refuges, particularly those depicted at work in laundries. The reason generally provided for this reticence was on-going litiga-

tion by former residents of convent penitentiaries in sister communities in Ireland - it is certainly the case that some of these communities were uncomfortable with this particular feature of their past.

In addition to documents and photographs, the art and objects (both made and collected by women) offered a valuable way of reading the relationship between women religious and the spaces that they created and inhabited. In my visits to various convents belonging to different orders I was able to view such items as sketchbooks, prayer cards, easel paintings, murals, hand-embroidered vestments and altar cloths, banners, statues and furnishings - much of which provided evidence of the extraordinary skills that convent life enabled women to acquire. During the course of my research I visited a wide variety of convents and monasteries, the large majority in England but also in Italy, France, Ireland and Belgium - ranging from the pre-modern (sites that provided a historical context for post-emancipation convents), such as the thirteenth century Laycock Abbey in Wiltshire and the eleventh century Fontfroide Abbey in Narbonne to recently completed monastic sites such as the Bishop Edward King Chapel in Oxford designed in 2009 by Niall McLaughlin for the sisters of the Communities of St John the Baptist and the Good Shepherd: such buildings provided evidence of continuity in traditions and practices.

Beyond the convent, I have been given access to private collections of art and embroidery held at the Oxford Oratory church, Downside Abbey and Douai Abbey and to the 'miraculous' Mater Admirabilis fresco in the convent of the Sacred Heart in Rome. Collections such as the Stephen Welsh papers held by the RIBA archives, augmented, supported and sometimes contradicted material harvested from the convent archives.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the many and lengthy conversations that I have had with sisters, former lay residents, and archivists has provided me not only with material but also given me the means of understanding it.

### **Literature review**

As discussed, at the outset of my thesis, very little work had been produced on the architecture of English Convents. The last three years, however, has seen a growing body of research in the field of Roman Catholic architecture from the nineteenth century to the present day and specifically an increasing number of scholars exploring modern monastic architecture. This has expressed itself in both publications, conferences and research projects and has been a driving force behind my own thinking which has had to continually shift and respond to new scholarship.

While the dearth of secondary texts initially presented some difficulties in uncovering material, it has proved, in many ways, to be both advantageous and fruitful - it has meant that I have had to cast my net widely in search of material which would allow me to decipher these dense and complex spaces and have consequently drawn from a range of disciplines. Attempting to assemble a focused methodology from this motley selection of sources was a daunting prospect but one which I hope has allowed me to bring original perspectives to a scarcely considered and little understood building type.

Two seminal texts have guided my approach from the very beginning and throughout my thinking. These are Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space* published in 1974 and Amanda Vickery's 1993 'Golden age to separate spheres? A review of the categories and chronology of English women's history'.<sup>4</sup>

It was immediately clear to me that I would be unable to produce a history of women and architecture without re-imagining the discrete categories of patron, designer, builder and user and re-casting the process of construction in dialectical rather than technological or narrative terms. The reach of Lefebvre's work is difficult to overstate - his concept of space as a social product has influenced not only art and architectural historians but, among many others, geographers, sociologists and anthropologists. The convent, simultaneously architecture and community, acts as a petri dish for examining Lefebvre's characterisation of space as a set of encounters between collective identity, patterns of use and the spatial imaginary. In the convent, behaviour was bound by a complex assembly of systems, beliefs and hierarchies and these are clearly inscribed in the built structures - both in their design and in the way that the buildings evolved and accreted. Moreover, as both a religious and a domestic site, the blurred distinction in the convent between actual and imagined space and the occupation of space by real and transcendent agents creates an additional 'phantom' dimension. It would be impossible to ascribe authorship of these buildings to an individual and an architectural history of convents that attempted such would fall at the first hurdle.

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<sup>4</sup> H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Wiley, 1992. A. Vickery, 'From Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History'. *Historical Journal*, 1993, 36:2 383-414.

In the early stages of my research I had considered Bruno Latour and Michael Callon's Actor-network Theory as a critical tool for reading convents.<sup>5</sup> Actor-network Theory develops the idea of space as social product, proposing that objects can also be 'actors' within the social networks that shape systems and spaces - an approach which seemed to offer potentially creative ways of reading an architecture that was intricately bound not only to the particular inhabitants who occupied it but also to the material culture that was produced within it. The disadvantage of Actor-network theory, however, is that it precludes the possibility of systems being operated through individual or even collaborative agency and offers only the prospect of mapping a set of 'actor' relations. Since no 'actor' would carry more or less value than the other, this would have had the counter-productive effect of actively diminishing the role of women in convent building.

Women both individually and collectively shaped convents in ways that were, from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century, unprecedented and unmatched. The codified organisation of space within the convent responded not only to the practical and religious needs of these women but also to contemporary social standards. The literal 'separate spheres' of the convent corresponded closely (if unconventionally) with the imaginary separate spheres of Victorian culture, society and morality.

Amanda Vickery's challenge of separate spheres ideology as an organising principle provided the catalyst for my own interrogation of this theme. In her critique of the separate spheres category, she rightly highlights the instability of the term. What, she asks, did different women (or indeed men) mean

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<sup>5</sup> Latour, B. *Reassembling the Social: An introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, Oxford, OUP, 2007.

by the 'public' and 'private' sphere and did this change over time? While this thesis concurs with Vickery's wider points about the discrepancy between proscription and behaviour and the dangers of chronicling a narrative of emancipation and liberation, it suggests that the 'separate spheres' of Victorian literature has much to offer in providing insights into the way that women understood their role in society. Vickery cautions that, 'we should take care to discover whether our interpretation of public and private marries with that of the historical actors themselves'.<sup>6</sup> As the basis for exploring women's social and cultural self-image, this study examines the buildings that groups of women from across society (albeit under the auspices of overarching ideologies) constructed under their own impetus. These sites, my research will suggest, are themselves the voices of historical actors.

In revisiting separate spheres as a conceptual device, I do not attempt to generalise, reduce or simplify female experiences - indeed, it is important to emphasise that responses to separate spheres ideology shifted considerably over the period under examination in this study. I do not expect to extrapolate wide points about women's activity or women's response to cultural ideals but rather to present a case-study that suggests that for some women the construct of 'separate spheres' was sufficiently convincing to help define, organise and shape their communities. The examples offered by the numerous convents that I will examine offer a relatively consistent picture of the way in which women interpreted this ideology and as such reveal how prescriptive ideals were disseminated and received.

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<sup>6</sup> Vickery, p. 412.

From these two texts, emerged a nascent methodological approach that sought to explain how convent architecture could be at once the product of a matrix of social relations and the tightly-harmonised articulation of ideologies.

### **Religious sisterhoods in the nineteenth century**

Though little has been written specifically on the relationship between women religious and architecture, a growing number of historians have turned their attention to women's religious communities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Carmen Mangion and Barbara Walsh, for example, make detailed socio-historical readings of Catholic women religious in nineteenth century England and Wales and are among the first historians to emphasise the exceptional and unprecedented agency that these women exercised.<sup>7</sup> Susan O'Brien's work on the vital role of women in shaping communities has also been important. Of particular significance is her article 'Making Catholic Spaces: Women, Decor and Devotion in the English Catholic Church, 1840-1900' which explores the relationship between Roman Catholic women and the material culture of the church in the nine-

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<sup>7</sup> See C. Mangion, *Contested Identities: Catholic Women Religious in Nineteenth-Century England and Wales*, Manchester University Press, 2008. C. Mangion, 'The "Mixed Life": Balancing the Active with the Contemplative', in C. Mangion and L. Lux-Sterritt (eds) *Gender, Catholicism and Spirituality: Women and the Roman Catholic Church in Britain and Europe, 1200-1900*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. B. Walsh, *Roman Catholic Nuns in England and Wales 1800 – 1937: A Social History*, Irish Academic Press, 2002.



teenth century - a text which introduced to me the unique contribution that Cornelia Connelly made to the revival of English Catholic architecture and upon which much of my research has since focused.<sup>8</sup> Her current research into 'miraculous' objects and art has continued to inform and shape my thinking. Maria Luddy's work on penitentiaries in Ireland has been useful in helping me to construct a picture of the over-arching vocation and mission of the two French orders which feature as case studies in my thesis, the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge and The Good Shepherd Sisters, who established communities simultaneously in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland.<sup>9</sup> In addition, her reading of sexuality and correction in the nineteenth century, though confined to Ireland, shed light on methodological approaches to the subject which helped me define my own research objectives in the early stages of writing my thesis.

All of these scholars, among a number of others, have drawn extensively from Peter Hughes's 1985 doctoral thesis, 'Cleanliness and Godliness: a Sociological Study of the Good Shepherd Convent Refuges for the Social Reformation and Christian Conversion of Prostitutes and Convicted Women in Nineteenth Century Britain' which provides a detailed and highly focused analysis of the symbolic and actual relationship between morality and spirituality in the charism of the Good Shepherd Sisters. Hughes's painstaking research (drawn from material to which, as the Order's archivist, he had privileged and unmatched access) and nuanced reading of the sources continues to be influential and widely read by established and emerging

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<sup>8</sup> S. O'Brien 'Making Catholic Spaces: Women, Décor and Devotion in the Catholic Church, 1840 – 1900' in D.Wood (ed) *The Church and the Arts*, Blackwell, 1995.

<sup>9</sup> M. Luddy, *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. M. Luddy, *Prostitution and Irish Society, 1800-1940*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

scholars of women's religious communities. Though Hughes touches only briefly on the architecture of penitentiaries, his thesis introduced me to the fan-shaped configuration of Good Shepherd chapels - a feature which has been central to my hypotheses about the role of women religious in design and spatial planning. The broad sweep of my thesis owes a great debt to Hughes insightful and balanced assessment of Victorian attitudes towards spirituality, sexuality and correction.<sup>10</sup>

In the interests of scale, scope and theme, the case studies that I have selected are all Roman Catholic. However, it has been important to give consideration to the fact that the majority of female convent refuges in nineteenth-century England were run by Anglican sisterhoods. Though I have not focused on any of these, they have been significant to my arguments as there was considerable cultural and ideological exchange between the denominations - most frequently operated through the movement of converts. Historian Susan Mumm leads in the field of Anglican women's communities and her 1997 article, 'Making Space, Taking Space: Spatial Discomfort, Gender and Victorian Religion', continues to be the only published work to deal specifically with nineteenth-century English women religious and the politics of built space.<sup>11</sup> Art historian, Ayla Lepine's on-going research into the relationship between theology and the material culture of Anglican women's communities has been helpful in exploring the possibilities of cul-

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<sup>10</sup> P. Hughes, 'Cleanliness and Godliness: A Sociological Study of the Good Shepherd Convent Refuges', PhD Thesis, Brunel University, 1985.

<sup>11</sup> S. Mumm, 'Making Space, Taking Space: Spatial Discomfort, Gender and Victorian Religion' in K. Sayer (ed) *Victorian Space(s)*. Leeds Centre Working Papers in Victorian Studies, (8). Leeds, UK: University of Leeds. 2006. pp. 7-8. S. Mumm, *Stolen Daughters, Virgin Mothers: Anglican Sisterhoods in Victorian Britain*, London, Leicester University Press, 1999.

tural cross-fertilisation between Roman Catholics and Anglicans and in shaping my thoughts more widely.

Finally, though very little work has been produced on the art and material culture of British convents (indeed, very little has been produced on the art and material culture of British Roman Catholicism) a number of scholars have published research on the art and architecture of continental convents. Most notable among these is Helen Hills, whose exploration of female agency in the design, patronage and decoration of early modern Neapolitan convents, detailed in her 2004 monograph *The Invisible City: The Architecture of Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Neapolitan Convents* provides valuable insights into the way that gender, wealth and politics interacted to produce a distinctive aesthetic and building type.<sup>12</sup> More recently, in her 2011 doctoral thesis entitled 'Image, Authenticity and the Cult of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, 1897-1959', Sophia Deboick has produced an important study of the way that early techniques in photographic image-manipulation were marshalled to aid the cause for Thérèse of Lisieux's beatification. Deboick's research is significant in highlighting the increasingly internationalist and expansionist agenda of Roman Catholicism - the cult of St Therese was a global phenomenon that was stage-managed by the Vatican and generated a lucrative trade in mass-produced St Sulpician devotional art.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> H. Hills, *Invisible City: The Architecture of Devotion in Seventeenth-Century Neapolitan Convents*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004.

<sup>13</sup> S. Deboick, 'Image, authenticity and the cult of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, 1897-1959', PhD Thesis, University of Liverpool, 2011.

## Theology

The religious culture of women's communities informed every facet of convent life: from daily devotions to painting walls and must, as far as the sisters were concerned, be considered the single most important motivational force behind the creation of space. This thesis views the relationship between women religious and architecture through the lens of theology and in particular through the mystic spiritualities which found form in the later nineteenth century and are detailed in the taxonomies of mysticism produced by psychologist William James and theologian Evelyn Underhill.<sup>14</sup> Their major works; Hill's *Mysticism: A Study in Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (1911) and *The Essentials of Mysticism* (1920) and James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) provide a description of mystic spirituality that is articulated at an approximate mid-point of my time frame. The publications by both Underhill and James are a product of the blossoming, from the mid-nineteenth century, of mystic spirituality which was expressed in the ritual and devotional practices, art and culture of Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism and the emerging quasi-Christian movements of (among others) Spiritualism, Christian Science, Theosophy and Anthroposophy. Whilst it is not likely that either of these publications were widely read by women religious, it is clear that they describe a set of spiritual functions that would be recognisable to a broad spectrum of nineteenth to mid-twentieth century 'mystics'.

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<sup>14</sup> W. James. *Varieties of Religious Experience: a study in human nature*, New York, Longmans, Green and Co, 1917. E. Underhill, *The Essentials of Mysticism*, New York: Cosimo Inc., 2007.

Scholarship in the field of mystic theology from the last twenty years has challenged both James's and Underhill's analyses, querying the psychological and philosophical nature of mystic experience and ineffability and aiming to destabilise the set of a priori categories presented by James. Of significance to my research are those critiques that have emerged from feminist discourses.

### *Feminist theologies*

Nineteenth-century theology and separate spheres discourse have been brought into dialogue in recent feminist readings of Christian mysticism, particularly those by Caroline Walker Bynum and Grace Jantzen.<sup>15</sup>

Jantzen, writing in the 1990s identified a significant shift in the late twentieth century towards personal, interior spirituality – one which she suggested reflected the decline of the political and the rise of the 'self' in the age of post-feminism. In reaction to this, Jantzen presented a history of gender and Christian mysticism that sought to challenge readings of mysticism that ranged from the psychological investigations of the early twentieth century to the post-modernist and Derridean perspectives emerging from the late 1980s onwards. Jantzen suggested that the unproblematic focus on interiority in twentieth century readings of mysticism detracted from the political and intellectual integrity of medieval and counter-reformation women such as Hildegard of Bingen and Teresa of Avila, whose written works helped shape Christian theology. These women, Jantzen argued, had been co-

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<sup>15</sup> G. Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995. G. Jantzen 'Feminists, Philosophers and Mystics', *Hypatia* Vol. 9 (4), pp. 186-286, 1994. C. Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, London, UCLA Press, 1987

opted into the canon of Christian mysticism without a proper interrogation of the nature of their spirituality, which she claimed was characterised more by bodily and often erotised encounters rather than psychic ones.

For Jantzen, the term 'mysticism', although it offers a useful shorthand for the philosophers, visionaries and prophets whose personal spirituality stepped beyond mainstream theology, is problematic because it operates as an umbrella for too unwieldy a group of thinkers. She suggests that too many scholars continue to rely on the canon largely drawn in the early twentieth century by William James, Evelyn Underhill and W. R. Inge, in order to examine the nature of mysticism.<sup>16</sup> At the heart of Jantzen's critique is a desire to rescue female 'mystics' from the hinterland of interior and private spirituality. Importantly for this study, Jantzen suggests that women's spirituality turned from the public to the private at the same historical moment that separate spheres ideology began to gain purchase and that the relegation of women's spirituality to the private sphere was consolidated by the emergence of 'mysticism' as a branch of theology.

I suggest, however, that in rejecting interior spirituality as politically impotent, Jantzen misses the ways in which many nineteenth-century women drew on mystic texts and practiced interior contemplation in order to craft their own theologies, which would, in turn, provide the ideological framework for a range of public activities.

The emergence and rapid expansion of active sisterhoods in nineteenth-century England has been well documented.<sup>17</sup> Much less research has been undertaken on the development of spiritual vocations or charisms

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<sup>16</sup> W.R. Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, London, Methuen & Co., 1899.

<sup>17</sup> See C. Mangion, B. Walsh, S. O'Brien

which were often devised by the foundresses and written into the order's Rule. They combined directions on the practical operation of vocations such as refuge work, teaching and nursing with the spiritual justification for these works. Rules and constitutions seamlessly blended the pedestrian and mystical in ways that bewildered secular society and even some Catholic lay and clergy.

The guiding spiritual principle for many charisms were the mystic writings, in particular the constitutions and spiritual exercises, of Ignatius Loyola in the early sixteenth century. Loyola, who founded the Society of Jesus produced a collection of works that reimagined prayer through action as well as contemplation. Though his constitutions were largely intended for his own community they operated as the model for many subsequent orders. The Spiritual Exercises (five hours of prayer and contemplation daily for a period of 28-30 days) were used by religious of different orders but do not appear to have been widely practiced in the lay community – month long retreats being incompatible with the lives of most lay people.<sup>18</sup> The theological approach advocated in the Exercises known among the Jesuits as 'contemplative in action', provided the rationale for active orders and Ignatian spirituality helped to guide and shape the personal spirituality of many British and continental sisters.

While Ignatian spirituality formed the backbone of many women's religious cultures, it merged with a wide range of other influences, from Irish folkloric traditions to Eastern Orthodox devotions. Ideas were gathered and spread informally between houses and orders and gradually crystallised to form

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<sup>18</sup> *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. Elder Mullan, 1914 <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/seil/seil35.htm>

distinctive, personalised spiritualities that communicated the order's vocation and cultural identity.

Nineteenth and twentieth-century convent art and architecture, I propose, is the material expression of these vernacular spiritual cultures that began to emerge in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century – cultures which articulated themselves best through devotional labour rather than the written word.

## **Ecclesiastical and institutional architecture**

### *Convent design*

Of the small amount of material on convent design, Timothy Brittain-Catlin's doctoral thesis, 'A.W.N Pugin's English residential architecture in its context' and the subsequent article 'A.W.N Pugin's English Convent Plans' have been of most value to the development of my ideas and were vital in allowing me to unpick the significance of women religious in convent design - that I disagree with some of the conclusions that he draws from his astute reading of the architecture has helped shape my own arguments.<sup>19</sup> Roderick O'Donnell's work on the Pugins in the Midlands and in Ireland has also provided a valuable source of information on convent design in the first

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<sup>19</sup> T. Brittain-Catlin, 'A.W.N. Pugin's English Convent Plans' *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 65, No. 3, Sept., 2006. T. Brittain-Catlin, 'A.W.N. Pugin's Residential Architecture in its Context', PhD Thesis, Cambridge University, 2004.



years of Roman Catholic revival in England.<sup>20</sup> Importantly, both O'Donnell and Brittain-Catlin are active in shaping conservation strategies for nineteenth and twentieth-century convents which has animated the dynamic between scholarship and practice in the architectural history of these sites and invigorated current thinking in the field.

Further afield, Canadian architectural historian Tania Martin's 1997 'Housing the Grey Nuns: Power, Religion and Women in fin de siècle Montreal' makes a close architectural reading of the order's Mother House and examines the direct role that women played in its design through drawings and plans made by the nuns.<sup>21</sup> Martin's work demonstrates clear parallels between the activities of British women religious and those in Canada and suggests that the international programme of Roman Catholicism and its centralised administration allowed a similar range of possibilities for Roman Catholic women across the world. Indeed, further tentative enquiries that I have made into this area which are, unfortunately, beyond the remit of this thesis, suggest that British convent designs were replicated as far afield as Australia.

Very recent research by the American architectural historians, Barbara Mooney and Jessica Basciano, further indicates that Roman Catholicism allowed women across the world to influence the aesthetic and spatial design of convents. Basciano's reading of the massive Basilica of St Thérèse

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<sup>20</sup> R. O'Donnell, *The Pugins and the Catholic Midlands*, Gracewing Publications, 2002. R. O'Donnell, "'An Apology for the Revival': the architecture of the Catholic Revival in Britain and Ireland" in J. De Maeyer and L. Verpoest (eds.) *Gothic Revival. Religion, Architecture & Style in Western Europe, 1815-1914*, (KADOC- Artes 5, Universitaire Pers, Leuven, 2000), pp.35-48.

<sup>21</sup> T. Martin 'Sites of Prayer and Pilgrimage Within a Convent: The Architectural Manifestations of a Religious Vocation' in E. Smythe (ed.) *Changing Habits: Women's Religious Orders in Canada*, Novalis Publications, 2007, pp. 129-50. T. Martin, 'Housing the Grey Nuns: Power, Religion and Women in fin-de-siècle Montréal: Exploring Everyday Landscapes', *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*, 7, 1997. pp. 212-29.

in Lisieux, France (1929-54) finds that the community had complete control over the architectural style and building programme.<sup>22</sup> Mooney's work also suggests that women played a direct role in the selection of particular historicised motifs and style. Her analysis of St Benedict's convent in St Joseph, Minnesota designed in 1911 by George Stauduhar under the close direction of the community's Mother Superior, illustrates how significant the cultural roots of an order (in this case German) were in the production of monumental architecture.<sup>23</sup> Basciano's and Mooney's findings closely reflect my own on aesthetics and cultural sensitivity in expatriate communities - the archives and architecture of the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity, for example, strongly suggest that they were at pains to incorporate elements of their French heritage into the design of their convents in Britain and Ireland. Many of the sources that I have uncovered suggest a long tradition in Europe of women designing and even building their own convents - dating back to the seventh century saints, St Rusticula, Abbess of Arles and the German St Landrada who both undertook manual building work in the construction of their monasteries.<sup>24</sup> The archaeologist Roberta Gilchrist's examination of medieval enclosed orders presented in her 1994 *Gender and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Women Religious* has been formative in helping me to trace this heritage in England.<sup>25</sup> Her analysis of the original

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<sup>22</sup> J. Basciano, 'Sisterly Love in Lisieux: Building the Basilica of Sainte-Thérèse' in K. Jordan and A. Lepine (eds.) *Building the Kingdom: Architecture for Religious Communities*, London, Pickering and Chatto (forthcoming).

<sup>23</sup> B. Mooney, 'Prairie Progressivism: George P Stauduhar and St Benedict's Convent' in K. Jordan and A. Lepine (eds.) *Building the Kingdom: Architecture for Religious Communities*, London, Pickering and Chatto (forthcoming),

<sup>24</sup> J. T. Schulenberg, *Forgetful of their Sex: Female Sanctity and Society*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998 p. 84

<sup>25</sup> R. Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Religious Women*. London, New York, Routledge 1997.

plans and artwork at Laycock Abbey and the scope for women to shape their surroundings provides an important context within which to situate my reading of modern convents. Most significantly, however, Gilchrist employs Pierre Bourdieu's interpretation of habitus to make a reading of female agency and convent design. Here she suggests that we might read the role of medieval nuns in building enclosed convents as an act in which they exercise agency to shore-up a system that oppresses them as women.

Transposing Gilchrist's approach to modern convents might offer potentially exciting ways of understanding these spaces but whilst I refer to habitus, I have resisted the temptation to apply it thematically myself. Victorian convents belong to an age conspicuously shaped by prescriptive gender ideology and such a reading might have skewed the delicate balance between female authority and the subjugation of women by patriarchal social forces in favour of the latter - the inferences that I have drawn from archival evidence suggest a complicated picture of female agency but do not support an argument that convent architecture was broadly oppressive, either intentionally or inadvertently.

### *Roman Catholic architecture*

Until recently, Roman Catholic architecture in Britain has received little scholarly attention by comparison with Anglican architecture. Though much has been written on A.W.N. Pugin (notably Rosemary Hill's 2008 biography *God's Architect: Pugin and the Building of Romantic Britain*) there have been no major monographs on other noted Roman Catholic architects such as Edward Pugin or J.F. Bentley, that compare to architectural historian Michael Hall's 2014 biography of the Anglican architect G.F. Bodley and no

edited collections on Roman Catholic architecture of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>26</sup> Recent articles and volumes which have explored nineteenth-century churches have focused on Anglican sites - Michael Hall's, 'What do Victorian churches mean?' positions the Anglican architect William Butterfield at the centre of the Gothic Revival, eclipsed only by A.W.N. Pugin, while collections such as Andrew Saint and Chris Brooks's 1995 volume, *The Victorian Church: Architecture and Society*, features only one chapter that considers (although not exclusively) Roman Catholic architecture in England: the Jesuit scholar, Anthony Symondson's 'Theology, Worship and the Late Victorian Church'.<sup>27</sup>

This oversight might be accounted for by a smaller number of monumental sites in the English Roman Catholic church and a programme of building that was constrained by limited budgets. In addition the distinctive holistic approach that Anglican architects such as J. Ninian Comper, G. F. Bodley and J.D. Sedding took to the design of the building, art, textiles and furnishings offers wider, richer possibilities for reading these sites. The paucity of studies dedicated to Roman Catholic church building in England, however, falsely implies that this architecture was less inventive and cast a comparatively shallow influence. Moreover, the lack of integrated, cross-denominational research has missed the varied ways in which Roman Catholic and Anglican architecture was engaged in creative dialogue.

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<sup>26</sup> R. Hill, *God's Architect: Pugin and the Building of Modern Britain*, Yale, Yale University Press, 2008. M. Hall, *George Frederick Bodley and the Later Gothic Revival in Britain and America*, Yale, Yale University Press, 2015.

<sup>27</sup> M. Hall, 'What do Victorian Churches Mean? Symbolism and Sacramentalism in Anglican Church Architecture, 1850-1870', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 59.1 (March 2000) pp. 78-94. A. Saint & C. Brooks (eds.) *The Victorian Church: Architecture and Society*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1995.

There are signs, however, that Roman Catholic architecture is beginning to attract attention. Christopher Martin's, *A Glimpse of Heaven: Catholic Churches of England and Wales* published in 2009 by English Heritage is the first to chart Roman Catholic architecture in Britain.<sup>28</sup> Martin's spare history is clearly ancillary to Alex Ramsay's stunning photographs of sites ranging from the austere eighteenth century chapel at Lulworth castle to Frederick Gibberd's spectacular 1967 Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral. The emphasis on glossy images in this publication hints at English Heritage's ambition to raise broad awareness of the architectural significance of these sites - it is not a coincidence that *Glimpses of Heaven* was commissioned at approximately the same time that English Heritage began the Taking Stock project; a comprehensive survey of Roman Catholic churches in England and Wales designed to identify those sites that deserve recognition and protection.

Looking at later Roman Catholic church design in Britain, the architectural historian Robert Proctor's pioneering work, emerging from a major research project and leading to his 2014 volume *Building the Modern Church: Roman Catholic church architecture in Britain, 1955-1975* has enabled me to engage with new methodologies and approaches to the relationship between Roman Catholic theology and architecture. While Proctor's focus falls beyond the time frame of this thesis, it provides a valuable background to changing liturgical layout and how it responds to both the centralised politics of the Roman Catholic church and to the particular spiritualities of parishes and communities.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> C. Martin, *A Glimpse of Heaven: Catholic Churches of England and Wales*, English Heritage, 2006.

<sup>29</sup> R. Proctor, *Building the Modern Church: Roman Catholic Church Architecture in Britain, 1955-1975*, Aldershot, Ashgate Studies in Architecture, 2014.

Though *Glimpses of Heaven* features a section on abbeys, schools and seminaries, neither of these landmark volumes have included the institutional architecture or even chapels of convents. There is much work to be done in identifying, cataloguing and analysing the several hundred Roman Catholic convents and monasteries (many of which are under threat) in Britain.

### *Institutional and residential architecture*

Whilst Roman Catholic church building suggested aesthetic and cultural motifs for convent design, the practical functioning of the convent, particularly those which incorporated refuges and required sisters to be separated from lay women, demanded a different model. Much of my research has been dedicated to finding examples of buildings which operated in similar ways and might have suggested architectural patterns for modern convents. These potentially included workhouses, industrial buildings, orphanages, lunatic asylums and prisons (particularly panopticons, like Pentonville prison). Thomas Markus's 1993 *Buildings and Power: Freedom and Control in the Origin of Modern Building Types* provided a vital set of models for nineteenth century institutional and correctional buildings from which I was able to assemble a chronology by comparing the layout of sites from medieval hospitals and monasteries through to secular magdalen institutions and prisons and develop hypotheses about the evolution of modern convent architecture.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> T. Markus, *Buildings and Power: Freedom and Control in the Origin of Modern Building Types* Routledge, 1993.

The set of power relations which clearly shape the design and use of convent penitentiaries, suggest possibilities for a Foucauldian reading of the spaces. Whilst this does offer an interesting vantage point from which to view the architecture of convent refuges and penitentiaries, I have resisted making such a reading of any other aspects of convent design - a narrative of convents viewed solely through the lens of power relations would overplay the significance of discipline and correction in this building type.

Recent scholarship has addressed a research gap in the architecture and experience of British institutional spaces. *Residential Institutions in Britain 1725-1970: Inmates and Environments* edited by Jane Hamlett, Lesley Hoskins and Rebecca Preston is the product of a two year research project on institutional spaces based at Royal Holloway University of London and entitled 'At Home in the Institution? Asylum, School and Lodging House Interiors in London and South-East England, 1845-1914.'<sup>31</sup> The objective of both the project and the volume has been to explore place-making through the experience of inmates and much of the Hamlett's work has been drawn from oral histories which provided the basis for a Lefebvrian analysis of these communal spaces.

## Women and architecture

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<sup>31</sup> J. Hamlett, L. Hoskins, R. Preston (eds.) *Residential Institutions in Britain 1725-1970: Inmates and Environments* London, Pickering and Chatto, 2013.

The subject of women in architectural history is one that continues to be dogged by a parallel question to that raised by Linda Nochlin in her 1971 seminal essay ‘Why have there been no great women artists?’.<sup>32</sup> While Marxist and feminist discourses have helped to liberate art historians from the fetters of grand narratives, architectural history remains curiously resistant to finding ways of accommodating women’s role in place-making. Lynne Walker is one of the few scholars to have worked consistently on the theme of women as historical architects in Britain- her research has, not surprisingly, been central to the development of my own ideas and introduced me to ways of thinking about and positioning women’s role in making built space. Her 1989 essay ‘Women and Architecture’ chronicles the opportunities for women to engage in design and building, from the ‘amateur tradition’ of leisured women, through the obstacles presented in the nineteenth century by the professionalisation of architecture to the marginalisation of female architects in the twentieth century.<sup>33</sup> Walker’s recent article ‘Women and Church Art’ examines the opportunities that religion offered women for artistic expression, a subject also explored by Jim Cheshire in his 2008 article ‘Elizabeth Simcoe and her Daughters: amateur ecclesiastical design in the 1840s’ and most recently by Jenny Uglow in *The Pinecone*; her 2012 biography of the Victorian amateur architect Sarah

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<sup>32</sup> L. Nochlin ‘Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?’ first published in V. Gornick and B. Moran (eds.) *Woman in Sexist Society: Studies in Power and Powerlessness*, New York, Basic, 1971.

<sup>33</sup> L. Walker, ‘Women and Architecture’ in J. Rendell, B. Penner and I. Borden (eds) *Gender Space Architecture: an Interdisciplinary Introduction*, London: Routledge, 2000. L. Walker, ‘Home and Away: The Feminist Remapping of Public and Private Space in Victorian London’ in I. Borden, J. Kerr and J. Rendall (eds) *The Unknown City: Contesting Architecture and Social*, MIT Press, 2002.



Losh which focuses on her most comprehensive work, St Mary's Church, Wreay.<sup>34</sup>

Elsewhere, in acknowledgment of women's virtual absence from the canon, scholars have explored oblique ways of understanding women as place-makers through their indirect roles. Elizabeth Darling and Lesley Whitworth propose three approaches for assessing women's historic contributions to the built environment, in the introduction to their 2007 edited volume *Women and the Making of Built Space in England; 1870-1950*.<sup>35</sup> Firstly, they outline the conventional route of 'identification and reclamation of female counterparts to the canon of dead white males'. This, they point out, is problematized by the obvious disadvantage that women are placed under by way of their scarcity in the professions. Secondly, they suggest the identification of particular fields of practice that women were engaged in and through which they can be celebrated. These areas are more likely to include patronage, philanthropy and criticism than architectural practice and therefore open up ways of integrating women's contribution. Thirdly, they suggest an inclusive approach that draws from Lefebvre's model and focuses on the anonymous; 'the factory worker, the shop clerk, the housewife'. This has the obvious virtue of liberating the concept of space shaping from the constraints of the canon but, as discussed earlier, risks obscuring the exceptional contributions of individual women. Indeed, the fact that Darling and Whitworth's edited collection includes a chapter dedicated to the

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<sup>34</sup> L. Walker, 'Women and Church Art' in T. Sladen and A. Saint (eds) *Churches 1870-1914*, The Victorian Society, London, 2011. J. Cheshire, 'Elizabeth Simcoe and her Daughters: Amateur Ecclesiastical Design in the 1840s'. In M.Hall and R.Hill (eds.) *The 1840s: Studies in Victorian Architecture and Design*. London, The Victorian Society, 2008 pp. 87-95. J. Cheshire, 'Space and the Victorian Ecclesiastical Interior' in S. Alfoldy and J. Helland (eds.) *Craft, Space and Interior Design, 1855-2005*. Aldershot, Ashgate, 2008 pp. 27-43. J. Uglow, *The Pinecone*, Faber & Faber, 2013.

<sup>35</sup> E. Darling and L. Whitworth, *Women and the Making of Built Space*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2007. p. 2.

work of architect Sadie Speight indicates that they themselves are wary of giving equal weight to the contribution of all 'actors' in the process of design and construction.

Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner and Ian Borden's 2000 edited collection, *Gender Space Architecture: an Interdisciplinary Introduction* presents a broad ranging collection of essays and excerpts in which the focus is tightened as sharply on feminist as architectural discourse.<sup>36</sup> The volume combines seminal works with more recent research to produce a manifesto for women's place and purpose in architecture. Among the most important chapters for my own research, are excerpts from Alice Freidman's 1992 'Architecture, authority and the female gaze: planning and representation in the early modern house', in which Freidman makes an inventive reading of Hardwick Hall through the filter of feminist film criticism, applying a subversion of Laura Mulvey's 'male gaze' to her analysis of Bess of Hardwick's role in design and planning.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Rendell, J. Penner, B. and Borden, I., *Gender, Space, architecture: An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, New York, Spon, 1999.

<sup>37</sup> A. Freidman 'Architecture, Authority and the Female Gaze: Planning and Representation in the Early Modern Country House' in J. Rendell, Barbara Penner, Ian Borden (eds) *Gender Space Architecture: an Interdisciplinary Introduction* London: Routledge, 2000

**A short history of convents and monasteries in Britain,  
1829 - present day**

Although this thesis does not explore comparisons with the architecture of male communities during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the following offers a brief account of male and female monastic architecture in order to provide context.

Religious communities, prohibited after the reformation until the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829, were founded and revived at an unprecedented rate during the nineteenth century - in women's communities alone the numbers had risen from just two illegal convents in the 1770s to 235, housing around 3000 nuns by 1873.<sup>38</sup> The rupture in Catholic continuity wrought by the reformation meant that both male and female communities had to forge new cultural identities that could be located within the European Catholic context and also describe a distinctively English religious character. Medieval monastic architecture offered an effective template for some enclosed orders (those who took solemn vows, remained within the cloister and focused on prayer and contemplation) shaping spaces that appealed to the popular English taste for antiquity without compromising a Catholic identity. However, the great majority of foundations were simple-vowed congregations whose vocations included the ministry of health, education and social care within the lay community. The convents of these active or apostolic religious had to serve a range of roles, often accommodating such diverse spaces as classrooms, industrial laundries, infirmaries, chapels and

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<sup>38</sup> S. O'Brien, 'Terra Incognita: The Nun in Nineteenth-Century England', *Past and Present*, No.121, Nov., 1988, pp. 110-140. p. 110.

cloisters under one roof and economic constraints meant that many emerging communities simply adapted pre-existing buildings. Where budgets allowed for purpose built religious houses, however, architects had to meet the challenge of unifying the conflicting specifications of buildings which were both practical and sacred and reconciling questions of style which were as much concerned with politics and theology as aesthetics.

### *A.W.N. Pugin and the Gothic Revival*

The dominant influence on nineteenth-century ecclesiastical architecture was Gothic Revivalism, a style forcefully championed by A.W.N. Pugin. Pugin designed ten executed monasteries and convents and although he wrote a great deal on the superiority of Gothic architecture in church building, he produced much less on its suitability for religious houses in general and very little specifically on convents. The reasons for this are unclear but may reflect a lack of understanding on Pugin's part of the role and function of 'modern' religious orders. As a result, the most successful of Pugin's religious houses are those that he designed for English male enclosed orders – communities which attempted to revive medieval monasticism. At the Benedictine abbey of Mount St Bernard's designed in 1839, for example, Pugin's formal monastic plan, situated within the heart of the Leicestershire countryside, was an almost perfect recreation of a pre-reformation monastery and provided a precedent for sites such as Dunn and Hansom's Downside Abbey (1872) and Frederick Walter's Buckfast Abbey (1907). However, the medieval-styled convent that he designed in the same year for the Sisters of Mercy (an Irish order with a wide apostolate that included teaching and refuge work) in the densely populated London district of

Bermondsey, drew sharp criticism from the congregation's foundress, Catherine McAuley who considered the costly building an impractical folly. Although Pugin was re-employed in 1840 by McAuley to design the next Mercy convent at Handsworth, Birmingham, she gave him extremely detailed architectural specifications, this time stipulating everything from the appearance and layout of the convent to the exact size of the nun's cells.

While Gothic had emerged in tandem with revived Catholic rituals, it quickly became an ecumenical architectural vocabulary and by the middle of the nineteenth-century, it spoke more to Englishness than denominational sectarianism.

#### *Gothic versus Roman: The influence of the Counter-Reformation*

Not all Roman Catholic orders favoured the Gothic style, however, and the debate between Gothic and Roman (neoclassical/Baroque) reflected the political battle lines drawn within the institutional church between the Ultramontane faction, who looked towards Rome for cultural and theological direction and the Recusants who favoured the continuity of an English tradition - although technically prohibited, Catholic families had continued to worship covertly during penal times. Cardinal J.H. Newman who, with Father F.W. Faber, founded the first society of English Oratorians (a community of lay brothers and priests) in 1847 was a vocal opponent of the Gothic style, arguing that it promoted an arcane and outdated form of liturgy that was incompatible with the Counter Reformation Tridentine Rite used in most Roman Catholic masses.<sup>39</sup> Despite Newman's uncertainty about Ultramontanism, the neoclassical Oratories in London

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<sup>39</sup> See G. Hyland 'Newman, Pugin and the Tridentine Liturgy' (unpublished) 2013 and R. O'Donnell 'Introduction' in A.W.N. Pugin, *A Treatise on Chancel Screens & Rood Lofts*, A Welby Pugin, C Dolman, Hereford, Gracewing, 2005.

(Herbert Gribble, 1880) and Birmingham (Edward Doran Webb, 1907) clearly articulate his commitment to the Counter-Reformation ideals of the Oratorians and his reservations about Recusant traditions.

### *Anglican Communities*

Religious communities were a distinctive feature not only of Roman but also Anglo-Catholicism. The Oxford Movement of 1833 ushered in a revival of Catholic practices, devotions and rituals within a small branch of the Anglican Church that included the foundation of religious orders. While the buildings commissioned by these communities did not vary significantly from those Roman Catholic convents and monasteries built in the Gothic style, they were designed exclusively by Anglican architects such as G.F. Bodley, William Butterfield, and G.E. Street. The Community of St John the Baptist founded the first Anglican refuge for the rehabilitation of prostitutes at Clewer in Berkshire and in 1853 employed Henry Woodyer, a pupil of Butterfield, to design a large Gothic convent on a similar plan to Pugin's Mercy convent at Handsworth. The 'penitent' women, known within the community as Magdalens, were housed in a separate wing of the convent and, along with the nuns, produced high-quality needlework to the designs of celebrated architects such as J.D. Sedding and John Ninian Comper.

### *New Directions*

By the early twentieth century religious tensions began to wane and an increasing Roman Catholic confidence led religious communities to experiment with a greater diversity of historical styles. The Byzantine Revivalist

style, popularized by J.F. Bentley's Westminster Cathedral designed in 1897, exerted a powerful influence on religious houses such as the striking Quarr Abbey on the Isle of Wight, designed in 1911 by Dom Paul Bellot, a member of the Benedictine brotherhood who trained as an architect at the Ecole des Beaux Arts.

### *The Liturgical Movement and the Second Vatican Council*

In Europe, the liturgical movement (a theological shift towards the democratisation of the liturgy, initiated by Italian Benedictine monks) began to take shape in the early years of the twentieth century and had a profound effect on the architecture of churches and religious houses. The introduction of the Dialogue Mass (a forerunner of the vernacular Mass) in which the congregation participated by reciting parts of the Latin text, meant that, for the first time, the priest faced the congregation. As a result, the altar, which had previously been positioned against the wall of the chancel, now had to be free standing to enable the priest to celebrate Mass from behind it. Where, historically, enclosed nuns and monks had been separated from the laity by the provision of an external chapel with a grille through which they viewed the Mass, they began to join the parishioners for worship in the nave. The influence of monastic asceticism on liturgical movement spirituality lent itself to a more austere interpretation of ecclesiastical spaces which dovetailed with the nascent modernist movement in architecture. From the 1920s, European architects such as Rudolf Schwarz were designing churches for the

Benedictines that were a radical and, for some, shocking departure from tradition.<sup>40</sup>

Britain was relatively slow in adopting liturgical movement worship and architecture – very few churches offered the Dialogue Mass until the late 1950s.<sup>41</sup> The first parish to pioneer this form of liturgy in Britain was founded at Cockfosters in London in 1936 by Dom Constantine Bosschaerts, a Belgian Olivetan Benedictine. Bosschaerts was himself a trained architect and helped to design the monastery and adjoining Church of Christ the King, built in 1940 – both at the vanguard of modernist architecture in British Roman Catholic buildings. The Cockfoster Olivetans were a mixed community of nuns and monks who shared a vocation dedicated to spreading liturgical movement spirituality; the nuns through teaching and producing icons and mosaics and the monks through parish work. While they promoted radical liturgical reform, however, they continued to maintain strict segregation between the sexes and the site was specifically designed to facilitate this, in much the same way that early Christian and medieval double monasteries had.

The principles of the liturgical movement were finally enshrined in the directives of the Second Vatican Council in 1962. From the mid-1960s all Roman Catholic Masses in Britain were celebrated in English with the priest facing the congregation. Many religious communities embraced the opportunity to design monasteries, convents and chapels that reflected the new theology. Because of the unique and complex specifications of convents

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40 See M. Torgerson *Architecture of Immanence: Architecture for Worship and Ministry Today* Michigan, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007.

41 See N. Yates, *Liturgical Space: Christian Worship and Church Buildings in Western Europe 1500-2000*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2008 p.134.



and monasteries, religious had always played an active role in their design and had necessarily been open to innovation. Buildings such as the groundbreaking Church of Our Lady, Help of Christians, designed by the Catholic architect Francis Pollen in 1964 for the Benedictines at Worth Abbey, met with the approval of both the monks who commissioned it and architecture critics but was greeted with less enthusiasm from the more conservative Roman Catholic laity.

### *Contemporary architecture and building use*

By the late twentieth century, the most significant issue facing religious life was the steep decline in new members and the ageing populations of communities. As a result, many Victorian and early twentieth-century convents and monasteries had outlived their use - difficult to adapt and expensive to maintain, many were redeveloped or demolished. By 2002 the community of Benedictines at the stately Stanbrook Abbey designed in 1871 by E.W. Pugin, had dwindled to just twenty eight nuns and postulants and the decision was finally taken by the Abbess to move to a smaller purpose-built site. Their departure posed the problem of what to do with the original Abbey. A buyer was finally secured in 2011 and the abbey, which is protected by statutory listing, was given planning consent to be converted into a hotel on the condition that the ecclesiastical and monastic character of the building was preserved. The nuns commissioned the architects Fielden Clegg Bradley Studios to design a state of the art environmentally sustainable monastery in the North Yorkshire Moors which won a Civic Trust Award in 2010. Though the new building retains monastic features such as cloisters in its layout, the creative interpretation of these has

shaped a building that, in contrast to the hotel in the former Stanbrook Abbey, bears little resemblance to a traditional monastery.

Though diminishing in numbers, religious communities continue to be important patrons of innovative architecture. In 2009 Niall McLaughlin won a RIBA competition to design the Bishop King Edward Chapel at Ripon College, Oxford for the Community of St John the Baptist whose convent is located nearby - the completed building was shortlisted for the Stirling Prize in 2013. An important specification of the brief was that the new chapel should harmonize with the Ripon College buildings designed by the celebrated Anglican architect and convent builder, G.E. Street. Sites such as these demonstrate the enduring tradition of architectural invention and creative authority in religious communities.

### **An architecture of service**

Rarely, over the centuries, has architectural practice been considered an obligation. To most it has been a job, to many a passion, to some, perhaps, a calling but very few must have considered it an obligation. To women religious, however, conceiving, designing, building and adorning physical spaces was no more or less important than managing accounts, tending to the sick, overseeing laundry work or teaching the catechism. All of these were vital components in the operation of the convent and the sisters would have

understood the execution of these tasks to be, above all else, in the service of God: a spiritual duty.

For many nineteenth and twentieth-century women religious, making convent spaces was a duty born of necessity. The restoration of religious orders to England, after the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829, saw the emergence of a new type of English religious institution – the active community.<sup>42</sup> These orders or congregations took their ministries outside the convent, undertaking social work and offering refuge (often to prostitutes), teaching, nursing and visiting the sick and poor. In contrast, Pre-reformation convents had been, almost exclusively, dedicated to contemplative prayer and were enclosed. Sisters did not venture out of the convent and lay people, although sometimes admitted within guest ranges were strictly prohibited from entering the nun's cloister. A great many architectural precedents existed for enclosed convents (albeit few extant English ones): spaces which had a long tradition, a clear purpose and a consistent design brief.<sup>43</sup> In contrast, many of the foundresses of active orders had, themselves, written the order or congregation's Rule: a document that operated as a spiritual and practical guide to convent life. The Rule was generally tailored to the foundress's personal vocation and required buildings that could answer to a number of functional and symbolic purposes. Convents were highly complex sites that demanded an extremely detailed knowledge of the Rule – a qualification that only foundresses and women religious who held positions of authority within the community possessed and which enabled only

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<sup>42</sup> The only apostolic community founded in England after the reformation and before emancipation was the Congregation of Jesus (established by Mary Ward) who founded the Bar Convent, York in 1686.

<sup>43</sup> The consistency of the monastic plan is evidenced by the layout of all of the extant large scale nineteenth-century monasteries.

them to provide the design brief. Indeed, the stipulations of these briefs were often so baffling to lay professionals that women religious were occasionally required to circumvent architects and builders altogether in the making of their spaces.

I use the term 'make' here because the involvement of women religious in the building of their convents extended far beyond financing and planning projects, providing architect's briefs or even designing. Women religious were also decorating and producing art work, project managing, negotiating directly with tradesmen, undertaking structural maintenance and even manual building work. Beyond the need to rationalise the complex design, three key factors influenced the decision to undertake particular tasks. Firstly, budgets were often extremely limited and it was important that women religious had sufficient knowledge of the construction trade to be able to ensure that work was being carried out according to plan.<sup>44</sup> If money was very tight and the required skill could be learned from a book or at the instruction of a willing professional, a sister might even undertake some manual work herself. Secondly, many women religious felt a spiritual calling to express themselves artistically. This was particularly true in convent chapels, where women often designed, decorated (and redecorated), painted, sculpted, embroidered and produced stained glass as an act of devotion.<sup>45</sup> Thirdly, work, for both men and women in active communities, was considered an act of devotion or worship. In contrast to the Protestant Church, which regarded the home as the proper place for women, in reli-

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44 See C. Mangion, *Contested Identities* and B. Walsh, *Roman Catholic Nuns in England and Wales*.

45 The obituary for Sister Mary Tommaso that appears in the SMG necrology book describes her artistic vocation: 'She loved painting, finding in this, as all true artists do, a way of expressing her love for God'. SMG Necrology, p.90,

gious orders and congregations, Catholics actively promoted work as a means for women to express their piety and humility. Here, the grind of daily life was physically and mentally arduous for both men and women.

Very few women apart from religious from either Protestant, Roman Catholic or secular society were undertaking building work in this way during the period under examination in the study. This is not to suggest that other women would not have chosen to engage in architecture and construction, rather that very few other women had the freedom to do so to such a comprehensive degree. The fledgling Catholic hierarchy was keen to establish itself quickly and lacked a centralised structure. Consequently women religious were often invited to establish communities in dioceses in order to assist in establishing new parishes. These women financed their own communities and asked for little in return for their vital parish work, other than to manage and run their convents autonomously. Many Bishops regarded this a small price to pay and rarely interfered or challenged the authority of the Mother Superior of a house.

Nuns and sisters experienced life as women in very different ways than did females from other sections of society. But, importantly, this did not mean that they considered themselves constitutionally different from other women, only that they had chosen an alternative to marriage and family that required them to fulfil other duties; the women who commissioned, constructed and occupied these buildings were no more or less than women elsewhere in Victorian society. As historian Barbara Walsh suggests: "Why were these daughters of the strong farmers and middle class merchants so successful in their careers? Perhaps they brought to convent

life an overlooked bonus in that their family backgrounds had fostered in them an inherent business acumen and authority.<sup>46</sup>

Apostolic sisters clearly entered religious life with an assumption that they were just as capable as men at writing architect's briefs, drawing plans, driving bargains and digging foundations. Had they assumed otherwise, convents would have looked very different.

### **Inherent Paradox**

This study began as an attempt to assemble a narrative of the contribution that women religious made to architectural history. During the course of my research, however, I have found that each new source; each letter, plan, scrawled sketch, obituary or conversation suggests a picture that undermines and even contradicts the last. In the initial stages I was hoping to reclaim convents - conceived, funded, designed, decorated and built by nuns – as spaces of female emancipation. And yet, I could not escape the fact that they could also, paradoxically, be places of female containment; if not spaces of oppression, then certainly of coercion.

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46 B. Walsh, 'Lifting the Veil on Entrepreneurial Irishwomen: Running Convents in Nineteenth-Century England and Wales', *History Ireland*, Vol. 11, No. 4, Winter, 2003, pp. 23-28. p. 26. It should be noted that Irish women were recruited to English convents in large number during the nineteenth and twentieth century. The 1911 census returns for St Mary's SMG convent, Portslade, for example, reveals that 17 of the 19 of women religious recorded as living at the convent were born in Ireland. K. Jordan 'Representing Women's History in Historic Environment Conservation: A Case Study of St Marye's Convent, Portslade' MSc Dissertation, Appendices, 2009.

I suggest that it is precisely through this and other paradoxes that the architecture of active convents is best understood because this is how women religious themselves experienced and rationalised the spaces. This began at the most fundamental level with the co-existence of the oppositional categories of 'active' and 'enclosed'; active women religious being those whose ministries took them out of the convent (or required members of the lay community to be accommodated within it) while enclosed were those whose life was built around prayer and contemplation. Apostolic and semi-enclosed communities identified these two elements with the sisters Mary and Martha who appear in the gospels - Mary representing prayer and Martha representing work.<sup>47</sup> These elements were fused together within the vocation, charism and theology of the community. The essence of enclosure, as the name suggests, was seclusion - the outside world both distracted from and contaminated the spiritual focus required for meditative prayer. In contrast, the outside world was the very *raison d'être* of active orders - inspiring missions that often saw nuns straining, seemingly perversely, towards the very places that most threatened spiritual cleanliness and stability. And yet the central principle of enclosed orders – seclusion - segued without theological complication into the rules of active orders. It was the fusion of these profoundly incompatible ideas that laid the foundation for English convent architecture. This duality also reflected the 'separate spheres' of private/feminine and public/masculine at play (at least theoretically) in secular society, as historian Susan Mumm suggests:

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<sup>47</sup>The 'Mary and Martha' dichotomy, though already established as a metaphor was outlined by an anonymous reviewer of John Nicholas Murphy's survey of convents *Terra Incognita* published in 1873, 'Even the works of active charity depend upon the hidden influence of prayer, and it may well be, that at the last day before the Great White Throne the contemplative life of Mary, who has chosen the better part, the one thing needful, will have a richer reward, because productive of richer results than the active life of Martha, careful and troubled, as it is, about many things.' Quoted in C. Mangion, 'The 'Mixed Life'', p. 168.

'In the eyes of their contemporaries women should be in the home, but it was unclear what category of space a convent fell into: was it an extension of the home, as its defenders sometimes claimed? Convents were private spaces for the women living in them, but they were public because of the cultural fascination with them and because of their public work with women and children, often carried out in the convent complex. It was not clear if they were a refuge from the world, or an essential part of God's work in and for the world, or some kind of liminal hinterland.'<sup>48</sup>

Materially, then, convent architecture had to facilitate the oppositional functions of public and private. Conceptually, it had to capture and to unite the imaginary properties of these. As far as some women's religious communities were concerned, the most effective convents did just this by maintaining an idea of enclosure through physical segregation; particular groups were accommodated in buildings that looked traditionally monastic, separated from others on the same site, who occupied industrial or institutional buildings. The apparent inconsistency of these convents was not lost on contemporary observers. The penal reformer Sir Godfrey Lushington, for instance, commented on the contrast between religious and industrial spaces, noting that it was a 'contradiction for a convent to be a factory'.<sup>49</sup> Despite appearances, this was not simply an ideology or an architecture of expedience. It reflected a faith structure that not only accepted paradox but was defined by it.

The notion of paradox was not difficult for women religious to accommodate within their practical and devotional life - it is the essence of the Trinity (that

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48 S. Mumm, 'Making Space, Taking Space' pp.7-8.

49 P. Hughes, 'Cleanliness and Godliness' p.332.



God is at once the Father, Son and Holy Spirit) and the Incarnation (that Christ is simultaneously Divine and Human). These were states that defied human logic and which could, therefore, be meditated upon but never comprehended. Hence in spiritual matters there was no requirement to understand God's methods, only to interpret and follow his will. From this perspective, not only do the coexistence of such oppositional categories as saint and sinner, celibate and sexual, material and imaginary, functional and symbolic, ascetic and opulent, need no rational justification, they are, in fact, profoundly descriptive of the mystery of God.

Paradox is a constantly recurring feature in the iconography of women's religious orders – the quintessentially self-contradictory figure, Mary Magdalene (both saint and sinner) being a frequent figurehead of active communities. One way of understanding the buildings that these women created might be, as Susan Mumm has suggested, to see them as liminal spaces where nuns reconciled duality by occupying a threshold position between two conflicting states. But liminality suggests ambiguity and convents were nothing if not spaces of moral and religious certitude. Moreover, liminal spaces exist between two poles but the dichotomies set up in Catholic spirituality were experienced simultaneously. We might draw an analogy for this from Schrödinger's 'cat' theory on quantum mechanics; the fate of the cat in the box is unknown until the lid is lifted but in the absence of knowledge it is simultaneously both alive and dead. In choosing not to lift the lid, women religious lived by different but parallel existential paradoxes and drew heavily from them in the construction of a cultural identity.

This apparent rejection of reason might suggest that these spaces were chaotic but they were not. In fact, the complex segregation required by the

Rule of all active convents demanded a highly rationalised functional plan that left very little room for the eccentric flourishes of Victorian Gothic architecture. On the occasions that architects were able to assert their authority over the design of a convent, sisters often removed unnecessary features or redesigned impractical spaces.

This is not to say, however, that convents were spartan places. Indeed the co-existence of functional and symbolic, opulent and ascetic categories were acceptable inconsistencies that reflected the equally acceptable coalescence of hierarchy and inequality.

The following explores the idea of inherent paradox in convent architecture by coupling conflicting concepts. In doing so I do not seek or attempt to impose order – these are not suggested as definitive categories – but to illustrate the notion of duality within convent life and built spaces.

### *Modernity and tradition*

The buildings of almost all nineteenth century, active convents drew together aspects of monasticism with the technology of domestic life and, most importantly, vocations. The lack of an overarching visual style in this building type reflected the fact that active convents were composed of discrete spaces that fulfilled a range of purposes: devotional, contemplative and liturgical; domestic; educational; industrial and medical. Convents that provided refuge for prostitutes, such as those of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity and Refuge and the Poor Servants of the Mother of God, routinely combined the motifs of ecclesiastical architecture with the institutional, industrial and domestic styles of secular

Victorian society. Semi-enclosed orders had clearly demarcated spaces, each with their own identifiable stylistic signature. The sisters' quarters in these convents were always within a self-contained building, sometimes (conspicuously) referred to as a 'monastery', to which all lay-people were strictly denied access.<sup>50</sup> This allowed sisters to maintain a sense of enclosure within a site that further enclosed very large numbers of lay-women. The nun's quarters and chapels in these convents were invariably built in the an identifiably 'religious' style (largely gothic) while the lay-women's quarters and work areas were often, to all intents and purposes, architecturally indistinguishable from workhouses and industrial laundries.

Chapels had a different status to any other building on a convent site. They were always the most opulently decorated spaces and, although the layout varied, maintained features that were universally consistent.<sup>51</sup> These included: the sanctuary; altar and tabernacle at the eastern end, a nave or choir, Stations of the Cross (a sequential depiction of the passion of Christ adorning the walls) and a Calvary or Crucifix above the altar. Frequently, however, chapels were built within the nuns' living quarters which meant that although, as a sacred space, it was theoretically separate from the domestic spaces, it conversed intimately with them. Very often, for example, the infirmary was built adjacent to and above the chapel with either a

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50 M.H. Herbert, *The Two Sisters: A Tale for the Good Shepherds*, London, 1870, p. 241. In her novel, Mary Elizabeth Herbert describes the nuns' wing of the Good Shepherd convent as a 'monastery'.

51 Peter Hughes suggests that despite tight budgets the Sisters of the Good Shepherd were prepared to spend money if it conveyed a prestige that honoured God. Invariably this would have been in the chapel where 'little money was spared on the church sanctuary and altar and their adornment'. Hughes, p. 424. This did not always meet with diocesan approval. Cardinal Manning, who famously refused to fund the building of Westminster Cathedral while there was a need to address the ills of poverty, made known his disapproval of the Good Shepherd's proposed use of Devonshire marble in their chapel.

gallery or window overlooking the sanctuary so that the sick could observe Mass.<sup>52</sup>

In those convents where laundries generated an income for the community, the laundry was often the second most important (and expensive) building. The emphasis on these buildings reflects the new ways of understanding prayer that emerged in active convents - for the women who worked in the laundries these could also be spaces of devotion. Whilst these were not liturgical spaces they were sites of devotion over which women had sole jurisdiction in practical matters and had the authority to implement informal theologies within - it is significant that both lay and women religious often read aloud from the bible or sang hymns during manual work.

### *Chastity and Sexuality*

A complex relationship existed between notions of chastity, sexuality and gender. Although being a female religious required the highest level of sexual purity (it was possible to be consecrated after having been married but most women religious – in theory - had never experienced sexual relationships) the fact that they were symbolically married (to Christ) marked out a significant difference between male and female religious. In contemplative orders, particularly in continental Europe, the language of worship often took a highly eroticised form with ecstasies being an established feature of female religious experience. Victorian modesty, no doubt, played a large part in dampening this fervour but there are nonetheless, if not erotic then

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<sup>52</sup> Evidence for this can be found at St Marye's, Portslade, St Mary's, Roehampton, St Mary's Handsworth, St Mary's, Bermondsey (Leaves from the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy, 1881, The Catholic Publication Society, New York) and St Michael's, Waterlooville.

distinctly romantic notes to the spirituality of both contemplative and active women religious<sup>53</sup>

Mary Magdalene remains one of the most compelling and curious figures in the iconography of women's religious orders. Her name was used, without an obvious pattern, to connote either piety or sexual transgression. Former prostitutes who had entered convents such as those of the Good Shepherd and the Sisters of Charity and Refuge, could, if they showed sufficient penitence and dedication work their way up to becoming 'Magdalen Sisters'.

These sisters were not and could never hope to be 'proper' nuns - the term Magdalen here served as a perpetual reminder that the stain of some sins was, at least in this world, indelible.<sup>54</sup> And yet the name Magdalen was also frequently adopted by figures as chaste and pious as Frances Taylor (latterly Mother Magdalene Taylor), foundress of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God.

### *Separateness and communality*

The opposing categories of sin and purity created a highly stratified structure within the convent, both in material and imaginary terms. Though socially progressive in many respects, active convents were not, during the

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<sup>53</sup> L. Lux-Sterritt, "Until Death do us Unite": Spiritual love and longing in Early Modern English convents', paper given at the *'Identities, Organisations and Exile' History of Women Religious of Britain and Ireland conference* June, 2011. Also see M. Bernstein, *Nuns*, Collins, 1976. 'the nuns of the visitation in Europe in their constitutions were exhorted to 'live, breathe and pant for your celestial spouse' but this was omitted in the 1948 version on the grounds that 'the Bishop would not like that'. Bernstein, p.122.

<sup>54</sup> in *The Home of the Lost Child* is a semi-fictitious account of life in the Good Shepherd Convent at Hammersmith, the anonymous author describes the charism '...our rule strictly forbids that no person of whatever fortune or rank and talents she may be possessed, can be received into our order, if ever there has been a suspicion of her morality. They can become magdalenes'. Anonymus, *The Home of the Lost Child, a tale of the Asylum of the Good Shepherd, Hammersmith, London, C. Dolman, 1848*, p. 9. For further description of the Good Shepherd Rule see also Hughes, 'Cleanliness and Godliness'.

period under examination in this study, egalitarian spaces - indeed, they were conspicuously less so than many of their medieval forbears.<sup>55</sup> In the convents of the Good Shepherds a highly complex system of segregation, (which ensured that the different groups of women - choir sisters, lay sisters, penitents, magdalene sisters, orphans and so on - did not see one another) evolved from a belief that innocence was under constant threat of contamination. Many of the convent chapels of the Good Shepherds and Sisters of Our Lady of Charity were designed to ensure that all groups accessed the chapel via separate routes and each could worship with a view of the altar but in total isolation from each other.

Further spatial divisions were made within the community of religious. Most orders, both active and contemplative, segregated choir from lay sisters. This division was largely one of demographic class. A two-tier system ensured that one section of the community, those wealthy women who brought dowries with them, occupied a higher status than lay sisters, who were drafted from the working and lower-middle classes and performed tasks such as cleaning and cooking.

The only ostensibly private spaces in the convent were the sisters', individually inhabited cells but even here the distinction between public and private was complicated. In common with most communities, the Rule of the SMGs stipulates that, 'no-one may shut the door of her room so that it cannot be opened on the outside, or have anything locked without leave of the superior'.<sup>56</sup> The lack of personal ownership that sisters had over any space in the convent, effectively rendered even their cells public.

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<sup>55</sup> See R. Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture*.

<sup>56</sup> Rule and Constitutions 1892, SMG Archive ref II/C/6, Personal Duties, Rule 9

### *Forgiveness and Punishment*

Congregations who offered refuge to convicted women and working prostitutes (provided they ceased immediately and demonstrated sufficient penitence) aspired to effect spiritual transformation through atonement. But despite the centrality of forgiveness in Christian teaching, it remained impossible, as discussed earlier, for former prostitutes to be accepted into religious life – a prohibition that implied that full spiritual transformation was not, in fact, achievable for all. Moreover, the notion of forgiveness was complicated by an emphasis on discipline. Here the two meanings of the word are brought into dialogue. Mental discipline and correctional discipline were bound tightly together in the contemplation of and atonement for one's sins - a shift of focus might read this either as punishment (self-administered or imposed upon others) or spiritual fortitude. These distinctions were likely to have been read differently by sisters and penitents.

Transgression of the convent rules (for all women) resulted in withdrawal of privileges, isolation or, if serious enough, ejection. The overarching Rule was both organisational and theological, which is to say that the stipulations ranged from the pedestrian to the spiritually lofty and, though they were frequently edited and amended, were not open to individual interpretation.<sup>57</sup> In aspects of layout and sometimes decoration, convent architecture was guided by the Rule and nowhere more so than in the maintenance of order and discipline. Victorian critics of convent life such as Seymour Hobart made much play of the prison-like appearance of many convents. In defence Cardinal Manning pointed out that high walls and small windows pro-

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<sup>57</sup> The SMGs produced at least four versions of their rule between 1869 and 1900.

tected the privacy of inhabitants from potentially hostile onlookers and even intruders.<sup>58</sup> In reality high walls and small windows probably did serve to both protect and contain. Although sisters were at pains to stress that lay-women were free to come and go, the fact that, from time to time, women did escape over the walls suggests that this wasn't always entirely accurate.<sup>59</sup> Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries stories of the harshness of convent punishments periodically emerged, sometimes leading to court cases. While there may have been some truth in these claims, it is unlikely that some of the more colourful descriptions of punitive spaces, such as the underground dungeons that one carpenter claimed to have constructed, had any basis in fact.<sup>60</sup> It is not without significance, however, that magdalene institutions were often called 'penitentiaries' by the nuns who founded them - a word that had the same cultural register then, that it has today.

### *Male and female*

Equality between sexes in convent life was complicated. Most active convents were founded at the invitation of a Bishop but were autonomously financed, managed and maintained by women. In the great majority of or-

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<sup>58</sup> Agnes Stewart's preface to her novel, *The World and the Cloister* delivers a response to the attack on convent life made by Hobart Seymour. In it, she responds to his assertion that prison-like convent architecture is designed to incarcerate women. She quotes Seymour's description of 'lofty walls, massive gates, barred windows' and comments, 'he [seems] willing to forget that a number of unprotected females, living alone require the security from without which bolts and bars can give.' A. Stewart, *The World and the Cloister, to which is Added Prefatory Remarks on a Lecture on Nunneries Lately Delivered at Bath by the Rev. Hobart Seymour*, London, Richardson 1852.

<sup>59</sup> A number of accounts of lay-women escaping appear in convent archives. Constitution XVII of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd's Rule states, 'That there be nothing near [the enclosure] walls which may facilitate ingress and egress' - a stipulation that suggests that the sisters recognised the problem of possible break outs. Quoted in Hughes, p. 53.

<sup>60</sup> M. Wheeler, *The Old Enemies: Catholic and Protestant in Nineteenth-Century English Culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 65.



ders, the mother superior was directly answerable to the Pope rather than the Bishop and so, in some matters, had a higher authority than the Bishop within convent.<sup>61</sup> The priest who was invited to officiate Mass was, in the setting of the convent, subject to the Mother Superior but in the spiritual order, outranked her by virtue of his liturgical authority. Even here, however, the spiritual hierarchy was obscure. During the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries a number of causes were opened for the beatification of foundresses of English orders. Plans for some were clearly being fomented during the foundress's lifetime, indicating that certain groups (probably male and female) regarded these women as having a higher spiritual status, even before beatification, than those ordained men who were not destined for sainthood – who made up the vast majority of Roman Catholic priests.<sup>62</sup>

The compulsory presence of a priest meant that, in contrast to most male religious orders, it was impossible for female religious communities to be entirely self-contained or single sex. Consequently, although men were generally denied access to convents, certain spaces had to be designed around the presence of a man.<sup>63</sup> The vows of celibacy that theoretically neutralized a priest's sexuality rendered him different from other men and in some respects placed him on the same platform as the (ostensibly) sexually neutral nuns. But sexuality was not the only category through which both nuns and priests defined gender and the privileging of and access to spa-

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61 For a discussion of the hierarchical structure of women's religious orders see C. Mangion, *Contested Identities* and B. Walsh, *Roman Catholic Nuns in England and Wales*.

62 'Mother as we knew her' is an internal publication by the SMGs compiled shortly after Frances Taylor's death. It comprised a collection of sisters' memories of the foundress and was intended to form part of the cause for her beatification.

63 For a description of spatial division between priests and religious in medieval convents see R. Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture*.

ces was demarcated across gender lines. In some convents the nuns and priests had separate sacristies through which communication could be made without sight of one another.<sup>64</sup> Here, the separateness was less a signifier of sexual propriety so much as a reminder that the sanctuary, as the Eucharistic space, was a male dominion. All other spaces in the convent, however, would have been accessible to the priest through invitation only.

### *Humility and Authority*

Though women religious were required, in practical terms to exert authority over both their charges and one another, they were under spiritual obligation to aspire towards humility at all times. There were clear precedents for female subordination to male authority, both in Catholicism and in wider Protestant and secular society.<sup>65</sup> This meant that, although women frequently financed, designed, decorated, built and maintained convents, their work was never accompanied by the fanfare that celebrated men's architectural projects. By contrast, the names of monks and priests such as Canon A.J.C. Scoles and Fr Benedict Williamson, labouring (putatively) under the same doctrinal principles as nuns, were routinely mentioned in journals such as *The Builder*. This is not to say, however, that nuns did not take pride in the work that they or other members of the community undertook – simply that references to it do not appear outside convent archives. Archival

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64 An article on the 'new' church at The Good Shepherd Convent in Ford describes the 'ingenious contrivance' set into the wall separating the nuns' and priest's sacristies which enabled 'anything to be passed from the one room to the other'. Exactly what the 'ingenious contrivance' was remains unclear. *The Bootle Times*, 30th March, 1889, p. 5.

65 An indication of women's subordination to men is given by their legal status - it was not until 1882 that the Married Women's Property Acts granted married women full control over their property. Although sisters, as single women, were entitled to own property, the prohibition on married women reflected wider cultural attitudes towards gender equality.

sources from across different communities suggest that while nuns often conceded that men were physically stronger and had, through experience and training, more technical expertise they did not consider them to be innately superior to women, as designers, decorators or even builders.

This thesis examines a range of apparently diverse communities that have a common theme; their architecture expresses (albeit in different ways) the two distinct strands of aesthetics and functionality. Though these categories are often cast as mutually exclusive, here they are tightly interlaced under a theology that consistently and insistently emphasised work (be it painting, embroidering, washing or teaching) as an act of devotion. While these activities took place largely within the private world of the convent, they were necessarily subject to external religious and secular forces, as the following chapters will discuss.

## Chapter 2

# PAGANISM AND POPERY: THE IMPACT OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY DIALOGUES ON CONVENT ARCHITECTURE



**Figure 2** Builders at the site of the Old Palace, Mayfield c1864. Source: Archives of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus

*'...a French cathedral of the present time is an excellent preventative against the revival of paganism; for here, the abominations of modern design and trumpery stand forth in all their hideous inconsistency, by the side of the old Catholic work which they dishonour with their intrusion'*

A.W.N. Pugin <sup>66</sup>

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66 A.W.N. Pugin *The Present State of Ecclesiastical Architecture in England*, London: Charles Dolman, 1843, p.130.

Modern convent architecture was both influenced by and influential upon a nascent Roman Catholic aesthetic. In the early years following emancipation, English neoclassicism and the continental, neo-Baroque styles imported by orders and clergy in exile, dominated Roman Catholic church building. By the time the first active communities were established in England, however, A.W.N. Pugin had already completed the neo-medieval Roman Catholic church of St Mary's in Derby (1836) and begun formulating ideas on the moral rectitude of Gothic that would be enshrined in his manifesto, *The Present State of Ecclesiastical Architecture*. These were to make a swift and significant impact on the architecture of all Victorian religious communities.

One narrative of English Roman Catholic architecture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries might see it characterised by a lack of stylistic direction until the (spectacularly unlikely) combined forces of the Second Vatican Council and Brutalist architecture, liberated it from historicism. It is certainly the case that the identity crisis of the Victorian Roman Catholic church is laid bare by the startling range of vocabularies from which it drew; beyond the Gothic Revival, these ranged from rural church vernacular, sober English Renaissance and French/Norman Romanesque to the high-camp of St Peter's and the Gesu in Rome and the exotic orientalism of Hagia Sofia in Istanbul. This might, in part, simply reflect the fact that it was born in an age where every social institution and organ of power drew frantically on historical motifs to understand and locate itself but it is also the result of a particular political tension between the Ultramontane Roman and Recu-

sant English traditions that competed for control in the mid-nineteenth century.

Although Roman Catholic building programmes were not strictly permitted until 1829, in reality parishes had begun to emerge informally following the first Catholic Relief Acts in 1791 and 1793. By the late eighteenth-century the English attitude to Roman Catholicism was largely one of indifference and, in fact, refugee clergy and religious orders fleeing, first the French Revolution and later persecution by Napoleon, were generally welcomed. Though this was certainly an improvement on the attitudes of previous generations, it might be interpreted less as growing tolerance towards Catholics and more as an expression of hostility towards the revolutionary regime in France. Moreover, the loosening of prohibitions on Catholic worship was, to some extent, a by-product of the general move towards religious toleration stimulated by the repealing, in 1790, of the Test and Corporation Acts which had excluded non-conformists from holding office in government.<sup>67</sup>

By 1797 there were approximately five and a half thousand priests and six thousand lay people and between 1792 and 1800 around forty religious communities, schools and seminaries, previously exiled to the continent under English persecution, had returned. The private chapels of country estates and embassies could not serve the burgeoning number of worshippers and so informal parishes were gradually established. By and large, a blind eye was turned to the building of Roman Catholic churches between 1800 and 1829 but, nevertheless, places of worship such as the church of St Vincent and St Paul in Stratford, East London, which opened in 1813

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<sup>67</sup> See D. Holmes, *More Roman than Rome: English Catholicism in the Nineteenth-Century*, Patmos, 1978.

were built without windows facing the street to minimise damage from attacks.<sup>68</sup>

The years between the first Catholic Relief Acts and the re-establishment of the Catholic Hierarchy in 1850 saw a transformation in the administration and leadership of the Roman Catholic church. During Penal times, Roman Catholicism had continued structurally under the authority of the Recusant English aristocratic families and their clergy - although it wasn't until the 1791 Relief Act that Roman Catholics were allowed to enter the professions and own land, the most powerful Catholic families had always had the freedom to do so and their wealth and influence gave them ascendancy over all other Catholic groups. After 1829, the absence of formal dioceses and an episcopacy, meant that Roman Catholicism operated under the provisional jurisdiction of the 'vicars apostolic'. As the largely Irish migrant Catholic community expanded, the political authority of the Recusant English Catholics was gradually superseded by the interests of the Ultramontane factions who looked to Rome for religious and administrative direction.<sup>69</sup>

The Recusants and Ultramontanists were divided across theological and also, significantly, cultural lines. Recusants tended to be conservative in tastes, moderate in theology (they opposed the dogma of papal infallibility) and emphatically English in outlook. The Ultramontanists, in contrast, supported papal authority, imported Roman devotions and aesthetic styles and regarded 'Englishness' with, perhaps not surprisingly, some hostility.

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68 Edward Yarnold gives figures for the rapid expansion of Roman Catholic church building during the late eighteenth to mid twentieth centuries, 'By 1823 there were 358 churches and chapels in England and Wales, by 1837 433, by 1851 nearly 600, by 1880 more than 1,100 and by 1949 2,821.' E. Yarnold, 'The Catholic Cultural Contribution: Architecture, art liturgy and music' in V. McClelland and M. Hodgetts (eds.) *From Without the Flaminian Gate: 150 Years of Roman Catholicism in England and Wales*, DLT, 1999.

69 Ibid.

This tension deepened following the development of the Anglican Oxford Movement in 1833 and the subsequent conversion to Roman Catholicism of one of its key founders, John Henry Newman. The Oxford or Tractarian Movement, led foremost by the Oxford theologians, Newman, Edward Pusey and John Keble, pressed for the reinstatement in Anglican worship of pre-reformation ritual and theology.<sup>70</sup> From the Oxford Movement, emerged Anglo-Catholicism; a branch of Anglicanism that shared liturgical practices with Roman Catholicism but continued to regard the Crown as the head of the church and styled a determinedly English character - albeit a somewhat fictional one.

In 1845, Newman, one of the leading lights of the Oxford Movement, converted to Roman Catholicism. While this move sent shock waves through the Anglo-Catholic community, its most significant impact was felt in the Roman Catholic church. Although Newman expressed some ambivalence about papal dogma and Ultramontanism, he was critical of the theological diffidence of Recusants and consequently threw his weight behind the Roman cause. When the Catholic Hierarchy, which comprised the foundation of an episcopacy and formal dioceses, was finally re-established in 1850 it was under the 'Romanizing' influence of the first Archbishop of Westminster, Nicholas Wiseman. The battle for political authority between Recusancy and Ultramontanism was decisively and permanently, settled.

This is not to say, however that the cultural influence of Recusancy disappeared. Indeed, it received a powerful boost from the treatises of Roman

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70 Much of the ritual associated with Anglo-Catholicism, particularly the incorporation within the liturgy of Transubstantiation (whereby the Eucharistic sacraments are believed to be the actual rather than symbolic body and blood of Christ) were incorporated later. For an analysis of early Tractarian theology see W. S. F., Pickering, *Anglo Catholicism, A Study in Religious Ambiguity*, London, Routledge, 1989.



Catholic convert, A.W.N. Pugin who insistently promoted not only the virtues of pre-reformation English architecture but also the revival of medieval rites in the liturgy - namely the ancient (English) Sarum rite over the sixteenth-century, counter-reformation (Roman) Tridentine Rite.

Pugin's obsessive love-affair with Gothic was not simply an idiosyncratic quirk, it was also, importantly, the product of zeitgeist - he was by no means alone in his enthusiasm for the art and architecture of the middle ages. An interest in medievalism had been growing among artists and writers since the late-eighteenth century and found expressive form in the manifestos of the German Romantic movement, particularly the Nazarene School, as will be discussed in further chapters. In Britain, the influence of the Nazarenes is seen clearly in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, founded in 1848, which sought and established new connections between Christian spirituality and visual culture and out of which some of the most prominent church artists of the nineteenth century emerged.

It was, however, in architecture (where revived medieval rituals could only take place in spaces designed to accommodate them) that the Gothic Revival was able to fully activate synergy between aesthetics and function. In the Medieval church, the Eucharistic rite was performed in a sanctuary in which the Priest and laity were separated from one another by a densely latticed rood screen. The overall effect, when added to the fact that the priest stood with his back to the nave, was to render the Mass virtually inaudible - it was, in any case, presumed that the Mass was inaccessible to the ordinary worshipper as it was spoken in Latin. The purpose of separating the laity from the priest, therefore, served simply to emphasise an unquestioned spiritual hierarchy and distinguish between the sacred and pro-

fane. In the nineteenth-century revival of these rituals, this division had a slightly different register. Christian worship in England had been through the democratising machine of the Protestant Reformation and worshippers, who listened to services delivered in their native tongue, were accustomed to a level of participation. A return to ritual opaqueness meant recasting separation as a division of mystery and beauty rather than (as Protestants characterised it) priestly contempt and the most effective way of foregrounding this was through the sumptuous decoration of the most sacred spaces. All of this stood in very stark contrast to the austere, neo-classical Georgian architecture of the low and broad church, with its clear-glass windows, white walls, shallow chancels and large pulpits - positioned prominently lest there be any doubt that the emphasis in Protestantism was squarely on sermons and preaching rather than mystery and ritual.

The combined utility and symbolism of Gothic, as articulated by Pugin (both in his writing and his built architecture) was quickly seized upon by Anglo-Catholics. In 1839, Cambridge undergraduates, John Mason Neale, Alexander Beresford-Hope and Benjamin Webb founded the Cambridge Camden Society with the aim of promoting Gothic architecture and antiquity. Such was the rapid success and subsequent influence of the Society that in 1845, it moved to London and became (and continues to be) The Ecclesiological Society.<sup>71</sup> The Society's journal, *The Ecclesiologist* provided a platform for discussing and disseminating ideas and was instrumental in securing Gothic Revivalism as the dominant style in Victorian church building.

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<sup>71</sup> J. White, *The Cambridge Movement: The Ecclesiologists and the Gothic Revival*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1979.

Gothic Revivalism was adapted to Anglican and, indeed other denominations of protestant church building, with negligible dissent.<sup>72</sup> As an 'olden-times' English style it suited the Victorian taste for comforting historicism and cultural elitism. Moreover, it was sufficiently unchallenging for its potentially unsettling Catholic roots to be overlooked. Ironically, it was a much more problematic style for the fledgling Roman Catholic church.

J.H. Newman's response to Gothic architecture perhaps best captures the difficulties that it posed to a church whose cultural and theological fault lines could trigger destructive tremors. Newman had been a founder member of the Oxford Society for Promoting the Study of Gothic Architecture in 1839 (The Oxford Movement's answer to the Cambridge Camden Society) and there is no doubt that he had initially been an admirer of the Gothic style. His growing concerns turned on its practicality and though he was generous in his praise of Pugin's eye for detail he was less sure of his grander vision. In a letter to Maria Rosina Giberne written in 1848, Newman complains that Pugin's:

*..altars are so small that you can't have a Pontifical High Mass at them...his tabernacles are so low that you can scarce have exposition...his East windows are so large that everything else is hidden in the glare...his screens [sic] are so heavy that you might as*

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72 Some non-conformists specifically rejected Gothic and preferred to use the classical idiom. The Baptist preacher, Charles Spurgeon, for example, held strong views on the style as one account suggests: 'Mr Spurgeon expresses a feeling of perfect horror at the Gothic. "Greek" he exclaimed "is the sacred tongue and Greek is the Baptists tongue...every Baptist place should be Grecian - never Gothic. We owe nothing to the Goths as Religionists.'" The Life of Rev. C.H. Spurgeon from His Birth to the Present Time, being a Complete Biographical History of the Great Preacher and a Critical Review of his Sermons, London, James Paul, 1860 p. 579.

*well have the function in the Sacristy for the seeing of it in the congregation*<sup>73</sup>

Newman's theological allegiances (in particular his commitment to the Tridentine Rite) finally trumped his cultural leanings. In 1847, Newman was ordained in Rome and consolidated his political position by joining the counter reformation Congregation of the Oratory of St Philip Neri. When he returned to England he founded the London Oratory and when the Oratory church was replaced in 1884, it was to the appropriately neo-Baroque designs of Herbert Gribble - a building that would have appalled Pugin.<sup>74</sup>

The choice between Gothic and Roman was not simply determined by party lines. The Jesuit Church of the Immaculate conception in Mayfair, London completed in 1849 to the designs of Joseph John Scoles employs the decidedly English, Decorated Gothic style. The interior furnishings, however, comprise an eclectic assemblage of Gothic and Counter-Reformation - the high altar, designed by A.W.N. Pugin, is characteristically true to his Gothic principles but elsewhere the side chapels depict Jesuit priests and images of the Sacred Heart in a starkly contrasting Roman style. Similarly, the lavish marble statuary and large painting of St Francis Xavier betray the Counter Reformation heritage of this community.

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73 Quoted in G. Hyland, 'Newman, Pugin and the Tridentine Liturgy' *True Principles*, Vol IV (III), 225-254 (Spring 2012). For a discussion of the relationship between Tractarianism and architecture also see J. Patrick, 'Newman, Pugin, and Gothic', *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 2, Winter, 1981, pp. 185-207.

74 Peter Howell suggests that F. W. Faber held particularly strong views about the correctness of the Baroque style: 'Father Faber is said have claimed that St Philip Neri (their founder) would have demolished Westminster Abbey and replaced it with a Baroque church'. P. Howell, 'Between medievalism and counter reformation: Catholic church building after Pugin', in T. Sladen and A. Saint (eds.), *Churches 1870-1914*, Studies in Victorian Architecture and Design, 2011, p. 29.

As the first buildings of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) in England, The Church of the Immaculate Conception and the adjoining Mount Street Jesuit Centre were highly significant in the establishment of Roman Catholicism in Britain. The Jesuits had been (and continued to be throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) the subject of a particularly focused hostility from British Protestants and so it must have been clear from the outset that the building's design would be a sensitive issue. In 1849 (just twenty years after Catholic emancipation) an elaborate Counter-Reformation style such as Gribble's London Oratory would undoubtedly have attracted unwanted attention but a quiet and conspicuously English design implied a certain humility and courtesy. Inside the church, however, the Jesuits were at liberty to decorate as they saw fit. This careful selection of styles, adjusted to the need to outwardly assimilate but inwardly articulate particular cultures and heritages, is also seen in some of the early convents that I will be discussing later.<sup>75</sup>

By the later nineteenth century the triumph of Ultramontanism ensured that the Tridentine Rite was used in almost all Roman Catholic churches, while the Sarum Rite all but disappeared. This meant that many of A.W.N. Pugin's impractical rood screens were removed and in some cases his chancels had to be rearranged. The Pugin scholar, Gerard Hyland proposes that a certain rapprochement between the Recusant Gothic style and the Ultramontane Roman liturgy was reached, appropriately, in the architecture of A.W.N. Pugin's son, Edward. Hyland suggests that E.W. Pugin's 1859

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75 Monsignor H. Pasquier gives an of an expatriate Good Shepherd community in which, 'The sisters said they were making a copy of their home, the Mother House. They told Mother Mary of Euphrasia they had the same devotions, the same statues in their chapel and that a lamp and candlesticks exactly like those at Angers, had been given them.' H. Pasquier, *Life of Mother Mary of St Euphrasia of Pelletier, foundress and the first Superior General of the Congregation of Our Lady of the Good Shepherd of Angers*, London, Burnes & Oats, 1953 (translation from original 1893), p. 366

church in St Eldon, Liverpool ‘resolves all of the criticisms that Newman had made of his father’s earlier country churches [and] finally succeeded in fully reconciling Gothic with the requirements of the Tridentine liturgy and associated devotions’.<sup>76</sup>

The great party line schisms drove Roman Catholic architecture in surprisingly creative ways but arguments over the virtues or otherwise of architectural styles were not confined to the church and were being played out widely elsewhere, as the extensive writings and lectures of John Ruskin testify. Against the backdrop of these lofty debates, emerged a petty but revealing rift between two of the most important figures in the Gothic Revival; though, like Pugin, Ruskin dedicated much of his work to the promotion of Gothic, he was openly disparaging of Pugin, making the unlikely claim that, other than *Contrasts* he had, ‘never read a word of any of his other works, not feeling, from his architecture, the smallest interest in his opinions’.<sup>77</sup> While the two would certainly have seen eye to eye on many matters, not least the effrontery of Pagan classicism to everything that was spiritual, beautiful and virtuous, Ruskin’s horror of Popery prevented him from ever being able to acknowledge the enormous debt that church architecture owed Pugin or his own grudging admiration of him.

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76 G. Hyland, ‘Newman, Pugin and the Tridentine Liturgy’

77 P. R. Conner, ‘Pugin and Ruskin’ *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 41, 1978, pp. 344-350.

## Restoring Faith: the (re)building of Mayfield Convent



**Figure 2.1** Watercolour of the Old Bishop's Palace, Mayfield.  
Source: SHCJ Archives

On November the 18th 1863, an open air Mass was celebrated in the ruins of a medieval bishop's palace in the village of Mayfield, Sussex. When it was celebrated again in the same spot, four years later, the congregation found themselves sitting under a roof, inside a chapel that proudly proclaimed itself to be the first pre-reformation ecclesiastical building to be returned to Catholic use. The restored chapel at Mayfield convent was an important moment in the revival of English Catholicism. It gave material expression to a growing Catholic confidence through the literal and symbolic restoration of pre-reformation ecclesiastical sites to Catholic worship - such building programmes were, to Catholics, symmetrical with the restoration of the true faith. Indeed, Cardinal Wiseman, then Archbishop of Westminster, was said to have considered the restoration at Mayfield 'a step towards the

conversion of England...the concern not only of the community but of the whole Catholic world'.<sup>78</sup> Unsurprisingly, this ambition did not meet with universal approval. At Mayfield, indignant opposition was raised to the reincarnation of the Old Bishops Palace by the Sussex Archaeological Society: a provincial band of local historians, antiquarians, landowners and country vicars.<sup>79</sup>

The following, examines what it meant to make a Roman Catholic convent in Victorian England and how the making of this convent can be situated within wider historical debates about religious culture and the reuse of buildings. How we choose to interpret, protect and rehabilitate the built environment reveals the way we see ourselves at a given moment in time, about how we understand ownership in real and abstract terms and about the extent to which reshaping our surroundings is also an exercise in reshaping our history. Few sites articulate this more volubly than the unique collection of buildings that, in the nineteenth century, comprised Mayfield convent

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78 Wadham, p. 237. Elsewhere, an anonymous biographer of Connelly suggests that, "the restoration of the ancient shrines of England was one of his most cherished dreams" *The Life of Cornelia Connelly 1809-1879* p363

79 The Rev Francis Close of Cheltenham gave a sermon in 1844 entitled 'The "Restoration of Churches" is the restoration of Popery', quoted in J. Patrick, 'Newman, Pugin and Gothic', *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 2, Winter, 1981, pp. 185-207, p186.





**Figure 2.2.** Mayfield Convent Chapel restored by E. W. Pugin, 1868  
Source: author



**Figure 2.3** Convent buildings at Mayfield by  
George Goldie, 1873. Source: author



**Figure 2.4.** Cloisters in Mayfield Convent  
by P. P. Pugin, 1883 - 4 Source: author

One of the key questions that Mayfield poses concerns where the buildings sit individually and as a group on the spectrum between restoration and rebuilding (figures 2.2, 2.3, and 2.4). It is a ‘Ship of Theseus’ question: is the site essentially a collection of restored medieval buildings or did it, at some point, become simply an ersatz version of medieval architecture? This is not, of course, a new question – it was one that was vital to Victorian ideas of architectural authenticity.

As discussed earlier, the pre-occupation with medieval architecture that had been fomenting from the late eighteenth century and found formal expression in the treatises of A.W.N. Pugin and the Cambridge Camden Society,

can be attributed in some part to its cultural and practical suitability to the revived liturgical practices of the Tractarians and Roman Catholics.<sup>80</sup> The 'medievalisation' of worship and the growing interest in pre-reformation architecture resulted in countless crumbling medieval churches being heavily restored and architects turned for inspiration to the work of the French restoration architect Eugene Viollet-Le-Duc, noted particularly for his work on Notre Dame.<sup>81</sup> In his 1849 essay, 'The Seven Lamps of Architecture' John Ruskin, expressed his disapproval, calling restoration 'a lie from beginning to end'. Ruskin's supporters included William Morris who, in 1877 co-founded the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) to address what he called the 'forgery' of restoration. The SPAB successfully lobbied for the Ancient Monuments Protection Act of 1882 which laid the way for subsequent legislation. The following is from the SPAB's Manifesto, written in 1877 by Morris, and is perhaps suggestive of Pater's 'art for art's sake' philosophy applied to historic architecture:

It is for all these buildings, therefore, of all times and styles, that we plead, and call upon those who have to deal with them, to put Protection in the place of Restoration, to stave off decay by daily care, to prop a perilous wall or mend a leaky roof by such means as are obviously meant for support or covering, and show no pretence of other art, and otherwise to resist all tampering with either the fabric or ornament of the building as it stands; if it has become inconvenient for its present use, to raise another building rather

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<sup>80</sup> James Patrick suggests that 'modern students of [the Oxford Movement] have often agreed that between the attempt to discover the ancient faith and the revival of Gothic there was, if not a causal relationship, at least deep sympathy. J. Patrick, 'Newman, Pugin, and Gothic', *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 2, Winter, 1981, pp. 185-207. p. 186.

<sup>81</sup> It is significant that Viollet-le-Duc's work was first translated into English by the Catholic architect Benjamin Bucknall.

than alter or enlarge the old one; in fine to treat our ancient buildings as monuments of a bygone art, created by bygone manners, that modern art cannot meddle with without destroying.<sup>82</sup>

Ruins, as the section above suggests, occupied a particular position both in terms of the practical implications for protection/restoration and also in the popular imagination. They became the muse of romantic artists and poets, like Turner and Wordsworth, inspired by their elegiac qualities. For historians and antiquarians they were historical records from which the nation could draw valuable lessons and locate a sense of identity. All of this lent weight to the convictions held by Ruskin, Morris and others that ruins should be preserved intact rather than restored.

It was against this backdrop, that the restoration of Mayfield commenced. In 1863, Louisa Carroll Duchess of Leeds purchased the ruins of a Bishop's Palace in the village of Mayfield. Parts of the building, which had once been the seat of the Archbishops of Canterbury dated to the thirteenth century. After the reformation, it passed into the hands of Thomas Gresham, and enjoyed a final moment of glory when Gresham received Elizabeth I there. After changing hands several times, it gradually fell into disrepair. By the late eighteenth century, the site had passed notionally from unsightly rubble to pastoral idyll - indeed a young Queen Victoria chose the Old Palace in 1832 as a picnic spot. By the time the Duchess of Leeds bestowed the ruins on the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, they were entirely uninhabitable

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82 W. Morris, Manifesto of the Society of the Protection of Ancient Buildings, 1877 <http://www.spab.org.uk/downloads/The%20SPAB%20Manifesto.pdf>

and the condition of her gift was that the sisters undertook a full restoration of the site.<sup>83</sup>



**Figure 2.5.** Workmen during the restoration of the former bishop's palace, c.1864. Source: SHCJ Archives

The Society of the Holy Child Jesus was founded in 1846 by an American Roman Catholic convert, Cornelia Connelly (1809-1879). Unlike many of the new Irish and French foundations and despite Connelly's own Ultramontanist leanings, her order was firmly rooted in English recusant Catholic culture - the school that she established at Mayfield became popular with 'old' Catholic families. Connelly herself was a determined and able woman with a firm grasp of public relations and a broad knowledge of history and art. She involved herself in all aspects of the community's development and took a central role in the design and construction of her convents - a subject which will be examined in detail in later chapters.

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<sup>83</sup>See M. Armour, *Cornelia: The Story of Cornelia Connelly, foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus*, Society of the Holy Child Jesus (internal publication) 1979. Also, J. Lancaster, *Cornelia Connelly and her Interpreters*, Way Publications, 2004.

The restoration of Mayfield was a particular ambition of Connelly's - alert to the wider significance of Mayfield, she shared Cardinal Wiseman's judgment that this would be a highly symbolic project. One biographer notes her determination that 'to have such a house [Mayfield] and all its associations with the Catholic past, as the centre of her society in England was 'worth any sacrifice'.<sup>84</sup> And she undoubtedly contributed to the overall design of both the chapel and, later, the convent buildings. In 1863 she commissioned E.W. Pugin to begin work on the rebuilding of the chapel and the adjoining North wing, including the tower.

The relationship between Connelly, and the infamously irascible Pugin, as further chapters will explore, was charged, quarrelsome and fruitful. In 1864, She wrote, rather provocatively, to Pugin:

We should prefer the East window long to take in a beautiful stained glass design .... The entrance from the infirmary to the tribune is not drawn, perhaps you have forgotten it ... of course you observed that your drawing of the choir windows on your section are not the same as those shown on the south elevation. Did you intend this or was the south elevation an afterthought?

And, most importantly, if the architect refused to do what Connelly asked, she sacked him. We know that Connelly did not re-employ Pugin to restore the east wing of the convent and we know that Pugin considered bringing a law suit against her because of this. It is unclear why she decided against Pugin – there is certainly no evidence that she was unhappy with the work he had done - so we are left to speculate. The following extract from a letter

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<sup>84</sup> Wadham, p. 235

written from Pugin to Connelly in 1868 does, however, hint at a possible reason, Pugin writes:

What you propose at Mayfield would ruin the whole job, we should have the finger of scorn pointed at us from all parts of the world. You have an antient [sic] building with all its size, grandeur and interest, these are decided advantages but like most other advantages they are attended with a certain amount of drawbacks which you had better make up your mind to endure.<sup>85</sup>

While we must draw inferences cautiously, the letter seems to suggest that Connelly had asked for a little of what William Morris might have called 'destructive restoration' of the medieval space and that Pugin, in characteristically charmless fashion, had refused. The job was given instead to the Catholic architect George Goldie - a curious choice given that Goldie had successfully sued Connelly in 1867 for the full costs of unexecuted plans drawn up for another church. The contracts with Goldie were signed on the 1st June 1872 (some four years following Pugin's letter to Connelly) and the restored buildings were blessed on the 15th December 1873. Goldie was clearly more amenable than Pugin to Connelly's vision - his restoration involved ripping out the great stone staircase (which was intact and complete with locally forged iron handrail) in order to create more space (figure 2.6).

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<sup>85</sup> Letter to Cornelia Connelly from Edward Pugin dated 1868, Archives of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus.



**Figure 2.6** Original staircase at Mayfield, removed during Goldie's restoration. Source: E. Bell, *Mayfield, the Story of an Old Wealden Village*



**Figure 2.7** New staircase and interior by Goldie, 1873. Source: author





**Figure 2.8** Photograph of the restored chapel shortly after completion in 1868. Source: SHCJ Archives

Goldie's additions are of a different order to Pugin's, both in terms of the level of intervention and in his freer, less anxious interpretation of the site (figures 2.3 and 2.7). In many ways Goldie's crisp-edged fantasy is braver than Pugin's stark, sombre and restrained chapel (figure 2.8). Indeed, the chapel interior is a space unlike anything else in Pugin's oeuvre (very little of which one might call restrained) and appears to be the work of a man who was acutely aware that his restoration of this important medieval building was under the scrutiny of his peers.

Tellingly, a critique of the restoration made in 1903 by a Mayfield resident, Eva Bell-Irving, mistakenly attributes Goldie's restoration of the school buildings and convent to Pugin and she wonders at the care that he took in the chapel but the apparent recklessness of his work elsewhere. She comments: 'Pugin showed much judgment in preserving with care all that is an-

cient in the buildings with the exception of the grand staircase which was demolished to give more room<sup>86</sup>

Clearly by 1903, the taste for authenticity in restoration and conservation had entered the mainstream.

The next phase of works saw alterations made to the chapel in 1881 and new school buildings in 1896 and offices, a dairy and cloister added in 1883-4, all by Peter Paul Pugin (figures 2.9, 2.4 and 2.10). If Goldie's interpretation could be described as free, then P.P. Pugin's was positively abandoned - the debt to Viollet-le-Duc in this little bit of Carcassonne in the East Sussex countryside, couldn't be clearer.



**Figure 2.9** Chapel with addition of rood screen, reredos and rails by P. P. Pugin, 1881. Source: SHCJ Archives

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<sup>86</sup> E. Bell-Irving, *Mayfield, the story of an old Wealdon Village*, London, William Clowes and Son Ltd. 1903, p.197,



**Figure 2.10** Gatehouse at Mayfield by P. P. Pugin, 1896.  
Source: author

In the chapel, P. P. Pugin added an enormous reredos to the High Altar and surrounded it with brass rails (figure 2.9). It is not clear why Mother Angelica Croft commissioned these arguably unnecessary additions twenty short years after the chapel was completed by E.W. Pugin but it perhaps articulates an anxiety that the restoration, though faithful to one vision of English Catholicism, also had to answer to another: the neo-Gothic simulacrum that had become the authentic devotional space for Victorian Catholics. Thus the reredos and altar rails have the odd effect of both completing the space as a Victorian neo-Gothic church whilst at the same time, entirely stripping it of its integrity.

None of this was at all popular with the Sussex Archaeological Society. Unfortunately, all of the letters and documents relating to the Society's case-work are currently in storage but the amount of time and energy that the

Society dedicated to Mayfield elsewhere, speaks for itself. Both Holy Child internal publications and biographies of Cornelia Connelly note the Sussex Archaeological Society's objection to the restoration. In a rather provocative move, the society chose the tiny village of Mayfield as the venue for their annual meeting just a few months before Pugin completed the convent chapel. Lengthy descriptions of the site and its history appear in both the 1867 and 1868 volumes of their journal. In the latter, a critical appraisal of Pugin's restorations is offered by one of their members, William Ansell Day, to whom I will return shortly. Most significantly however, the Society were clearly aware that it was useful to have important friends. A paper by the Anglican architect G. E. Street appears in the 1864/5 transactions of the Royal Institute of British Architects, a year after Pugin was commissioned to undertake the restoration of the chapel.<sup>87</sup>

Street's paper, which includes an extremely detailed survey and sketch (figure 2.11) of the ruins, concludes that the original roof would have been 'one of the most noble designs it was possible to conceive'. To commence work under this spotlight must have placed enormous pressure on Pugin and it seems clear, as mentioned earlier, that the austerity of his restoration was influenced by this anxiety. His letter to Cornelia Connelly expressing his fear of the 'finger of scorn' lends further weight to this reading of the chapel - what appears on first inspection, to be a very bold use of space was probably, in fact, a nervous compromise between Connelly's specifications and the increasing emphasis among architects and critics on preservation over restoration. As we have seen, Goldie proceeded apparently oblivious to the finger of scorn and by the time the SPAB's attention was

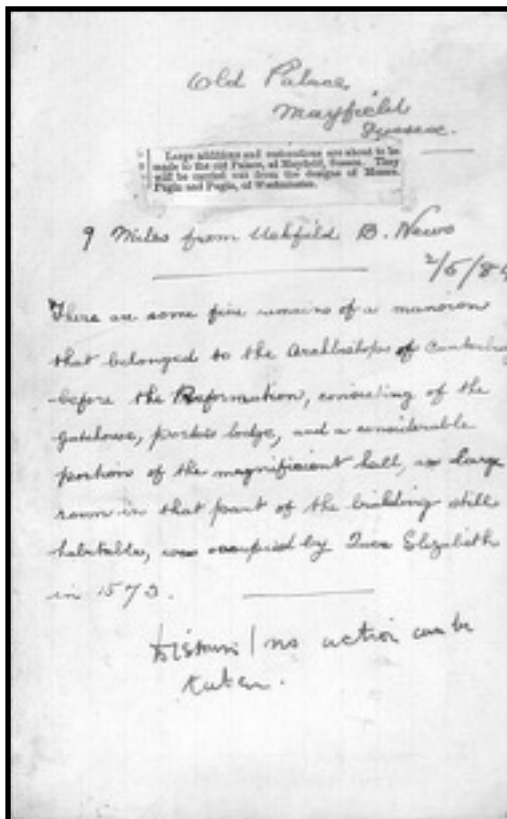
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<sup>87</sup> G.E. Street, 'On English Woodwork in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries', *Journal of The Royal Institute of British Architects*, 1864-5.

drawn to P. P. Pugin's proposed additions they simply looked at the site and noted, wearily, 'no action can be taken.'<sup>88</sup> (figure 2.12)



**Figure 2.11** Sketch of the Old Bishop's Palace by G.E. Street. Source: *Journal of the RIBA*, 1864-5



**Figure 2.12** Fig 2.12 Letter from SPAB concerning interventions by P. P. Pugin at Mayfield Convent: SPAB Archives

<sup>88</sup>Archives of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Monuments.

What was it about Cornelia Connelly, E.W. and P.P. Pugin and George Goldie's restoration of Mayfield that so offended the Sussex Archaeological Society? William Ansell Day's critique of Pugin's chapel offers a clue:

Speaking personally, I cannot think the restoration is well imagined. The great hall was built for the banquet; it was fitted for the revels of stately churchmen, but it was not the place where prayers were to be chanted and masses said. The tracery of those old windows to which the ivy clung so closely, and the decaying floors of those old chambers where the great Queen rested and which bore the Gresham crest, had a charm which can never attach itself to the grand but inappropriate splendours of Mr Pugin's chapel, or of the neatly restored chambers of the building to which it is annexed.<sup>89</sup>

The word that stands out in Ansell's review is 'inappropriate'. There are a range of ways that we might read Day's use of this word but coupled with the word 'splendour' (a specious charge, given the extreme austerity of the restored chapel) it hints at vulgarity. He is unambiguous about the 'inappropriate' use of the building – it was meant he says for 'the revels of stately churchmen' and emphatically not for 'prayers to be chanted and masses to be said'. And most significantly, he stresses the 'inappropriate' lack of deference to one of the major figures of the Protestant Reformation, the 'great Queen', Elizabeth I.

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<sup>89</sup> W. Ansell Day 'Additional Notes on Mayfield' *Sussex Archaeological Society* Vol. 21, 1869 p. 20.

Would it be over-reading Ansell Day to discern a shade of anti-catholicism? If he had been more explicit it would have contravened the gentlemanly rules of the Society which demanded that: 'controversy, especially on religious or political subjects...is expressly forbidden by our rules'.<sup>90</sup> But if this is a veiled expression of distaste at Catholic building projects (particularly those for religious communities) then he certainly would not have been alone. A growing hostility towards convents was expressed in the Reverend Seymour Hobart's lobbying of parliament, during the 1850s for a bill that would enable forced convent inspection – spaces that he insisted were little short of prisons.<sup>91</sup>

All of the above indicates that monastic ruins occupied a very important and highly contested space – for people like the Sussex Archaeological Society they were monuments to a history that was culturally British, whiggish and resolutely Protestant. To Catholics the crumbling state of their heritage was a painful reminder of Penal times and ruins were, therefore, to be restored and rebuilt at every opportunity.

To illustrate this point, the case of Kirkstall Abbey in Leeds makes a fascinating comparison with Mayfield.<sup>92</sup> At around the same time that P. P. Pugin was preparing his plans for Mayfield, the Yorkshire Archaeological Society

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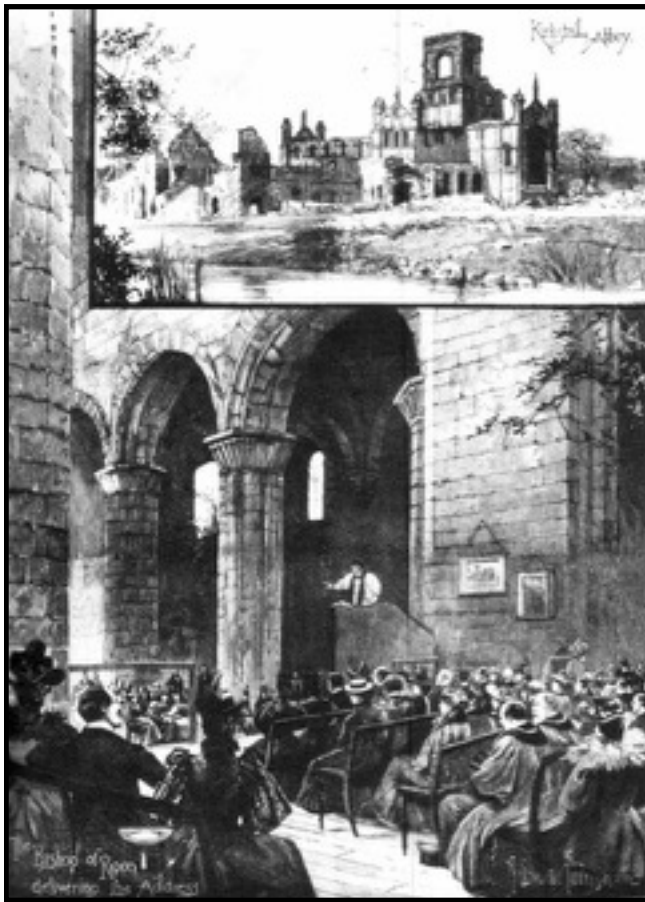
<sup>90</sup> 'Rules of the Sussex Archaeological Society' *Sussex Archaeological Society*, Vol. 21, 1869

<sup>91</sup> In *The World and the Cloister*, Agnes Stewart are suggests that the purpose of security in convents was to protect sisters from hostile outsiders rather than contain them response to Seymour Hobart X', In page 5 'Mr Seymour 'on lofty walls' massive gates barred windows' and he seemed willing to forget that a number of unprotected females, living alone require the security from without which bolts and bars can give.' *The World and the Cloister, to which is Added Prefatory Remarks on a Lecture on Nunneries Lately Delivered at Bath by the Rev. Hobart Seymour*, London, Richardson, 1852.

<sup>92</sup> Charles Dellheim makes a detailed analyse of the role of the Yorkshire Archaeological Society in the conservation of Kirkstall Abbey in C. Dellheim, *The Face of the Past: The Preservation of the Medieval Inheritance in Victorian England* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982 pp.92-106

discovered that George Gilbert Scott had been asked by Edward Ackroyd, a wealthy local industrialist, to draw up plans for the restoration of the former Cistercian monastery, Kirkstall Abbey. Scott, like E.W. Pugin, was clearly alive to the prospect of criticism and his proposal treads very carefully 'The clashing of antiquity by the reconstruction' he suggested 'would be but small'. This 'lightest of touch' approach wasn't enough to reassure the Society and they appealed to the newly formed SPAB for help. The SPAB successfully championed the cause and the ruins were eventually passed, intact, to the local authority. Like Mayfield, Kirkstall had come to occupy a space in the popular imagination as a picturesque ruin. Tributes such as Thomas Girtin's painting 'Kirkstall Abbey – evening' and George Hill's ode 'Kirkstall Abbey' shored up its romantic credentials and a certain emotional blackmail was brought to bear on any philistine with an ambition to improve it. But perhaps, more importantly, the few years that separated the restorations at Kirkstall and Mayfield had seen a sharp cultural and political shift in the way that the public, broadly, engaged with historic buildings. Kirkstall, like Mayfield had been a popular spot for picknickers since the early nineteenth century. After the Bank Holiday Act in 1871 the numbers of visitors rose sharply and the surrounding population came to regard Kirkstall as a part of their local heritage – a heritage which they had a right to access.





**Figure 2.13** Open air sermon held at Kirkstall Abbey. Source: C. Delheim, *The Face of the Past*



**Figure 2.14** Mass in Mayfield Convent chapel. Source: SHCJ Archives

The two images in Figure 2.13 and 2.14 show Kirkstall, having successfully resisted restoration and the fully restored chapel at Mayfield. The contrast between these pictures captures a great deal about the cultural, religious and political tensions in nineteenth century architectural discourses. At Kirkstall, we see a defiantly Anglican moment - here, the Bishop of Ripon, a broad-churchman, preaches from the pulpit in a roofless, tumble-down tribute to the Protestant Reformation. In contrast, Figure 2.14 depicts a High Mass taking place at Mayfield in the early twentieth century, a space that had been wrested from Protestant or secular control and returned to Catholic use. To do so meant to remake it in every sense – the highly ritualised, formal liturgy could not have taken place here without a complete and very specific reordering.

Is Mayfield any less authentic a space than Kirkstall Abbey? Mayfield convent or school as it is now, like all living buildings is characterised by accretion – it has grown, evolved and adapted. It cannot be said to be true to itself in the way that the Sussex Archaeological Society imagined possible, as it is no longer in use as a bishop's palace. Whether we can say that Kirkstall Abbey, preserved, ostensibly untouched, according to the conservation principles of the SPAB, is true to itself is a moot point. Its current use, which might loosely fall into the category of recreation and leisure, is one that is certainly at odds with Kirkstall's ecclesiastical roots. And if its purpose is to be a pristine testament to English history, then it might struggle to be described as that. Whilst it remains the picturesque ruin of George Hill's earnest elegy, the perpetual battle against entropy – continual maintenance of the structure and masonry, taming of the vegetation, mowing of the lawns and so on has preserved a monument that is no less a lie – to

borrow from Ruskin – than Mayfield. We might say, in fact that Mayfield is at least an honest lie.

The following postscript reveals insights into the way that Anglo-catholic women religious situated themselves in relation to English history and the triumph of the SPAB's approach to conservation philosophy. In 1916, a group of Anglican Benedictine nuns, took over the former St Mary's Abbey in West Malling, founded in 1096 by the Benedictine monk-Bishop, Gundulf of Rochester. Parts of the abbey were sufficiently intact to be used without a great deal of intervention or modification but all that remained of the original church was one transept, which the nuns used for worship. After the Second Vatican Council issued directives for the re-ordering of liturgical spaces, it became clear that the nuns would require a new abbey church so they commissioned the architects Maguire and Murray to design a space that, in the spirit of the Liturgical Movement, would promote ecumenism by drawing on early Christian architecture rather than a style that stressed denominational loyalties. The centrally-planned, simple and conspicuously modern space completed in 1964, makes no attempt to blend in with the Norman buildings to which it is adjoined (the nuns enter the church through the original eleventh century doorway) but rather evokes a monastic austerity in keeping with the nun's spirituality. William Morris would have approved

## Conclusion

Unlike Malling Abbey, there is nothing left at Mayfield that might be called a medieval building but neither could we call the Pugins' and Goldie's restorations strictly Victorian buildings. They are certainly not manifestos for the blustering rhetoric of Gothic versus Roman that buildings such as A.W.N. Pugin's, St Giles, Cheadle or Herbert Gribble's, Brompton Oratory might be considered. Rather, Mayfield is a complex site that expresses not only internal conflicts between patron and architect but also politely captures the tension between Catholic and Protestant, modernity and tradition, public and private, that characterised nineteenth century political, religious and cultural discourses.

A distinctive and intricately bound relationship between theology and architecture emerged during the nineteenth century. As we have seen, this intersected with a range of broader dialogues to shape the architectural identity of the Roman Catholic church. The liturgical function of space was a significant factor in the choice of aesthetic styles but, importantly, not all religious buildings were liturgical. Convents occupied an in-between space, aptly described by John Murphy in his 1876 directory of convents as 'Terra Incognita'. Because of the complex set of functions that convents demanded, those only fully comprehensible to the women who shaped and used them, these 'unknown worlds' could not easily be described, understood or classified by architects or critics. Sisters were often required out of necessity to design their own spaces and it was for this reason that religious life offered nineteenth and early twentieth-century women one of the very few opportunities to actively engage in architecture.

## Chapter 3

### 'A DIABOLIC INVENTION OF AN INFERNAL MIND': WOMEN'S AUTHORITY IN CONVENT DESIGN



**Figure 3** Stations of the Cross at St Mary's Convent, Roehampton by Sr Mary Tommaso c.1920s. Source: Photography by Kenny Hickey and Matt Spour

*'Mr Pugin the architect was determined we should not look out of the windows – they are up to the ceiling – I could not touch the glass without standing on a chair. I do not admire his taste though so celebrated' 93*

Catherine McAuley, 1839

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<sup>93</sup> M. Sullivan, *Letters of Catherine McAuley, 1818-1841*, The Catholic University of America Press; annotated edition edition, 2004 p. 230.

The design of nineteenth and twentieth-century convents was shaped in no small part by the extraordinary degree of independence that English religious communities had from the institutional church in the mid-nineteenth century. Women religious were in a unique position to patronise, commission, design and manage spaces in ways that no other women in lay and secular society were able to do. As historian and theologian, Sheridan Gilley suggests: 'Despite the constraints of the religious life, women in the Victorian religious orders enjoyed a considerable autonomy from male authority in both their day-to-day work and their general strategy of deciding what to do'.<sup>94</sup>

This was, to some extent, a by-product of government and bureaucracy in the early years of the post-emancipation Roman Catholic church. The interim administration of the 'Apostolic Vicariate' combined with limited finances and the need to quickly found missionary parishes and schools (particularly in urban areas), meant that women religious were indispensable in the establishment of the institutional church and, for the sake of expediency as much as anything else, were subjected to very little interference from the Vicars Apostolic.<sup>95</sup>

As discussed in the previous chapter, as the Catholic population boomed the weaknesses of the Apostolic Vicariate (inflated by the fact that England was not subject to Canon law) were laid bare and the need for a centralised

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<sup>94</sup> Quoted in B. Walsh, *Roman Catholic nuns in England and Wales*, p. 91.

<sup>95</sup> See E. R. Norman, *The English Catholic Church in the Nineteenth-Century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984 pp.70-71

government within the church became pressing.<sup>96</sup> The re-establishment of the hierarchy in 1850 meant the formalisation of dioceses overseen by bishops - a structure that had significant implications for women's religious communities. Those that were under papal authority (where the Rule and constitutions were papally endorsed) were able to continue relatively autonomously as the reach and see of the Vatican was generally too wide for the administrative or constitutional details of individual communities to come into the spotlight. Those communities that were episcopally endorsed and fell within the jurisdiction of bishops, however, found their authority increasingly circumscribed. This was compounded for all religious communities after Canon Law was finally codified in 1918 imposing centralised regulations on religious life for both men and women.

While the codification of Canon Law attenuated self-governance and independence, communities continued to operate according to the guidance of the Rule. As discussed earlier, this was a text usually written by the founder or foundress of the community (sometimes by or with the assistance of a cleric) which gave detailed instructions on day-to-day activities and spiritual life, and also provided clear instructions for how convent space should be shaped and used. It was not uncommon for communities to adapt the Rule of another order or congregation and almost all were founded on one of a number of models - many enclosed orders were founded, for example, on the Rule of St Benedict and most active orders were founded on the Rule of St Ignatius which emphasises prayer through work.

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

## Structure and economics

In many orders a Superior General was appointed for life (the first Superior General often being the foundress of the order) to oversee all the communities and promote unity and expansion. Each individual foundation had a Mother Superior who was either appointed or elected and had, after the Superior General, complete authority over the community. With some variation according to different vocations, the superior appointed a Mother Assistant, a Mistress of Novices and a Mother Bursar who generally served for a term of three years. The means of raising finances were dictated by the vocation of the community but chiefly comprised some combination of the following.<sup>97</sup>

### *Dowries and gifts*

Contemplative orders, which separated choir from lay (or sometimes external) sisters, traditionally relied on dowries, gifts and bequests. The emphasis within the Rule on asceticism and the fact that they often, like male monastic orders, owned large tracts of land meant that they were able to be broadly self-sufficient. Most semi-enclosed and some active orders also had the separate strata of choir sisters. Bringing a dowry to the community gave women a privileged position - generally the role of the choir sisters was to recite the office and the role of the lay sister was to perform manual

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid. p.91.



work. This two-tier system helped attract middle and upper class women to religious life which produced the added benefit of allowing the community to build valuable connections with wealthy Catholic families who might make substantial donations and bequests. After 1918, Canon law stipulated that dowries could not be spent within the benefactor's life time which meant that convent administrators became adept at making shrewd investments. Beyond dowries, religious communities relied on their work within and for the lay community to generate an income.

#### *Laundry work*

Laundry work, as will be detailed in subsequent chapters, was lucrative. It was undertaken not only by penitents but also by the sisters (the laundries of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God at Roehampton and Brentford were initially staffed by sisters) and by lay women from the parish who were paid.

#### *Education*

Male enclosed orders often augmented their income through the establishment of fee-paying schools such as those founded by Benedictines at Downside, Worth, Ampleforth and Douai abbeys. Male active communities such as the Jesuits and Oratorians also founded schools, though these were more often in urban centres and provided education for a wider range of social classes. Many women's communities whose Rule was based on the constitutions of the Jesuits (those such as the Society of The Sacred Heart and the Faithful Companions of Jesus) also prioritised education.

Those that founded fee-paying schools such as the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, very often used the profits to subsidise schools for the poor.

### *Nursing*

In the years before comprehensive state provision, women religious provided a very significant level of health care throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Historian, Carmen Mangion notes that, 'of the 113 women's religious institutes present in 1900, twenty-five provided significant health services; sixteen were involved in institutional medical provision, and ten provided medical services for patients in their own homes. Institutional care was offered in twenty-nine medical institutions, which included general hospitals, homes for incurables or the chronically ill, convalescent homes, and school infirmaries.'<sup>98</sup> As Mangion suggests, nursing had a special significance within the charism of many communities as the role of the sisters was not only to attend to the physical needs of the patient but also the spiritual ones - particularly for those facing death.<sup>99</sup>

In papally endorsed communities, the funds raised by the community were controlled by the Mother Superior and her administration. Even when an order or congregation was invited by the bishop to establish a community, diocesan funds were rarely advanced and many foundations started out in severely straitened circumstances. The great advantage of struggling at the outset was that it meant that women were able to maintain independence. Although bishops had 'visitation rights' which they tended to exercise once a year with the purpose of ensuring that rules were being observed and that

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<sup>98</sup> C. Mangian, 'To Console, to Nurse, to Prepare for Eternity': The Catholic Sickroom in Late Nineteenth-Century England', *Women's History Review*, 21:4 (2012), pp. 657-78. p.2.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

the convents finances were in order, this was largely a formality. As Barbara Walsh suggests: 'Bishops liked to keep, or liked the appearance of keeping, control over over a community's purse strings. However for some congregations such financial inspections might be assessed as a token exercise especially when it came to matters of property and investments'.<sup>100</sup>

Despite the fact that the Roman Catholic church largely accepted women's administrative (and to some degree, religious) independence, the authority that women religious exercised over their communities attracted a great degree of hostility and suspicion from secular and protestant society

### **Convent inspection and legislation**

The sharp growth of female religious communities contributed significantly to a mid-Victorian swell in anti-Catholicism, directed towards Anglo but particularly Roman Catholics. What ostensibly offended Protestants was the implicit rejection of marriage and motherhood that founding or joining a religious community constituted and the threat that this posed to separate spheres ideology. The set of social and cultural conditions that produced Coventry Patmore's ode to domesticity 'The Angel in the Home' were fun-

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<sup>100</sup> B. Walsh, *Roman Catholic nuns in England and Wales*, p.92

damentally opposed to voluntary celibacy and, perhaps more importantly, female authority.<sup>101</sup>

A lecture given by The Anglican clergyman, Michael Hobart Seymour in the Bath Assembly Rooms in 1852 laid bare Protestant hostility towards female religious communities. Based, ostensibly on his tour of convents in Italy and allegations that had been made about a community in Devonport run by the Anglican Priscilla Sellon, Seymour claimed that sisters: 'must spend their life-long existence, wearsisome to themselves, and useless to others, for they are without one object to interest or occupy them....the inner life of a nunnery is a life of monotony, wearisomeness, disappointment, contention, bitterness and despair'.<sup>102</sup>

It was in this climate that in 1869, Susan Saurin, also known as Sister Mary Scholastica, brought a lawsuit against the Mother Superior of a convent in Hull, Mrs Mary Starr. Saurin accused Starr of a campaign of persecution that began after she had refused to tell Starr what she had shared with a priest during confession and ended with her being ejected from the community. The case revealed details of convent life which included accusations of cruelty and bullying and a prohibition on communication with the outside world. The scandal was something of a gift to critics of female religious life as Michael Wheeler suggests:

Although mid-Victorian Englishmen had often voiced suspicion of convents because they believed that their inmates had pledged

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<sup>101</sup> Maria LaMonaca suggests that 'the aspect of Catholicism that most directly contributed to its popular designation as an 'anti-domestic' religion was surely its privileging of celibacy over matrimony' M. LaMonaca *Masked Atheism: Catholicism and the Secular Victorian Home*, Ohio: The Ohio State University Press, 2008 p 95

<sup>102</sup> Quoted in M. LaMonaca, *Masked Atheism*, p. 99. For a description of the Sellon scandal see R. Kollar, *Foreign and Wicked Institution? The Campaign Against Convents in Victorian England*. Cambridge: James Clarke and co. 2011 pp.268-276

blind obedience to Roman Catholic priests, in this instance they conceded what some defenders of convents asserted: that they were in truth 'female republics'. But if a striving for female authority constituted a part (a generally unacknowledged part) of the appeal of convent life, then the case of *Saurin v Starr* reconfirmed the conviction of most mid-Victorians that female self-government did not and could not work.<sup>103</sup>

Part of the preoccupation with convents, as evidenced by an abundance of over-excited Victorian novels and numerous apocryphal stories about dungeons, sadistic punishments, and 'unnatural behaviour', can probably be attributed to a prurient fascination with single-sex communities but it resonated at the highest levels of Victorian society and posed a material threat to convent life.<sup>104</sup>

Cross-party efforts were made in parliament to address the perceived threat of the burgeoning number of women's religious communities. In 1853 and 1854 abortive attempts were made by the liberal MP, Thomas Chambers to establish a parliamentary select committee to explore whether the inmates of convents might require additional legislative protection. The Conservative MP, Charles Newdegate campaigned ceaselessly for an Act of Parliament that would allow forced inspection of convents - places that

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<sup>103</sup> M. Wheeler, *Old Enemies: Catholic and Protestant in Nineteenth Century English Culture*, p. 21.

<sup>104</sup> The precedent for these was set by *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk, as exhibited in a narrative of her sufferings during a residence of five years as a novice and two years as a black nun in the Hotel Dieu nunnery in Montreal* first published in 1836. Among many lurid claims, (the fictional) Monk states 'I was now, she told me, to have access to every part of the edifice, even the cellar, where two of the sisters were imprisoned for causes that she did not mention. I must be informed that one of my great duties was to obey the priests in all things; and this I soon learnt, to my utter astonishment and horror, was to live in the practice of criminal intercourse with them'. Quoted in P. Gardella, 'American Anti-Catholic Pornography' in C. McDannell (ed), *Religions of the United States in Practice*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 2001, p. 459.

he claimed operated as extra-judicial prisons. Newdegate had a rather romanticised view of his own crusade which perhaps betrays something of his personal interest in the matter. He complained that, 'an increasing number of innocent English maidens [were being tempted] to chain their souls to irrevocable vows of obedience and to immure their bodies within red-brick convent walls.'<sup>105</sup> Though neither the efforts of Chambers or Newdegate were successful, women religious were constantly mindful that they operated under the watchful and often hostile eye of the English state.

While female authority within Victorian convents was, therefore, largely ascendant it was also perpetually challenged and women had to negotiate delicate paths through an antagonistic landscape. It was in this climate that women exercised their considerable if contested agency to shape and design convents to the specification of their own rules and constitutions.

It was certainly the case that women religious were directly involved in commissioning, purchasing, managing and often letting properties, as Barbara Walsh suggests: 'Backed by timely investments, property could be purchased, buildings renovated or built and many Superiors proved themselves women of assertiveness, skill and foresight.'<sup>106</sup> However, their interest in the architecture of convents extended beyond practicality; the incorporation of historicist styles and particular religious motifs in both the architecture and decoration of convents was a central concern.

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<sup>105</sup> Quoted in S. Mumm, 'Making Space, Taking Space', p. 3

<sup>106</sup> B. Walsh, *Roman Catholic nuns in England and Wales* p.107.

### Training to be an amateur

The increasing regulation and professionalisation of architecture meant that women, denied formal access to higher education and barred entry to the professions after marriage, were excluded from practising in any formal sense, for much of the nineteenth century.<sup>107</sup> Cloistered life, however, offered women the time to read, study and develop interests which they could put into practice informally in the construction and decoration of convents - indeed, as will be discussed in chapter 6, when necessity demanded, women often learned technical building skills from manuals. Moreover, some leisured women entered religious life armed with skills that allowed them to draw up architectural plans in the amateur tradition. The control that most women had over their communities, however, was not always sufficient to compensate for lack of training and did not always enable them to secure a direct creative role.

A case in point is offered by Mother Mary Anastasia Becket who, at some point in the late 1830s/early 1840s, drafted the plans for a convent (of which she was the patron) in Birr, Ireland. Becket is described in the convent annals as an artist and the plans were well received by the community. They were sent to A.W.N. Pugin, who was a personal friend of Mother Mary Anastasia, with a request for advice about the costs. Pugin returned them and the annals quote 'without remark (merely stating) what the likely cost would be. His estimate ruled out the project at once'. He then proceeded to

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<sup>107</sup> L. Walker, 'Women and Architecture' in Rendell, J., Penner, B. and Borden, I., (eds.) *Gender Space Architecture: an Interdisciplinary Introduction*, London, Routledge, 2000, pp 244-257

submit his own designs for the convent which were subsequently executed. An interesting post-script to this story is that, although the foundation stone of the convent was laid in 1846, the convent wasn't finished until 1876 because the excessive cost of Pugin's building was such that it had to be carried out piecemeal – as and when funds could be raised.<sup>108</sup> It is worth pointing out that, like Mother Anastasia, Pugin himself had received no formal training and did not provide technical plans for his designs and (perhaps like Mother Anastasia) his plans were often impractical and had to be adapted to be made financially viable.

Although no women religious had professional qualifications in architecture, many had received some form of art training. This included instruction from professional artists and artisans, which enabled them to master highly skilled crafts such as wood carving, sculpture, stained glass, mosaic work and embroidery. Many toured Europe, studying and sketching from the Old Masters and many went on themselves to disseminate these skills within and beyond their religious communities. Cornelia Connelly, Foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus placed art at the centre of her education curriculum and made sure that the sisters who taught it had sufficient skill to do so. In addition to hiring professional tutors (one Signor Regali was engaged by Connelly to teach the sisters 'modelling' so that they could 'make as well as paint' their own statues) she also herself taught the sisters watercolour techniques, issuing lengthy directions, such as : 'It is necessary to have a moist surface in order to prevent hard lines in the sky. It is necessary to have an old cotton stocking or cloth to absorb the water when too much is put on and also to vary and soften the sky...'<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Stephen Welsh Papers, File 123, Goldie, Goldie and Child.

<sup>109</sup> Wadham, p.192



The emphasis that Connelly placed on art within the charism of the community, continued after her death. In the late nineteenth century, a wood carving studio with links to the Arts and Crafts movement appears to have been installed within the grounds of the convent. This may have coincided with the construction of additional buildings in 1890 but the sisters benefited from lessons in woodcarving and produced such items as the intricately carved cover of the commemorative manuscript produced in 1894 in figure 3.1.



**Figure 3.1** Manuscript cover carved by SHCJ sisters, 1896.  
Source: Sr Helen Forshaw SHCJ

Women such as the Holy Child Jesus sisters worked purposefully, and produced art that had practical and symbolic value. Indeed, women religious sometimes received commissions and sold their work, generating an income for the community. Importantly however, they did not regard themselves as professional in any sense - to have done so would have been sharply at odds with the principle of humility that was fundamental in the

charism of all women religious. The skills and knowledge that they acquired were used, as the following case studies suggest, to communicate their vocations and theologies and, importantly, to understand and negotiate political sensitivities within both the Catholic and secular establishment.

### **Personalities and Power Struggles**

#### *Catherine McAuley and A.W.N. Pugin*

'I do not admire Mr Pugin's style', Catherine McAuley, foundress of the Sisters of Mercy complained after her first visit to the new, purpose-built Gothic convent at Bermondsey. Given that there is no evidence that she had an interest in architecture, her concern with the Gothic style is a little unexpected.<sup>110</sup> But, in fact, 'Mr Pugin's style' was profoundly significant to McAuley and to the establishment of her British foundations.

As discussed in chapter 2, the Gothic style was rarely employed in Roman Catholic Victorian architecture without some consideration of its political and theological resonances. Gothic had a particular and complicated significance in the architecture of active women's religious communities. The large majority of female apostolic communities had arrived from France and Ireland and of these, none had cultural affiliations with or loyalties to the Gothic style - indeed all were naturally inclined towards the theology and

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<sup>110</sup> M. Sullivan, *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley*, p. 225

Counter-Reformation culture of Ultramontaniam.<sup>111</sup> Despite this however, all of the convents commissioned by active orders before 1870 - the Mercy convents in Birmingham, Liverpool and Nottingham, The Good Shepherd Sisters (GSS) convents in Hammersmith, Dalbeth and others, the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity (OLC) convent in Bartestree and the Society of the Holy Child Jesus convent in Mayfield - were energetic expressions of Gothic Revivalism.

McAuley's first five English Mercy foundations were established in convents designed by A.W.N. Pugin. Each building had to fulfil a range of functions as the Mercy apostolate was varied and included refuge work, social work and education. Founded in Dublin in 1827, the congregation expanded very quickly, largely due to need created by poverty in Ireland and the international call to establish missionary parishes in England. By the time McAuley died in 1841, she had established forty foundations in England and Ireland.

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<sup>111</sup> The only evidence I have found of a preferred style among the missionary communities relates to the chapel at the Good Shepherd Convent in Angers; '[the architect] had the good idea of applying the Romanesque style of the C12th...with its noble and serious form, the Romanesque style is most suited to monasteries. It captures the austerity of the cloister with its calm gentleness and mystique'. Lachese, E., 'La Chapelle du Bon Pasteur D'Angers', *Extrait des Memoires de la Societe imperial d'agriculture, sciences et d'art d'Angers*, 1859, pp. 2-3. Romanesque and Italianate styles were also frequently employed in Ireland. For examples see the OLC Chapel at Highpark, Dublin and The Chapel of the Convent of the Good Shepherd, Limerick.



**Figure 3.2** Baggot Street Mercy Convent, Dublin, 1827.

Source: Archiseek

None of McAuley's Irish foundations were built in a Gothic or formal monastic style. Of the three still standing, all probably drew loose inspiration from French eighteenth and nineteenth-century convents (The Classical Baggot Street in figure 3.2, Charleville, built in 1839<sup>112</sup> with its pointed gables and round-arched windows has vague Romanesque notes while St Leo's in Carlow, 1837 is rigidly neo-Classical). It is clear from recollections in the Mercy annals that McAuley saw a basic incompatibility with the modernity of her congregation and the tradition of monastic life:

[the first Mercy House in Baggott Street, Dublin] was built in Conventual style which surprised and even amused her for she has told us since that she never intended to establish a Religious Order' although she came later to see that this was what God wanted.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> The National Inventory of Architectural Heritage of Ireland describes Charleville, slightly misleadingly, as 'Tudor Gothic' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VvrVSnaVWoY>

<sup>113</sup> M. Sullivan, *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley* p. 34

Only in the very loosest sense might we consider Baggot Street, a large neo-classical building that incorporates a simple cloister, to be built in the 'Conventual style'. Little wonder then, that McAuley was somewhat bewildered by Pugin's convent at Bermondsey, a towering Flemish Gothic Revival edifice which, in its insistence on formal monasticism, was a theatrical interpretation of convent architecture (figure 3.3).<sup>114</sup>



**Figure 3.3.** Mercy Convent Bermondsey, A.W.N.Pugin 1838. Source: The Institute of Our Lady of Mercy

By the time McAuley arrived in Bermondsey in 1838, the building was nearing the end of construction. It had been commissioned on speculation by

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<sup>114</sup> T. Brittain-Catlin, 'A.W.N. Pugin's English Convent Plans', p.357

Father Peter Butler who was hoping to attract a community of missionary nuns to help establish a parish. As the first purpose built convent to be constructed since the reformation, the site attracted a good deal of interest from the Catholic community. In 1844, for example, *The Tablet* commented that: 'Now there is a large handsome convent...a beautiful spire and belfry have lately been added so that once more may be heard (as in days gone by) at morning, midday and at eve, religions voice (the convent bell) summoning to prayer.'<sup>115</sup>

In 1837, the Sisters of Mercy accepted an invitation by Father Butler to found a community in Bermondsey and help with parish work. Despite being aware of the architectural significance of the site, McAuley was not at all impressed with the convent, complaining that: '[it is] not well suited to the purpose...the sleeping rooms are too large...the other rooms too small... the corridors confined and not well lighted. All the gothic work outside has made it expensive'<sup>116</sup>

It would appear that building work progressed after the sisters had moved in. Whether this is because Pugin's plans were not yet fully executed or whether McAuley issued further instructions is not clear. It is certainly the case, however, that a year after the sisters took up residence, it was still considered highly unsatisfactory:

The convent is not more than half built - I do not admire Mr Pugin's taste, though so celebrated - it is quite the old, heavy, monastic style. He was determined we should not look out of the

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<sup>115</sup> *The Tablet*, Vol. 3 16<sup>th</sup> April, 1844. 120 & 148.

<sup>116</sup> Letter to M. Josephine Warde, Cork, December 24<sup>th</sup>, 1839, M. Sullivan, *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley*, p.227.

windows - they are up to the ceiling -we could not touch the glass without standing on a chair. We have got one good room finished, with brown walls and a long table....The schools are not commenced yet - they intend to put cells over them, which are much required - for the part that is compleated [sic] is not well laid out - too much room in some places and not enough in others. We are obliged to go to the church to say our Office - but it is perfectly free to our use and nearer to the Community than the choir in Baggot St, is to the reception parlour - we have a private door - however it is certainly cold and bleak for a few. Mother Mary often says she likes Rutland Street Convent much better, and so do I.'<sup>117</sup>

Indeed, many of the sisters at Bermondsey appear to have remained unconvinced by Pugin's medievalism. One Mercy sister, writing in 1885 described the convent at Bermondsey as 'more like a tomb than a modern dwelling' and recalls scathingly:

There was at that time in England a sort of craze for the Pugin style, than which, as when applied to dwellings, nothing could be more comfortless. The impracticable people who would have nothing but the "old ecclesiastic" never thought of combining the conveniences of modern civilisation or rather it's absolute requirements, with their bald gothic barns, but most melancholy among the cheerless enough anywhere but most melancholy amid the London fogs.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> M. Sullivan, *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley*, p. 227. Rutland Street convent in Cork was a purpose built convent but was already standing when the Sisters moved in. The sisters moved out in 1852 to a new Gothic convent on the site of an old dominican priory

<sup>118</sup> Anonymous, *Leaves from the Annals of the Sisters of Mercy*, New York: The Catholic Publication Society Co., 1885 p. 56.

Gothic as an aesthetic choice for a modern convent clearly baffled the newly arrived Irish sisters who wondered why anyone would choose to build in the 'monastic style of some far away century' but the impractical nature of the design was the real sticking point.<sup>119</sup> One of the features of Bermondsey that McAuley particularly disliked was the lack of a covered walkway between the convent and chapel - something that irked her so greatly that she produced an acrostic poem on the subject.<sup>120</sup>

It might seem surprising then, that in 1840, she chose to re-engage Pugin in the building of her next convent, St Mary's (originally St Ethelburga) in Handsworth, Birmingham (figure 3.4). It is reasonable to assume that she had little choice in selecting Pugin, as the project was financed by the Earl of Shrewsbury who was also Pugin's patron and mentor. McAuley was clearly determined, however, to adapt Gothic to the Mercy Rule as best she could and to check any of Pugin's excesses. Rosemary Hill describes Handsworth, as 'a cheerful, pretty building, feminine in scale yet robust' invoking masculine and feminine features with the aim of capturing something of the working relationship between Pugin and McAuley.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Timothy Brittain-Catlin suggests that McAuley, 'was sufficiently annoyed about [the walkway] to write an acrostic poem on the subject, which is kept at the convent's archives. This persuaded the priest, Butler, to have a covered way built'. T. Brittain-Catlin. 'A.W.N. Pugin's Residential Architecture in its Context' p.97

<sup>121</sup> R. Hill, *God's Architect*, p.88.





**Figure 3.4** St Mary's Convent, Handsworth, 1840. Source: English Heritage

The construction of St Mary's, Handsworth offers the best documented account of a foundress working with an architect on the design of a convent - lengthy correspondence between McAuley and her circle detail her involvement in and views upon the buildings produced by and for her. Her detailed architect's brief for Handsworth indicates that she had clear ideas about how the building should function - an area in which she had considerably more expertise than Pugin. Her specifications were exacting:

[The] convent should have at least twenty cells – 10 feet by 7- a small window – and small door made so close to the partition wall as to leave a sufficient space for the Bed's head a Novaship – about 18 feet 14 – a community room– Refectory – and Choir – each to be 25 feet by 19 – good room for infirmary – and a small reception parlour. It is very desirable that there should be only two floors above the basement story. The refectory should be close to the Kitchen – all executed in the plainest style, without any cornice – cheap grates and stone chimneypieces.

Furthermore, McAuley provided Pugin with, not only details about the type of furniture that she wanted but also sketches (figure 3.5). In a letter to the Vicar Apostolic, Thomas Welsh, she writes:<sup>122</sup>

Furniture wanted for the convent: a straw and hair mattress for the beds. Small press, not too high, that will answer for a wash stand with a small drawer and cupboard underneath for the linen.

The chairs in the Noviceship and Community rooms not heavy (what we have are cane seats).

The refectory tables to be of plain deal, not painted of this form (picture) (my note: Perhaps the tables were painted at Bermondsey).

The side tables to be 2ft 5 in high and two feet in width, the length in proportion to the Room.

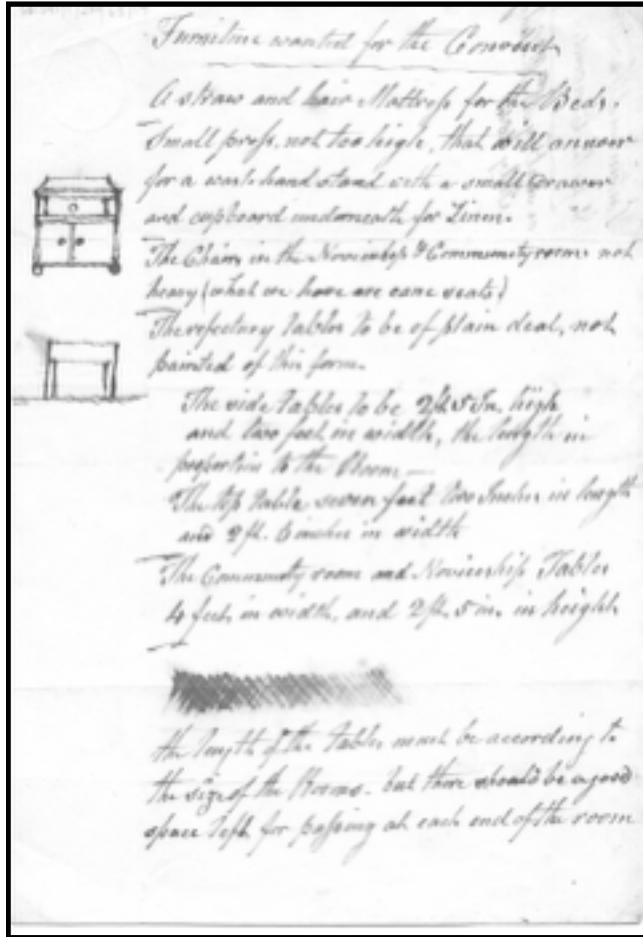
The top table seven feet two inches in length and 2ft 6 inches in width.

The Community room and Noviceship Tables 4 feet in width and 2ft 5 inches in height.

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<sup>122</sup> Roderick O'Donnell suggests that, at Handsworth 'Pugin took great pains to furnish the interior'. This would seem to have been compromised to some extent by McAuley's stipulations. R. O'Donnell, *Pugin and the Midlands*, p.72

The length of the tables must be according to the size of the Rooms. But there should be a good space left for passing at each end of the room.'<sup>123</sup>



**Figure 3.5.** List and sketch of furnishing required for Handsworth by Catherine McAuley. Source: RSM Archives

Pugin's diary suggests that he dutifully took down these details and reproduced them precisely as McAuley requested.<sup>124</sup>

<sup>123</sup> M. C. Sullivan, *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley*, Letter dated February 4th 1840.

<sup>124</sup> R. Hill, *God's Architect*, p. 87.

Despite extensive musings on typologies of religious architecture, including monasteries, Pugin wrote very little on convents.<sup>125</sup> We might speculate reasons for this reticence but it is certainly the case that he misunderstood the purpose and function of modern convents. As an enthusiastic advocate of medievalism, he took a romantic but outdated view of women's religious orders. Roderick O'Donnell notes that "Pugin had definite views on the necessity of a strict enclosure required by the rules of orders of monks and nuns founded in the Middle Ages' and the convent at Bermondsey suggests that he thought he was designing for an enclosed order – in what McAuley disparagingly describes as 'quite the old monastic style'.<sup>126</sup> But in fact the vast majority of communities were, like the Sisters of Mercy, simple vowed, active congregations who required buildings that answered to a range of practical demands. In many respects these convents had more in common with modern secular institutions (buildings that were, no doubt, anathema to Pugin) than pre-reformation monasteries.<sup>127</sup>

It is clear then, that when Pugin embarked on Handsworth, despite McAuley's detailed instructions he was still struggling to understand the brief and while he may have taken on board that the Sisters of Mercy did not require or want an enclosed monastery, he continued to cast about for a medieval template. Pugin appears to have drawn inspiration for Handsworth

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<sup>125</sup> See A.W.N. Pugin, *The True Principles of Christian or Pointed Architecture*, London, 1841., A.W.N. Pugin, *Contrasts: or, A Parallel Between the Noble Edifices of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries, and similar Buildings of the Present Day; showing the Present Decay of Taste: Accompanied by appropriate Text*, Salisbury, 1836; 2nd edition, London, 1841, A.W.N. Pugin, 'On the Present State of Ecclesiastical Architecture in England' (part I), *Dublin Review*, vol x, May 1841, pp 301-348; (part II), *ibid*, vol xii, February 1842, pp 80-183.

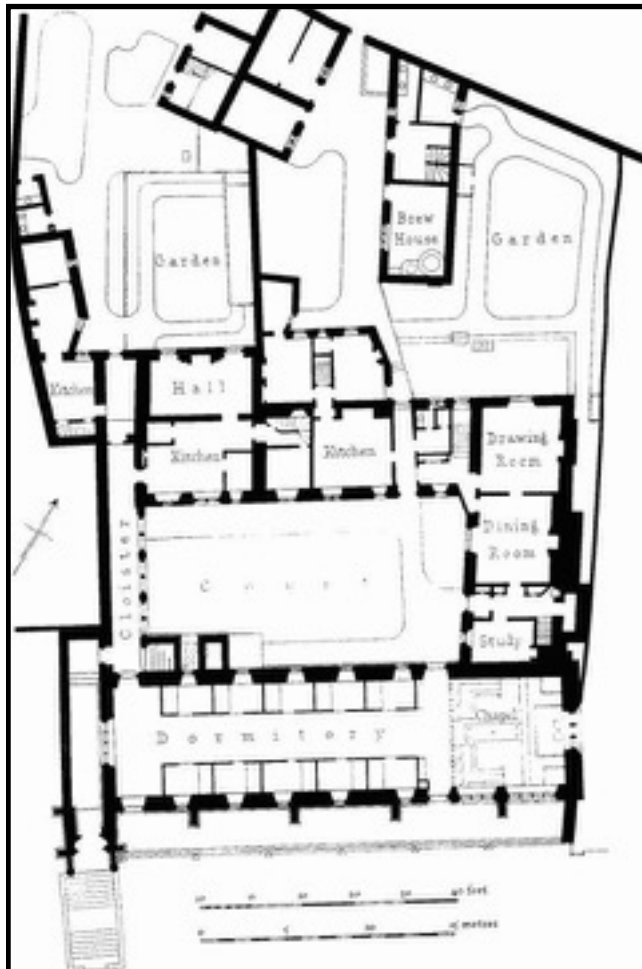
<sup>126</sup> R. O'Donnell, *Pugin and the Midlands* p.71.

<sup>127</sup> Pugin in fact makes a series of comparisons between contemporary institutional buildings and medieval alms houses and hospices in *Contrasts*.

from the fifteenth-century Browne's Hospital (figure 3.6)<sup>128</sup> and a letter to J.R. Bloxham, written during the construction of Handsworth emphasises the significance of the 'hospital' as a template:

'I am erecting a hospital for the Sisters of Charity [sic] at Birmingham. It is quite in the solemn devotional spirit of Catholic England. no French dolls.

"No tinsel or Milliners finery" are to be found within the walls'.<sup>129</sup>



**Figure 3.6.** Plan for Browne's Hospital.  
Source: T. Markus, *Buildings and Power*

<sup>128</sup> 'Hardman has given the land and Pugin has drawn the plan, 'based chiefly upon that of 'Browne's Hospital' in Stamford, for the convent now building for this institution at Handsworth, which will include a chapel, cloister, community room, refectory, offices and private chambers besides rooms for about thirty 'female orphan children' 'Sisters of Mercy' in Birmingham, *Orthodox Journal* 10 (30 May 1840): 351-52, quoted in M. Belcher, *The Collected Letters of A.W.N. Pugin*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003.

<sup>129</sup> Quoted in R. O'Donnell, *Pugin and the Midlands* p.72

Though Handsworth does have something of the outer appearance of Browne's hospital however, it functioned internally as a modern convent. One area of convergence between the two internally was the proximity of ground floor cells to the chapel - the only feature of the layout with which Catherine McAuley was unhappy: 'I do think some of his plans would admit improvement; for example, he has brought the cells close to the chapel door, which will, I fear, be attended with some inconvenience.'<sup>130</sup> Elsewhere, McAuley took exception to some of Pugin's decoration, commenting: 'I do not admire his gilded figures of saints; they are very coarse representations, and by no means calculated to inspire devotion.' Though she disliked them, they were not removed but simply became part of a more eclectic interior design as the building accreted. As Roderick O'Donnell points out, 'Pugin installed medieval carvings, especially in the cloisters which today jostle with the very *bondieuseries* he denounced.'<sup>131</sup> I suggest that it is the very 'jostling' of competing tastes and functions at St Mary's that provides the key to understanding this building.

The definitive analysis of Pugin's designs for Handsworth is Timothy Brittain-Catlin's 2006 article, 'A.W.N. Pugin's English convent plans' This exemplary study makes a thorough and detailed reading of the site and proposes that the unusual design at Handsworth and subsequent Mercy convents, a conspicuous departure from his rigid historicism, demonstrates a flexibility and creativity that undermines Pugin's own professed desire to 'revive, not invent'.<sup>132</sup>

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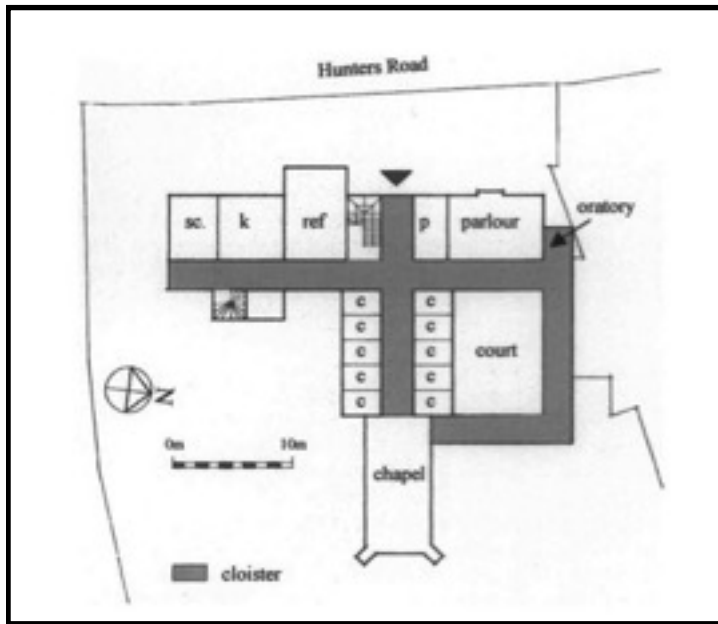
<sup>130</sup> Letter to a Sister of Mercy (late August 1841) M. C. Sullivan, *The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley*, p.433

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.* p.72

<sup>132</sup> Quoted in P. Stanton, *Pugin*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1971

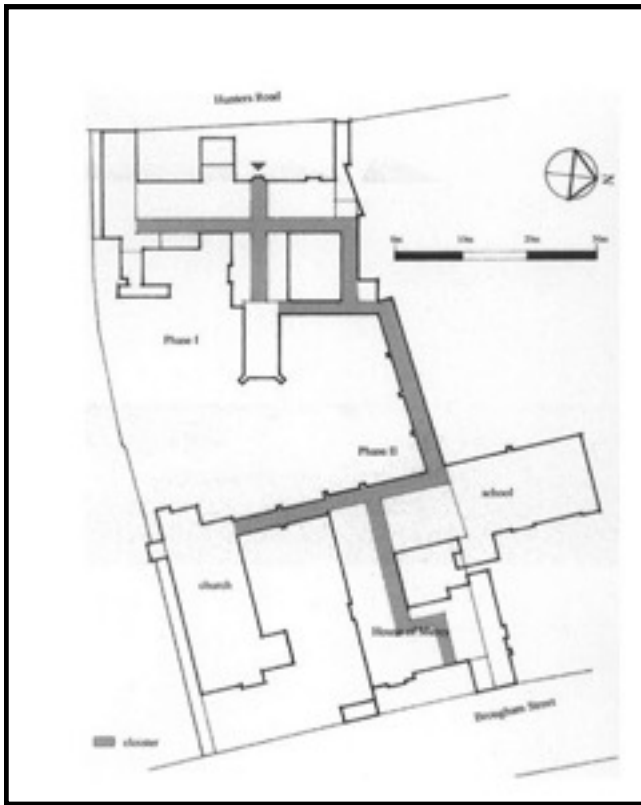
Brittain-Catlin draws his evidence from, in particular, Pugin's use of meandering corridors and expansive circulatory space in the Mercy convents:

The question raised by these prolonged routes is why Pugin, seen by Pevsner as a proto-functionalism, would design extensive and unnecessary circulation space for such low-budget buildings. The first possible answer is that he did it for architectural effect, for the architect discovered early in his career that even a cheap building can gain theatricality through the treatment of the junctions between corridors.<sup>133</sup>



**Figure 3.7.** Plan of Handsworth, first phase. Source: T. Brittain-Catlin, 'A.W.N Pugin's English Convent Plans'

<sup>133</sup> Brittain-Catlin, p. 366.



**Figure 3.8.** Plan of Handsworth, late 1850s. Source: T. Brittain-Catlin, 'A.W.N Pugin's English Convent Plans'

The question of why Handsworth comprises such seemingly 'unnecessary circulation space' is certainly worth consideration. Pugin's original design for Handsworth shows a formal, traditional monastic plan (figure 3.7) but the plan of the site in the late 1850s, produced by Brittain-Catlin, shows a lengthy cloister (completed in 1844) connecting the original convent site with a school and a House of Mercy at the eastern end which are, in turn, connected with the church (figure 3.8). Brittain-Catlin suggests that it is the apparent needlessness of providing such a lengthy cloister that offers evidence of Pugin's willingness to experiment and deviate from tradition. What this misses, however, is the importance of the cloister within the practical and theological function of the convent: that it allowed lay women from both the House of Mercy and children from the school (segregated from the sisters and from each other) to access the church separately via one covered



walkway. Given this, it might be reasonable to infer that the length of cloister had less to do with a whimsical desire to create meandering ambulatory space than that the House of Mercy was set at a respectable distance from the convent and allowed different groups to access communal spaces via different but linked routes.<sup>134</sup>

As further evidence that meandering circulation space was employed by Pugin for 'architectural effect', Brittain-Catlin notes the relative 'splendour' of the cloisters: 'by the economic standards of the complex as a whole, these cloisters, with their cascading stairs are very grand'.<sup>135</sup> But the additional cloisters were financed, in two phases, by Barbara Hardman who donated ring-fenced funds specifically for their construction.<sup>136</sup> Lavish and 'ahistorical' cloisters were not part of Pugin's original plan: as Brittain Catlin himself notes, the original design for St Mary's has much in common with the 'highly historicising cloister plan' of Mount St Bernard's Abbey which Pugin had just completed for the Cistercians in Loughborough (figures 3.9 and 3.10).<sup>137</sup> Far from being than an affectation, I suggest that cloisters were a practical addition, necessitated by the Mercy Rule<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> An alternative reason for the length of the cloister is offered by Roderick O'Donnell who suggests that the topography of the site might have required the House of Mercy, school and church to be positioned further from the convent than was initially planned.

<sup>135</sup> Brittain-Catlin, p. 362

<sup>136</sup> 'The Cloisters connecting the Convent with the House of Mercy had been built by Mrs Barbara Hardman and these were continued to the Church and are well adapted for Processions' Annals of the Sisters of Mercy, Archives of p.20. Also see Jeffery, B., *Living for the Church before everything else: The Hardman Family Story*, RSM internal publication, 2010, p. 48.

<sup>137</sup> Brittain-Catlin, p. 360.

<sup>138</sup> Though not a sister, Barbara Hardman was a 'lay-boarder' at the convent.



**Figure 3.9.** Pugin's design for St Mary's, Handsworth. Source: English Heritage



**Figure 3.10 .** Pugin's design for Mount St Bernard's Abbey, Leicestershire, completed 1837. Source: victorianweb

In the convent building, though McAuley had done her best to moderate Pugin's medievalism, the sisters subsequently found that various elements of the site still proved unsatisfactory. Between 1850 and 1876, the sisters oversaw 'improvements' to the plan and made substantial changes to the layout of the convent, including building cells to replace those positioned with inconvenient proximity to the chapel. The convent annals record that:

Towards the close of the year 1850, two good sized rooms for a Mixed and an Infant School were erected over an Almonry with a kitchen attached to it for the poor who had hitherto been served

from a lower kitchen of the Convent. A corridor of Cells was built over the School Rooms and connected with the upper floor of the Convent. When the cells of the upper Corridor were ready for occupation, the Cells in the cloister leading to the Choir were vacated. Those on one side form the Chapter room and the opposite partitions remained to make the sacristy and Rev. Mother's room. At the same time the kitchen was enlarged and a wooden partition was put up to form a passage leading to the back stairs and Almonry Schools...<sup>139</sup>

...in 1858 the screen in the Convent Choir was removed to make room for 2 extra Stalls on each side. The prie-dieus in front of the stalls were also taken away. The hot water apparatus was laid on round the cloisters and through the chapel.<sup>140</sup>

Additional changes were made in 1876 as the annals record:

As the rings of the bell grew more frequent, The inconvenience of having to cross the court in all weathers to open the door to all who came became more serious. Accordingly, in the autumn of 1876, plans were drawn up for the changes required...The refectory was to be lengthened 14 feet by being built out towards the road. The community above being correspondingly enlarged. A new cloister beginning at the place occupied by Our Lady's Oratory and reaching to the road was to form the new entrance and over it a cell was to be built, adjoining the Noviceship. The old porch was to be transformed into the oratory. The portress room

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<sup>139</sup> Annals of St Mary's Convent, Handsworth, 1841 - present, p.56.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

opposite the store room was to be added to the chapter room, the portress taking up her quarters at St Michaels.<sup>141</sup>

This rather undermines Brittain-Catlin's suggestion that Pugin's skill lay in being able to 'translate into a room layout the concept of distinction between different types of activity and person, and also of periods of transition from the outside world into a state of grace.'<sup>142</sup> The features, such as cloisters, that he highlights were not unprecedented in convents and cannot be attributed to Pugin - women religious in Ireland and France had been building convents in a range of historical styles that incorporated cloisters and processional spaces and were fully able to incorporate the spatial distinctions between, 'different types of activity and person, and also of periods of transition from the outside world into a state of grace', themselves, indeed these distinctions were absolutely fundamental to the Rule of all active sisters.<sup>143</sup>

Brittain-Catlin suggests that it was the 'free hand that [Pugin] was allowed when designing convents' that accounts for quirkiness of the buildings he produced for the Sisters of Mercy.<sup>144</sup> Though he might have had a 'free hand' in the design of the speculatively built convent at Bermondsey, I suggest that Pugin had anything but this at Handsworth. Rosemary Hill, I believe, rightly maintains that 'the credit Pugin has been given for the 'rational approach' to planning [at Handsworth] should really go to Mother

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> T. Brittain-Catlin, 'A.W.N. Pugin's Residential Architecture in its Context', PhD Thesis, Cambridge University, 2004., p. 219.

<sup>143</sup> Lengthy cloisters, separate walkways and even tunnels are a feature of the labyrinthine GSS Mother House in Angers built in 1833 (see figure 4.22) and almost certainly provided the model for Hammersmith (Gothic additions to which made by Pugin). At least one of Catherine McAuley's convents in Ireland (founded before Handsworth) incorporated a cloister.

<sup>144</sup> Brittain-Catlin, p. 374

McAuley'.<sup>145</sup> This is supported by the fact that the capriciousness of Pugin's 'ahistorical' convents, as Brittain-Catlin concedes, was visible nowhere else in his oeuvre and was a subject upon which he is 'not recorded as ever having uttered a word.'<sup>146</sup> I suggest that Handsworth reflected less Pugin's 'eccentric planning' than expedience – less artistic flourish, than a set of compromises and accretions that, in fact, disrupted Pugin's vision. He was certainly not a man who believed in design by committee, as the architectural historian Roderick O'Donnell suggests, Pugin sometimes attributed his perceived failures to outside interference from the 'self-appointed devil's advocate [always] thrusting his claw and spoiling the job....the furious committee man, the prejudiced ecclesiastic [and the] liberal benefactor.'<sup>147</sup> The interference of women religious in the design of his convents might explain why, despite being central to medieval religious life, convents barely feature in Pugin's treatises on Gothic architecture.

McAuley was a highly capable administrator, leader and businesswoman who had a firm grasp of politics. Though she was by no means a connoisseur, she certainly understood the importance of architecture and was able to negotiate with powerful patrons whilst at the same time ensuring that her convents could function according to her Rule. Had she attempted total control of the building programme, as Mother Mary Anastasia had tried with her convent in Birr, she might have lost all ground - she would have been pitted against not only Pugin but her patron (and Pugin's great champion) the Earl of Shrewsbury. McAuley instead brokered a deal in which she

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<sup>145</sup> R. Hill, *God's Architect: Pugin and the Building of Romantic Britain*, London, Penguin, 2007. p.88

<sup>146</sup> Brittain-Catlin, p. 360

<sup>147</sup> R. O'Donnell 'Introduction' in *The Present State of Ecclesiastical Architecture* p. xvii

accepted the visual language of Gothic at Handsworth but imposed, as best she could, the technological pattern of her convents in Ireland. It was, in many ways, irrelevant whether or not she personally liked the Gothic style (we may draw conclusions from the fact that, though she praised it to the Bishop of Galway, she consistently disparaged it in her letters to sisters).<sup>148</sup> What was important was that she understood its cultural significance: not only did Gothic allow convents to soften into the English landscape but, ironically, its pre-reformation heritage lent weight to a quiet propaganda campaign being mounted by Roman Catholics which sought to claim Catholicism as England's original and true religion. The following report in the Catholic Press of Catherine McAuley's first convent at Bermondsey illustrates this point clearly:

We feel happy in being able to give an engraving of this Convent which contains the holy community. Hitherto we have given only representations of the convents and other religious houses which the Zeal of our ancestors so profusely scattered over this once happy country...it must, however, be gratifying to every Catholic heart now to witness a revival of those holy practices of piety and charity which characterised our beloved country in times past<sup>149</sup>

Architecture was a powerful tool, as Catherine McAuley was well aware, in the drive to assert the moral and theological rectitude of Roman Catholicism in England.

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<sup>148</sup> Perhaps ironically, Catherine McAuley's tomb in the grounds of the her first Mercy Convent in Baggot Street, Dublin is a conspicuously Gothic construction.

<sup>149</sup> *The London and Dublin Orthodox Journal of useful knowledge and Catholic Intelligencer* vol IX Saturday December 21<sup>st</sup> 1839 No.234.

*Cornelia Connelly, Goldie, Wardell and E.W.N. Pugin*

Nowhere is this campaign made plainer than in the restoration of the medieval Bishop's Place in Mayfield, executed under the direction of Cornelia Connelly, foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus between 1863 and 1873 and outlined in the previous chapter. The dynamic between all architects and patrons - the economic constraints, conflicting ideas and compromises are what push and pull buildings into their final shape. But there is an added dimension to the power play between Cornelia Connelly and her architects: that Connelly was a woman living at a time when most of her female counterparts were denied rights over their property, were barred from the professions and largely confined to the domestic sphere, is absolutely central to the way the buildings at Mayfield took shape in the 1860s and 70s.

Connelly entered religious life under exceptional circumstances. Born in 1809 in Philadelphia, she married and had five children, two of whom died in infancy. In 1839, she converted, at her husband's Pierce Connelly's behest, to Roman Catholicism and the two moved to Rome while Connelly was pregnant with their fifth child. Shortly after arriving, Pierce Connelly declared that he intended to join the priesthood. The two were granted a Papal Decree of Separation and he was ordained in 1845. Cornelia moved into the Trinità dei Monti convent in Rome and soon after made the decision to enter religious life herself, hoping to join the Society of the Sacred Heart. Instead, however, she decided that her calling was to start her own teaching order, The Society of the Holy Child Jesus and produced a Rule which was promptly endorsed by Pope Gregory XVI. She arrived in England in

1846 with two of her children and founded a community in a convent that had already been built on speculation in Derby.<sup>150</sup>

Shortly after her arrival, however, Pierce Connelly renounced both his priesthood and Roman Catholicism and arrived in England to demand that Connelly also do so and return with him to America as his wife. She refused and he claimed custody of the children, removing them to Rome and holding them to ransom in the expectation that she would not be able to give them up. She made the decision, however to remain in England and as a last resort Pierce Connelly brought a lawsuit against her in 1849 for restoration of conjugal rights. With the support of Bishop Thomas Grant, Connelly fought the case and won but the legacy of this notorious case (one that drew unwanted attention to the issues of celibacy and marriage within religious orders) was that Grant was cautious about supporting Connelly in further litigation.<sup>151</sup>

During Connelly's time with the Sacred Heart Sisters at the Trinita dei Monte convent in Rome, her ideas on the theological significance of art and architecture, began to foment. Two, in some respects conflicting, factors appear to have been at play in the artistic inspiration that she drew from Rome. It is clear that she was inspired by the Classical and Baroque art and architecture that surrounded her but she also absorbed, via instruction from a member of the Nazarene Brotherhood, the aesthetic and spiritual principles that lay behind Gothic Revivalism. These were clearly combined

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<sup>150</sup> Though sometimes attributed to A.W.N Pugin the convent was actually designed by Charles Hansom. It was so poorly built that it had to be demolished in the 1850s.

<sup>151</sup> Among other biographers see J., Lancaster, *Cornelia Connelly and her Interpreters*. Oxford, Way Books, 2004., M. A. Armour, *Cornelia: the Story of Cornelia Connelly Foundress of the Holy Society Jesus. Society of the Holy Child Jesus*, 1979, J. Wadham, *The Case of Cornelia Connelly*, Pantheon, 1957.



however, with her continuing interest in the Counter-Reformation (if only in subject matter) as an entry from the annals describing her portrait of Ignatius of Loyola suggests:

In Rome in 1844, Mother Connelly divided her time between visits to the churches and taking lessons in painting from a master sent by Flatz, the pupil of Overbeck.<sup>152</sup> A beautiful picture in oils of St. Ignatius, full length and holding his Rule in his hand, was the outcome of these lessons'.<sup>153</sup>

Unlike Catherine McAuley, Cornelia Connelly clearly had a deep personal interest in art and architecture. None of the convents or chapels that she built were the product of expediency and in fact, she fought to ensure that the function and style of her buildings was exactly to her design.

Theologically, Connelly's tastes were solidly Ultramontane. Counter-Reformation and particularly Ignatian spirituality was one of the dominant influences on Connelly's Rule and so it would not have been surprising, having just arrived from Rome, bringing with her Jesuit theology and plainly aware of the battle lines between Ultramontanism and Recusancy, for her to want to plant visibly Roman roots in England. She chose instead the Gothic style

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<sup>152</sup> Both the SHCJ annals and M. A. Armour's biography suggest that Connelly received lessons from 'Flatz'. 'Some of Cornelia's most interesting ideas in the book of studies were on the subject of art, ideas which would have developed under the art professor Flatz when she had taken painting lessons in Rome in 1836-7. He belonged to the Nazarene school of Overbeck (1789-1869) which had affinities with the Pre-Raphaelites.' Armour, P. 66. Flatz is likely to be Gebhard Flatz, among whose best known portraits is one of the Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier. It may be however, that the artist was in fact another member of the Nazarenes, Maximilian Seitz.

<sup>153</sup> Annals of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, p.65. Unfortunately, this painting no longer appears to exist but it may be that, like the later portrait by Sister Mary Clare, women who had associations with the Jesuits were encouraged to make copies of the only portrait of Ignatius thought to have been painted from life, which hung in the private chapel of the General of the Society at the Gesu in Rome.

(in the case of Mayfield not merely neo but actual Gothic) for her buildings, the style of the English Recusant tradition which was already by this time, as we have seen, opposed by Newman for its emphasis on the arcane and by extension its implicit challenge to the Tridentine Rite.

Connelly was not confined to Gothic Revivalism - there were certainly examples elsewhere of the neo-Baroque and Classical in English religious architecture. Her second foundation at St Leonards, Sussex, provides some insights into the factors that steered Connelly's choices. St Leonards was built on speculation in 1834 to the designs of Charles Parker. Parker had travelled extensively in Italy and produced an Italianate design for St Leonards (as was considered appropriate for Roman Catholic architecture in the years directly following emancipation). Just twelve years later, however, William Wardell was hired to undertake a second phase of works. Known for his neo-Gothic churches and public buildings, Wardell toned down the Italianate style by introducing elements of Gothic (figure 3.11). Connelly arrived just as the works were nearing an end and was clearly alive to the meaning of this. In a letter to Cardinal Wiseman written in 1848, she reports: 'the buildings though spacious and convenient are not in good architectural taste; but all that is now being built under the direction of Mr Wardell is quite correct. The foundations of the church are laid & the contract signed'.<sup>154</sup> Connelly's choice of the Gothic style, may or may not have been expedient but it was certainly not uncritical or ill-informed. One biographer reports that: 'Mother Connelly had always been an admirer of

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<sup>154</sup> Quoted in J. Wadham

[A.W.N.] Pugin's work since she had met him at Alton Towers. His "Glossary" was her invariable guide in matters of ecclesiastical taste.<sup>155</sup>



**Figure 3.11** . Fig 3.13 Additions to St Leonards's convent by William Wardell, 1848 - 9. Source: East Sussex County Council

The many hagiographies of Connelly provide a consistent account of her decision to acquire Mayfield; that on Whit Sunday in 1863, she and some pupils from her school at St Leonards had been picnicking in the grounds and that she had a thought that Mayfield, with all of its 'historical associations with the pre-reformation Church' would be the perfect site for her noviciate.<sup>156</sup> This was not, in fact, an original idea - Bishop Thomas Grant had already considered and rejected the site as a seminary. We might say, then, that by the time Connelly was sufficiently established at St Leonards to found a noviciate, her choices were no longer driven by practical considerations but rather by questions of taste. Mayfield was much more than a

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<sup>155</sup> Anonymous, *Life of Cornelia Connelly, 1809 -1879, foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus*, Longman's, Green and Co, London: 1922 p. 363. Connelly met A.W.N. Pugin in 1842 at the Earl of Shrewsbury's (also Catherine McAuley's patron) seat at Alton Towers

<sup>156</sup> Sister Helena Desmond, 'The Old Palace Mayfield', SHCJ internal publication

personal folly, however: her master-stroke in choosing it was that, whilst it allowed this Roman Catholic convent to recede into the Sussex countryside it was also a defiant but subtle act of propaganda – Mayfield, as discussed in the previous chapter, being the first pre-reformation building to be returned to Catholic use. In emphasising Englishness in Catholic worship, she secured the support of the Recusant aristocracy who bequeathed gifts and sent their children to the (expensive) school.

Connelly oversaw all of the works at Mayfield and the evidence suggests she was confident in her knowledge of architecture (both stylistically and structurally) and was perfectly prepared to stand her ground if she thought that the architects or builders were wrong or if they had not done as she asked. One of the builders, a Mr Hodgson, complained about the difficulty in having to reconcile Pugin's 'haphazard plans' with Connelly's perfectionism, commenting 'the work does not seem to be too good for Mrs Connelly. She requires everything to be most fully carried out even though perfectly aware of the position'<sup>157</sup>

And if they were not prepared to acquiesce, she was more than happy to let them go, with or without the approval of the Bishop. Indeed, the fact that Connelly was prepared to challenge Bishop Thomas Grant, both in her determination to have Mayfield and her dispute with the architect George Goldie, as discussed below, demonstrates the enormous significance of architecture for Connelly.

None of this is to say, however, that Connelly lacked respect for the profession or for the individuals that she employed – nor they for her. On the contrary: one of the most extraordinary features of her relationships with these

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<sup>157</sup> Quoted in J. Wadham, p.253.

men is that she displayed genuine warmth, kindness and deference to their skill in equal measure to her assertiveness and was willing to forgive quite breathtaking acts of rudeness and petulance. With William Wardell, the architect employed at St Leonard's, Cornelia formed an enduring friendship, continuing to correspond with him after he emigrated to Australia in 1858 – Wardell's daughter, in fact, remained in England to attend Mayfield School.

In 1855, some seven years after his work on the convent at St Leonards had been completed, Connelly commissioned Wardell to produce plans for a chapel at St Leonards. Work on a convent chapel had, in fact, already commenced in 1837 to an Italianate design probably by Charles Parker (although the plan seems to have changed by 1839 to a Gothic style building, possibly to a design of AWN Pugin's).<sup>158</sup> These works, however, had stopped in 1843 – five years before the Holy Child Sisters arrived. Connelly was keen to resurrect plans and asked Wardell to produce a design that would fulfil the Gothic promise of the unfinished chapel. Unfortunately, it proved difficult securing the funds to begin construction – possibly plans for the St Leonard's chapel were simply eclipsed later by the grander project that was about to commence at the former Bishop's Palace in Mayfield. By the time Connelly returned to plans for the St Leonards chapel some years later, Wardell had emigrated to Australia.

Though the restoration of Mayfield, as discussed in chapter 2, was widely considered to be an important step in the restitution of an English Catholic tradition, it was not initially supported by Bishop Thomas Grant, who, for reasons that are unclear but may be connected to the fact that he himself had rejected it, refused to approve the purchase. Connelly's friend and pa-

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<sup>158</sup> It may be that the A.W.N. Pugin drew up designs but the chapel seems to have commenced (and was left unfinished) by an architect named Jones.

tron, Louisa Carroll, Duchess of Leeds stepped in and bought the site, donating it on the condition that Connelly could raise the funds to restore it – a challenge that she rose to by sending her nuns on a begging tour of Europe. E.W. Pugin was commissioned to undertake the first phase of work – the restoration of the chapel, the North wing and tower (figures 2.2 and 2.8).

The collaboration between Connelly and Edward Pugin, as mentioned earlier was fractious, energetic and creative. As one of her biographers Juliana Wadham, perhaps over-generously describes it: 'Pugin and Cornelia understood each other. Their arguments and fierce discussions were based on good-humoured regard and the insults which flowed amiably between them were carried on in the knowledge that they would be mutually stimulating and provoking.'<sup>159</sup>

There is little doubt that Connelly was directly engaged in shaping Mayfield. Though the many anecdotes relating to her role in the designs at Mayfield should be approached with caution, it is revealing that so many of her biographers refer to it: all of her biographies give some account of her relationship with Pugin and her contribution to the restoration of Mayfield. One anonymous chronicler reports, for example:

A story is told of Pugin presenting [Connelly] on one occasion with some drawings for her approval. She studied them for a few minutes and then, without speaking, took her pencil, made several alterations, and then said "would that be more artistic?". The architect was delighted with her candour and courage in correcting his

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<sup>159</sup> Wadham, p. 253.

drawings, and, in reporting this very novel experience, spoke of her with admiration, adding "and what is more, she was right!"<sup>160</sup>

During the period in which Pugin was engaged to work on the chapel and North wing, the two appear to have been discussing the restoration of the rest of the convent. Juliana Wadham records that: '[Pugin] and Cornelia settled into discussions of architecture and niceties about cornices and her wish to avoid the cloisters becoming a "rope-like looking thing".'<sup>161</sup> I have not been able to find the letters described by Wadham that relate specifically to designs for the convent but she suggests that they indicate that Connelly was producing her own drawings for a concert hall – designs which Pugin dismissed, we assume humorously, as a 'diabolic invention of an infernal mind'. That Pugin was immediately commissioned in 1867, on completion of the chapel at Mayfield to replace Wardell on the unfinished chapel at St Leonards indicates that Connelly was pleased with his work at Mayfield. For his part, Pugin had successfully managed to negotiate a path as discussed in chapter 2, between Connelly's specifications and the reproach of his professional peers. Though Connelly was happy with Pugin's work he was not the first person to produce plans for St Leonards following Wardell's departure:

Mother Foundress began to make preparations for the completion of the Church left unfinished by Mr. Jones. She first invited Mr. Goldie to present drawings, but these proving unsatisfactory, from an artistic point of view, were not accepted. Mr Pugin's

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<sup>160</sup> Anonymous, *The Life of Cornelia Connelly 1809-1879: Foundress of the Society of Holy Child Jesus* p.249

<sup>161</sup> Wadham, p. 238.

drawings elicited unqualified admiration, and on April 30<sup>th</sup> it was decided to begin the building at once on his plans'.<sup>162</sup>

Goldie's proposal was turned down in favour of Pugin's and Connelly sent Goldie a letter, politely requesting "the sum which I am indebted for your drawings". The sum that Goldie suggested was met with surprise, as Connelly's next letter suggests:

I am advised that the amount due to you is 2 and a half per cent on the value of the work ordered. Our present contract amounts to £2,695, making your rightful demand a little less than £75 for drawings and time spent. I think you will remember that you applied for tender on your own account much to my surprise and before I had seen the drawings and been charged for tender".<sup>163</sup>

She promptly sent him a cheque for £75 which Goldie refused to accept. Bishop Grant was called on to mediate the dispute but, after the notorious Connelly vs. Connelly case, was reluctant to support Connelly in another lawsuit. To the satisfaction of neither, Connelly ended up sending Goldie £80 with an accompanying letter expressing her indignance, "I certainly did not expect so ungentlemanly a pressure on your part...though your letter proves that I ought to have expected it'.

The convent chapel of St Michael and All the Holy Angels in St Leonard's was completed to E.W. Pugin's design in 1868 -a year after he completed the chapel at Mayfield. Connelly appears, again, to have been pleased with

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid. p. 171. Though this excerpt would seem to suggest that Connelly invited Goldie to submit a tender, her own letter contradicts this.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.



Pugin's work – certainly no complaint seems to have been made. However, events were to take a rather different turn as she began to draw up plans for the restoration of the remaining buildings at Mayfield. The letter that E.W. Pugin sent Connelly in 1868, the same year that St Leonards was completed, rather tests the limits of what might be called 'good humoured regard':

What you propose at Mayfield would ruin the whole job, we should have the finger of scorn pointed at us from all parts of the world. You have an antient [sic] building with all its size, grandeur and interest, these are decided advantages but like most other advantages they are attended with a certain amount of drawbacks which you had better make up your mind to endure'.<sup>164</sup>

It is not absolutely clear to which building Pugin refers but, given that he had already completed the chapels at Mayfield and St Leonard's and that he was interested in continuing his work at Mayfield, the correspondence between Pugin and Connelly was likely to concern the proposed convent.

Perhaps Pugin's letter to Connelly was in the spirit of banter – or perhaps it was condescending high-handedness. What historical documents cannot express, unfortunately, is tone. Whichever it was meant to be, Connelly's response was unambiguous - she rejected Pugin's plans. And he responded, equally unambiguously, by threatening legal action. In preference to Pugin's proposal, Connelly chose plans submitted by, of all people, George Goldie. This was an extremely surprising and diplomatic move and, per-

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<sup>164</sup> Letter to Cornelia Connelly from Edward Pugin dated 1868, Archives of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus.

haps in deference, Goldie bent, where Pugin had refused, to Connelly's will: as detailed in chapter 2, his plans made no concession to any of the 'drawbacks' that Mayfield presented.

Mayfield is certainly an expression of medievalism and it was undoubtedly an exercise in propaganda for the new Roman Catholic church. But above all these things, it was a functioning convent and neither the interests of medievalism or Catholic propaganda were allowed to compromise this: if the destruction of a medieval staircase occasioned disputes with eminent architects or the censure of conservationists, then so be it.



**Figure 3.12.** Interior of Mayfield chapel following restoration by Aelred Bartlett in 1951. Source: SHCJ Archive

As discussed in chapter 2, P. P. Pugin added an enormous reredos and brass altar railings in the chapel at Mayfield in 1881 - additions that were perhaps made because the chapel was felt by the community to be too bleak. In 1951, the chapel was again reconfigured by Aelred Bartlett, who stripped out the late Victorian decoration so that it could be 'restored to something like its appearance in Reverend Mother Foundress's time' (figure

3.12).<sup>165</sup> Fittingly, the altar rails that P.P. Pugin had installed were removed and recycled as lights which now hang in the chapel and were created to the designs of Mother Mary Lorenzo Fitzgerald-Lombard. Not only did Mother Mary Lorenzo also design the testa, mounted above the altar and the new altar table but, being a trained architect, also drew up the plans and advised on extensions, alterations and the construction of new buildings at Mayfield<sup>166</sup>

## Conclusion

By the time that the first Irish and French active congregations arrived in England, Gothic architecture was already regarded by the Protestant churches as an ecumenical style that was distinguished by its Englishness rather than its denominational politics. To employ it, then, would have allowed convents to melt discretely into the built landscape, whilst at the same time maintaining a religious character. Building in such a way had dual benefits: it allowed sisters to use a broadly but not uniquely religious style that could unite the conflicting categories of active and enclosed in apostolic communities and it also created a facade that detracted from the internal technology that powered its operations - this was particularly use-

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<sup>165</sup> Reverend Mother Provincial's Account of the Restoration of Mayfield Chapel (typed history), Archives of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus (undated).

<sup>166</sup> Based on email exchanges with Sr Helen Forshaw who was a sister at Mayfield and a personal acquaintance of Sr Mary Lorenzo.

ful, as the following chapter will examine, for magdalen institutions which attracted the most suspicion. When employed inexpensively and with restraint, it was a style that sisters were perfectly happy to use.

By the later nineteenth century, however, hostility towards Roman Catholics had begun to wane and the need for women's communities to assimilate, accordingly diminished. The large magdalen convent built in 1863 in Bartestree, Herefordshire for the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge (OLC) to designs by E.W. Pugin is a towering exercise in Gothic Revivalism (figure 3.13) that almost certainly drew inspiration from Hansom's Anglican magdalen convent in Clewer. Twenty six years later the sisters commissioned Leonard Stokes to design another large magdalen convent in Waterlooville (completed in 1889). This time however, the inspiration for the design was drawn from the order's Mother House in Caen (figures 3.14 and 3.15).<sup>167</sup> Though Pevsner rightly comments that 'Stoke's original block has his unmistakable originality, but tempered with monastic austerity', the building that stands is not simply an expression of Arts and Crafts architecture; rather, it is a serendipitous union of Stoke's 'originality', the contemporary taste for Queen Anne revivalism and the sister's specification for seventeenth-century French domestic/vernacular.

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<sup>167</sup> Some sources suggest that Bartestree rather than Waterlooville was influenced by the Mother House in Caen but the standing architecture clearly demonstrates that it is the other way round.



**Figure 3.13.** Convent of The Sisters of Our Lady of Charity, Bartestree by E.W. Pugin, 1862 - 3. Source: The Pugin Society



**Figure 3.14.** Fig 3.18 St Michael's Convent, Waterlooville by Leonard Stokes, 1889. Source: author



**Figure 3.15.** Mother House of the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity, Caen. 1657. Source: sgmcaen.free.fr

Beyond style however, women were actively engaged in designing the layout of convents in ways that were, though less well documented than the example of Catherine McAuley, just as direct. The fan-shaped chapels described in the following chapter, for example, had no precedent in Britain and the archives provide details about the exchanges between two different women's religious communities on the design and construction of these buildings

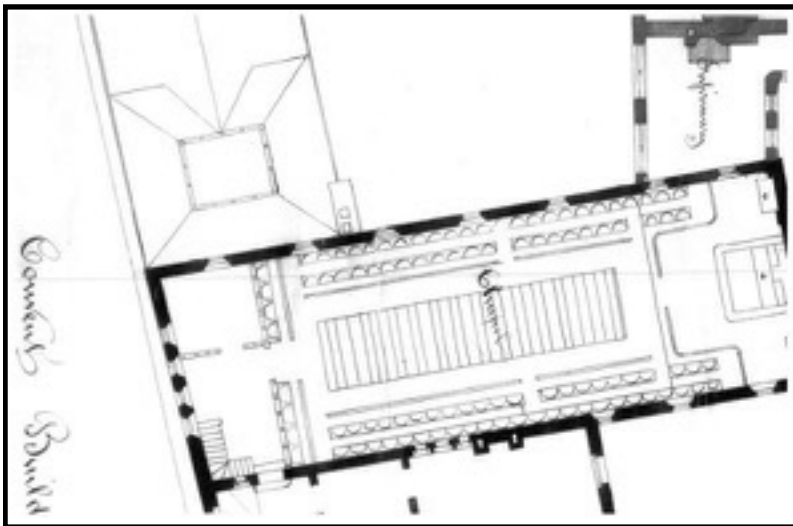
Very often it was assumed by architects that women were too ignorant of construction to be able to make useful comments. In fact, given the enormous value of convent buildings in the economy of the community, it was a high priority for women to equip themselves with knowledge. An example of this is given by the dispute that arose between the sisters of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God (SMG) and the architect A. E. Purdie during the construction of the chapel at St Mary's convent in Roehampton (figures 3.16 and 3.17). The Mother Superior at Roehampton was very unhappy with the plan, protesting that the proposed iron girders would be 'exceedingly ugly' and would make the chapel feel like a 'railway station'.<sup>168</sup> Instead she suggested that pillars would be a preferable means of support. Purdie complained to the contractor, Mr Harvey, that 'the ladies are not practical, otherwise they would not have altered my plans in the first instance of iron ties buttresses' but eventually had to concede that, 'the pillars would do as well as the girders and also add to the beauty of the chapel'.

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<sup>168</sup> Mr Purdie's letter dated June 27<sup>th</sup> 1889 (?) 'Buttresses were proposed that would cost £300 more than contemplated. When this (?) was objected to, iron girders like a railway station were proposed. (?) was objected to on the (?) of being so exceedingly ugly.3 Inside pillars were then proposed to support the roof and this finally was agreed upon'. SMG Archive ref IIF/31 (1)



**Figure 3.16.** *St Mary's Roehampton chapel interior, SMG IMG 9968. Source: author*



**Figure 3.17.** *Plan by A. E. Purdie for the chapel at St Mary's Roehampton. Source: SMG Archives*

If Purdie resented having his authority questioned, then he also recognised that he was not in a position to question the authority of the Mother Superior. And while he was happy to share his displeasure about the situation with the contractor, he was careful not to betray this to the sisters.<sup>169</sup> Contrary to Purdie's view, the Poor Servants were nothing if not practical - Purdie's

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<sup>169</sup> SMG archive ref. IIF/31/1

middling status would have conferred a modest stamp of quality on a building without incurring great expense and the sisters would have assumed a degree of latitude in negotiations with him. A letter written to Purdie by one of sisters in 1889, suggests that instructions were perfunctory and delivered without any great deference to his expertise.

Mother M. Austin desires me to send you the enclosed. There are alterations but she wants ample provision...for doors and the present packing room..and the window in the dining room to be very long so as to admit as much air and light as possible. If the 20x18 (?) will not admit of this it must be a little wider, a foot or two taken from the (?) will probably meet the difficulty'<sup>170</sup>

Maintaining authority in relations with architects was very important as there were no pattern books for active convents - indeed many of the orders were themselves still working out their own vocations and charisms for much of the nineteenth century and their building's specifications had to continually change to keep up. In some cases architects did not understand the charism of the order, could not interpret the design brief and ended up providing spaces that simply did not work. At the convent at Brook Green built in 1872 for the Good Shepherd Sisters (GSS) by George Goldie the sisters were rather less effective than the Poor Servants at providing clear instructions and taking issue with the architect when he failed to deliver. While the sisters were delighted with with the cloister they were extremely disappointed with the laundry. The annals record Mother Weld and the superior of Brook Green's response:

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<sup>170</sup> May 12<sup>th</sup> 1889 From Sister Imelda to Mr Purdie SMG Archive ref IIF/31 (1)



..both were alarmed at seeing how small and dark the laundry was and that there was no packing room at all, the place for the ironing stove was so small that no shovel could have been used in it and every bit of coal for all the fires would have to be brought there through the beautiful cloister, consequently the whole house would fill up with steam. The doors were all double ones, stained and very highly varnished and even the beams of the wash-house were the same. It looked like a model and was much the same upstairs'.<sup>171</sup>

Goldie, used to producing Gothic set pieces like the convent at Mayfield, had created a fantasy 'model' laundry that he presumably imagined would function like Marie-Antoinette's Hameau de la Reine rather than an industrial space fitted to generate maximum profits for the community. Unlike Cornelia Connelly the sisters were, in this case, circumspect, reproaching themselves for not having read the plans properly: 'Our good God will not take us to account for being bad architects..although we must do our best when this becomes part of our duty to our 'poor children''<sup>172</sup>

Under circumstances where the specification resulted in confusion or disputes, it was sometimes easier for a sister to design the space herself and simply give her plans to a builder, as in the case of the infirmary wing at the Poor Clares convent in Baddesley Clinton, Warwickshire. The site was designed piecemeal and works were undertaken in waves by several architects. A letter written by Sister Mary Paula to the architectural historian

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<sup>171</sup> Hughes, p.164.

<sup>172</sup> *ibid.* p. 165.

Stephen Welsh in 1964 describes the results of a disagreement with one of the architects in the early 1880s: 'The design for the new infirmary (in the north wing) by Thomas Turner was never carried out. For some reason, he didn't prove satisfactory and they abandoned his plan and the abbess and the builder together designed the quarters now used for the infirmary.'<sup>173</sup>

It is not clear what the reasons were for rejecting Thomas Turner's plans - it may be that his plans were too expensive - where budgets were tight, circumventing the architect was often an effective way of saving money. Or it may be that, as with Goldie, he proved incapable of understanding or responding to their needs. This was a consistent theme in the design of convents, particularly those that relied on a complex network of discrete spaces in order to segregate different groups of women, as the following chapter explores.

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<sup>173</sup> Letter to Stephen Welsh from Sr Mary Paula, 1964, Stephen Welsh Papers, File 178, Biographical notes on A E Purdie, RIBA Archives.

## Chapter 4

### 'SPOTLESS LILIES AND FOUL-SMELLING WEEDS': CONVENT ARCHITECTURE AS AN APPARATUS OF SANITATION AND TRANSFORMATION



**Figure 4.** Penitents at the washroom at the Convent of the Good Shepherd, Ford, Liverpool, c.1895. Source: Peter Hughes

*'Innocence and guilt face to face! The bright cheerfulness of unsullied virtue so near to the most abject wretchedness of multiplied sinfulness! The spotless lily side by side with the rank, noxious, foul-smelling weed that grew up in the dark shadows of the crumbling tomb! The consecrated nun speaking to the polluted outcast!'*<sup>174</sup>

*"The Magdalenes of High Park" The Irish Rosary, 1897*

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<sup>174</sup> A Dominican friar, *The Irish Rosary*, 1897 "The Magdalenes of High Park" Quoted in J. Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment*, University of Notre Dame Press, 2007. p35

The debates and conflicts discussed in the previous chapters were among a range of discourses that shaped the mechanical, decorative and symbolic structures of convents. The following chapter explores the impact of secular society, expressed through statutory laws, prescriptive ideology, the emergent fields of criminology and psychology and the philosophy of discipline, and considers how these were interpreted and incorporated within the spirituality, practical functioning and aesthetic of refuge convents.

The late nineteenth century saw a proliferation of religious institutions dedicated to the spiritual and social transformation of prostitutes. Various known as asylums, penitentiaries and refuges (frequently with the prefix 'magdalen' attached) these foundations responded to a widespread preoccupation in Victorian Britain with the moral and physical cleanliness of women who sold sex.

This chapter discusses the ways in which nuns used architecture to cleanse and transform the 'fallen'. The striking contrast of nuns and prostitutes offered Victorians a compelling muse for depictions of virtue and vice, as suggested by the turgid sketch of High Park Magdalen Asylum that appears in *The Irish Rosary* which works a metaphor ham-fistedly drawn from Ruskin's 1865 lecture, 'Sesame and Lilies'. The orders who founded magdalen or refuge institutions built an entire ideology on the contraposition of purity and impurity – one that represented a spiritual mirror to the normal/abnormal model cultivated by the emerging secular sciences of criminology and psychiatry.

In both religious doctrine and scientific theory the dichotomy of sex and chastity had a concomitant category of dirt and cleanliness. In secular society an anxiety about the relationship between sex and dirt found robust expression in the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866 and 1869. These statutes, designed to curb the spread of venereal disease, sanctioned the compulsory quarantine in lock hospitals of women charged with soliciting.<sup>175</sup> For many Christians and particularly Roman Catholics who elevated celibacy as the holiest state, these polemics were a powerful articulation of the sacred and profane or bodily and spiritual. The focus of Roman Catholic anxiety was not the transmission of disease occasioned by the proximity of the defiled and virtuous but the threat of moral corruption. Where lock hospitals removed the physically unhealthy for fear of contamination, magdalen institutions segregated the morally unhealthy. In the operation of control, however, both the Empiricist secular and Rationalist religious reformatories employed (whether consciously or not) the technologies of a Benthamite model of power, albeit, in different ways. This chapter explores Foucault's critique of discipline to analyse the surprising influence of the panopticon on both conceptual and architectural structures in magdalen institutions.

The transformation of fallen women or penitents was effected, as Bentham himself might have advocated, through a combination of hard work and contemplation of their supposed crimes. To this end the two most important buildings in the magdalen institution were the laundry where the penitents worked and generated an income for the refuge and the chapel where the sisters performed their assigned task: recitation of the Divine Office. Each

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<sup>175</sup> For a full discussion of prostitution and the Contagious Diseases Act see J. Walkovitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class and the State*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980.

building represented, then, the contrasting functions of and groups within the refuge. The problems attendant on accommodating both of these groups within the refuge and the spatial and symbolic measures devised by nuns themselves to address them will be discussed in detail. In the case of magdalen institutions, the phenomenon of nuns exercising an extraordinary degree of autonomy in the creation of spaces was marshalled in order to reproduce explicitly patriarchal forms of power and control.

Magdalen institutions in the UK and Ireland have been, and continue to be, the subject of a great deal of research by historians. This thesis focuses specifically on the architecture of religious communities and so views the operation of this particular vocation from an oblique position. Beyond an introductory summary, I do not offer an expansive history of these sites and therefore there are a number of questions, particularly those relating to cross-denominational relationships, that are left unanswered: although most penitent refuges in the UK were founded by Anglicans, this research, as discussed earlier, focuses on Roman Catholic orders. I have, however, referred to the first Anglican magdalen institution in Clewer, Berkshire as the architecture suggests important parallels within the communities and the possibility of ideas being passed between the denominations.

A final word on terminology: the terms used to describe these institutions varies in the primary and secondary literature. Where I describe the sites generally I use the term magdalen institution, where I refer to specific sites, I use the terms that were applied by the individual order.

## Magdalen institutions in the UK

The first magdalen institutions to be established by Roman Catholic orders in the UK were those of the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge (OLC) and The Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd (GSS). The GSS, founded in France in 1835, was a branch of the OLC also founded in France in 1651 under the Rule of St John of Eudes. Both were dedicated to 'the reformation of the fallen' and the preservation of 'girls who are in danger of being brought up immorally'.<sup>176</sup> The GSS were the first to arrive in Britain, establishing a convent in Hammersmith in 1843 in a house that was subsequently adapted and enlarged.<sup>177</sup> The OLC followed in 1863 commissioning a large, purpose built convent in Bartestree, Herefordshire.

In 1887 and 1892 the Poor Servants of the Mother of God (SMG), founded in 1872 by Frances (subsequently Mother Magdalen) Taylor established refuges in London, Sussex and Liverpool.<sup>178</sup> Unlike the GSS and OLC, however, the SMGs were a congregation with a mixed apostolate that included nursing and social care - Frances Taylor had, herself, been a nurse in the Crimea. Though there is evidence that Frances Taylor corresponded with the GSS and drew inspiration from their Rule, a firm emphasis was placed on preparing former prostitutes for meaningful and suitable employ-

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<sup>176</sup> F. Steele, *The Convents of Great Britain*, Roehampton: John Griffin, 1901, p. 121

<sup>177</sup> D. Evinson, *Pope's Corner: Historical Survey of the Roman Catholic Institutions in the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham*, Fulham & Hammersmith Hist.Soc., First Edition edition, Dec. 1980. p37.

<sup>178</sup> 32 SMG 'foundations' were made between the first convent in Fleet Street, London in 1868 and the death of the foundress in 1900. Only two of the convents, however, were purpose built, St Mary's Roehampton (actually completed in 1902) and the convent at Carriwohill, Co Cork Ireland,

ment in the outside world - penitents never joined the ranks of consecrated women. Although, as mentioned, there were numerous Anglican penitent refuges, the GSS, OLC and SMG were the only Roman Catholic orders to undertake magdalen ministries in the UK.

Both the OLC and GSS also founded magdalen institutions in Ireland and, although they operated under the same Rule, it is important to stress that practical management was mediated by a particular relationship between the state and religious institutions – recent evidence suggests that in Ireland, involuntary detainment in refuges formed part of the government's social policy. In Britain, however, atonement through the refuge system was considered to be contingent on voluntary admission and the high turnover of penitents in the refuges of all three Catholic orders further militates against any suggestion that they were carceral. Although refuges were sometimes known by the orders as 'penitentiaries' – a term which was also used in wider society to describe penal institutions - it was applied literally in this case to connote penitence rather than punishment. While it may be the case in Irish magdalen institutions, I have not seen evidence of punitive spaces within refuges. This is by no means to suggest, however, that they were designed to be egalitarian – indeed, democracy ran entirely counter to the spirit of refuge orders.

The institutions of both the GSS and the OLC functioned according to an elaborately stratified hierarchy. Both orders were episcopally enclosed, which meant that nuns took the simple vows generally associated with active congregations rather than solemn vows associated with papally enclosed orders. The Rule of semi-enclosure stipulated that some nuns were confined to the 'monastery', while others oversaw the supervision of peni-



tents within a separate building or wing but none left the confines of the convent and, importantly, that no-one but penitents, orphans and nuns were allowed within the institution.<sup>179</sup> The only exceptions to this rule were the *tourieres*, an unconsecrated sub-group of lay sisters who were able to leave the convent to carry out necessary errands and receive tradesmen. Nuns were separated into choir sisters, lay sisters and novices. Among the penitents, women were assigned different tasks on entry and could work up through the ranks, achieving rising levels of status and privileges. In the convents of the GSS, penitents could be consecrated as 'Magdalen Sisters' and although the GSS Rule took pains to emphasise the difference between magdalen and choir or lay consecrates (positions that demanded uncompromised virtue) Magdalene Sisters were held in high esteem and served, as will be discussed later, a valuable purpose. Larger convents also accommodated orphans and preservation charges – girls who were at risk of going astray. A strong familial vein in the structure of the refuge was emphasised by use of the terms mother, sister and children (often used to describe both adults and girls).

Spatial organisation of the different groups was a challenging enough task but the profound belief that sin was infectious meant that each, to greater and lesser degrees, had to be separated from one another. The preoccupation with contagion in refuge orders was such that measures to prevent it deliberately echoed those imposed to control contagious diseases. The

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<sup>179</sup> M. E. Herbert, *The Two Sisters, a Tale for the Good Shepherds* p. 41. 'In two separate wings of the same building lived, according to the arrangements of Father Eudes, his daughters of light and peace, and the daughters of the deepest of degradation and misery. There was but one door of communication between the monastery'. For a description of spatial division according to the Rule see also, 'SECOND REPORT OF THE ORDER OF OUR LADY OF CHARITY AND REFUGE., *Irish Quarterly Review*, (1860:Jan.)

Rule of the SMGs dedicates a number of clauses to the management of penitents. Sections 1 and 2 under the heading:

Rules for the girls in our houses and directions for those in charge of them' stipulate, respectively:

1 It is strictly and positively forbidden for any sister to touch the refuge girls, their clothes, bed, bedding or anything belonging to them

2 No-one is to have anything to do with the girls except the Sisters appointed to relieve them.<sup>180</sup>

Although the SMGs were directly inspired by the work of the GSS and OLCs in the operation of their magdalen institutions, they were not episcopally enclosed, did not make the distinction between choir and lay sisters and stopped short of classifying and segregating women to the highly controlled degree upon which the GSS and OLCs insisted.<sup>181</sup> This may, however, have been partially influenced by the lack of funds for producing expensive purpose built refuges rather than ideological differences. Limited budgets meant that the overwhelming majority of SMG foundations were established in pre-existing buildings which would have been difficult to adapt in such a way as those of the GSS and OLC.

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<sup>180</sup> 'Rules of Mother Foundress for the guidance of the Sister in Charge of the Girls' – SMG Archive ref C.C2 p.146

<sup>181</sup> Taylor, F., *Religious Orders or Sketches or Orders and Congregations of Women*, London, Burns and Lambert, 1862.

*The laundry*



**Figure 4.1.** Laundry building at the former convent of St Marye's, Portslade, completed 1909. Source: author

As with most magdalen institutions, the commercial laundry was a vital source of income for the OLC, GSS and SMG convents. Although many received (sometimes substantial) donations, they were nevertheless required to generate their own revenue. The upkeep of large numbers of penitents was costly and it may be the case, as the GSS maintained, that many succeeded in doing little more than breaking even. After initial purchase costs and with the possible exception of the chapel, the greatest single outlay in convent expenditure was likely to be on laundry buildings and machinery (figure 4.1).

The extent to which laundry work was consciously chosen because of its symbolism is unclear. Much has been made by scholars of the appealing notion that laundry work was an analogue for the washing away of sins but

I have yet to find any mention of this obvious metaphor in any of the Rules, documents, writings or letters of refuge orders.<sup>182</sup> In fact, laundry work proved ideal for a range of very practical reasons: It was an industry dominated by female workers and was therefore considered suitable for women, work could be undertaken and managed internally, there was a constant demand for services and it was demanding, physical work that ensured that penitents were always meaningfully occupied. 'Active occupation' as the SMG information on St Saviour's observed 'is one of the best reformatory powers'.<sup>183</sup> Here it is important to emphasise the distinction between reformation and punishment - the purpose of laundry work for the SMGs was primarily to reform and return women to life outside the refuge and was certainly not regarded as punitive (see appendix 4).

Much of the material relating to building programmes held at the SMG archives is dedicated to the construction of laundries. This gives some idea of how important they were to the operation and economy of the community and the amount their construction drew from the community's budgets. The following letter from 1894, detailing the new laundry buildings in Brentford, gives some idea of their significance and of how these sites were laid out and fitted:

A single storey brick and slated building with small basement under part. At present on course of completion and when finished to be used as Laundry. The ground floor divided into a number of

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<sup>182</sup> For a discussion of this see P. Hughes, 'Cleanliness and Godliness'.

<sup>183</sup> St Saviours Refuge, SMG publication, p.75.

compartments with brick partitions and to be used as packing and receiving room, wash house and ironing room. This latter compartment to contain an ironing stove which will stand on concrete and have a short length of pipe carried into the brick chimney and will I should say from the particulars given me be securely arranged. There will however no wire cage over stove or pipe. Part drying room formed of brick and concrete to be heated by hot air from a securely fixed furnace thereunder – this drying room is completed and I consider some secure and well arranged 4 brick built coppers also herein, having Bradfords patent Hot Water Apparatus connected therewith for supplying hot water. The upper will probably be used as ironing rooms etc but this has not yet been decided upon.<sup>184</sup>

#### *Sites and primary sources*

There are no magdalen institutions in operation today in the UK - those that continued into the late twentieth century closed after the Community Care Act of 1990. Most of the large buildings were difficult to re-use and many have been pulled down in recent years. The lack of extant examples has meant that it is difficult to speak generally about the architecture and I have had to be wary of drawing inferences that cannot be substantiated. This chapter, therefore, builds analysis on close readings of two extant sites; The SMG convent of St Marye's, Portslade, Sussex where the laundry, chapel and residential buildings have been minimally adapted for use as a shop and accommodation for the homeless charity, Emmaus and the OLC

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<sup>184</sup> SMG Archive ref IIF/31 (1)

convent of St Michael's, Waterlooville in Hampshire which ceased operation as a care home for the elderly (its final incarnation) in 2003 and has been empty since. Plans of St Marye's made in the 1960s provide a fairly clear idea of the original layout but only minimal plans of part of the ground floor are available for St Michaels. The former OLC magdalene institution which stands at Bartestree in Herefordshire provides the largest and (externally) most legible example of Roman Catholic magdalen institutions and the layout and plan (though not the style) is clearly drawn from earlier houses in France. It has been so transformed by conversion into flats, however, that it has become extremely difficult to read the internal space. The chapel, however, remains intact and some original plans exist for the ground floor of the monastery.

Further evidence for the design and layout of similar institutions, offered by written descriptions and contemporary photographs of the spaces has helped me build a wider picture. A pamphlet on the SMG refuge of St Saviour's in Liverpool provides photographs and written details of the internal space and workings of the laundry. Some material exists on the convents of the Sisters of Our Lady of the Good Shepherd (GSS) at Hammersmith, Finchley and Dalbeth and, although access to the archives has been restricted, extensive primary sources are made available in the PhD thesis of Peter Hughes, former GSS archivist. Contemporary newspaper reports, letters, building reports, annals, gazetteers and novels provide additional information. Although I have not made a reading of any Good Shepherd sites, these sources provide important context. In addition, plans, photographs and accounts of building programmes exist for the GSS mother

house in Angers and the OLC mother house in Caen and I have drawn from both of these to build a picture of the evolution of magdalen institutions.

### **The Poor Servants of the Mother of God: St Marye's Convent, Portslade**



**Figure 4.2.** Residential buildings at former convent of St Marye's, Portslade, completed 1933. Source: author

St Marye's convent was established in 1904 in an early nineteenth-century manor house in Portslade, Sussex. It was originally founded as a penitent refuge but later accommodated preservation girls (girls who were in danger of going astray) and women with learning disabilities and finally closed, following the Community Care Act, in 1994. The site was taken over by the homeless charity Emmaus who housed the homeless 'companions' in the residential block and adapted the former laundry and chapel for use as shops. The plan in figure 4.3 shows that adaptation of the original manor house to allow segregation would have been impossible and that the only way to effectively separate penitents from nuns was by building a second block. The laundry building, positioned at a short distance from the peni-

tent's accommodation, was also added in the early twentieth century, at great expense.

The residential block (figure 4.2) which was completed in the early 1930s, was connected to the convent via a corridor, traversed by the nuns for access to the penitent's building and the penitents for access to the chapel which was joined to the convent. As was often the case, the nuns also retained a separate chapel within the convent for private use. A key distinction between the buildings is the sleeping arrangements. Although the plan shows relatively small bedrooms within the inmates block, these were much later subdivisions of large dormitories.<sup>185</sup> At least one sister would have been present at all times in the penitent's block and, accordingly, a room for a supervisory sister was positioned next to the dormitories. In the convent, small cells indicate that, as with all active and enclosed orders, they were intended for single occupancy.

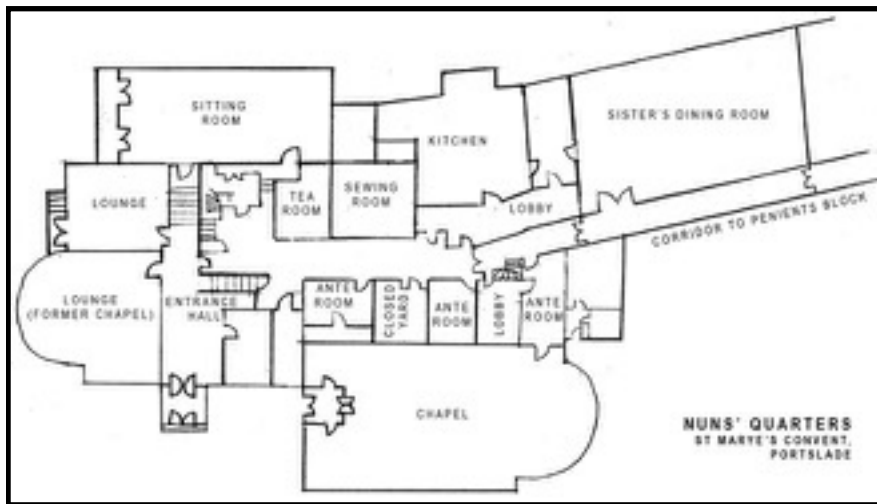
Former residents recall that inmates were, at no time allowed into the convent and that the door between the two buildings was always locked – a precaution that was also observed at the Convent of the Good Shepherd in Hammersmith.<sup>186</sup> Multiple doors in the corridor between the blocks suggest a valve effect to impede access.

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<sup>185</sup>K. Jordan, 'Representing Women's History in Built Environment Conservation', MSc Dissertation, 2009. Information drawn from interviews with former residents.

<sup>186</sup> Steele, *The Convents of Great Britain*





**Figure 4.3.** Plan of the sisters' quarters (former manor house) and chapel at St Marye's. Source: author

### The Sisters of Our Lady of Charity, St Michael's

#### Convent and Church of the Sacred Heart



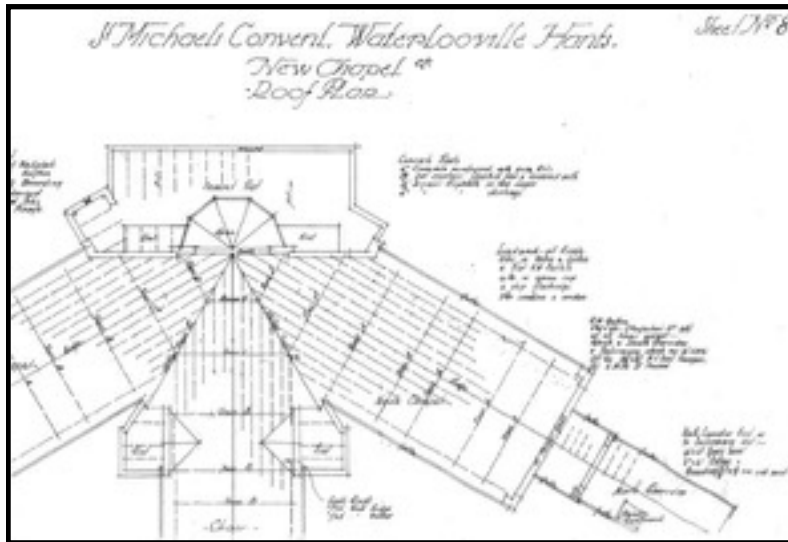
**Figure 4.4.** Rear view of St Michael's Convent, Waterlooville, Leonard Stokes, 1889. Source: <http://www.adamshendry.co.uk>

The Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge were invited by Bishop Vertue in 1885 to found a convent that would provide refuge for local women but

the founding of the convent also brought the additional benefit of establishing a Catholic presence in the nascent parish (on the sister's arrival, the Catholic 'community' comprised just one family). The sisters found temporary accommodation and adapted a stable for use as an interim chapel which they opened to the public in 1886. In 1889, St Michael's convent, designed by the Roman Catholic architect, Leonard Stokes, was completed and the sisters moved in. Raising funds for a new chapel, however, took rather longer than the sisters had anticipated and it was not until after the First World War that they began to develop plans for the Church of the Sacred Heart. The small parish had grown since the sister's arrival but not significantly to justify a separate church. Bishop Cotter therefore requested that provision be made for a lay congregation in the sister's church.<sup>187</sup> The neo-Byzantine church was completed in 1923 to the designs of W.C. Mangin (figures 4.5 and 4.6). It served both the fledgling Catholic community and also the nuns and women in their care who occupied the adjoining St Michael's convent. Although it was not unusual for pre-reformation churches to serve both religious and lay via the provision of either external chapels or bisected naves, by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries relatively few parish churches were physically connected to convents. At Waterlooville the convent, in fact, predated a formal Catholic parish so the absence of a pre-existing church placed pressure on the sisters to make provision within the grounds of the convent.

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<sup>187</sup> Ward, J., *The Leonard Stokes Directory: architect in a dressing gown*, England, J. Ward, 2009.



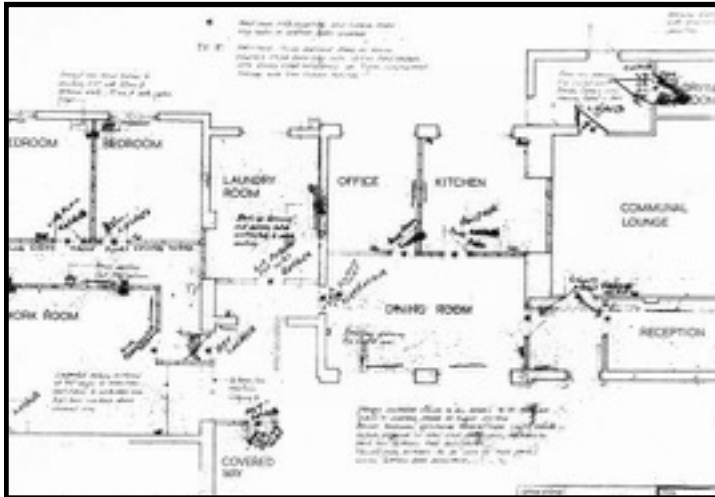
**Figure 4.5.** W. C. Mangan's plan for the Church of the Sacred Heart, Waterlooville completed 1923. Source: OLC



**Figure 4.6.** Church of the Sacred Heart Waterlooville, W. C. Mangan, 1923. Source: author

Unlike St Marye's, the monastery and refuge were two wings of the same building and a labyrinthine design of corridors and staircases both connected and divided the different spaces within the building. The arrangement of access between the two wings was highly complex and gave the appearance of greater freedom of movement between the two but this was deceptive. At St Marye's the single corridor separating the blocks made the distinction between the two clear. At St Michael's, the combination of confus-

ing layout and wide, open staircases diverted attention from the multiple doors (many of which as the plan indicates were intended to be kept locked, as at St Marye's) controlling all points of congress (figures 4.7 and 4.8).<sup>188</sup> As with St Marye's, the penitents slept in large dormitories while the nuns slept in private cells. Both groups had separate infirmaries, refectories, washing facilities and kitchens.



**Figure 4.7.** Ground floor plan of part of the former penitents' quarters, St Michael's Convent, Waterloooville. Source: OLC

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<sup>188</sup> 'The penitents part of the house is entirely separate from the nuns convent, there is a cloister between, but the door is always locked, and never under any circumstance s do the penitents enter the convent. The nuns are said to be at home in their convent, and on duty when with their 'children'. F. Steele, p. 245



**Figure 4.8.** Door between the monastery and penitents quarter's marked 'enclosure' at St Michael's. Source: author

The most visible sign of separation was seen in the church. Here, there were three separate entrances which allowed groups to enter without seeing one another. The sisters had two points of entry to the space outside the choir (a flight of stairs from the first floor infirmary and a covered walkway from the ground floor living areas) the lay women entered from a corridor which connected the church to their wing (with a separate penitents infirmary overlooking the chapel on the first floor) and the parish entered through an external door (figures 4.9 and 4.10).



**Figure 4.9.** View of the interior of the Church of the Sacred Heart from the first floor nun's infirmary. Source: author



**Figure 4.10.** View of the partially demolished walkway between the penitents quarters and the penitents nave in the Church of the Sacred Heart, Waterlooville. Source: author.

Despite the rigid segregation between lay and consecrated women, there was not a clear hierarchy in the design of the different areas - according to the sisters, the lack of decorative coving or ornate fireplaces reflected the 'monastic simplicity' intended in Stokes's design.

A distinctive feature of the convent was that the rooms were referred to in French; the space outside the nun's choir, called the 'Avant Choir', the linen room 'La Lingerie' and the kitchen, 'La Kitchenette'. There is no spiritual

motivation for this which clearly reflects the sisters desire to maintain their cultural identity - as the style of the building does.

### **Inhabiting the magdalen institution**

Both of these institutions fulfilled four functions; to enable the sisters to perform their devotional vocation; to help transform and rehabilitate the penitents; to generate an income for the community and to provide a home for all the women. All of these functions are legible in the designed spaces.

Unlike the buildings of male communities, convents incorporated conspicuously feminine, domestic spaces and were often structured in ways that resembled the Victorian middle class home<sup>189</sup> Though marriage and motherhood, naturally, were not features of convent life, women religious recreated family structures, nevertheless, as wives (of Christ), sisters (to one another) and mothers (either as individuals, administrating the religious community as a whole; collectively, to the penitent inmates who were often called 'children' or functionally, to orphaned children).<sup>190</sup> This was explicit in the spirituality of some orders - the Rule of the SMGs for example includes the line 'We are all of one family, children of the same mother'.<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> M. LaMonaca, *Masked Atheism: Catholicism and the Secular Victorian Home*, Columbia, The Ohio State University Press, 2008 and M. Wheeler, *Catholic and Protestant in nineteenth-century English Culture*, Cambridge, 2006.

<sup>190</sup> Although nuns regarded themselves as being 'married' to Christ and often wore rings on their marriage finger, they referred to themselves as 'brides' rather than 'wives'.

<sup>191</sup> Rules and Constitutions of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God, no.58.

In her study of women with learning disabilities, the sociologist Mary Stuart takes as a case study, a convent care home which, in its architecture, structure and the the charism of the congregation, bears very striking similarities to St Marye's (figures 4.3 and 4.11). Stuart identifies a process for lay women in which: 'The experience of coming to live in the convent was like becoming a child again, a sort of rebirth. The sisters have their children. These children were the women they cared for.'<sup>192</sup>

She also notes the actual and symbolic similarities between the convent and the family home - those that are very clearly present at both St Michael's and St Marye's:

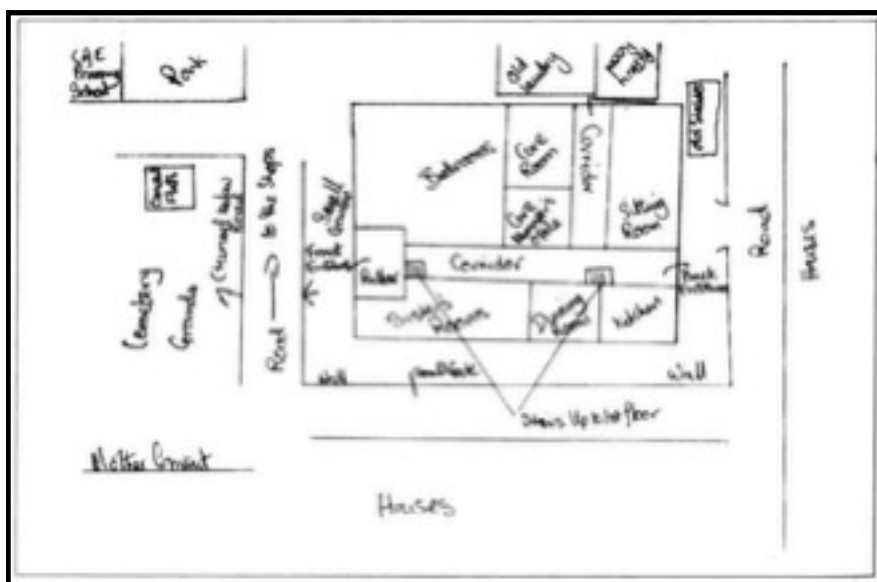
The architecture and geography of the convent emphasise the duality of experience for those who lived there and in some respect is not unlike most houses where front rooms and entrances are kept for visitors. The work areas were situated away from the sight of visitors and parents and...this hid the labour of these women.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> M. Stuart, *Not Quite Sisters: Women With Learning Disabilities Living in Convent Homes*. Worcestershire, BILD Publications, 2002. p.117.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.





**Figure 4.11.** Ground floor plan of the sisters' quarters at 'Mother House'. Source: Mary Stuart.

At St Marye's, the 'adult' members of the community occupied the front of the house. Their quarters included a range of reception rooms and private bedrooms. The 'children', at the rear of the house, had separate recreational and dining rooms, teaching areas and dormitories. A cell for the nun who supervised the 'children' was usually adjoined to the dormitory.<sup>194</sup> In similar fashion, the increasing emphasis on private domestic spaces, meant that children's and adult's areas were increasingly separated in the middle and upper-class Victorian family home – children often had separate dining and recreational spaces, where possible on upper floors to the rear of the house. In addition, children frequently shared rooms, even in large houses. The 'adult' reception rooms were generally situated at the front of the house

<sup>194</sup> In her volume, *Convents of Great Britain and Ireland*, Francesca Steele describes the distinctive layout of Good Shepherd convents: 'The penitents' part of the house is entirely separate from the nuns' convent, there is a cloister between, but the door is always locked, and never under any circumstances do the penitents enter the convent. The nuns are said to be at home in their convent, and on duty when with their 'children'.' Steele, p. 245.

and were, if not richly, then comfortably decorated. Children were, if only ideally, not permitted unfettered access to these spaces.<sup>195</sup>

In the magdalen institution, the interior design of the sisters' living areas, mirrored the family home. While the sisters had individual cells, the 'children' slept in dormitories. Reception rooms were often decorated in the style of domestic homes - many orders adapted large family houses, retaining much of the general layout and décor. At convents such as St Marye's, Portslade, the inclusion of a sewing room, a tea room and two lounges and, in both St Marye's and St Michael's, the conspicuous absence of traditional monastic spaces such as libraries, almonries and chapter houses speaks of a highly feminised, domestic gentility (figure 4.3 and 4.12).

Further evidence of divisions constructed along domestic and familial lines, is offered by a contemporary description of the GSS convent at Hammersmith in the 1836 novel *The Home of the Lost Child*. The anonymous chronicler notes that, though, 'the "children" as the penitents are always called, were chiefly in the laundry'<sup>196</sup>, the arrangements in the nuns monastery were rather different:

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<sup>195</sup> Stefan Muthesius describes the private sphere of the family as being a 'relentless process of differentiation and segregation' Quoted in J. Hamlett, *Materialising Gender: Identity and middle class domestic interiors 1850-1910*, PhD thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2005. Also J. Hamlett, *Material Relations: Domestic Interiors and Middle Class Families in England, 1850-1910*, Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2010. For further analysis of domestic interiors, see L. Davidoff and C. Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and women of the English middle classes 1780-1850*, London, Hutchinson, 1987.

<sup>196</sup> Anonymous, *The Home of the Lost Child, a tale of the Asylum of the Good Shepherd, Hammersmith*, London, C. Dolman, 1848. p.24. Although this is a work of fiction, it was written by by a member of the community and is set at the GSS convent at Hammersmith. The outline of the Rule, Charism and operations of the community clearly describe those of the GSS and so it can be assumed that this is an accurate description of the real convent.

The salle was simply a large room, where those nuns whose duties in the large house permitted it, assembled at stated times to work and converse, as a relief to the silence of the greater part of the day, and a very merry group they were. A few tables and chairs, and other neat but poor furniture was all the room contained. There was no carpet. And the only costly ornament the room could boast were a fine oil painting and a beautiful crucifix in ivory over the chimney piece'.<sup>197</sup>



**Figure 4.12.** Drawing room at St Michael's Convent, Waterlooville, c 1890s. Source: OLC

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<sup>197</sup> Anonymous, *The Lost Child* p. 32.



**Figure 4.13.** *Dormitory at the Good Shepherd Convent, Ford, Liverpool, c. 1895. Source: Peter Hughes*



**Figure 4.14.** *Nun's cell at St Michael's Convent, Waterloooville. Source: author.*

These spaces were in every respect 'adult' spaces - there no comparable rooms for the penitent 'children'. Moreover, they often also doubled up as reception rooms for visitors, in much the same way that drawing rooms in family homes operated as suggested by Jane Hamlett, 'from the point of view of the family the most important visitors were those from their own social class, who were generally received in the drawing room'.<sup>198</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> J. Hamlett, *Material Relations: Domestic Interiors and Middle Class Families in England, 1850-1910*, Manchester and New York, Manchester University Press, 2010. p. 33

There is no evidence that nuns regarded the overtly familial structure of an organisation that manifestly rejected family life as ideologically problematic, despite the fact that it was not rooted in any conventual tradition. The elevation of notions of family within religious communities seems to reflect the growing emphasis on the nuclear family in wider society – the familial structure was much looser in English medieval orders with Abbesses or Priories overseeing the community rather than mothers and there was a complete absence of either symbolic or actual 'children' within the convent.<sup>199</sup>

Stuart suggests that the family structure of the magdalen institution deliberately infantilised the adult penitents in order to suppress their sexuality: 'for the convent residents, the closeted environment of the nunnery created particular limitations on sexual expression'<sup>200</sup>

Keeping the women spatially and imaginatively as 'children', limited their sense of themselves as sexual beings and helped the process of reconstructing them.

St Michael's and, to a lesser extent St Marye's, were constructed to both enable physical segregation and also foster a sense of otherness (as children and as transgressors) within the penitents. Indeed, we might read the division of space within the Magdalen institution in terms of Foucault's model of 'normal and abnormal' categories in the construction of Utilitarian

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<sup>199</sup> The ascent of the nuclear family has been the subject of much debate since Lawrence Stone asserted, in *L. Stone, The Family Sex and Marriage*, Weidenfeld, 1977 that kinship networks were elided by a growing emphasis on the smaller family. Naomi Tadmor and others have argued that this is an oversimplification of a complex picture of continuity and change. Whilst the picture of actual relations is certainly more complicated than Stone suggests, the proliferation of prescriptive Victorian literature implies that the idealised nuclear family had a strong and widely influential cultural currency.

<sup>200</sup> Stuart, *Not Quite Sisters: Women With Learning Disabilities Living in Convent Homes*. Worcestershire, BILD Publications, 2002.

forms of power. In the refuge, normal translated as clean and abnormal as soiled and while the aim was to sanitise and transform, the anxiety to prevent cross-contamination in the process was all-pervasive.

How, then, did women religious imagine that sin was communicable? All of the orders that operated magdalen institutions focused on sexual transgression, reflecting, as suggested earlier, a wider anxiety about women engaging in prostitution and extra-marital sex. In secular society, the ostensible justification for this was to address the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. In Roman and Anglo Catholic circles, an even more wretched fate awaited transgressors - eternal damnation. For Catholics the greatest threat of corruption was posed by the corrupted and the most vulnerable to this were the purest. Thus the convent was composed of the most potentially destructive combination of inmates. Accordingly, a great deal of written material produced within the orders is concerned with the prevention of penitents introducing nuns to vice.<sup>201</sup> Outside the convent, the contrasting figures of the nun and the prostitute, unsurprisingly, provoked much comment.

In his sociological analysis of the GSS asylums Peter Hughes suggests that the rigidly enforced prohibition of any mention of the penitents' past reflected an anxiety that the subject might be sexually arousing for both penitents and nuns.<sup>202</sup> Wantonness amongst the inmates was, of course, a given but the endless iteration of chastity within the convent Rule served to also acknowledge nun's sexual desire by emphasising its corollary - self-abnega-

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<sup>201</sup> Material relating to this is evident in the archives of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God and is detailed in P. Hughes's account of the Good Shepherd charism given in his PhD thesis 'Cleanliness and Godliness'.

<sup>202</sup> Hughes, p. 52.

tion. The plea for prayers of intercession by one GSS sister, that: 'I may never for one moment offend against my Vow of Chastity...as I know the dangers before me...and I know my own weakness by experience', illustrate this hardship.<sup>203</sup> I suggest, that it is the function of a gaze mediated by longing and self-denial that helped shape this architecture.

### **Bentham's Panopticon and the Magdalen Institution**

The significance of the gaze, as will be discussed in more detail later, was pivotal in the functioning of the magdalen institution as it was in the structure of secular reformatories. In his seminal analysis of discipline, Michel Foucault suggests that late eighteenth-century Utilitarianism introduced a philosophy of control based on the supposedly empirical properties of human behaviour: those which could be reduced into binary subsets of a normal/abnormal paradigm. Understanding human nature in Manichean terms was not in itself pioneering - the philosophical shift lay in the proposal that these were mutable traits, contingent on circumstance. The necessary conclusion of this was that if society created aberrance then society could cure it and the remedy was made concrete (in theory, at least) in Jeremy Bentham's design for the panopticon - an architectural device for transforming and rehabilitating the criminal, idle and insane.

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid. p. 353.

Bentham opened his treatise on the panopticon without modesty: 'morals reformed – health preserved – industry invigorated instruction diffused...all by a simple idea in architecture!' .The 'simple idea' was a circular building composed of individual cells organised vertically around an internal 'annular area' at the centre of which was an observation hub or, as Bentham termed, 'inspector's lodge'. The cells were intended for single occupation and each had two windows: one at the rear to allow daylight and one at the front to allow inspection. The inspector's lodge had windows that provided full view of each inmate but, importantly, the backlighting of the cells obscured the inmates' view of the inspector. In this way, inmates were made aware that they were under surveillance at all times even if, in fact, the 'inspector's lodge' was empty. To Bentham's disappointment, no true panopticon was ever built but the theory proved enduringly influential not simply in the production of quasi-panoptic architecture but as a tool of social control. Foucault's argument that the panopticon permanently reversed the pre-industrial model of mass observation of a spectacle to individual observation of the masses continues to be persuasive in an age minutely documented by the ubiquitous surveillance camera.

Bentham's design for the panopticon was developed simultaneously with not only the fledgling 'human sciences' but also the expansion of medical knowledge and the development of fields such as epidemiology – epistemologies which were in continual dialectical conversation. The notion of contagion had particular purchase in nineteenth-century social and scientific discourse, giving rise to both significant medical breakthroughs but also credence to a raft of pernicious pseudo-sciences – among the least edifying



being those concerned with the sexual behaviour of women.<sup>204</sup> Out of this ideological miasma emerged both secular and religious institutions dedicated to curbing the spread of moral decay: a disease, according to the propaganda of these establishments, carried largely by women. Curative and transformative technologies in such places were informed by enlightenment sciences even where, as in the case of refuge orders, the ideology of an establishment stood in defiant opposition to Empiricist philosophy.

Despite its widespread influence in the architecture of reformatories, there is no evidence that any magdalen institutions were built specifically according to Bentham's directions for a panopticon. None were circular in layout and none had central observation towers. There was little in the highly specialised design of these buildings that appeared to promote transparency - In addition to direct supervision, observation of the penitents was effected through a variety of oblique methods, such the positioning of mirrors (which were forbidden in the penitents quarters so as not to encourage vanity) in strategic places.<sup>205</sup> And yet, tightly controlled observation and segregation, the rationale for the panopticon, were also the principle mechanisms for operation of the orders' Rules.

Although a loosely 'panopticised' philosophy is discernible in the disciplinary structures of refuge orders, I suggest that the observational framework within their institutions, were unlike those of any other correctional, medical or educational facilities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The magdalen institution was neither a reproduction nor an inversion of the unidirec-

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<sup>204</sup> See Ferrero, G. L., *Criminal Man, According to the Classification of Cesare Lombroso*, London, G. P., Putnum's Sons, 1911.

<sup>205</sup> In her unpublished research, Mary Coote suggests that at the Anglican Clewer Magdalen asylum, mirrors were positioned so that nun's could observe women, unseen.

tional gaze of the panopticon but instead was a finely wrought, multi-dimensional organism in which a range of different groups were, for very particular reasons, visible at certain times, in certain places and to certain people. A single uninterrupted view of the whole was afforded to the only figure qualified to pass judgment on all members of the community – God.

Critical in the formation of this structure, as suggested earlier, was the peculiar significance of the gaze in the ordering of convent spaces - a sensory experience that permeated every aspect of the industrial, domestic and ritual functions of convent life.

#### *Staging the spectacle*

The mission of the magdalen institution was to provide refuge and care whilst at the same time inculcating penitence and thus effect spiritual and moral reformation. To this end, the spectacle of inspirational or devotional figures was the cornerstone of a process of learning by example. As discussed earlier, Foucault has suggested that the panopticon reversed the paradigm of mass onlookers to observed masses. Using this hypothesis, it can be demonstrated that the magdalen institution, though influenced by secular principles of discipline, rejected a rigidly panoptic model, for it is through observation of spectacles such as the Mass, devotional processions and iconography, the ritual of consecration and the exemplary nuns themselves that transformation of the penitent masses was intended to take place.

The gaze had a particular theological role in Roman Catholic culture. The centrality of devotional effigies in worship, a feature that was spotlighted in

the nineteenth-century by Protestant accusations of idolatry, suggests that visual stimuli played an important part in the spirituality of female religious orders. Nuns and penitents alike sought inspiration in representations of the Virgin Mary, Magdalene or Sacred Heart and images within the convent were carefully selected for their edifying properties. The Rule of the GSS demanded, for example, that 'There shall be no pictures or images in the convent or chapel except such as are calculated to excite devotion'. Saints were intercessory in the relationship between God and worshipper and their effigies refracted the human gaze heavenward. In return, the Divine, omniscient gaze was diffused across humanity.

A controlled bilateral gaze operated between sisters and penitents. In those orders whose apostolate included the reformation of penitents, transformation was effected through the studied observation of exemplary figures, both allegorical and real. Here, sisters as 'spotless lilies', provided the penitents with a constant, highly visible source of inspiration. A constitutional endorsement of this tactic appears in the introduction in some communities of the Magdalen Order.<sup>206</sup> Here, the Magdalen Sister, a figure marked out by her black dress and silver cross was installed within the penitent ranks as a visible exemplar, in the belief that atonement 'needed to be sustained by good example'.<sup>207</sup> The penitents' gaze was returned by the observation of the sisters assigned to supervise them.

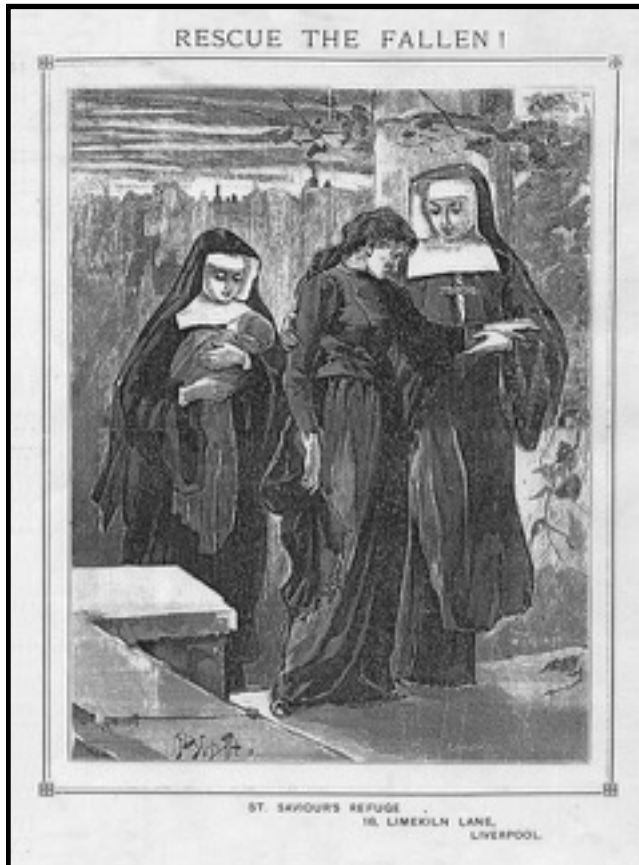
I suggest, however, that the mediated gaze of the sisters was more than observational. Those women religious who did not supervise penitents were either physically prevented or directly instructed not to look at the pen-

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<sup>206</sup> GSS and some Anglican communities such as the Sisters of St John the Baptist at Clewer

<sup>207</sup> Hughes, p. 76.

itents as the SMG Common Rule directs: 'The sisters are to pass the girls by as if they never saw them...'<sup>208</sup> This suggests that here, the desire **not** to see presumes an involuntary desire **to** see.



**Figure 4.15** *Liverpool Refuge illustration 'Rescue the Fallen'* Source: SMG Archive ref C.L p.66.

### *Masking the spectacle*

Whilst real women were not to be looked upon, the fall of the penitent operated, as it did for many others, as muse for women religious (Mary Magdalen, for example, was frequently represented in the paintings and statues that decorated magdalen institutions) and the literature and imagery of the

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<sup>208</sup> SMG common rules no 18 - it is important to remember that the SMGs did not segregate lay women from sisters to the same degree as the GSS and OLC. The lack of physical boundaries meant that imaginary ones sometimes had to stand in their place.

'fallen' was often sentimental as figure 4.15 illustrates. Of the great many photographs that were taken of magdalen institutions, a surprising number were of penitents and, though these were not romanticised, they were certainly composed in ways that were rich with meaning. The photographs taken of penitents by the SMGs are particularly interesting as the penitents are only ever shown with their backs to the camera. Though it is very likely that these images were composed in order to protect the anonymity of women who would be returned to secular society, the staging also seems to echo the traditional classroom punishment of facing the wall and, importantly, reveals a great deal about the structures of observation in refuge orders. The picture in figure in 4.16 is of penitents and sisters outside the Russell House refuge in Streatham, South London. The group of sisters are oriented slightly towards the group of penitents who are facing the wall. Neither group can see the other: the penitents because of their orientation and the sisters because their eyes are closed in prayer. The image perfectly illustrates the notion of imaginary screens that is suggested by the SMG Rule quoted above - here the women are present in the same space but invisible to each other.



**Figure 4.16** *Penitents and Sisters at St Mary's Streatham*  
Source: SMG Archive ref Album IIG/1/3

The need for sisters to create visual barriers between themselves and the penitents (whether materially constructed or imaginary) in all of the refuge orders suggests a preoccupation with the appearance of the penitents. In her 1975 essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', Laura Mulvey employs the notion of *scopophilia* to make a psychoanalytical reading of the gaze. In discussing 'fascination with the human form' she suggests that: 'there are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at.'<sup>209</sup> In figure 4.16, it would seem that the very act of not looking apophatically emphasises the significance of looking. As the custodians of a secret and dangerous knowledge, the penitents must have been objects of curiosity for the sisters and the instruction not to look, whether consciously or not, acknowledges this. Moreover, the symmetry in the configuration of the photograph in figure 4.16 - both are separately but simultaneously engaged in prayer -

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<sup>209</sup> L. Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' originally published in *Screen* 16.3 Autumn 1975 pp. 6-18. <http://imlportfolio.usc.edu/ctcs505/mulveyVisualPleasureNarrativeCinema.pdf> pp 2-3

hints at an important theological feature of refuge life: that both sisters and penitents were sinners who sought spiritual transformation.

As the photograph indicates, sisters and penitents had to share communal spaces and partake in communal activities such as Mass and since budget rarely allowed for separate chapels, a range of strategies to simultaneously display and conceal were devised.

### **Ideology and theology: the fan shaped chapel**

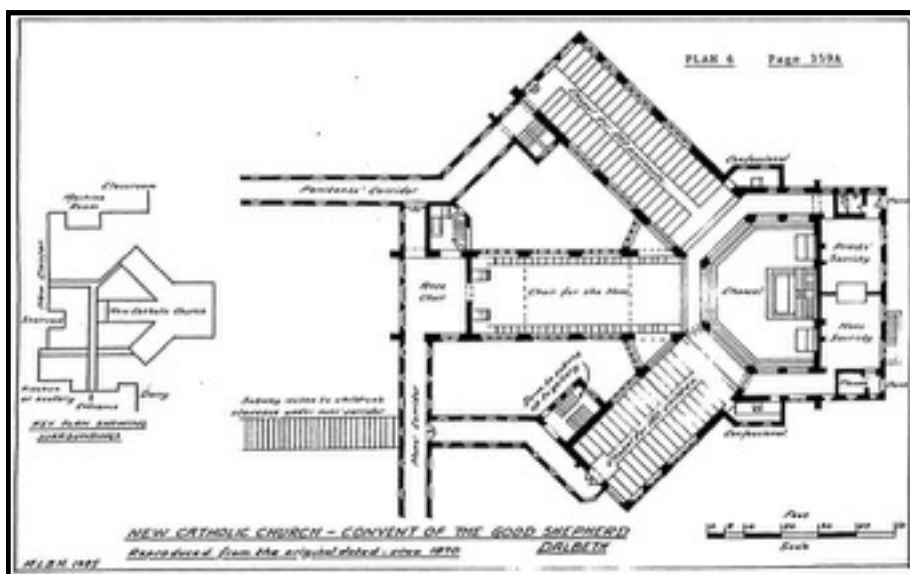
The most extraordinary spatial articulation of the complex ideology of refuge orders were the fan-shaped chapels, such as that at the OLC convent of St Michael's described above, built in England and Scotland between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries. No evidence exists to suggest that any religious orders other than the GSS and OLC built chapels to this distinctive plan. In fact, the fan-shaped chapel appears to be the first significant deviation from either the basilican or cruciform layout in any British Catholic Church and it would not be until the reforms of the Second Vatican Council in 1962 that the architects of parish churches would experiment with liturgical space to this degree.

The first fan-shaped chapel in the UK was probably built at the Convent of the Good Shepherd in Dalbeth, Glasgow.<sup>210</sup> The convent annals indicate

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<sup>210</sup> I have found no evidence for a chapel of this configuration in any of the standing chapels of the OLC or GSS in France.

that, although plans were submitted for a chapel in 1855 by George Goldie, the chapel was not completed until 1866 and it is unclear whether Goldie, who designed the rest of the convent buildings, was the architect. The plan in figure 4.17, taken from the GSS archives, bears the date 1870 and since the church was built just four years earlier, it is reasonable to infer that these plans record the layout of church as it stood, perhaps for the purpose of some addition or amendment to the design. The space comprises two naves set at forty-five degree angles to a central nave (the nun's choir). At the eastern end is the sanctuary, with the altar abutting the eastern wall (this was moved forward at St Michaels, as with almost all Roman Catholic churches after Vatican II) The position of the altar against the wall distinguishes Catholic from Protestant churches – in Catholic worship, the presence of God in the consecrated sacrament means that the priest cannot turn his back to the altar and so the Mass is said with all communicants, including the priest, facing the eastern wall.



**Figure 4.17** Plan of 'fan-shaped' chapel at the Good Shepherd Convent, Dalbeth, Glasgow. Source: Peter Hughes



The Mass was observed with orthodox ritual in all refuge orders and accordingly the priest faced the altar throughout the ceremony. Though the configuration meant that some worshippers had a restricted view of the Mass, it enabled the three separate congregations to participate at the same time but without sight of one another. As has been discussed, the desire to categorize and segregate informed all aspects of refuge life and its significance was such that even catching sight of one another in uncontrolled circumstances was thought to be a danger. Although the design of the work and domestic areas required a complex conceptualisation of the space, the provision of separate buildings or wings for penitents ensured that most nuns could be kept apart from most penitents at most times, the one place where all were compelled to be together was the chapel and the maintenance of segregation presented obvious logistical problems.

The difficulty of separating congregations was not new. It was relatively common for pre-reformation contemplative orders to build chapels that served a lay parish. Strict enclosure demanded that religious were kept from view of the laity and so extern chapels, attached to the convent or monastery were built at right angles to the sanctuary. The religious received the Eucharist through a grille in the wall separating the extern chapel and sanctuary. This simple configuration, which continues to be reproduced today in the chapels of some enclosed communities (albeit without the grille) allowed an easy separation of two congregations. Even simpler divisions were sometimes made by erecting a screen which bisected the chapel across an east/west axis. A common feature of convents which housed a novitiate was to create a screened area behind the nuns choir (the nave bisected north to south) where the novices could observe mass. Here,

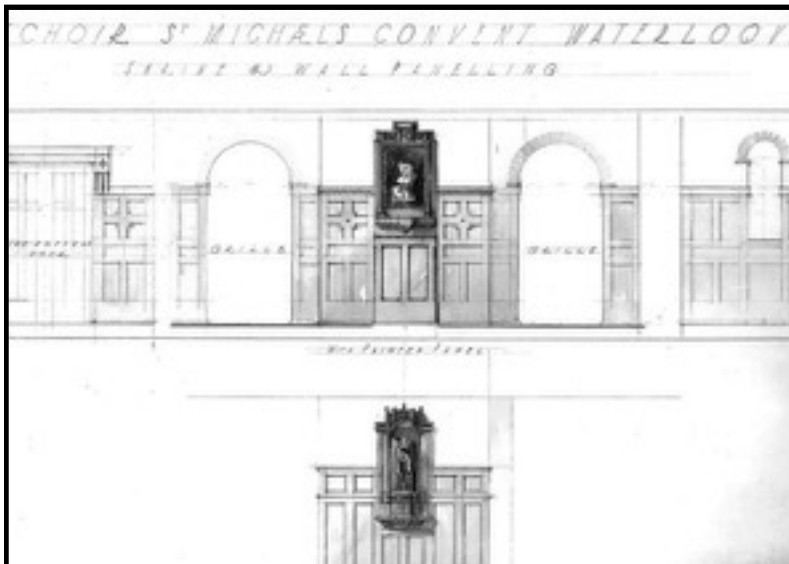
however, where the need to segregate was less pressing, the Eucharist was received communally.

Where multiple discrete groups were present in refuge institutions, however, in the larger refuges, base-line separation could be achieved in no less than three groupings. In the earlier institutions, the groups comprised nuns, penitents and preservation girls (the need to separate the latter – women who had fallen and girls who easily might – having some urgency). In later Magdalen institutions, the fan-shaped device was used to separate the nun and penitent congregations from lay parishioners – Bishops frequently asking women's orders of various ministries to provide places for lay worship in burgeoning parishes.

At Dalbeth, as the plan shows, the three congregations were made up of refuge inmates. The different access routes give an idea of the complexity of the wider refuge and the way that the chapel operates as a locus, connecting all of the discrete areas of the site and symbolically bringing all inmates together, as equals, before God. The uniform decoration in all three naves of chapels such as that at the OLC convent of St Michael's in Waterlooville indicates, perhaps surprisingly, that despite segregation there was a commonality in the sensory experience of worship. Here only the superior, the mistress of novices and the mistress of penitents occupy markedly different positions to the other worshippers within the space (figures 4.18 and 4.19).



**Figure 4.18** Mother Superior's throne in the Church of the Sacred Heart, Waterlooville. Source: author



**Figure 4.19** W. C. Mangan's sketch for the Mother Superior's throne, Waterlooville. Source: OLC

In the chapel the structure of the gaze alters, as all defer to God who replaces all observers and reduces all to the observed. At first glance, the fan-shaped chapel appears to reverse the panoptic model by situating the priest as a central focal point for multiple groups of observers. But, in fact, the mechanism of control through observation is played out in the fan-

shaped chapel in a way that almost perfectly reproduces the panopticon. The transformands are positioned radially around the altar but cannot see each other. Although the priest can be seen by the congregation, he cannot see them as he celebrates Mass with his back to the nave. In this way, all are oriented towards the actual body (and eye) of Christ which resides in the sacrament placed upon the altar or within the Tabernacle (standing in for the inspector's lodge). All worshippers know that they are being watched and modify their behaviour accordingly. But the compelling paradox in both the material and conceptual design of the fan-shaped chapel is that it borrowed from an architecture that explicitly replaced God with human, in order to install God as the master of panopticon, the most Godless of all built forms. Had the nuns rationalised it in such terms, they may have enjoyed this irony. An alternative way of reading it, is that the most potent articulation of the fan-shaped chapel is not of a shared and sacred humility before God but rather a profane expression of control of one human over another – a spatial apartheid that continually buttressed authority and superiority.

The structure of the magdalen institution, though deviating, as has been described, in particular ways from secular models of control and discipline, produced paternalistic forms of power. There has been some suggestion that the refuge work undertaken by women religious represented a feminised and therefore compassionate and understanding attitude towards prostitution. There is certainly evidence to suggest that nuns took the trouble to consider the root causes of vice – rape, abuse and poverty but the overarching emphasis in refuge orders on penitence, particularly in light of the fact the nuns were apparently aware that many women had been raped and exploited, rather undermines this argument. Indeed, as the historians

Susan Mumm, Maria Luddy and Martha Vicinus point out, at no point were nuns involved in movements that sought to address the causes rather than palliate the effects of the sex trade.<sup>211</sup> No religious orders lent vocal support to Josephine Butler's campaign to repeal the degrading Contagious Diseases Acts or to raise the age of consent. While it is clear, then, that refuge orders were driven by the desire to do good, this was bound by a doctrine that refused to challenge the deeply unjust status quo. That this was the case, probably reflected Catholic and specifically Pauline teaching on the nature of women and original sin and it might be reasonable to infer that nuns saw refuge work, in some measure, as atonement for the sins of their sex.

This does not mean, however, that they operated under the direct auspices of men. All of the refuges discussed in this chapter were managed autonomously by nuns and two of the orders (the GSS and SMG) were founded by women according to Rules that they themselves had written. The phenomenon of women choosing to exercise autonomy to ends that appear self-limiting - the construction of *habitus* as it is described by Bourdieu - is not confined to women's religious orders but it finds a powerful expression here. What can be said of female agency in refuge orders is that, for whatever reason, many women religious were drawn to and chose this mission. From within the boundaries of a theological framework, they conceived ways of inculcating atonement, then designed and built the conceptual and physical structures required to enact it. Moreover, as the architecture of twentieth century magdalen institutions such as St Marye's, Port-

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<sup>211</sup> S. Mumm, 'Not worse than other girls: The convent-based rehabilitation of fallen women in Victorian Britain', *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 29, No. 3, Spring 1996, pp. 527-546. M. Vicinus, *A Widening Sphere: Changing roles of Victorian Women*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1977.

slade indicates, though elsewhere in society the social currency of 'separate sphere' diminished significantly over the twentieth century, it proved stubbornly resistant within the culture of magdalen institutions. A critical analysis that aims to view the agency of nuns engaged in refuge work through the historical prism of feminism needs to be made cautiously.

## Building the refuge

### *Spatial planning*

For all active convents, as discussed in the previous chapter, the unique specifications for buildings were invariably provided by nuns. In the refuge orders, the highly complex organisation of space demanded innovative approaches, such as the fan-shaped chapel, that often broke with traditional ecclesiastical forms. Where, then, did the sisters draw inspiration for such architecture?

Both the OLC and GSS experimented with configurations other than the fan shape for their chapels. At the GSS chapel in Ford, Liverpool (figure 4.20) the nave was bisected east to west by a screen, with a transept at right angles to the sanctuary – a design that combined two pre-reformation devices. This was less effective than the fan shape at separating the three congregations but was probably a cheaper alternative. *The Bootle Times* of 1889, reported of the chapel: 'There is a peculiarity about it that we believe is only found in one other church in the kingdom, which is the possibility for three congregations to worship in at the same time, all being able to see the altar, but yet unable to see one another.'<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> 'Our Churches Past and Present', Article VI Church of the "Sacred Heart" Ford. *The Bootle Times*, 30<sup>th</sup> March 1889



**Figure 4.20** Nun's choir at the Good Shepherd Convent chapel at Ford, Liverpool, c.1880s. Source: *The Bootle Times*

In fact, there were at least two chapels that fitted this description by 1889 – Dalbeth and Bartestree – but the report confirms that this was a highly unusual configuration.<sup>213</sup> By the end of the nineteenth Century both the GSS and OLC seem to have favoured, where budgets and space permitted, the fan shape. As well as the chapel at St Michael's Waterlooville, of those that are known to have been constructed, the GSS built at least three: at Dalbeth, at Stapleton in Kent in 1901, by Pugin and Pugin and another, as late as 1955, in Bishopton by Thomas Cordiner.

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<sup>213</sup> By 1889 there were numerous GSS and OLC foundations in the UK. If there were more three nave chapels in other of their refuges, the novelty of the one at Ford described in this article suggests that they were not a common feature of the magdalen institutions built by these orders, at this point. It is important to note, though, that these spaces fiercely guarded their privacy and *The Bootle Times* was unlikely to have conducted very extensive research.





**Figure 4.21** 'Fan-shaped' chapel at Convent of the Good Shepherd, Bishopton by Thomas Cordiner, 1955. Source: GSS Archives

I have noted the names of the architects responsible for providing plans for these churches but it is clear that in all cases except for the chapel at Dalbeth, the sisters themselves requested the fan shape.<sup>214</sup> The annals of the OLC reveal that Bishop Vertue gave his consent for the sisters to 'think out [a] plan'<sup>215</sup> for the new church at St Michaels, and they travelled first to the OLC Convent in High Park to inspect the chapel (a T-shape configuration). The sisters at High Park suggested that they visit the GSS convent at Dal-

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<sup>214</sup> This configuration is exclusive to the GSS and OLC and none of the architects who supplied plans are known to have replicated it elsewhere.

<sup>215</sup> Annals of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, p. 28.

beth, Glasgow. The sisters did so and made the decision to base their church on the fan-shape, as the annals record:

...it was there that they found exactly what they required, at least the idea of three in one, and the Sisters part completely private and enclosed. Though the journey was tiring, it was worth it. After a few hours with these dear Sisters, the visitors returned to High Park, quite pleased with the place, photos etc of Dalbeth Church. It is practically on these lines that the present beautiful church is built in our monastery, with many improvements and additions to suit the needs of the Children and the public.<sup>216</sup>

The plan for the Church of the Good Shepherd in Dalbeth shown in figure 4.17 indicates that, as at St Michaels, access to the chapel was complex - indeed the children (in this case actual children) appear to have entered their nave from a subway. This has echoes of the vast GSS Mother House at Angers in which a network of tunnels allowed the many different groups to traverse the site without being seen by one another (figures 4.22 and 4.23)

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid



**Figure 4.22** Mother House at Angers, founded in 1829. Building on the site commenced 1830s. Chapel by Louis Duvêtre, 1859. Source: [patrimoinedefrance.com](http://patrimoinedefrance.com)



**Figure 4.23** Tunnels at the Mother House in Angers. Source: GSS Archives, Angers.

I have not been able to uncover an obvious precedent for the design of the fan-shaped chapel and it is not clear whether it was one that the sisters had already experimented with in France, developed in Ireland (the OLC arrived in Ireland in 1833 and the GSS in 1835) or designed, perhaps with the help

of Goldie, for the first time in Dalbeth.<sup>217</sup> It is certainly the case, however, that there were a range of architectural devices employed in both religious and secular institutions that might have been influential.

The architectural historian, Thomas Markus, traces a lineage of reformatory architecture through medieval almshouses to the hospitals of the enlightenment and the utilitarian asylums, workhouses and prisons. Looking at Markus's plans for monastic hospitals it seems likely that these provided some inspiration for the design of some convent refuges - as discussed in chapter 3, A.W.N. Pugin is likely to have based the Mercy convent at Handsworth (1839) on Brownes hospital in Stamford (1493). St Mary's Handsworth had a marked influence on English convent designs of various orders and both the GSS and OLC would have been familiar with the Mercy convents that had already been completed by Pugin, before they arrived - those at Bermondsey, Handsworth and Nottingham. Indeed, the GSS employed Pugin's service at their convent in Hammersmith in order to transform a distinctly secular building into an identifiably monastic one and the OLC commissioned his son Edward to design their flagship refuge at Bartestree - the designs for St Mary's Handsworth drawn, as discussed earlier from Browne's Hospital, are clearly referenced and demonstrate the influence of a monastic tradition on Bartestree. Elsewhere, it is interesting

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<sup>217</sup> There is some anecdotal evidence that the GSS convent in Limerick, founded in 1848, had a chapel that accommodated three congregations but it is not clear when this might have been built; a new chapel was built in 1929). I have not been able to find any evidence for it in photographs of the extant building, now the Limerick school of design. [http://find-articles.com/p/articles/mi\\_6941/is\\_2\\_35/ai\\_n28434176/](http://find-articles.com/p/articles/mi_6941/is_2_35/ai_n28434176/). This article suggests, further, that the chapel was accessed by separate tunnels as at Dalbeth. It is not clear who designed the original convent but, significantly, plans for a new oratory in 1877 were drawn up by the firm Goldie and Child. Further three nave churches in Irish GSS refuges might be Wexford 1893, where there was a nave with side aisles, one of which was the 'penitent's chapel'. The GSS in Belfast had just 2 choirs- one for nuns and one for penitents.<http://www.dia.ie/works/view/2853/building/CO.+WEXFORD%2C+NEW+ROSS%2C+CONVENT+OF+THE+GOOD+SHEPHERD>.

to note that pre-reformation monasteries were less rigid in the design of liturgical space than the builders of parish churches. The plan of Brownes Hospital in figure 3.16 shows that, as with the fan-shaped chapel, an altar was positioned so that all patients or inmates could observe Mass. Here, though, there were no divisions between the worshippers

This feature distinguishes 'modern' and medieval monastic spaces – the latter were, in fact, surprisingly egalitarian.<sup>218</sup> Thus, in the complex ordering of discrete spaces, the sisters were required to look elsewhere. Markus's critique of the Hôpital Général (1656), with reference to Foucault's analysis of the same, is of particular interest to an examination of magdalen institutions. Markus's description of this 'landmark' architecture shows the striking resemblances in the form and function between the two:

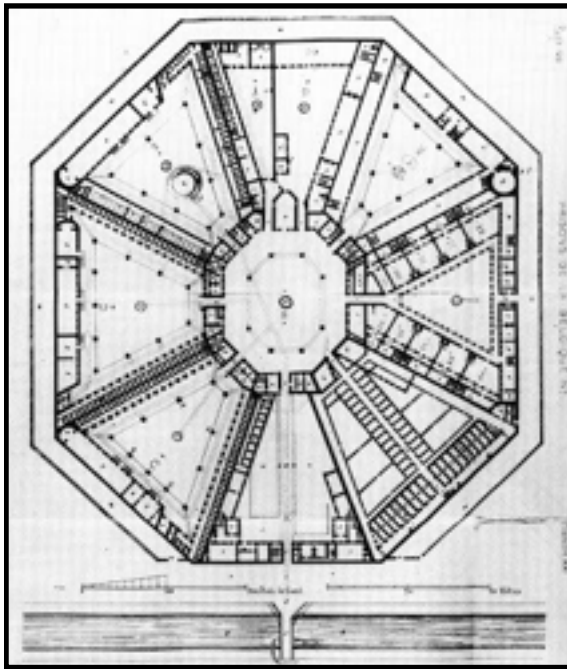
A system was invented for collecting and confining those who in one way or another could introduce chaos into the social order. After confinement a range of regimes could be imposed to heal, reform or punish these individuals and to make them work. There was an extensive list of categories: the physically or mentally ill, those suffering from the moral disease of crime or unable to work as a result of old age or infirmity, the poor...vagrants, orphans and deviants of all kind. For the next two centuries this programme consumed by far the greatest slice of public building resources in the construction of poorhouses, workhouses, orphanages, almshouses, prisons, hospitals and asylums<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> R. Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture: The Archaeology of Religious Women*, London, New York, Routledge, 1997.

<sup>219</sup> T. Markus, *Buildings and Power: Freedom and Control in the Origin of Modern Building Types*, London, Routledge, 1993. p95

The plan in figure 4.24 , of the Maison de Force in Ghent (1722), demonstrates that, expanding on the Hôpital Général model, the architects of reformatories had begun to experiment with radial forms in the segregation of inmates - some sixty years before the publication of Bentham's Panopticon in 1787. Importantly, both the Hôpital Général and the Maison de Force are examples of a Catholic response to the need to impose social control suggesting that the GSS and OLC may have been fomenting spatial techniques for segregation, such as the fan-shape chapel, before they arrived in England – indeed, further research might reveal that precedents for the fan shape might be found in the chapels of French refuge orders.



**Figure 4.24** 1839 Plan of the Maison de Force, Ghent. Source: T. Markus, Buildings and Power

### *Architectural style*

The importance of precedents and cultural roots lay at the heart of planning and design in missionary orders. The OLC, in particular, brought elements of their cultural heritage to wider building projects in the UK. St Michael's

convent in Waterlooville was designed by Leonard Stokes in 1889 and, as mentioned in the previous chapter and seen in figures 3.18 and 3.19, while it bears the hallmarks of Stokes's deference to Lutyens, it is also strikingly reminiscent of the OLC mother house in Caen. Moreover, much of internal space is described, mentioned earlier, using the French vocabulary of the order - the narthex or ante-choir, referred to as the 'Avant Choir', the kitchen 'La Kichenette', the linen room 'La Lingere' and so on.<sup>220</sup> This suggests that the nuns gave specific directions for how the space was to be used and arranged.

The question of architectural style, though perhaps not the most pressing consideration for nuns was, nevertheless, significant. It is not a coincidence that St Michael's resembles the mother house in Caen, nor is the ostentatiously Gothic style of the OLC convent at Bartestree a random selection from a range of mid-Victorian possibilities. As will be considered in more detail later, A.W.N. Pugin's work at Hammersmith indicates the need felt by the GSS to present an appropriate monastic style that would mask the secular appearance of the laundry work that took place either inside or behind the convent, reflecting an identity crisis in the ideology of refuge orders. Though there are no photographs or plans of this site, the following descriptions from the annals indicate the way in which the complex spatial planning fused with the Gothic style

The church was lengthened by the sacred heart chapel for the lay and touriere sisters and any of the choir sisters who were too infirmed to kneel in the stalls. To this side was added a long plain building joining on to the old original house, running parallel with

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<sup>220</sup> Information supplied by OLC sisters of St Michael's Convent, Waterlooville.

the cloister to the church, and three stories high. On the ground floor was a community room a sacristy and a linen room. Above this were the infirmary, [which was] close to the church tribune, the novitiate and novice mistress' room and the roberie. The top storey had two rows of cells opening onto a wide corridor running the whole length of the building, with a window the full length of the passage at each end. Nothing could have been more simple compact and satisfactory. The whole faced the convent garden. There was only one drawback, which was that it closed the windows on one side of Mr Pugin's beautiful gothic cloister, but there seemed to be no alternative, and the alcoves were formed into niches for statues which gave a very conventual aspect to the whole. The two top storeys were over the cloister which afforded the necessary width for the double row of cells.<sup>221</sup>

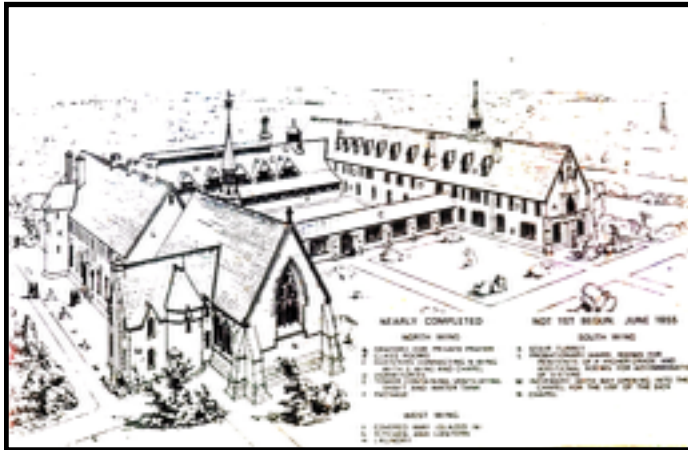
This site (completed in 1849) was the first religious magdalen institution in Britain and, combined with the religious stipulations contained in the GSS charism, clearly provided a template for further magdalen institutions, including Anglican ones. The House of Mercy at Clewer, established by Harriet Monsell and Rev T.T. Carter was the first Anglican magdalen institution to be built in the UK (figures 4.25 and 4.26). The newly formed order of the Sister of St John the Baptist based the Rule on that of the GSS but kept it relatively flexible. As with the GSS, the penitents were sub-divided into unconsecrated and consecrated (Magdalen Sisters). The complex site designed by the Anglican architect, Henry Woodyer, and begun in 1855 (but not fully completed until 1881) reflects the Rule - the plans show, for exam-

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<sup>221</sup> Brittain-Catlin, p.282



ple, a range of buildings intended for 'penitents of a higher grade'. The style, particularly the brick work polychromy, owes a debt to the architect of All Saints, Margaret Street, William Butterfield, to whom Woodyer was articulated.



**Figures 4.25 - 4.26** top to bottom

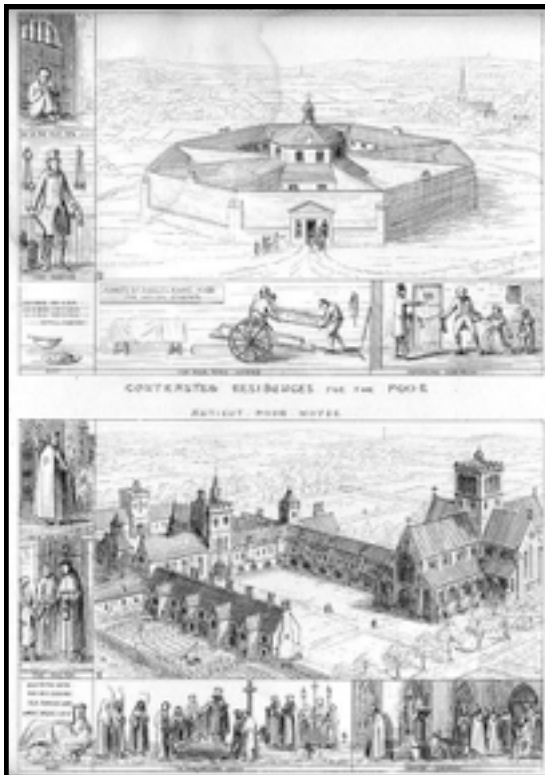
Figure 4.25 Henry Woodyer's plans for the Convent of St John the Baptist, Clewer, 1853-1881. Source: Mary Coote

Figure 4.26 Magdalen's quarters at the Convent of St John the Baptist. Source: Mary Coote.

In 1862, seven years after building works at Clewer commenced, E.W. Pugin was commissioned to design a large complex of buildings for the OLC at Bartestree. As with Clewer and the GSS convent at Hammersmith, the

buildings were designed to segregate the sub-groups of sisters and lay women but in style, close comparisons can be made with Woodyer's buildings at Clewer. Both, owe a debt to A.W.N. Pugin's Mercy convents of the 1840s, none of which were magdalen institutions

Unlike Clewer, the chapel at Bartestree was designed to separate sisters from lay-inmates, although the extern chapel was not added until some years after completion of the site. The Longworth Chapel, originally the private chapel of a nearby manor house dates from the late fourteenth century but was moved in 1869 to form an extern or second nave of the convent chapel. It is unclear whether this was at E.W. Pugin's suggestion but it is significant that this noted restoration of a pre-reformation church to Catholic use, was executed just three years after E.W. Pugin completed the restoration of the medieval chapel at Mayfield.



**Figure 4.27** 'Contrasted residences for the poor' suggested by Pugin in *Contrasts*. Source: Wikipedia

The complex relationship between theology and architecture in women's religious orders turns on the combination of spirituality and vocation captured in the term 'charism'. Women religious were able to synthesise the 'contrasts' that Pugin illustrated (figure 4.27) by expressing the mechanical structure of the convent in a politely historicised architectural language. In magdalen institutions, in particular, as the chapter has demonstrated, the practical side of charism is clearly legible in the laundries, complex ambulatory spaces, dormitories and utilitarian principles behind the design of chapels. The emphasis on prayer through work, however, often gives the misleading impression that the spirituality of women religious was experienced corporately and mediated entirely by the Rule. This was not so; as the following chapter suggests, women experienced personal and private relationships with God and expressed these in ways that shaped the art and architecture of the community.

## Chapter 5

### 'ARTISTS HIDDEN FROM HUMAN GAZE': VISUAL CULTURE AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN THE CONVENT



**Figure 5.** Sketch for the the Stations of the Cross at St Mary's Convent, Roehampton by Sr Mary Tommaso, c. 1920s. Source: Kenny Hickey and Matt Spour

*'..artists, whose beautiful handiwork is animated with life, who form souls in purity and ornament them with the ineffable grace of Christian virtue. Such are the daughters of Mother Pelletier, artists hidden from human gaze, bestowing on the soul entrusted to their care the blessing of peace and the ornament of Divine grace'.<sup>222</sup>*

*Monsignor H. Pasquier*

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<sup>222</sup>Pasquier, H., *Life of Mother Mary of St Euphrasia of Pelletier, foundress and the first Superior General of the Congregation of Our Lady of the Good Shepherd of Angers*. London:Burnes & Oats, 1953 (translation from original 1893) p.372.

In the previous chapters I have explored the imprints made on convent architecture by secular ideology, aesthetic discourses, cultural heritage and formal theology. The following explores the emergence of vernacular theologies which drew, not from Roman Catholic dogma but from the legacies of mysticism. Women's religious communities are broadly acknowledged to have been seats of mystic theology until the counter-reformation and much of the literature of mysticism was written by women. I suggest that this tradition continued into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries albeit in a different guise. Moreover, the significance of late modern-era mysticism (as opposed to formal Roman Catholic theology) to the spirituality of women religious is most clearly expressed, not in their writing, but in the paradoxical architecture and art that they produced.

### **Spirituality in the Victorian convent**

Over the past twenty years, Grace Jantzen and Caroline Walker Bynum have brought feminist perspectives to theology that seek to challenge the dominant versions of Christian mysticism; from those that describe a universal mystic experience to those that reject the autonomous subject alto-

gether.<sup>223</sup> While both Jantzen and Bynum acknowledge mystic traditions, they attempt to destabilise the metanarratives of mysticism by highlighting gender difference in the way that spirituality was experienced, expressed and interpreted. Both have developed their arguments through a close study of the written works of medieval women and both agree that what has been retrospectively labelled mysticism ushered in a 'golden age' of female religious authority in the thirteenth-century, paving the way for subsequent female visionaries and thinkers.<sup>224</sup> The weakness in Jantzen and Bynum's analyses is that they focus on literature and thus largely peter out after the counter-reformation. Jantzen was explicit in her reasons for doing so, She has productively argued that, as religion was superseded by the state as the major organ of power across Europe, religious thought bifurcated: mysticism retreated into the private sphere whilst theology gained ascendancy in the public sphere by establishing itself as an intellectual branch of the enlightenment project. In this account, the mystic experience turned inwards at precisely the same historical moment that separate spheres ideology gained purchase; no longer seers, prophets and philosophers, women were relegated to the guardian angels of morality. In Jantzen's words, "both mysticism and women, then, became constructed as private and personal, having nothing to do with politics" <sup>225</sup>

This chapter looks at the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to explore Jantzen's characterisation of mysticism during this period. I will argue

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<sup>223</sup> See, for example, G. Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995 and C. Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe*, MIT Press, 2011.

<sup>224</sup> The identification of mysticism and mystics is rooted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century works of Evelyn Hill, William James, William Ralph Inge and William Philip Downes.

<sup>225</sup> G. Jantzen, 'Feminists, Philosophers and Mystics', *Hypatia* Vol 9 (4) pp186-286 1994, p.190.

that we must treat with caution the inferences that Jantzen has drawn from the dearth of written accounts by women and that we might productively look elsewhere for evidence of an authoritative female spirituality - one which has failed to assert itself in either the canon of mysticism or feminist discourse but is, nevertheless, part of a self-confident female tradition. I suggest that, as the written word came to be guarded with increasing jealousy by the academy, material and visual culture became a potent means and expression of women's soulful communion with God.

Literary theorist Robert P. Fletcher suggests that, as a seat of mystic experience, 'by the nineteenth century in England the convent had been replaced by the home'.<sup>226</sup> But in fact, nowhere in Victorian England was female spirituality more widely and creatively explored than in convents. Hitherto, scholarly accounts of women's mystic experiences have been drawn exclusively from enclosed women's orders – women who were confined to the cloister and focused on meditative devotion. The reasons for this are plain; in women's religious orders, contemplation and mysticism are generally considered the corollary of one another. I suggest, however, that active sisterhoods – those whose apostolate included education, health or social care in the lay community - shared an emphasis on interior spirituality but experienced it through devotional labour as well as prayer. This served the purpose of providing a spiritual justification for the paradox of being both active within and removed from society, the dual identities which are often symbolised in the culture of women religious by Mary and Martha. That the emergence of a new spirituality (one that reflected the way that sisters were reimagining their charism in the nineteenth century) suggests a

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<sup>226</sup> Fletcher "Convent Thoughts" Augusta Webster and the Body Politics of the Victorian Cloister, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, (2003) 295-313, p. 297.

certain expediency does not detract from its integrity. The means of achieving a mystical union with God (whether or not we accept that the experience itself is universal or, indeed, actual) have demonstrably tracked major cultural and theological shifts. Such scholarly works as there are on the spirituality of Victorian sisterhoods have identified a common thread of what I shall term mysticism, observing 'the special connexion [sic] with God transcending the material' but placing this firmly within the context of their pastoral work.<sup>227</sup> In emphasising vocational labour, pragmatism and austerity, these scholars have missed the peculiar significance of art in the spirituality of these communities.

The focus of my research is on English convent culture but it is impossible to examine this without exploring the influence of continental Europe. The art that is discussed in this chapter was produced in an international context; in search of artistic inspiration, women religious cast their nets widely and rapidly disseminated works of art (or reproductions) throughout their convents – across Europe and beyond – and between orders. Indeed, I suggest that to identify a 'national' style in English convent art relies on an understanding of the style that Roman Catholics term 'international'.

The following will consider works that illustrate how active women religious embraced interior mystic spirituality and found ways to express it in works of art that could, like Eastern icons, transcend narrative depictions of the subject matter and operate as stimulants to mystic experience. Moreover, I aim to demonstrate that precisely the same cultural, social and religious conditions that produced these works also defined the emerging psychology and scholarship of mystic spirituality.

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<sup>227</sup> H. Stone, 'Constraints on the Mother Foundresses: Contrasts in Anglican and Roman Catholic Headship in Victorian England', PhD Thesis, University of Leeds, 1993, p.36.



### *Approaches to Mysticism*

As Jantzen rightly observes, the term mysticism is historically specific. Although the words 'mystic' and 'mystery' are used frequently, 'mysticism' does not appear in any of the primary source texts that form the spine of this study - as a description of a distinct arm of Christian theology, it was not in popular use during the period that they were written. Significantly, however, it was used by J. Beavington Atkinson in 1882 to describe the work of the Roman Catholic artist, Friedrich Overbeck (to whom I will be returning) and that one of the earliest attempts at an overview of Christian mysticism was produced in 1899 by the Roman Catholic priest, William Ralph Inge. We may therefore assume that the term had some, if limited, currency in nineteenth-century English Roman Catholic thought. The concept of a 'mystic' experience, drawn directly from Inge's taxonomy, was qualified in 1902 by William James in *Varieties of Mystic Experience*. James, a philosopher and clinical psychologist, attempted a scientific definition of mysticism in what has come to be known as the Perennialist approach. This was developed through the construction of four categories to which a mystic experience must conform. The first, *ineffability* refers to the altered-state consciousness through which a connection with God is made. The second, *noesis*, is the belief that what is communicated through the ineffable state is a higher knowledge. The third, *transience*, describes the fleeting nature of the mystic experience and the fourth, *passivity*, refers to a sense of individual will being overwhelmed by the Divine.<sup>228</sup> This paradigm, though widely challenged, cemented 'mysticism' as an umbrella term for a

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<sup>228</sup> W. James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: a study in human nature*, Longmans, Green and Co, New York: 1917 p.371.

range of thinkers and texts, from Platonic philosophy to counter-reformation ecstasies. As a self-contained category, however, mysticism suggested fresh and important theoretical approaches in the fields of psychology, theology, philosophy and feminist discourse and has assumed a particular significance for post-modernist thinkers from Kristeva to Derrida.

Grace Jantzen mounted a challenge to Perennialism by calibrating the terms in which a 'mystic' experience might be thought to exist. Both she and Bynum suggest that the spirituality of medieval and counter-reformation women was characterized by a bodily (often eroticised) rather than psychic encounter with God, therefore undermining, for feminists, the utility of a term predicated on interiority. In describing a distinct female tradition and rejecting 'ineffability' as a contingent factor, Jantzen attempted to rescue women's religious experience from the murky backwaters of the private and personal and restore its political and intellectual legitimacy. Bound up in Jantzen's disruption of the 'mystic' category, however, is an implicit rejection of the value of interior spirituality which, despite belonging to the psychically and physically private sphere was, for the women that I will be discussing, authoritative, creative, influential and enduring. Though Jantzen is undoubtedly right that the idea of ineffability would have 'baffled' the likes of Hildegard of Bingen and Teresa of Avila it certainly would not have baffled the women that I will be discussing. While they did not use the word 'mysticism', they would certainly have recognised James's description of it as his contemporaries who were subject to the same cultural forces. In this study, then, I employ the term mysticism as James defined it and in so doing I claim it, not as a universal term, but as a way of politicising the personal and feminized form that spirituality assumed in the nineteenth centu-

ry. Having established the parameters of this term, then, it is necessary to clarify what mysticism means in the specific context of this study.

### *Mystic texts*

The written works that were owned and read by active sisters reveal a great deal about the way that mystic spirituality was understood and practiced. In addition to the communities discussed in depth in this chapter, orders such as the English Congregation of St Catherine of Siena (Dominicans), and the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, collected works by some of the mystics identified by James and Inge, such as those by Teresa of Avila, Francis de Sales, Catherine of Siena and St Gertrude. It is clear that these were not read simply for their scholarly or historical value but also operated as spiritual handbooks. The 1869 biography of Mother Margaret Hallahan, foundress of the English Dominicans, for example, offers an intriguing account of her spirituality, which makes explicit references to mysticism: 'Her letters give evidence of that reading of the best ascetic authors which she pursued all her life, they also reveal her deep and accurate knowledge of moral and mystic science..' <sup>229</sup> It goes on to describe a super-sensual state that perfectly harmonises with James's notion of ineffability:

If a director required [Hallahan] in obedience to try at self-introspection, she strove indeed, but that nubecula, as I believe the mystics would call it, came over her soul: she grew very suffering; her imagination, which she habitually mistrusted and kept under,

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<sup>229</sup> Anonymous, *Life of Mother Margaret Mary Hallahan Foundress of the English Congregation of St Catherine of Siena of the Third Order of St Dominic*, New York: Catholic Publication House, 1869 p.iv

began to work; she grew sleepless; a heavy pressure was felt on her head, and that pressure increased until she could only compare it to an iron hand thrust into her brain...<sup>230</sup>

The word that seems to specifically synchronize with 'ineffability' here is 'nebecula'. I have yet to find other examples of the use of this term but employed, as it is here, in conjunction with the word 'mystic', it is surely descriptive of an altered state consciousness. The dominant mystic influence in the charism of all of the orders mentioned, however, was that of Ignatius of Loyola, mentioned both by James and Inge.<sup>231</sup>

### *Ignatian Spirituality*

The Rule of St Ignatius provided the model for the constitutions of many active female religious communities in the nineteenth century. The original Rule, which defined the charism of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) was written by Ignatius of Loyola following a series of mystical revelations in Manresa, Spain. Fundamental to Ignatian theology was the concept that God was present in everything (including sin) and that prayer could take a multitude of forms - most significantly, labour in the service of God. The Society of Jesus, accordingly, incorporated education and missionary work into their apostolate.<sup>232</sup> William James refers to this 'active' spirituality in his de-

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<sup>230</sup> *ibid* xi-xii

<sup>231</sup> James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 398, W.R. Inge, *Christian Mysticism*, The Bampton Lectures, London: Methuin & Co 1899, p.

<sup>232</sup> The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola (translated Elder Mullan) 1914 'Contemplation to gain love' 'God dwells in creatures, in the elements, giving them being, in the plants vegetating, in the animals feeling in them, in men giving them to understand, contemplation to gain love' <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/seil/seil35.htm>

scription of Ignatius: 'St Ignatius was a mystic but his mysticism made him one of the most powerfully practical human engines that ever lived'.<sup>233</sup>

This was not at the expense, however, of meditative prayer. Contemplation bore equal weight to work in Ignatian spirituality and religious were expected to follow the Spiritual Exercises composed by Ignatius between 1522-1524. The Exercises comprised a set of prayers and meditations themed around the life of Christ and performed daily for a period of 28 to 30 days. These were specifically designed to help the meditator achieve a mystic union with God. James describes their function thus:

Such manuals as Saint Ignatius's Spiritual Exercises recommend the disciple to expel sensation by a graduated series of efforts to imagine holy scenes. The acme of this kind of discipline would be a semi-hallucinatory mono-ideism- an imaginary figure of Christ, for example, coming fully to occupy the mind. Sensorial images of this sort, whether literal or symbolic, play an enormous part in mysticism.<sup>234</sup>

Ignatian spirituality naturally lent itself to those religious orders with an active apostolate, which constituted the large majority in the nineteenth century. Women's communities, in particular, were keen to maintain or cultivate a sharply defined religious character in order to distinguish their work from secular philanthropy. Practicing meditative contemplation in addition to the offices underscored the monastic heritage of modern communities and pro-

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<sup>233</sup> James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p.306

<sup>234</sup> *ibid* p.307

vided a theological and cultural framework within which to reconcile Mary and Martha.

Many of the orders that will be discussed operated under the Ignatian Rule: the Society of the Sacred Heart is, in fact, informally regarded as the partner order of the Society of Jesus. Not only was this instructive in the practical organisation and function of their institutions, it also exerted a considerable influence over their spirituality. The Society of the Sacred Heart, for example, was founded with the express aim, like the Jesuits, of promoting devotion to the Sacred Heart internationally - a vocation that, as with the Jesuits, was directed through the foundation of schools. The Poor Servants of the Mother of God, a simple-vowed congregation with a broad apostolate that ranged from nursing to refuge work also had close connections to the Jesuits. Frances Taylor, foundress of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God, in fact produced her own version of the Spiritual Exercises; a collection of prayers grouped thematically around the life of Christ.<sup>235</sup>

Whilst most histories of Taylor have focused on the practical nature of her spirituality and the ways that this informed the charism of The Poor Servants, there is little doubt that she was also personally engaged with the mystic elements of Ignatian spirituality. In a letter to her niece, Charlotte Coles written in 1889, Taylor writes:

I meant to have told you that I did twice, as I believe, have a glimpse into the other world. Once was after my dearest mother's death. I saw her in heavenly rapture, but the singular part was -

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<sup>235</sup> Taylor, F, (trans.) and Father James Clare (ed.), *Practical Meditations for every day of the Year on the Life of Our Lord composed chiefly for the use of religious by a Father of the Society of Jesus*. Described on spine: *New Meditations for Every Day of the year* (London, revised edn., n.d. vol. 2.)

she was beautiful and young and yet exactly like herself; I can't explain how, but I seemed to understand how we shall recognise our own eternity'<sup>236</sup>

Ignatian spirituality, though singularly important, offers no more than a small window onto the charism of these communities because each was individually designed by the foundress and laid out in her Rule. Those orders or congregations that operated under Papal rather than Episcopal authority were largely autonomous and free to construct (within the constraints of formal theology) their own interpretations of Catholic spirituality. This represented a very significant freedom from orthodoxy and allowed women to collect ideas, images and devotional iconography from a range of sources and introduce these to the lay community via their pastoral and educational work.

### **Mystic Iconography in Nineteenth Century Roman Catholicism**

Michel de Certeau, whose readings of Christian mysticism shaped post-modernist scholarship in the field, suggests that the mystical, in continual conflict with itself, appears in innately 'paradoxical forms'.<sup>237</sup> As discussed earlier, my research on the art and architecture of women's religious communities proposes that a conscious expression of this paradox lay at the

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<sup>236</sup> F. C. Devas, *Mother Magdalen Taylor of the Sacred Heart, foundress of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God, 1832-1900*, London: Burnes Oates and Washbourne Ltd, 1927, pp. 338-9.

<sup>237</sup> M. de Certeau, M. Brammer, (trans) 'Mysticism', *Diacritics* Vol.22, No. 2, Summer, 1992, pp11-25, p.16.

heart of the spatial planning and aesthetic culture of the convent.<sup>238</sup> This is most apparent in the spiritual iconography of women's nineteenth century-convents that deviated in nuanced but significant ways from that of the institutional Roman Catholic Church.

The English author and clergyman, Montague Summers, wrote in 1950 that 'one hundred years ago ...mysticism was regarded with distrust and suspicion' by the English Catholic Church.<sup>239</sup> The brand of mysticism that Summers alludes to here was almost certainly the kind being imported from Southern Europe. Mary Heimann has convincingly argued against the received wisdom that Roman Catholicism in England turned quickly towards the Roman Ultramontanism after the restoration of the hierarchy in 1850, suggesting instead that the Church maintained many of the texts and devotions of the English Recusant tradition.<sup>240</sup> Despite the more conservative tastes of the English Catholic Church, however, Susan O'Brien proposes that the religious culture of missionary nuns, many of whom taught in Catholic schools, informally introduced popular devotions that the institutional Church had been reluctant to promote but which have proved obstinately enduring, nonetheless.<sup>241</sup> It is certainly the case that, like the Jesuits at Farm Street, behind the discreet English Gothic facades of many convents, women constructed, through the visual iconography of mystic spirituality, their own, frequently un-English cultural identity.

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<sup>238</sup> Though I have yet to find examples of sisters using the word, Inge's reference to 'mystical paradox' provides a Victorian precedent

<sup>239</sup> Summers, M., *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism*, New York, Barnes and Noble, 1950, p. 41.

<sup>240</sup> Heimann, M. *Catholic Devotion in Victorian England*, Clarendon Press, 1995.

<sup>241</sup> O'Brien, S., French nuns in nineteenth-century England, *Past and Present* No.154 (February 1997) p.172



*The Virgin and Magdalene*

Whilst Marian devotion was and continues to be an important feature of the Roman Catholic Church there is, as O'Brien points out, a disproportionate emphasis on Marian iconography in English convents.<sup>242</sup> The reasons for this are perhaps obvious - Mary offers a feminized route of access to God. But the implications are more profound: the paradox of the Immaculate Conception (Mary as both mother and virgin) adds a deeper layer to the mystery of the Incarnation and provides the model for female dualism in Christian iconography, a dualism also compellingly embodied by Mary Magdalene.

The significance of Mary Magdalene to active women's convents is hard to overstate. As a powerful symbol of penance, her centrality to the iconography of active sisterhoods may reflect the growth of vocations given to the care and rehabilitation of prostitutes – an apostolate that grew rapidly in Europe, particularly in France, from the seventeenth century. The mystery of Mary Magdalene (in the Roman Catholic tradition) lies in her simultaneous status as both saint and sinner and one of the most intriguing ways that women found to spiritually engage with this paradox was to themselves assume the different roles of Mary Magdalene. As mentioned previously, whilst the 'penitent' prostitutes housed within the convent were often called 'Magdalens' it was also common for foundresses and superiors to take the name.

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid.

### *The Sacred Heart*

Although versions of the Sacred Heart can be found dating back to the Middle Ages, its most recent incarnation was revealed in a vision to Marguerite Marie Alacoque, a seventeenth-century French nun. All of the communities in the following case studies incorporated devotion to the Sacred Heart within their charism: The Society of the Sacred Heart was formed specifically to promote the devotion and The Poor Servants of the Mother of God, who established a Sacred Heart confraternity and joined the Jesuit's Apostleship of Prayer which was established in dedication to the Sacred Heart (figure 5.1). Whilst the support of Cardinal Manning helped to secure the Sacred Heart as an important devotional icon it was, as Susan O'Brien suggests, nuns who were the primary 'agents for its widespread popularity in Victorian Catholicism'.<sup>243</sup>



**Figure 5.1** Sacred Heart banner by Sr M Southworth, SMG. Source: SMG IMG DP4

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<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.* p.172

There can be little doubt about the role of the Sacred Heart in stimulating what James calls ineffability: as Mother Janet Erskine Stuart, describing her contemplation of the icon in 1896 states, 'I wish above all to acquire interior spirit and union with the Sacred Heart'.<sup>244</sup> Though the English Catholic Church was slow to endorse quasi-mystical devotions, these were, of course, an integral feature of the vernacular theologies and culture of continental Catholicism. Mary Heimann's study suggests that the English religious character, shaped by the reformation and enlightenment, was inherently programmed to seek a rational theology to frame paradox. In contrast, the spirituality of women religious, liberated from the constraints of politics, history and tradition, was able to embrace mystery and paradox without theological difficulty. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that these women looked towards the increasingly mystical and feminized Catholicism of Italy, France and Spain for a visual language that could express Christian mystery.

### **Mysticism and Art**

The desire to visually express Christian mystery has a long heritage. The historian, Bernard McGinn, discusses representations of the Passion and the Trinity from early Christian to medieval art, seeing in it 'the paradoxical

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<sup>244</sup> Quoted in Monahan, M., *Life and Letters of Janet Erskine Stuart*, London: Longmans, Green and Co. Ltd 1931 p.91

effort to make the invisible somehow accessible to our gaze'.<sup>245</sup> Here, McGinn examines not only the contemplation of art as a mystical bridge to God but also the production of art – an idea that began to gain purchase with late eighteenth and nineteenth-century medieval revivalism. In reaction to enlightenment empiricism and secularism, artists, theologians and writers sought to re-engage mystic thought as a means of negotiating the Divine. At the vanguard of this movement were the German Romantics, for whom the musings of Wilhelm Wackenroder and Ludwig Tieck provided a loose manifesto:

You must wait as with prayer, for the blessed hours when the favour of heaven illumines your inner being with superior receptivity. Only then will your soul unite completely with the works of artists...works of art are, in their manner, as little suited to the common flow of everyday life as are thoughts of God. They rise above the ordinary and the habitual and we must elevate ourselves to them with our whole heart .<sup>246</sup>

### *The Nazarene School*

The Nazarene school of painters incorporated Wackenroder's philosophy into a theology of aesthetics that looked back to 'pre-Raphaelite' art, pioneering a style that was, it scarcely needs noting, highly influential in England. The movement emerged from the Brotherhood of St Luke or Lukas-

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<sup>245</sup> McGinn, B. 'On Mysticism and Art', *Daedalus* Vol.132, No. 2, Spring, 2003, p.132

<sup>246</sup> Wackenroder quoted in Taylor, J.C. (ed) *Nineteenth-century Theories of Art*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987, p. 137

bund founded in 1809 by six students at the Vienna Academy and informally led by Friedrich Overbeck, a deeply spiritual man who wrestled with the competing call of monastic and artistic life. Overbeck, Franz Pferr, Ludwig Vogel and Johann Konrad Hottinger arrived in Rome in 1810 where they established an artist's co-operative in the empty monastery of San Isidoro on the Pincian Hill. Over the proceeding years they were joined by fellow German artists, including Peter Von Cornelius, many of whom, like Overbeck, converted to Catholicism. For Overbeck, concerned with the archaeology of Christian art and the rediscovery of sacred symbols or 'hieroglyphs', Catholicism was the necessary starting point. It was also the only branch of Western Christianity that, for the Nazarenes more widely, continued to explore and embrace mysticism.



**Figure 5.2** 'The Merciful Knight', Edward Burne-Jones, 1863. Source: Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery

The Lukasbund exerted a powerful influence on Italian religious art and actively supported the emerging Nazarene-inspired Purismo Religioso movement, whose ideals were set out in a manifesto published in 1843 and entitled 'Del Purismo Nelle Arti'. The Lukasbund themselves (and Overbeck in particular) enjoyed the patronage of Pope Pius IX who reigned from 1846-1878, under whose administration much of the residual secularism of the First French Empire was swept away: religious orders flourished once again, devotion to the Sacred Heart was consolidated by the introduction of a dedicated feast day and the beatification of Marguerite Marie Alacocque, Papal infallibility was decreed and Mariology became inscribed in Catholic worship via the newly defined dogma of the Immaculate Conception. In its wake, Marian apparitions abounded and countless miracles were attributed to her, or her agents.

Art historian, Cordula Grewe proposes that the Lukasbund drew from a range of historical and contemporary mystical sources in the creation of a new art that restored the ascendancy of the symbolic, which had been eclipsed by the high Renaissance pre-occupation with form and beauty and thereafter lost. She rehearses Hans Belting's argument presented in *Like-ness and Presence: The History of the Image before the Era of Art*, first published in German in 1990, in which he describes the ideological shift from medieval to renaissance art:

a stark divide in the history of Christian representation between, on the one hand, the image (Bild) as a miracleworking, magical, and talismanic holy object and, on the other hand, art (Kunst) as a modern notion born in the Renaissance, which replaces the conception of "authentic appearance" with that of the self-reflective

and self-contained artwork. From this new aesthetic perspective, Belting claims, "art took on a different meaning and became acknowledged for its own sake—art as invented by famous artists and defined by a proper theory."<sup>247</sup>

Grewe, however, disputes Belting's proposition that Bild and Kunst are irreconcilable categories and suggests that the Nazarenes were able to mesh concepts of the aesthetic and iconic, arguing that style and composition could be as much an integration of the holy as an expression of 'art for art's sake':

...formal conception could bear religious meaning and mark the aesthetic object, that is, art, as a means to venerate the holy. What is at stake in the Nazarene project is a redefinition of style from arbitrary aesthetic choice to expression of holiness that, not unlike the Holy Image, can transmit the sanctity of the original to its replica. It is my contention that the Nazarenes expanded the substitutional principle of painted icons to pictorial appearance.<sup>248</sup>

In largely Protestant England the relationship between mysticism and art was enacted in subtly different ways. A number of scholars have explored intersections between the two, discerning themes within the Romantic, Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic movements that were certainly in dialogue with the notion of privacy identified by Jantzen – interior spiritualities that belonged as much to male homosexual subculture as to the domestic home.

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<sup>247</sup> C. Grewe, 'Raphael's Dream', *The Nazarenes*, Pennsylvania, Penn State University Press (forthcoming), p. 9,

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

In literature, Ellis Hanson has also observed that the prominence of (particularly Roman Catholic) ritualism in the work of Decadents such as Huysmans and Wilde, inscribed a particular relationship between mysticism and the homoerotic – one which he argues pushed the literature of the Aesthetic movement to the margins of literary criticism until the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, the fact that Inge described Huysman's mystic novels as 'repulsive' whilst praising Wordsworth, whom he considered 'the greatest prophet...of contemplative mysticism' for his 'sane and manly spirit' would seem to support this and also demonstrate an awareness that mystic art had, by the end of the nineteenth century acquired a reputation at variance with Victorian morality.<sup>249</sup>

The zeitgeist of nineteenth-century mysticism gave birth to strikingly different offspring: while the Nazarenes and Decadents shared a common ancestor in the German Romantic movement they were separated by an ideological gulf. Nevertheless a precarious middle ground existed between the two in Anglo-Catholic art and architecture.<sup>250</sup> It is worth noting that, although the architecture of the Anglo-Catholic and English Roman Catholic churches was virtually indistinguishable for much of the nineteenth century, Anglo-Catholic art, perhaps tainted by the sensuality of Aestheticism, as expressed in the work of artists such as Burne-Jones and Simeon Solomon, appeared to be untranslatable (figure 5.2). English Roman

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<sup>249</sup> Inge, W.R., *Christian Mysticism*, p.305.

<sup>250</sup> Dominic Janes brings together the characterisation in Victorian culture of both the aesthetic and Oxford movements as effeminate, highlighting the emphasis that both placed on the mystery of the incarnation – the union of man and God – which he suggests speaks to a new (or revived) fusion of the Eucharistic and erotic, evocatively illustrated by Edward Burne-Jones in *The Merciful Knight* (1863-4) and Simeon Solomon's *The Mystery of Faith* (1870). D. Janes, 'William Bennett's heresy: male same-sex desire and the art of the Eucharist', *Journal of Victorian Culture* 17.4, 2012, pp. 413-35.



Catholic women religious instead, looked Rome-wards for artistic inspiration.

Notwithstanding the vital distinctions between gendered and queer spaces, it is curious that English lay women (who might have provided a more chaste model) are largely missing from the feminized genre of mystic art. This is not to say, however, that they were absent from the field of religious art. During the nineteenth-century the church offered women a range of artistic outlets – from the embroidery of kneelers and vestments to the design of stained glass and even chapels.<sup>251</sup> Though we might be tempted to look for comparisons between the paintings in the following case studies and religious art produced by lay women during the same period, I suggest that to do so would muddy the distinction between the ecclesiastical and the mystic as religious categories, the home and the convent as private spheres. The evidence that emerges from the testament of sisters, suggests that art was not so much produced in the service of the Church, as it was a means of entering into a personal, ineffable dialogue with God. As Cornelia Connelly, foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus wrote: 'A Christian art is one of the most important branches of education, second only to that of speaking and writing and in some respects even beyond the languages...'<sup>252</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> The opportunities available to women in the production of ecclesiastical art have been discussed recently in L. Walker, 'Women and Church Art', in Sladen, T. and Saint, A., (eds.) *Studies in Victorian Architecture and Design*, 2010. J. Cheshire, Cheshire, J., 'Elizabeth Simcoe and her Daughters: Amateur Ecclesiastical Design in the 1840s'. In Hall, M. and Hill, R., (eds.), *The 1840s, Studies in Victorian Architecture and Design*, London, 2011, pp. 87-95. J. Uglow, *The Pinecone*, Faber & Faber, 2013.

<sup>252</sup> Cornelia Connelly quoted in Wadham, p.192

The following considers two paintings 'created' by nuns from two different orders: The Society of the Sacred Heart (RCSJ) founded by Madeleine Sophie Barat in France in 1800 and The Poor Servants of the Mother of God (SMG) founded in England in 1872 by Frances (later Mother Magdalen) Taylor. Both paintings function as the iconic image of each community, employ devices from the genre of mystic art and have acquired a mythology within the congregation.

### Fine art and corporate identity in female communities

#### *The Society of the Sacred Heart and Mater Admirabilis*



**Figure 5.3** Detail of Mater Admirabilis, Pauline Perdrau RCSJ, 1844. Source: author

The Society of the Sacred Heart's house in Rome, the convent of the Trinità dei Monti, houses Mater Admirabilis, a fresco painted in 1844 of the young Virgin which is not only the iconic image of the order but also inspired a cult of its own, attracting devotees from women's religious communities across the world (figure 5.4). The story behind the painting rapidly established itself in Catholic miracle lore: according to RCSJ sources, it was executed by a young novice of the order, Pauline Perdrau.<sup>253</sup> Perdrau was, one day, seized by a desire to paint a fresco of the Virgin Mary in the cloister but with no experience of working in fresco, the Mother Superior was reluctant to allow it. She eventually relented, however, and a plasterer was employed to prepare the surface each day and offer advice. On completion of the painting, however, the Mother Superior was horrified to see how garish the colours were. The painting was dismissed as 'hideous' and was immediately covered with a cloth in the hope that, as the plaster dried the livid tones would mellow. After some weeks, to everyone's relief, the colours improved and the painting (which was now unanimously hailed a success) received a Papal blessing after a visit by Pope Pius IX. In some accounts a miraculous transformation of the painting occurred behind the cloth. Some months later, a priest prayed before the painting to be cured of a throat complaint – his subsequent recovery was proclaimed a miracle and the painting quickly became a pilgrimage site.

Pauline Perdrau's memoirs, though curiously silent on the subject of Mater Admirabilis, reveal a great deal about her spirituality. In 1843 Perdrau trav-

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<sup>253</sup> Perdrau's name is curiously absent from any accounts of Mater Admirabilis that were published externally. As far as I am aware only publications produced by the RCSJ and SHCJ name her as the artist.

elled to Loreto where her vocation as the servant of Mary was revealed to her through a mystic experience:



**Figure 5.4** Mater Admirabilis in the corridor at the Trinità dei Monti Convent, 1844, Rome. Source: author.

I was meditating there silently, looking with emotion at the sacred walls of this place where the Holy Virgin had pronounced the *Ecce Ancilla Domini*, when a light of holy grace suddenly illuminated the sacred words; I repeated this *Ecce Ancilla*. It seemed to me that I was there, present at the great mystery of the incarnation: 'You have been the servant of God' I said to the Holy Virgin, 'do you want that I should be yours until death?' I meditated at length on

these mysteries, playing the role of the humble servant. I concluded that Mary, who herself had dictated the exercises of St. Ignatius at Manresa, had inspired me also to enter into an intimate union with the mysteries of the holy life.<sup>254</sup>

Upon returning to the Trinità dei Monti in Rome, Perdrau determined to paint the Virgin. Having settled on the subject matter, however, she puzzled over how to portray her.

The community was in the habit of assembling for recreation in one of the cloisters. The nuns with their needlework, sat in a semi-circle round the presiding Superior Mere de Coriolis. It so happened that she was called away by the arrival of a visitor: "what a pity", commented one of the nuns. "I wish Our Lady would take Reverend Mother's place and preside at our recreation" In a flash Pauline had found what she was seeking, and there passed before her imagination a sudden and momentary vision of Mater Admirabilis – Our Lady seated in the Superior's place, her work in her hand, the open cloisters as background. "would you like me to paint Our Lady in this gallery?" She said shyly, pointing to the semi-circular archway of a shallow niche in the wall of the gallery. "oh yes, yes" was the unanimous answer.<sup>255</sup>

In this way, the painting self-consciously interacted with its intended audience and the particular activities taking place within the corridor; the Virgin,

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<sup>254</sup>P. Perdrau, *Les Loisirs de L'Abbaye, Souvenirs inedit de la Mere Pauline Perdrau sur la vie do Notre Sainte Mere*, Rome: Maison Mere, 1931 See appendix 1

<sup>255</sup> L. Keppel, *Mater Admirabilis 1844-1944*, London: Sands and Co. c.1944, p.12.

in sympathy with the sisters, resting momentarily from her spinning and lost in contemplation.

That the product of Pauline Perdrau's interior spirituality should be a work of art is not surprising; she had received some formal training as an artist before entering the Society of the Sacred Heart and had undertaken some commissions. Indeed, like Overbeck, she had been conflicted about whether to pursue a career as an artist (as her parents wished) or whether to enter religious life.<sup>256</sup> Whilst at the Trinita, she had been tutored by Alexander Maximilian Seitz (a student of Cornelius and Overbeck) who was resident in the neighbouring San Isidoro monastery.<sup>257</sup> The influence of the Nazarene school on *Mater Admirabilis* is manifest, as the art historian Cordula Grewe notes:

The picture's lyrical archaism and pastel coloring mark it as a true heir to the Lukasbund aesthetic, picking up on the brethren's early fascination with Fra Angelico and early Renaissance fresco. The pious literature is full of praise for the work's beauty of form, harmonious effect, and spiritual depth'.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> It was by no means unique for women religious to have studied art before entering the convent. Emma Raimbach was a talented professional artist who was awarded in 1826 a silver medal by the Society of Arts and regularly exhibited at the RA. After entering the Convent of the Good Shepherd, Hammersmith in 1847 she continued, painting deeply personal work that reflected her spirituality and vocation but which was no longer sold – little, thereafter, went on public display. Of the few of these that did, was a painting entitled 'Mother Reguadiat and three penitents' which was exhibited at the RA and was subsequently donated to Bishop Wiseman.

<sup>257</sup> Various RCSJ sources name the tutor as 'Stetz' but the annals of the SHCJ name the tutor of both Perdrau and Connolly as Flatz - Gebhard Flatz was at the time resident at San Isidoro. Cordula Grewe has suggested that the artist who tutored Perdrau was probably Maximilian Seitz.

<sup>258</sup> Grewe, *The Nazarenes*, Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press (forthcoming)

The debt to renaissance art was not lost on nineteenth-century pilgrims, either as the following critique indicates:

Kneeling before the Madonna of the Lily, one has the feeling that the painter had prayed before she painted, as was the case for instance, with Fra Angelico, and that her imagination, inspired by faith and love of God, conceived in prayer what she afterwards translated into this representation of the pure Virgin in the Temple..a deep and holy calm filled my soul.<sup>259</sup>

Mater Admirabilis illustrates the significant shift activated by the Nazarenes, from the storytelling of the Baroque and Counter-Reformation towards the iconography of early Renaissance and Medieval art (figure 5.5). The painting is interactive rather than didactic; Perdrau employs the 'hieroglyphs' of lilies, spinning distaff and open book to stimulate contemplation (perhaps even mystic experience) rather than as narrative tools used to enlighten the passive viewer. Indeed, it is significant that the gaze of the intended viewer of Mater Admirabilis, was disrupted in both temporal terms (the sisters' concentration was largely focused on needlework) and spatial (the semi-circular configuration of the needleworkers meant that image was in the purview of most). It was not until pilgrims, such as the priest quoted above, were admitted to the hitherto private space, that focused contemplation of the image took place.

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<sup>259</sup> Keppel, p.20.



**Figure 5.5** , 'The Annunciation', Fra Angelico, 1425-1428.  
Source: Museo del Prado

What separates *Mater Admirabilis* from the work of the Lukasbund, however, is its candid autobiography. Perdrau draws less on the canon of Christian symbolism than on her own domestic experience – the spinning distaff recalling her (unhappy) childhood labours and the colour of Mary's robes a memory, according to several Sacred Heart sources, of her favourite dress. Whilst it was certainly not unprecedented to portray Mary spinning, it is clear that this activity was meant to resonate in a space where women were occupied in textile work. Moreover, representations of the Virgin sewing (of which Perdrau's tutor would certainly have been aware) were numerous and would have been more appropriate in the context, lending further weight to claims that the painting is autobiographical.

Given the private setting, unusually domestic character and undistinguished technical quality of the painting, the question of why Pius IX promoted devotion to *Mater Admirabilis* is, in equal measure, pertinent and unclear. One may speculate reasons ranging from his desire to foreground Marian devotion, to re-establish the spiritual authority of religious orders (particularly



those associated with the Jesuits) or to affirm his support for the Nazarene enterprise. It is, however, plain that his enthusiastic endorsement of the miraculous work - his blessing of the painting itself, his readiness to approve miracles attributed to it and his commissioning in 1849 of Nicola Cerbara (engraver to the papal court) to produce devotional medals bearing the image – propelled the burgeoning international cult of Mater Admirabilis.<sup>260</sup> Evidence of the speed with which this was established is offered in a letter to Monseigneur Pierre-Henri Gerault de Langalerie from Alfred Monnin in 1864, twenty years after the painting was finished: 'Depuis notre visite a Mater Admirabilis, son culte n'a fait que s'étendre; sa gloire est allé de la mer jusqu'à la mer, et du fleuve jusqu'aux extremités de la terre.'<sup>261</sup>

Just how widely the cult spread in reality is unclear – though the 'ends of the earth' might be regarded as somewhat hyperbolic, it had certainly travelled overseas by the last half of the nineteenth century, as the many marble plaques lining the walls of the corridor at the Trinita die Monte testify. Eleanor C Donnelly, an Irish pilgrim writing in 1874 dedicated a verse to the image, which attempted to capture something of its mystic paradoxes:

O vast and wonderful mystery,

Laid open and bare to these childish eyes!

O sorrow deep as the infinite sea,

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<sup>260</sup> In *Mater Admirabilis: ou Les Quinze Premiers Annes L'image de Maries Immaculee* Mgr Alfred Monnin notes the commissioning of papal medals 'est répandue dans presque toute la chrétienté; des médailles des diverses grandeurs sont frappées à son effigie; la gravure, le bronze, les vitraux la reproduisent. Sa Sainteté Pie IX a daigné recevoir la première médaille d'or faite à Rome en 1849'.

<sup>261</sup> Monnin, A. *Mater Admirabilis*, Paris:Carlo Douniol, 1865 p.2

Where she dying lives, where she living dies:

For lo ! the Spinner who sits in the sun,

And the Mother who stands by the Cross are one.<sup>262</sup>

Devotees quickly established the painting as an intercessor in achieving a mystic union with God. For Mother Janet Erskine Stuart, Superior of the Society of the Sacred Heart community at Roehampton, England the painting was a direct source of spiritual revelation, as her reflections in 1912 indicate:

Having lived a little with Mater Admirabilis it seems to me that she is especially an advent Madonna, with that dawn creeping up in the sky behind her...I realised what strength and heavenliness there is in the Fifth Rule of Modesty (each one must express joy on her countenance...). I also realised that it is mental austerities that really wear the frame.<sup>263</sup>

Though this was not precisely the intended purpose of the painting it was certainly not inconsistent with its broad aim and was entirely consonant with the aesthetic ideology of the Nazarene project, in which, as an expedient to religious experience, the work of art itself becomes a 'miracleworking, magical, and talismanic holy object'.<sup>264</sup> The belief that Mater Admirabilis possessed 'miracleworking' properties undoubtedly lay behind the many repro-

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<sup>262</sup> Donnelly, E.C., 'Mater Admirabilis' *The Irish monthly*, Vol. II, pp. 662-663, November, 1874

<sup>263</sup> Quoted in Monahan, 1931, p.341

<sup>264</sup> C. Grewe, *The Nazarenes*, Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press (forthcoming)

ductions of the painting that were produced – from the replicas painted by Perdrau herself and distributed among Sacred Heart institutions across the world, to the medals, prints and statues that are still in production - which transit 'the sanctity of the original to its replica' as Grewe describes it.<sup>265</sup>

While Grewe is certainly not discussing the translation of high religious art into mass-produced Saint-Sulpician trinkets, movements such as Del Purismo Nelle Arti suggest the sacred significance of provenance and inheritance. Thus, for the Lukasbund, the process of reproducing holy images has a mystical value that is redolent of the Luke tradition – a legend that is, in fact, deliberately invoked in a series of prints by the Riepenhausen brothers (Catholic converts and members of the Nazarene circle) published in 1816 that depict Raphael as a new St Luke<sup>266</sup>

It is unlikely that many nuns were familiar with the theological aspirations of the Lukasbund or Purismo movement but I suggest that, by the mid-nineteenth century, their ideas had permeated many areas of popular religious art (although it may, of course, be argued that some of these ideas were ever-present in the ether of religious superstition). It is, therefore, in the spirit of the Luke tradition (whether Nazarene or Byzantine exegesis) that nuns from a wide range of orders made their own copies of Mater Admirabilis – either drawn or painted before the original or hand decorated reproductions (figures 5.6 and 5.7). Among the orders that held the painting in particular reverence was The Society of the Holy Child Jesus, whose foundress, Cornelia Connelly was, at the time Mater Admirabilis was paint-

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid

<sup>266</sup> According to tradition, St Luke painted the first Christian icons (notably the first image, from life, of the Virgin Mary). C.Grewe, *The Nazarenes*, Pennsylvania: Penn State University Press (forthcoming)

ed, a novice at the Trinità dei Monti. An artist herself, Connelly received instruction under the same tutor as Pauline Perdrau and was reputed to be the sitter for the painting. Indeed, according to one source, Connelly and Perdrau together conceived the idea for Mater and jointly executed it.<sup>267</sup> Before she left the convent, she made her own copy, which was apparently treasured by the community.<sup>268</sup>



**Figures 5.6 - 5.7** Left to right:

**Figure 5.6** Full size copy of Mater Admirabilis in the corridor of Barat House, Roehampton (date unknown). Source: Barbara Vesey

**Figure 5.7** C20th statue of Mater Admirabilis. Source: [www.vdoh.org](http://www.vdoh.org)

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<sup>267</sup> Anonymous *The Life of Cornelia Connelly*, 1809-1879, "The two postulants sat and worked together at recreation in one of the corridors and there they conceived the idea of painting on the wall a picture of our Blessed Lady as a young maiden...the picture was executed in fresco by Mademoiselle Perdrau, aided by Cornelia who made a copy of it for herself and always cherished a devotion to tis representation of our Blessed Mother' p78

<sup>268</sup> Ibid



Figure 5.8 Prints of variations of Mater Admirabilis painted by Pauline Perdrau in the corridor of the Trinità dei Monti convent. Source: author

Perhaps more surprising is an account of a pilgrimage to the site given by Anglican convert, Frances Taylor, foundress of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God: a hand-tinted copy of Mater Admirabilis and a prayer card bearing the image in the community's archive testify to the fact that devotion to Mater Admirabilis was, if not central to, then certainly active within the charism of the congregation (figures 5.9 and 5.10). Taylor's firm emphasis on ascetism and practicality appeared to allow little room for the production and appreciation of art and made her an unlikely devotee.



**Figures 5.9 - 5.10** *Left to right:*

Figure 5.9 Prayer card depicting Mater Admirabilis. Source: SMG Archive

Figure 5.10 Devotional picture, copy of 'Mater Admirabilis'

Source: SMG Archive ref IIG/5/2/1

### *The Poor Servants of the Mother of God and The Annunciation*



**Figure 5.11** 'The Annunciation', Aristide Dies, 1886, Church of St George and the English Martyrs, Rome. Source: author

Emerging, as it did, from a nation without a developed Catholic character, the Poor Servants of the Mother of God (SMG) had to construct its own cultural identity, drawing on the spirituality, iconography and devotional cultures of continental and Irish orders. Evidence of Frances Taylor's quest for inspiration is offered by her book *Religious Orders: or sketches of some orders and congregations published in 1862*, in which she summarises the history and charism of the most well-known women's communities.<sup>269</sup> Taylor developed particularly close bonds with the Society of the Sacred Heart whose mother house in England and convent in Rome were located in close proximity to those of the Poor Servants.

Though, as mentioned, art did not have a defined role in the charism of the SMGs (as it did, for example, in the charism of the SHCJ), it is clear that Frances Taylor had a firm understanding of its significance and utility and was keen to support sisters who demonstrated an aptitude for painting and drawing. Evidence suggests that Taylor's artistic enterprises were shaped by a number of factors and influences, including Ignatian and counter-reformation spirituality, her specific devotions (to the Sacred Heart and the Incarnation) her religious milieu (particularly the Society of Jesus) and, perhaps most importantly, the growing cult of Mater Admirabilis – such was the ubiquitous nature of Mater Admirabilis that Taylor was probably more familiar with the full size replica in the Sacred Heart convent in Roehampton than with the original (fig. 5.6).

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<sup>269</sup> F. Taylor *Religious Orders or Sketches or Orders and Congregations of Women*, London, Burns and Lambert, 1862.

The success of Mater Admirabilis must have impressed on many nuns the power of religious art, not only as a highly effective tool in the creation of corporate identity but also for its holy, perhaps even miraculous potential. It is in this light then, that we might read a small biography written by Frances Taylor of Sr Mary Clare Doyle. At first glance, it would appear to be nothing more than an affectionate tribute to a sister whose life was cut short and of whom Taylor was particularly fond. A different focus might also reveal, however, the influence of the Society of the Sacred Heart in the construction, whether knowing or not, of an English Pauline Perdrau. Indeed, though Doyle's short life followed a tragically different course to Perdrau's, Taylor's account reveals significant similarities between the two: like Perdrau, Doyle was both profoundly spiritual and a prodigiously gifted artist.<sup>270</sup> Both, like Freidrich Overbeck were initially torn between continuing their art education and enter the convent. Both, unlike Overbeck, chose a religious life over a career as an artist.

In 1879 Sr Mary Clare Doyle accompanied Frances Taylor on a tour of Catholic institutions on the continent. Taylor documented the tour (including a visit to Mater Admirabilis) and the works that Sr M Clare Doyle undertook:

Then she had another work in Rome, which was also a great pleasure. She was allowed to copy the only likeness of Saint Ignatius of Loyola. The copy was excellent, according to competent judges. That precious picture is in the Chapel of our Mother House, and will ever be reckoned among our treasures, both on account of its

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<sup>270</sup>Taylor, F., *Memoir of Sister Mary Clare Doyle SMG*, internal publication of the poor Servants of the Mother of God p.9



value as a true likeness of our Holy Father and of the dear sister  
whose skill gave it to us.<sup>271</sup>



**Figures 5.12 - 5.13** Left to right:

Figure 5.12 Portrait of St Ignatius of Loyola, Jacopino del Conte c.1556 -7, General Curia of the Society of Jesus, Rome gesu. Source: [jesuitinstitute.org](http://jesuitinstitute.org)

Figure 5.13 Portrait of St Ignatius of Loyola, after Jacopino del Conte, Sr Mary Clare Doyle, 1879. Source: Jeremy Butler

Though this painting did not achieve the celebrity of *Mater Admirabilis*, it was (and continues to be) among the most prized works in the SMG collection - as a work of art by a divinely endowed sister and as a hand painted copy from 'life' of a revered image (figure 5.13).

Whilst Perdrau's story was undoubtedly captivating and must surely have been the model for Taylor's biography, it was Perdrau's masterpiece that would make the most enduring mark on the culture of the Poor Servants. Of the works of art supported, commissioned or 'created' by Taylor, the iconic representation of the Annunciation owes the greatest debt to *Mater Ad-*

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<sup>271</sup> Ibid. p.32.

mirabilis (5.14). It had been Taylor's wish to express her devotion to the Incarnation in a work of art, for which she had devised a particular design. In 1886, while in Rome, she was introduced by a Jesuit father to an artist named Aristide Dies. Dies was probably selected less for his artistic reputation than for the fact that he spoke French, which allowed Taylor to communicate her vision in detail. Nonetheless, confusion arose over the precise composition of the painting – Taylor had specifically requested a portrayal of the Virgin after the angel, having delivered the news, had departed. On visiting the artist in his studio some days later, she was dismayed to see that the composition was clearly intended to accommodate the angel and promptly removed her companion's cloak and held it in the position that she wished Mary to appear.<sup>272</sup>

With this story in mind, revealing comparisons might be made between Taylor's Annunciation and another Annunciation, executed twelve years earlier by Pietro Gagliardi who was later commissioned by Taylor (also in 1886) to produce a painting of the Sacred Heart (figure 5.15). Gagliardi was a prolific and successful Italian artist who, though having trained under the Nazarene/Purismo artist Tommaso Minardi, tended to work in the Classical and Baroque styles. His fresco altarpiece at the Church of the Annunciation in Tarxien, Malta (1874) is among his most celebrated works and bears a striking similarity to Taylor/Aristide Dies's Annunciation. There is no direct evidence to suggest that either Taylor or Dies had seen Gagliardi's Annunciation but the fact that Dies was confused about the presence of the angel certainly suggests that he was working from a model that had an angel in it.

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<sup>272</sup> F. Devas, *Mother Magdalen Taylor; Foundress of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God*, London: Burnes, Oates and Washbourne 1927 p.260



**Figures 5.14 - 5.15** *Left to right:*

Figure 5.14 'The Annunciation' Aristide Dies, 1886. Source: author

Figure 5.15 'The Annunciation', Pietro Gagliardi, 1874, Church of the Annunciation, Tarxien, Malta. Source: [timesofmalta.com](http://timesofmalta.com)

The style employed by Taylor/Dies in the Annunciation is curious. Gagliardi's Annunciation owes much to the Spanish Baroque, particularly Murillo – the dynamic composition, swirling clouds, cherubs, chiaroscuro and so on. Taylor's commissioned painting, however, is restrained and pensive. While elements of a Gagliardi-esque style are clearly present, these have been conspicuously attenuated – the swirling clouds now a vague mist, cherubs reduced to winged heads, the symbolic form of the Holy Spirit accentuated by the surrounding text.

In reading Taylor's Annunciation, there are two key points of access. The first is Taylor's personal spirituality and the charism of her order. The choice of the Annunciation reflects, as previously mentioned, the centrality of the Incarnation in Taylor's spirituality and her decision to portray Mary alone is an indication of the significance of interiority. Taylor's wish was to depict the Virgin as 'she knelt alone, with her Hidden God, hidden within

her' - a moment that evokes the higher consciousness achieved (or aspired towards) through the Spiritual Exercises that Taylor and her community practiced.<sup>273</sup> Taylor's solitary Virgin is thoughtful - Gagliardi's, in the presence of the Angel, is (necessarily) responsive.

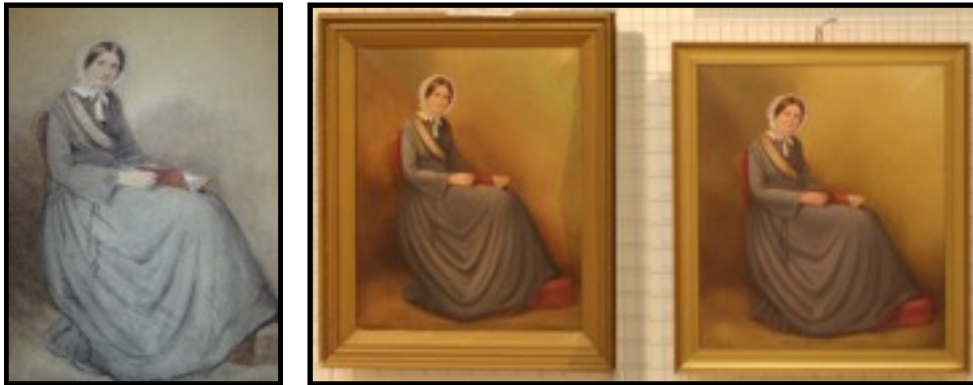
The second point relates to Taylor's conscious construction of an iconic image to represent her community. A picture such as Gagliardi's is effective in telling the story of the Annunciation but would be too animated to serve as an icon. A much better model for this is provided by Mater Admirabilis, the iconic image of women's religious orders par excellence. We know that Taylor held Mater Admirabilis in high esteem and it seems clear that she drew from it in the construction of her own iconic image. Though, as we have seen, Taylor certainly borrowed from the counter-reformation style (perhaps in tribute to the community's Ignatian roots), the composition (the solitary, pensive Virgin with lilies re-positioned prominently in the foreground and to the left) dampened chiaroscuro and flattened plane of her Annunciation owes much more to Perdrau's Quattrocento forms. Style and symbolism deliberately synthesized here, precisely as they are within Nazarene aesthetic theology

As the brand image of the Poor Servants, the Annunciation was a resounding success. But this is because it succeeded as an image that inspired and aided the sisters' spiritual devotions. Reproductions of Taylor/Dies's Annunciation grace the walls, in some form, of most Poor Servants convents. Importantly, many of these were the painstaking work of Sr Mary Tommaso who, throughout the early to mid-twentieth century hand painted numerous replicas (figure 5.17). At the chapel of the novitiate in Roehampton, Sr M

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid p.260

Tommaso reproduced it on a large scale over the altar so that it became an object of devotion for generations of novices, thus securing its status. As with Sr Mary Clare Doyle's copy of St Ignatius, the transmission of 'the sanctity of the original to its replica' could not be more clearly at play here.



**Figures 5.16 - 5.17** *Left to right:*

*Figure 5.16* Watercolour portrait of Frances Taylor as a Crimean nurse (artist unknown), c. 1857. Source: SMG Archive

*Figure 5.17* Two of the copies of the watercolour portrait of Frances Taylor, made by Sr Mary Tommaso, mid-twentieth century. Source: author

For Sr Mary Tommaso, the very act of reproducing the community's iconic images was itself a personal devotion, as her necrology entry suggests:

Sister was a real artist, and had been trained before she entered. She loved painting, finding in this, as all true artists do, a way of expressing her love of God (my italics) Her beautiful work will be a memorial of this dear Sister...she said once that she often prayed about a difficult piece of work, and it would "come right."<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> SMG Archive ref II/H/2 'A.M.D.G. The Poor Servants of the Mother of God. Necrology. Book 1 (1872-1945) (for community use only), (1956)' p. 90

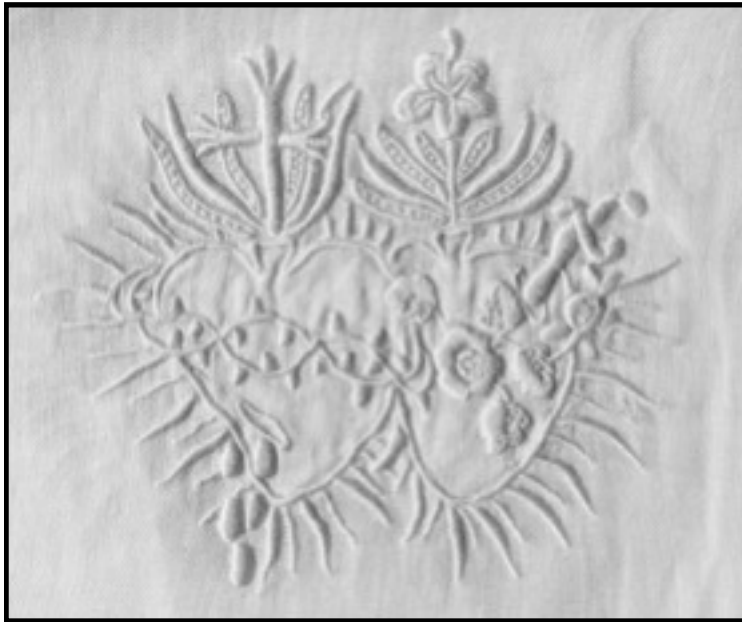
Painting as a form of prayer, as practiced by Sr M Tommaso, Pauline Perdrau, Sr Mary Clare Doyle and, in all probability, the countless nuns who made copies of Mater Admirabilis and other holy images is entirely consistent with Ignatian spirituality: 'contemplation in action' as it is described in Jesuit theology. But the artistic legacy of nuns' prayerful painting extends beyond the cloister - in responding to and fulfilling the Nazarene vision of religious art as both an exercise in historicism and a set of universal mystical codes perpetuated by their own inherently holy properties, the paintings of nineteenth-century active nuns exerted a quiet but forceful influence on the 'international' Roman Catholic style.

The notion of repetitive, meditative work as a channel to religious experience is most clearly present in the creation of fine-needlework; a liturgical art that was not only devotional in itself but produced items that adorned the sacred Eucharistic moment.

### **Textiles, contemplation and atonement**

The most widely produced form of material culture in both enclosed and active convents was ecclesiastical textiles. This term typically refers to the embroidery produced by nuns and in secular workrooms for use in and to decorate liturgical spaces. Working with textiles was a fundamental aspect of convent and religious institutional life, particularly in Anglican communi-

ties, and had a special theological relationship with the spaces within which it was produced. It was also symmetrical, in spiritual and practical terms with the operation of another form of textile work: the production of clean laundry (figure 5.19).



**Figure 5.18** Corporal embroidered by a sister of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge, c. late C19th. Source: OCL Archive



**Figure 5.19** Sisters at work in the laundry of the Good Shepherd, Finchley, c. late C19th. Source: Peter Hughes

The products of both forms of textile work were invested with the spiritual and moral ideology of the refuge. As texts, such items as clean shirts or the embroidered corporal in figure 5.18 raise important questions concerning who commissioned, designed and executed embroidery; under what conditions it was produced; whether it succeeded in transforming and rehabilitating penitent women (both sisters and lay women) and whether it was the product or the act of producing that symbolised this transformation. Examining textiles enables us to read beyond documentary evidence such as mission statements, memoirs and hagiographies and to sharpen our focus on details that have often been in the purview of historical discourses.

Textiles offer valuable ways of thinking about corporate identity that compare and contrast with painted art-work; unlike paintings or written sources, these are texts that the community worked as a body to produce. The spiritual emphasis on humility in refuge orders meant that embroidery, in common with laundry work, was produced communally and largely anonymously. This is not to say, however, that the organisation of the refuge was democratic – the institutional corpus was composed of hands, heart and head.

A separate spheres ideology provided the organising principle behind this work - albeit a notion of separate spheres informed rather by biblical precedents than prescriptive Victorian values. Frances Taylor, the foundress of the SMGs, for example, exhorted her Sisters to seek vocational inspiration in the life of the Virgin Mary,

Why did not our Lady, bearing God within her, go about and teach and prophesy?...She said nothing, went nowhere. What did she do? Washed, hung up the clothes, cleaned the house, cooked the



dinner, spun flax with linen, then made their clothes and mended them.<sup>275</sup>

This reveals one of the fundamental paradoxes that sits at the heart of Victorian women's own version of religious life – that the vocations of women religious should strive to be submissive, domestic and private. But achieving this required women to be self-governing, active agents in the public sphere – negotiating deals with contractors, touting for and publicising their work, liaising with architects and designers and undertaking punishing manual labour. Like Mary, they washed, hung up the clothes, made the clothes and mended them. Unlike Mary, they did this on an industrial scale, within tightly organised institutions. All of this would have been impossible had they followed her example in 'going nowhere and saying nothing'.

As discussed in the previous chapter, magdalen institutions began to emerge in the UK from the mid-nineteenth century, taking up the baton from secular institutions such as the Magdalen hospital founded by Jonas Hanway. In fact this enterprise had been directly influenced by the Roman Catholic convent refuges that had flourished on the continent since the seventeenth century. The guiding philosophy, which Hanway translated for his secular institution, was reformation through productive work. A condition of both the secular and religious institutions (at least in their initial incarnation) was that entry was on a strictly voluntary basis – since the object of the asylum was to rehabilitate women, only those who wanted to change were considered viable.

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<sup>275</sup> SMG Archive ref II/H/2 'The Poor Servants of the Mother of God. Instructions of Mother Foundress on Our Holy Rule on Confession etc. Taken from her Letters, and from Sisters' notes'. n.d. ?1930s pp.30-31

*The Good Shepherd Sisters and Sisters of Our Lady of Charity*

The following examines the function of embroidery and its corollary, laundry work, within the Roman Catholic Eudist communities of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd (GSS) and the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of Refuge (OLC). Both of these closely related orders, as described in chapter 4, had roots in the ideology of Jean Eudes and operated around the highly stratified principle of quasi-enclosure

On the continent, the Eudist institutions supported themselves through the industrial-scale production of plain needlework – the OLC convent at Saint-Cyr in Rennes, for example produced 25,000 shirts and 15,000 gloves in less than a year and supplied Parisian department stores such as Le Bon Marche.<sup>276</sup> Despite the foundress's belief that penitents were best suited to sewing, when the GSS arrived in the UK, needlework was quickly rejected in favour of washing – the examples offered by the Magdalen Hospital, workhouses and women's prisons demonstrated that laundry work was highly remunerative and efficient. In the first year of the GSS foundation in Hammersmith, it was estimated that the sisters had made ten times more money from laundry than contract sewing.<sup>277</sup> In France, as in England, fine needlework was produced by the Choir Sisters and became the particular vocation of Magdalen Sisters in the GSS communities.

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<sup>276</sup> 'Elles Lavaient leurs peches en lavant le linges' <http://www.ouest-france.fr/elles-lavaient-leurs-peches-en-lavant-le-linge-734252>

<sup>277</sup> Hughes, p. 119.

This was also an important feature of Anglican Sisterhoods such as that of St John the Baptist, founded at Clewer in Berkshire in 1844 by Harriet Monsell and T.T. Carter. The first of many 'Houses of Mercy' as Anglican refuges were known, its inception reflected a general anxiety about sexual vice and a specific concern about the lack of provision for fallen Anglican women. A large and imposing convent was completed in 1855 to the designs of Henry Woodyer. Susan Mumm suggests that Clewer was regarded as the most aristocratic of the Anglican sisterhoods and the fact that the community was able to sustain itself in the early years entirely through dowries pays testimony to the demographic differences between Roman Catholic and Anglican refuges.

The Rule of the order, drawn up by T.T. Carter was clearly inspired by the Eudists – Choir Sisters were separated from penitents and an order of Magdalen Sisters was introduced. Laundry work generated an income for the community and also provided an opportunity for the sisters to train women in skills that would serve them outside the convent. Unlike the Eudist foundations, however, ecclesiastical embroidery also generated a significant income at Clewer. The work was not the preserve of sisters and the order opened schools for the instruction of needlework. This work helped to secure the success of Clewer and institutions like it - Anglicans dominated refuge work in England – by 1903 there were 238 penitentiaries compared with fewer than thirty RC refuges. The embroidery produced by Anglican nuns, however, differed significantly in terms of patronage, design and use: much of the work produced in convents and work rooms was designed by architects, formed an integral part of the architecture of Anglican churches

and was (and indeed continues to be) highly valued in the canon of Anglican art (figures 5.20 and 5.21) .



**Figures 5.20 - 5.21** *Left to right:*

Figure 5.20 Sketch by J.D. Sedding for the altar cloth at Holy Trinity, Sloane Square, private collection. Source: author  
Figure 5.21 Detail of altar cloth at Holy Trinity, Sloane Square. Source: author

### *Laundries and penance*

As discussed in the previous chapter, whether Roman Catholics and Anglicans regarded laundry work to be reformatory, transformative or instructive, there is no doubt that it was considered punitive in secular institutions. The historian, Peter Hughes notes: 'That it was suitable as penance cannot be

denied. Of the Surrey House of Correction (now Wandsworth Prison), Mayhew had remarked that washing was the sole form of hard labour, and it was reported that at Northallerton Gaol the women considered the tread-wheel to be nowhere near as hard as washing clothes'.<sup>278</sup>

But, while they might both be applied to achieve the same end – productive or spiritual rehabilitation - there was a clear distinction in the ideology of women religious between punishment and penance

The historian Susan Mumm alludes to this when she asserts that sisterhoods 'were not opposed to workhouses out of a theoretical distaste for legislated assistance, but from a conviction that workhouses abused, humiliated and demoralised the unfortunate.'<sup>279</sup> Further weight is lent to the idea that work was intended as a means for penitents to mediate on or work through their sins rather than as a way of balancing justice or a deterrent. Emma Raimbach, a sister of the Good Shepherds wrote in the mid-nineteenth century:

(The laundry work) certainly is profitable to the souls of those among the penitents who are restless and brought up to hard labour or are very dissipated. To many a penitent to sit still for hours at needlework, mostly in silence, her companion her own grieved and irritated and perhaps remorseful thoughts, to sit with the other silent penitents is a purgatory and sometimes a very

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<sup>278</sup> Hughes, p. 375. In her PhD Thesis Lynda Pearce also notes the comparisons between laundry work in women's prisons and in magdalen institutions. Pearce, L. Catholic Philanthropy in Mid-Nineteenth Century Britain: The Reformatory Work of the Female Congregations, PhD Thesis, University of Kent, 2003

<sup>279</sup> Mumm, S., *Stolen Daughters, Virgin Mothers: Anglican Sisterhoods in Victorian Britain*, London, New York: Leicester University Press p.96.

painful source of temptation. For such a one the ironing room or wash house is their security...

In fact, Raimbach's words suggest that far from being punitive, laundry work was a compassionate route to penance for women who might, under quieter conditions, be tormented by their crimes. It is interesting that this view appears to be at variance with the foundresses' belief that sewing was the most suitable work for penitents. It is an ideological shift that, whether it speaks of an open and flexible spirituality or simply expedience, mirrors the shift in manufacturing and economic output in convent refuges from needlework to laundry work.

### *Contemplation*

As discussed earlier, having once been a 'fallen women', the Magdalen Sister could never become a nun in the proper sense. The special duty of these women was fine-needlework which was undertaken in silence: 'The Magdalens [occupy themselves] in needlework....an extraordinary silence prevails – the silence of the desert profitable alike for prayer and union with God.'<sup>280</sup>

Peter Hughes suggests that this work, undertaken in these particular conditions, was intended to stimulate a soulful connection with God:

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<sup>280</sup> H. Pasquier, p.113

The work of the Magdalen sister consisted in fine needlework, the making of ecclesiastical vestments and altar linen and the manufacture of unleavened bread wafers for Mass. Their special task was prayer and as a contemplative order, the orientation towards a mystical unity with God was explicit.<sup>281</sup>

The iconic images particularly associated with the Good Shepherds are the Sacred Heart and Mary Magdalene, the former symbolic of suffering and the latter of penance – both expressive of the special vocation of the order. For the Good Shepherds, penance and suffering were compounded, as the following illustrates:

God speaks through his work and the soul listens. This is conversation with him. Penance is the principal virtue of the magdalens. The beauty of suffering is a great mystery but it lies at the foundation of all artistic beauty...In the church, the penitent changes suffering into merit, common lead into pure gold...<sup>282</sup>

The changing of lead into gold is an important metaphor here as the process of transformation is at the very core of Good Shepherd spirituality.<sup>283</sup> While I have yet to find any direct reference to the symbolism of laundry work in the literature or archives of any order, the symbolic metamorphosis of plain cloth into rich embroidery is, as the above quote indicates, is explicit in the charism of the Good Shepherds. And while there

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<sup>281</sup> Hughes, p.52

<sup>282</sup> Pasquier, *Life of Mother Mary of St Euphrasia*, p114

<sup>283</sup> Comparisons between Anglican and Roman Catholic theologies of transformation through needlework and laundry were explored in a conference paper presented by Ayla Lepine and Kate Jordan at 'Material Religion in Modern Britain and its Worlds', Cardiff, 8-9 June 2012

is no indication that laundry work might be expected to produce an ineffable experience in the penitents, for Magdalens, the transformation of the soul was inextricable from the transformation of the fabric and, most importantly, both were together enabled and enacted via a mystic communion with God.

Monsignor Pasquier, the Domestic Prelate to Leo XII, makes a surprising number of references to art in the discussion of Good Shepherd spirituality in his biography of Mother Pelletier written in 1893.<sup>284</sup> The comparison drawn between the artist and the nun in the quote below is of particular interest:

..artists, whose beautiful handiwork is animated with life, who form souls in purity and ornament them with the ineffable grace of Christian virtue. Such are the daughters of Mother Pelletier, artists hidden from Human gaze, bestowing on the soul entrusted to their care the blessing of peace and the ornament of Divine grace.<sup>285</sup>

The metaphor of the artist employed here and the presence of the word 'ineffable' are significant. In conjunction, they clearly imply that the same processes are at work in the production of a piece art as in the spiritual transformation of a soul. A similar parallel between the mystery of artistic

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<sup>284</sup> Pasquier undertook a great deal of research in compiling his biography, 'When Mother Mary of St. Peter de Coudenhove asked me to write Mother Pelletier's life, I sought opportunities of talking to those among the religious who had known her, and whose touching words of filial piety often reminded me of the chronicles in which the Sieur de Joinville recounts the edifying actions of his beloved master, St. Louis. I also read the Annals of the community, the golden book in which are registered all the more striking incidents of the great work done for souls by the Congregation. I read also, and with much edification, the numerous letters written by Mother Pelletier herself, and the records of her instructions kept by others... When dealing with her letters or utterances, I have often preferred to give the good Mother's very words rather than my own'. p.xxii

<sup>285</sup> Pasquier p.372.



creation and the work of God through human agency appears elsewhere in the text:

It would be hard to describe the artist's work, as with a few colours or out of a block of marble, he makes the likeness of men beautiful by his own imagination; nor could the artist himself tell us how he puts life and sentiment into the material substances he handles: the work grows under his hands but he cannot analyse it. Still more difficult would it be to describe the action of soul upon soul, how the one transform the other....this is a work done only by the grace of God, a hidden agency often overlooked and not measurable by human standards'.<sup>286</sup>

Again, the idea of a mystic transformation that directly recalls the miracle of creation is deliberately invoked. The particular analogy employed here – the transformation of a block of marble into sculpture – suggests that sisters were highly attuned to the power of art as a spiritual tool. As a conjoined art form and devotional exercise, the fact that the production of embroidery by Magdalens harnessed interior spirituality, took place in silence and within the most enclosed of private spaces, is entirely consistent with Jantzen's assertion that spirituality had shifted from the public to the private sphere by the nineteenth century. Importantly, however, the liturgical art of the Good Shepherds had a functional purpose - for use (as vestments, altar cloths, corporals and so on) in the Mass. While the production of this art took place in private, the products were conspicuously public and served to decorate the most important and mysterious transformation in Catholic

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<sup>286</sup> *ibid.* p.53.

worship; the transformation of the sacraments into the body and blood of Christ.



**Figure 5.22** Detail of the Agnus Dei on altar cloth embroidered by OLC sisters, Waterlooville, late C19th, Oxford Oratory Church. Source: Fr Dominic Jacob

Despite a continuing emphasis on Marian devotion (bolstered by the canonisation in 1909 of the visionary nun, Bernadette Soubirous) by the early twentieth century the more florid notes of Roman Catholic vernacular mysticism were being increasingly dampened within the institutional church by the pallid regulations of Canon law and the intellectualism of the Liturgical Movement. The new theologies promoted by the Liturgical Movement aimed to unite the denominations and looked back to the early Christian church - in particular, to the monastic roots of Christianity. Through the Liturgical Movement art assumed a more explicitly evangelical role in the church more widely and the influences of the Modern Movement in art and architecture began to set new standards. Although shifts in styles and tastes can easily be read in the art and needlework produced by women religious throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, the work

of sisters such as Sr Mary Tommaso demonstrate the continuity of a mystic tradition.

## **Conclusion**

Susan O'Brien has described the unique ways in which sisters developed their own spiritual cultures, which then passed not only between different orders but also fed into the practices, rituals and iconography of the institutional Church. This chapter lends further weight to O'Brien's claim by highlighting the ways that artistic practices were autonomously formed and transferred between communities. The extent to which this reflects a new stress on interiority is unclear but it may be that the flowering of mystic devotions in English convents during the nineteenth century corresponded with two apparently conflicting movements: the increasing stress on sacerdotalism (male liturgical authority) which found its most powerful expression in Papal infallibility and the rise of female spiritual authority which is illustrated by the new emphasis on Mariology and the cult of modern female saints. It is extremely significant that, although women were denied a liturgical role, the religious authority of the Mother Superior within the community, as will be discussed in the following chapter, sometimes outranked that

of the Bishop - a state of affairs that warns against conflating the private with the passive.<sup>287</sup>

The great irony of James's analysis of mysticism is that the one group that it entirely misses - nineteenth-century women - is that which most closely fits his paradigm. No mention is made in *Varieties of Religious Experience* of either Therese of Lisieux or Bernadette of Lourdes, two of the most important Catholic mystics of the nineteenth century. The nearest that James gets, is a description of Marguerite Marie Alacocque:

In gentle characters, where devoutness is intense and the intellect feeble, we have an imaginative absorption in the love of God to the exclusion of all practical human interests, which, though innocent enough, is too one-sided to be admirable. A mind too narrow has room but for one kind of affection. When the love of God takes possession of such a mind, it expels all human loves and human uses. There is no English name for such a sweet excess of devotion, so I will refer to it as a theopathic condition. The blessed Margaret Mary Alacoque may serve as an example...amiable and good, but so feeble of intellectual out-look that it would be too much to ask of us, with our Protestant and modern education, to feel anything but indulgent pity for the kind of saintship which she embodies.<sup>288</sup>

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<sup>287</sup> In her discussion of the Rule of the Little Company of Mary, Carmen Mangion suggests that 'in some cases, especially when sisters were nursing patients in their homes, the requirements regarding prayer left some decision making to the judgement of the sister or her superior. Potter purposefully built this flexibility into the Rule, which suggests that the responsibilities of nursing sometimes required the interruption or temporary abatement of spiritual duties'. C. Mangion, 'The Mixed Life: Challenging Understandings of Religious Life in Victorian England'. p.172

<sup>288</sup> James, W., *Varieties of Religious Experience* p.534.

James does not dismiss women per se (he holds Teresa of Avila, for example, in the highest regard); he reserved his opprobrium for those who did not (or could not) express their mysticism intellectually and in written form - indeed he does not acknowledge any alternative media to the written form. It is revealing that, despite their lack of obvious credentials, James cites Walt Whitman, Edward Carpenter and Richard Jeffries as modern mystics.

Many of the women discussed in this chapter shared with James a culturally specific understanding of the mystic (it scarcely needs mentioning that, in addition to the blossoming of Catholic mysticism, they belonged to an age that produced wave upon wave of Swedenborgian cults) as internal and private and they experienced this through their own extralinguistic, 'ineffable' devotions. But if we consider the prayerful production of art to be both a spiritual exercise and a bodily encounter – the paintbrush and needle as the physical mediator of a union with God - then these women also fit neatly into the female tradition that Jantzen and Bynum identify. And yet, like James, neither scholar acknowledges them. We might say, then, that it is precisely because they did not contribute (whether by their own hand or a scribes) to the literature of mysticism; precisely because they do not articulate their experiences through the passive, male voice; precisely because that they do not appear in James's account that Jantzen rejects them.

A great deal more work on this subject is needed to establish the full breadth and scope of women's mystic art in the nineteenth century. I have not, for example, made comparisons with the spirituality and artistic output of male religious communities – something which is as likely to reveal convergence as much as disjuncture and I have touched only briefly on the comparisons that might be made between the spirituality of religious and

lay-women during this period. Moreover, the production of art by women religious, was not, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a new activity: I have focused here on the lateral cross-fertilization of ideas over a short period of time and within a small geographical range. A study is needed that explores the possibilities of a matrilineal transfer of artistic practices through the history of Christian women's religious communities; from the icons of Byzantine nuns to the medieval illuminated manuscripts of Herrad of Landsberg; the renaissance frescoes of Sr Plautilla Nelli to the monumental statues of the Sister Disciples. This story might offer vital perspectives on the mystic spirituality of women religious.

## Chapter 6

### 'AN UNACCUSTOMED SPADE': BUILDING, ADAPTING AND MAINTAINING CONVENTS



**Figure 6** The Vale of Rest, Sir John Everett Millais, 1858-9. Source: Tate

*'Mr Millais has caught admirably the awkwardness and weakness of the woman using the unaccustomed spade'*<sup>289</sup>

The Aetheneum, 1859

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<sup>289</sup> Quoted in S. Casteras, 'Virgin Vows: The Early Victorian Artists' Portrayal of Nuns and Novices', *Victorian studies*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Winter, 1981), pp. 157-184. p178

As previous chapters have explored, visual and literary representations of female religious life during the nineteenth century held a powerful sway over the public imagination as Victorians struggled to reconcile the notions of passive and active captured by apostolic sisters. *The Vale of Rest*, pictured above, depicts a subject matter that was so widely explored in nineteenth century art that it might almost be considered a genre. Nuns both fascinated and repelled Protestants and they were invariably presented as thinly veiled discourses on sexual repression and the distortion of normative roles.<sup>290</sup> The subtext of *The Vale of Rest*, suggested by the reviewer in the *Aethenum*, is one of 'self-immolation'; the nun is seen digging her own grave. The painting implies a disruption of the natural order that is intended to unsettle the viewer - the juxtapositions of youth and death, feminine frailty and the heavy 'unaccustomed spade'.

This depiction of a young female religious engaged in heavy work, however, might have struck different notes within religious communities where the notion of self-sacrifice had an entirely different spiritual register and where women were extremely well acquainted with the spade; both heavy work and death were transitional moments on the route to salvation, as Frances Taylor's words suggest: 'Look on your work as the penance by which you will gain heaven. It stands to you in the place of fasts and austerities...'<sup>291</sup>

The tradition of nuns manually building their own convents has a long heritage and is, in fact, a feature of the building projects of enclosed orders

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<sup>290</sup> The art historian Susan Casteras suggests that 'The major theme which unites paintings of [nuns] in the 1830s, 1840s and 1850s (as well as in later decades) was that of repressed sexuality'. S. Casteras, 'Virgin Vows' p. 157

<sup>291</sup> SMG Archive ref II/H/2 'The Poor Servants of the Mother of God. Instructions of Mother Foundress on Our Holy Rule on Confession etc. Taken from her Letters, and from Sisters' notes'. n.d.. ?1930s p.34



(particularly Carmelites as I will consider later). This was partly expedient (wherever possible women preserved enclosure by refusing admittance to lay people) and partly theological (all religious orders prioritised humility and asceticism). It was the Ignatian principle of prayer through work, however, that gave spiritual meaning to hard labour in active communities. Frances Taylor's instructions to The Poor Servants of the Mother of God, for example, make very plain her views on the sanctity of personally unrewarding toil:

Every true Servant of the Mother of God in our Institute should have, and I think I may say has the spirit of manual labour. St Paul had this spirit. The hermits of Old had it. The world despises it, but the church appreciates it, and the more her children advance in sanctity the more they appreciate the spirit of lowly labour, after the example of Jesus, Mary and Joseph.<sup>292</sup>

One of the virtues of a spiritual emphasis on drudgery was that it dovetailed neatly with the necessity in many active communities to keep a tight rein on budgets. Raising funds for building programmes was an uncertain process and few convents were built and finished according to one plan and to a definite timescale. This, combined with the fact that convent design was (particularly in the early stages) a gradually accretive process of trial and error, meant that the building was generally viewed by sisters as a continuous rather than contained operation. If sisters could combine designing with manual labour then they could ensure that the community's buildings were maintained at minimum expense.

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<sup>292</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 6.1** Sisters outside Brentford Laundry and Preservation Home during construction c.1894 Source: SMG Archive ref IIG/2/1 (pt)

### **Hiring, managing and supervising;**

#### **The Poor Servants of the Mother of God**

As well as prioritising hard work, the sisters of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God placed great value on economic prudence. Though decoration of chapels was important, the views of their foundress stood in stark contrast to those of Cornelia Connelly who, according to an anonymous biographer: ‘attached great importance to the revival of correct ecclesiastical ornament, and in her devotion to the Blessed Sacrament she desired all the adornments of the altar to be as costly and beautiful as possible’.<sup>293</sup>

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<sup>293</sup> *The Life of Cornelia Connelly* by a religious of the society, 1924, p151.

Frances Taylor, as discussed in the previous chapter, had a sharp understanding of the value of art, but she shared with Catherine McAuley, an emphasis on the utility of convent architecture - not only were the convents to be furnished simply but restraint was also to be shown in the chapels.

This had both a practical and theological function as the Rule suggests:

‘All we have must be poor (except in the Chapel, and even there a certain measure should be maintained), and all things must be in common’.<sup>294</sup>

Indeed the majority of Taylor’s communities were founded in standing buildings that were adapted for use which would have placed significant constraints on the aesthetic planning of space. These sites were frequently altered and added to and contractors and labourers were regularly hired. The sisters were very well aware that being a community of women made them vulnerable to being mis-sold services and misled which could be costly. To guard against this they went to extraordinary lengths to make sure that they understood every aspect of the building process.

During the construction, in 1914, of a chapel and residential buildings at St Mary’s convent Brentford, the sisters of the Poor Servants of Mother of God took over the task of managing the site. It was clearly assumed that the architect, J.C. Radford would not be able to ensure that the work was being carried out as required. The sharp observation of Sr Spinola, proved that their concerns were not misplaced:

The workmen were not measuring proportions of ballast and cement and had none of the Thames ballast. I gave [the foreman] to understand I only wanted the direction on specification carried out

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<sup>294</sup> Rule and Constitutions 1892, SMG Archive ref II/C/6, Rule 12

and the concrete should be composed of 5 parts Thames ballast to one part of best Portland cement. He then gave instructions to have some Thames Ballast put in with broken up bricks which is optional and to have the material from foundations screened which comes nearest to what [the architect] specified.<sup>295</sup>

It is unclear where and how this woman gathered sufficient information on the composition of mortar to be able to tell that the contractor was cutting corners. A few weeks later an entry records some concern about the quality of sand being used:

[Sister M. Spinola] also gave [Mr Radford] to understand she was not satisfied that some of the sifted material was collected for use instead of clean sand. Here again he tried to explain that one site could be used as a sandpit and what he saw was quite good. What he saw was some specially selected for him to see. What he saw was good but not the other heap and she couldn't say it was anything like what a good sandpit would produce. That if our site was sandy, they should dig much deeper than they had done before getting at proper sand.<sup>296</sup>

These matters were not unimportant. Budgets were extremely limited and the Sisters had to be sure of the quality of work that they were paying for - substandard workmanship was costly to replace or repair. These women were aware that they were vulnerable to exploitation - the example above

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<sup>295</sup> SMG archive ref. III/[Brentford House Records], Notebook 'Notes about Brentford Building'

<sup>296</sup> Ibid.

implies that Sister Spinola's vigilance arose (probably justifiably) from a general suspicion of tradesmen and contractors. Since the architect would not have made site inspections frequently enough to ensure that all building work was being carried out to specification, these women were required to equip themselves with as much knowledge as they could. What they lacked in expertise they more than made up for in a willingness to learn and a formidable resolve.

Though women did not, as discussed, have access to formal training, they had the time to acquire knowledge and learn skills - not only those that enabled them to keep a watchful eye on the people they employed but also that allowed them to undertake work of all kinds themselves.

### The 'Building Nuns' of Presteigne



**Figure 6.2** Carmelite nuns on the building site of the Church of Our Lady of Assumption of St Therese, 1954. Source: Menevia Diocesan Archive

In 1954, the building of a convent chapel by a group of Carmelite nuns caused something of a stir: not only did it capture the attention of the local and national newspapers but it also featured in a Pathé news item. What piqued the interest of the press was the fact that, not only had the sisters provided the specifications for their chapel but they had also dug the foundations, mixed the mortar, laid the block work and cast the lintels and in doing so up-turned popular notions of women religious as passive, private, contained and disempowered.<sup>297</sup> That I have been able to provide a detailed account of the following case study does not indicate that it was a unique event but rather that new media in the form of television, created opportunities for recording it for posterity. This was not a violation of the nuns' privacy - on the contrary, the sisters marshalled television news in order to gain publicity and raise funds.

I have been fortunate to be able to draw much of the following description and analysis of the building programme at Presteigne, Wales, from two first-hand accounts. The first was given to me by Sister Anne of Christ who was, at the time, a novice in the Carmelite community at Presteigne and participated in the construction of the Church of Our Lady of Assumption. This account is valuable not simply because so little has subsequently been written about this site, but because it gives voice to the women who commissioned, paid for and built the church and offers a unique insight into a

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<sup>297</sup> 'Down Memory Lane: The Building Sisters of Presteigne', Randall, A., *Menevia News*, May 2010, p 9. <http://content.yudu.com/Library/A1njxq/MeneviaNews/resources/9.htm>

collective identity that is made concrete in this building.<sup>298</sup> The second is an invaluable, characterful account offered by the architect, Francis Pollen's widow, Lady Therese Sidmouth who visited the nuns with Pollen and watched the work come to fruition. Her perspective on Francis Pollen's work and the extraordinary resolve and skill of the women who built his church, gives form to the following account.

### *The 'Building Sisters'*

In 1951, fourteen Carmelite Sisters arrived in the small town of Presteigne, Wales at the invitation of Bishop John Petit, who was keen to find a community of contemplatives to found a centre of prayer and provide a church for the fledgling parish. The Sisters secured 'Greenfield', a large early nineteenth-century house which had recently been vacated by the army and would serve as the monastery. Sister Anne remembers the journey from the convent in Birkhamstead to Presteigne:

'In midsummer 1951 we all moved down to Wales. The younger sisters went first to clean up the house. We travelled in livestock vans with the goats, sitting on bales of hay. The elders came down two weeks later with the pony and sheep.'<sup>299</sup>

Within weeks of their arrival, the sisters extended the living space by erecting huts on the site (the Carmelite Rule required that all sisters occupied

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<sup>298</sup> Sister Anne of Christ arrived in Presteigne as a Novice in 1951. She joined six other Novices from the Carmel in Birkhamstead and seven older Sisters from the Carmel in Notting Hill. She worked with the rest of the community in the building of the Church of Our Lady of the Assumption. Sr. Anne now lives in the Carmelite Monastery in Stillorgan Dublin and is the last of the 'Building Sisters'. Her memories of the project were recorded in a series of letters sent to me between 8<sup>th</sup> of July 2011 and 4<sup>th</sup> January 2012.

<sup>299</sup> Letter from Sr. Anne, dated 20<sup>th</sup> July, 2011

individual cells) and installed an altar bread bakery which provided the means to generate an income. They also began developing plans and accumulating the materials necessary for building a chapel.

Mother Michael Dawes, the Prioress of the community took charge of the project. As with most female religious orders, in practical matters the community was largely autonomous from diocesan control and all of the major decisions concerning the building programme at Greenfield were taken by Mother Michael. Funds for the projects were extremely limited – the community was largely self-sufficient and owned little more than a small amount of livestock. It soon became apparent that employing professional tradesmen to build the chapel would be beyond the means of the community and so Mother Michael decided that the sisters could undertake the building work themselves. One of the difficulties arising from such a venture was that it meant that the community would require a temporary dispensation from enclosure until the work was completed. Another problem, of equal if not greater weight, was that none of the sisters had previously received any training in construction skills. Sister Anne recalls that:

‘One of the younger nuns had shown aptitude in construction work by turning an outhouse into a goat stable, using discarded planks, so M. Michael gave her some E.V.P. “Do it yourself” books, “Teach yourself Brickwork”, “Teach yourself Roofing” etc., and asked her to become forewoman and learn the Building Trade. She would be joined by all those who were strong enough. A priest friend taught some carpentry skills and bought tools for us’.<sup>300</sup>

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<sup>300</sup> Ibid.





**Figure 6.3** *Carmelite nun cutting stone, 1954. Source: Menevia Diocesan Archive*

Work on a temporary chapel commenced in 1952. The sisters dismantled a conservatory and built a brick wall which was then roofed with asbestos sheeting. This provided a chapel for the laity, while the sisters worshipped in the adjoining 'best room' of the main house. With the construction of the permanent chapel in mind, the Sisters swapped the glazing bars and glass from the conservatory for five iron windows from an army hut. Mother Michael also bartered the community's flock of geese for a solid oak door from the cellar of Greenfield and purchased, with the little money that they had, some African hardwood flooring from an old army hut.

In 1953 the Sisters began the construction of the choir which would annex the monastery. The quantity of the hardwood flooring dictated the size and

shape of this simple rectangular building. Ever resourceful, the Sisters learned on the job and drafted in advice as they went:

‘We borrowed a concrete mixer and bought blocks and cement as we could afford. A master stonemason and bricklayer taught us his art, instructing us in ‘quoins ‘and lintels and the use of level and plumbline etc. His son, a carpenter, taught us the principles of doorways and roofing. Our G.P., who had built a mission hospital in China, gave guidelines over finishing the eaves, when we reached the roof’.<sup>301</sup>

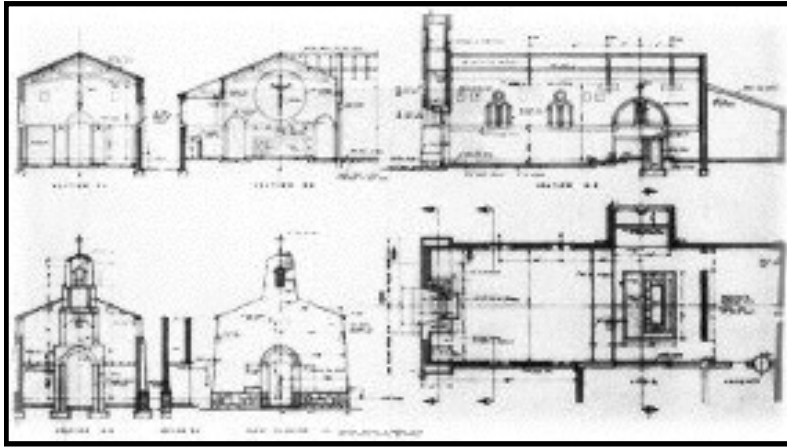
The lack of funds meant cutting back on the most basic tools. As Sister Anne recalls, ‘We had no scaffolding but managed with trestles and planks, carrying up blocks in our aprons and cement in buckets until we reached roof height’.<sup>302</sup>

In March 1951, the Sisters were visited by the architect Francis Pollen who was then an undergraduate architecture student and had been commissioned to alter the interior of a neighbouring house belonging to Lord Rennell of Rodd. Lord Rennell’s wife was keen to introduce Pollen to the Carmelite community and, on visiting the building site, Pollen immediately offered to donate plans for a parish church that would adjoin the nun’s choir – a building that was to be his first executed design (figure 6.4).

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<sup>301</sup> Ibid.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid.



**Figure 6.4.** Francis Pollen's plans for the Church of Our Lady of Assumption of St Therese. Source: Alan Powers

By early 1954, the plans were ready and the Sisters commenced building. M. Michael was keen to use local stone but it soon became clear that this would prove too costly and so it was decided that it would be reserved for the porch and plinth only. The Sisters gathered stone from local quarries and 'ruined buildings' which they brought back by lorry and began the heavy building work:

'The plinth was capped with concrete laid in situ in preparation for the block walls. Younger sisters worked on the block-work, a pair of us laying outer and inner leaf as the walls went up. The more elderly cast the concrete mullions...for the porch of which we required over 60. M. Michael cut the foundation/corner stone inserted into the stonework of the porch, and we had the concrete floor of the sanctuary and nave laid by August 1954...We then continued work on the bell tower, which had massive concrete, carried up by two middle-aged nuns in buckets; Trojans of the whole exercise!'<sup>303</sup>

Financing what had become a rather more ambitious plan than the Sisters had at first envisaged proved difficult. In the early stages, the Sisters saved

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<sup>303</sup> Letter from Sr. Anne of Christ, date 20<sup>th</sup> July, 2011.

from the meagre income that their work generated and received small donations from local people and visitors but after their work gained the attention of the press (in particular Pathé News), the donations began to accumulate in both number and value.<sup>304</sup> Despite this, the community were still required to take out a bank loan which meant that the church could not be consecrated until 1976 – the year that the loan was finally settled.

As with most convent building projects an uncertain trickle of funds meant that the buildings emerged piecemeal. The church was, in fact, in use before the altar was installed: In November 1954, Mass was said for the first time at a temporary altar and it was not until the following year that the permanent altar was completed. The annals record:

'Early in 1955, we built the stone altar, our greatest privilege of all. Deep into the ground its foundations had long been laid, and stone by stone it rose – some of the stones being relics of ancient monastic churches, collected for us by our friends'.<sup>305</sup>

Not surprisingly the completion of the altar, as the lyrical tone of this account indicates, was invested with profound significance. By the end of 1955, the doors into the sacristy were hung, the side chapel was completed, statues installed and the grille between the nun's choir and the sanctuary was put in place. Further additions and decoration of the interior continued sporadically over the proceeding years – notably a stone plinth for the tabernacle, made to Francis Pollen's design, which was finally erected in

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<sup>304</sup> The building project was reported in both the local and national press. Articles included John Lee, 'Oh for a cement mixer' March 14, 1956, Menevia Diocesan Archives (supplied by diocesan archivist, Alan Randall), 'Convent Builders', *Pathé News*, 1954 <http://www.britishpathe.com/video/convent-builders>

<sup>305</sup> 'The Establishment of Papal Enclosure at the Carmelite Convent, Presteigne, Radnorshire 24 November 1956, Feast of St John the Cross' Menevia Diocesan Archives, (supplied by Alan Randall)

1975. The last addition was a Eucharistic inscription on the East wall, given in 1988 by the Welsh writer and artist, David Jones who had also donated an inscription for the wall behind the altar some years earlier.

*Innovation and tradition*

From the perspective of an emerging canon of modern Catholic architecture, the Church of Our Lady of the Assumption, if not pioneering, is an interesting take on a vernacular Italianate theme that offers an opportunity, as Alan Powers suggests, to examine Pollen's 'remarkable command, even at this early stage, of three-dimensional form, undoubtedly learnt from the study of Lutyens'.<sup>306</sup> The space is characterised by a simplicity that verges on austerity and contrasts with the heavily freighted historicism that continued to dominate Catholic church-building until the later twentieth-century. A question arises, then, as to what prompted this modest departure from stylistic convention; was it Pollen's vision or the specifications of the 'building nuns'?

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<sup>306</sup> Powers, A. *Francis Pollen: architect 1926-1987*, Oxford: Robert Dugdale, 1999.



**Figure 6.5** . Church of Our Lady of the Assumption.  
Source: author

I suggest that the church is a coalescence of Pollen's gift for imagining sacred space, constrained budgets and the Carmelites spiritual emphasis on simplicity, asceticism and themes drawn from nature. The nuns certainly had their own ideas, having, as mentioned previously, already commenced the choir by the time Pollen made his first visit. In its most dynamic form, the creative relationship between the two seems to have come into play in the functional design of the space, and it is in this capacity that the church presents its most intriguing feature.

The rustic altar which was built by the nuns, to their own design, out of stones reclaimed from a Welsh monastery, stands away from the East wall on a raised platform (figure 6.6). At first sight, it would be reasonable to assume that this was a post Vatican II reordering of the space. But in fact it was designed, at the instruction of the sisters, not in an effort to promote lay participation but to enable both the nuns (through the conventual grille in the adjoining choir) and the parishioners in the nave, to see the altar while the priest celebrated Mass with his back to the congregation.



**Figure 6.6.** Altar in the Church of Our Lady of the Assumption. Source: author

Free standing altars were extremely unusual in English Catholic churches before the liturgical revolution of the second Vatican council in 1962.<sup>307</sup> And yet this church, a space dedicated to orthodox patterns of worship and ritual has, to all intents and purposes, the appearance of one that has enthusiastically embraced liturgical reform

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<sup>307</sup> Mark Torgerson points to a 1948 copy of *The Church Builder* which recommends a number of historical styles that are suitable for Catholic churches. Torgerson, M. A., *An Architecture of Immanence: architecture for worship and ministry today*, Grand Rapids, Mich; Cambridge: William B Eerdman, 2007, p 33.



**Figure 6.7** Interior (looking west) of the Church of Our Lady of the Assumption. Source: author

This unusual liturgical configuration serves to remind us that experimentation with form is not always the concomitant of progressiveness. In fact, the chapel at Presteigne, like Waterlooville, was built for a congregation that was, doctrinally conservative and the unusual arrangement of liturgical space was a direct reflection this.

A particular tradition among contemplative nuns across Europe informed the building project at Presteigne. The Rules of contemplative orders such as the Carmelites emphasise asceticism and physical labour and specify peculiar configurations in the ordering of monastic space, such as an imperative to build individual cells for the religious.<sup>308</sup> Moreover, the isolation that strict enclosure demanded meant that it was often easier for both men and women to undertake manual work than find ways of side-stepping the Rule in order to admit lay artisans. The practices that grew and became a part of religious life were transferred between communities and across na-

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<sup>308</sup> *The Rule of St Albert*, <http://carmelnet.org/chas/rule.htm>



tional boundaries.<sup>309</sup> Thus M. Michael's decision to build her own church was not born out of a sudden desire to upturn the status quo but was built on a firmly established precedent. She had, in fact, been inspired by photographs of the Carmelite community in Cologne, rebuilding the bomb-damaged roof of their convent.<sup>310</sup> The novelty of these enterprises, then, lies not in the emergence of new building practices but in the media used to transmit them.

And yet, despite the fact that footage and photographs of the building nuns of Presteigne have been in the public domain for almost sixty years no scholarly work has been dedicated to understanding or situating it within an historical or critical rubric. While Alan Powers does describe at some length the contribution of the nuns to The Church of Our Lady of the Assumption, he does not do so in a very positive light:

Since they had no money, Mother Michael proposed that they should build the chapel themselves, and Francis produced what he described as 'nun-proof' drawings...Apparently the nuns, working under the direction of the redoubtable Mother Michael, were so excited by the prospect of putting in the windows that they are about a foot too low in the wall'.<sup>311</sup>

The subtext of this story is clear – the integrity of Pollen's design scarcely survived the being executed by untrained nuns. It is worth noting that no

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<sup>309</sup> Sister Anne of Christ suggests that the involvement by Sisters in convent building is an international tradition among Carmelite women that continues today in Carmels from South Africa to the North of England. Letter dated 4<sup>th</sup> January, 2012.

<sup>310</sup> 'Down Memory Lane: The Building Sisters of Presteigne', *Menevia News*, May 2010,

<sup>311</sup> Powers, A. *Francis Pollen: architect 1926-1987*, Oxford: Robert Dugdale, 1999

mention of any such mistake is made in the account offered by Sister Anne of Christ.

From the perspective of the connoisseur, it would be difficult to build a case for the Church of Our Lady of the Assumption as a pioneering example of modern Catholic architecture, or even a notable building in Francis Pollen's career. I suggest that its value, instead, lies in the way that it negotiates a variety of spatial demands and articulates a female-centric narrative of the built environment. As a church it had to provide open access to parishioners and formal space for worship. As a convent chapel, it had to facilitate operation of the Carmelite rule, allowing the religious to see the Mass without being seen by the parishioners. Aesthetically, it had to reflect the monastic spirit of the religious community whilst also maintaining the feel of a parish church. And most importantly, it had to be built cheaply, using and re-using whatever resources were available to a design that could be realised by a team of inexperienced construction workers. It is certainly testament to the energy and fruitfulness of marriage between spirituality and necessity - and to the extraordinary will of the women who made it, as Lady Sidmouth, widow of Frances Pollen suggests:

...[the]community of 18 nuns were well into their 60's, yet they mixed cement, swung blisteringly heavy hammers to break the stone for rubble for the foundations, dug the foundations, & roofed the building themselves - 30ft. above ground. When they were offered a pile of stone from the local village, they got permission from their bishop to borrow a lorry, leave their enclosure, load the heavy stones onto the lorry & bring their bounty back to the con-

vent. But I expect you got all this & more from Sr. Anne - who, by the way was a most efficient foreman. They learnt everything from one of those yellow Teach Yourself books, which were popular at the time. There was a lovely account in one of the papers how, when the last tile had been fixed on the roof, the nun climbed down the steep ladder -all of 30ft - joined her fellow builders who, leaning on spades & pickaxes were led by Mother Michael in prayers of thanksgiving.<sup>312</sup>

Buildings such as The Church of Our Lady of the Assumption do not fit easily into the linear narratives of Catholic architecture because their creative trajectories - inconsistent and often contradictory – are wayward. They are not the unproblematically traditional spaces of conservative church builders, but neither are they the product of a heroic modernist vision any more than they are a post-modernist synthesis of styles. They are, in all respects sites of *otherness*.

The last word on The Church of Our Lady of Our Lady of the Assumption goes to Lady Sidmouth:

I shall never forget driving to Presteign [sic] to stay with friends in the winter of 1953. Francis had been out of the country for some-time & hadn't seen what progress had been made. Arriving late on a cold,frosty, night, we couldn't resist going to see the chapel. We couldn't believe our eyes - There was a full moon lighting up the

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<sup>312</sup> Email from Therese, Lady Sidmouth, 8th April 2012.

completed bell tower. We could see the oak door, which they had brought from their convent in Berkhamstead, in place. The building looked as though it had been there for centuries - it was hard not to weep tears of joy.<sup>313</sup>

Stanbrook Abbey in North Yorkshire, completed in 2010 for a community of Benedictines, brings the story of 'building nuns' up to date. The site, designed by Fielden Clegg Bradley Studios won a prestigious Civic Trust Award the following year - the twin virtues of simplicity and sustainability drew wide approval and the judges commended the design as 'an exemplar for new buildings within a rural setting'.<sup>314</sup>

As with The Church of our Lady of the Assumption, the opening of the monastery attracted the attention of the national press, not simply because of the award winning design but also because it offered a window onto the intensely private world of Benedictine nuns, a strictly enclosed order who rarely permit access to or venture beyond the confines of the monastery. The articles turned inevitably on the novelty of 'eco nuns' and much was made of the women's role in shaping the new convent.

The architect, Gill Smith of Fielden Clegg Bradley Studios, for example, revealed that the nuns had researched environmentally sustainable building methods and had even suggested some of the techniques employed by the

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid

<sup>314</sup> <http://www.fcbstudios.com/news.asp?n=452>

architects at Stanbrook.<sup>315</sup> Describing how the Sisters had trawled the internet for information, she remarked, with palpable surprise on how ‘clued up’ they were - the clear subtext being that these ultra-traditional innocents had emerged from the cloister, blinking in the light of a shiny twenty first-century techno-sphere. The nuns played along, posing gamely for the press with spades and hard hats, just as the ‘buildings nuns’ of Presteigne had, almost sixty years earlier (figure 6.8)



**Figure 6.8** Benedictine sisters during the building of the new Stanbrook Abbey. Source: The Guardian

## Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted parallels in the construction practices of women’s religious communities across a geographical range and time

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<sup>315</sup> In an interview with the Guardian the architect Gill Smith describes the creative relationship between the sisters and the architects, ‘Ideas for green features came from both sides...(the sisters) had done their research on the internet and there are techniques that we’ve used that we [the architects] were able to suggest’ Get thee to a nunnery, *The Guardian*, Mon 1<sup>st</sup> December 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/dec/01/catholicism-religion>

frame and between enclosed and active orders. Their reasons for designing, site-managing and building were invariably driven by a combination of economic constraints and charisma. In some communities the end product of labour provided the motivation to build.

That these practices were widespread is evidenced by the fact that building programmes such as these took place across the Catholic world. The Pious Disciples of the Divine Master, a female community founded in Rome in 1926 by Father James Alberione offer a clear example of this. The specific mission of the Pious Disciples was to produce art and architecture that illustrated and adorned the liturgy. Being among the very few women religious in the early twentieth century to receive semi-formal training in architecture, they were able to immerse themselves in every part of the creation of their churches<sup>316</sup> At The Church of the Divine Master in Alba completed in 1936 the sisters undertook some of the manual building work. One of the sisters recalled:

We, aspirants were brought to the site during the time of recreation which lasted for an hour or so. We were a group of about 60, between the ages of 15 and 18. Fr. Manera guided us in transporting the brick and passing them to the workers, part of the way with the cart, the rest on foot. The work was like a chain and if one stopped, we all stopped! ... At the beginning it was like sport for us, but then the bricks seemed heavier and we ran out of breath easily [...] when the church was finished it was said to us: "Look! The work of your hands now sings the glory of

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<sup>316</sup> Many of the sisters attended the school of Beata Angelico: an organ of the community (of the same name) founded in 1921 by Mons. Giuseppe Polvara, a priest, painter and architect.

God””. In the same way, the older Pauline brothers and sisters took up position at the large kilns to make and bake the bricks for the edifice.

Similarly, the building of the church and monastery of Christ the King at Cockfosters, North London (completed 1940) demonstrates a synergy between prayerful labour and sacred product; an act that echoes the devotional practice of producing ecclesiastical embroidery. The monastery was designed by Dom Constantine Boscchaerts, an Olivetan Benedictine monk from Belgium, for his community of nuns and monks. As with the Pious Disciples and other Liturgical Movement orders, one of the chief vocations of the community was the production of liturgical art and architecture. Unlike the Pious Disciples, the Olivetan Benedictines drew uncompromisingly on the Modern Movement. In 1948 *The Catholic Herald* records the aim of the Olivetans at Cockfosters as being :’To identify Benedictine monasticism today with progressiveness, as it was centuries ago, their means being what is most modern in art and architecture and lighting, their end being that we shall find God in a colourful building of noblest dimensions’.<sup>317</sup>

The building of the site, as at Presteigne, attracted the attention of the press, not least because of the spectacle of monks *and* nuns undertaking manual building - as with many monastic orders, in addition to the spiritual accent on work, the Rule did not permit the employment of paid labour. For some women religious, however, the spiritual focus was tightened simply on ‘lowly work’ for work’s sake, The Sisters of the Good Shepherd, for example, shared with the Poor Servants, an emphasis on prayer through

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<sup>317</sup> *The Catholic Herald*, 1948

work. Their first foundation in Angers, France (established in 1831) was built with the smallest resources and the sisters contributed directly to the construction as the annals record: 'The building of the church at the Good Shepherd was progressing thanks to the activity of the nuns, for all took part in the construction of the house of God...the nuns zeal acted as a stimulus to the workmen'<sup>318</sup>

A brief reference to a picture of St Euphrasia in a biography of Mother Pelletier, sheds important light on the theological significance of the church building programme at Angers. A sister expresses her approval on noticing that one of the penitents carried 'a little picture of St Euphrasia, occupied in erecting churches'.<sup>319</sup> St Euphrasia of Constantinople was the daughter of a Roman nobleman who, according to legend, chose a hermetic life rather than marry the Emperor Theodosius.<sup>320</sup> The form of mortification that she chose was to carry heavy stones from one place to another (figure 6.9). No hagiography that I have found suggests that this was done in the construction of churches - rather, the value of the exercise would seem to reside in its futility. The penitent referred to in Mother Pelletier's biography appears, however, to have drawn parallels between the church-building work being undertaken by all of the women at Angers and St Euphrasia's atonement -

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<sup>318</sup> Pasquier, *Life of Mother Mary of St Euphrasia*, p. 144

<sup>319</sup> A.M. Clarke, *Life of Revered Mother of St Euphrasia Pelletier, first Superior general of the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd of Angers*, London: Burnes and Oates Ltd, 1895 p. 62

<sup>320</sup> J. G. Shea, *Little pictorial lives of the saints : with reflections for every day in the year : compiled from "Butler's Lives" and other approved sources : to which are added lives of the American saints : placed on the calendar for the United States by special petition of the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore*, New York: Benziger Brothers, 1894 'If she found herself assaulted by any temptation, she immediately sought the advice of the abbess, who often enjoined her on such occasions some humbling and painful penitential labor; as sometimes to carry great stones from one place to another..'



an assumption that suggests that heavy construction work was regarded as a spiritually penitential activity within the GSS community.



**Figure 6.9** St Euphrasia depicted in J.D. Shea's 1894 Pictorial Lives of the Saints. Source: J. D. Shea, Pictorial Lives of the Saints

Not all of those who lived in convents and undertook building and repair work, however, would have embraced such activities with the 'zeal' that the Good Shepherd Sisters did. Lay women such as the penitent at Angers, were generally expected, alongside the nuns to perform unskilled tasks in the maintenance of convents. Mary Adams, who lived at St Marye's convent, Portslade, from the 1950s until the 1990s, recalls that: 'There were two little wooden summer houses in our grounds and I always had the job of red bricking the roof tiles and putting creosote on the wood of the inside and outside of the building.'<sup>321</sup>

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<sup>321</sup> M. Adams, *Those Lost Years*, Brighton QueenSpark Market Books, 1994 p. 34.

More generally she remembers the lay inmates regularly painting and decorating: 'We even did our own decorating...I was in charge of getting the paint and paint brushes ready.'<sup>322</sup>

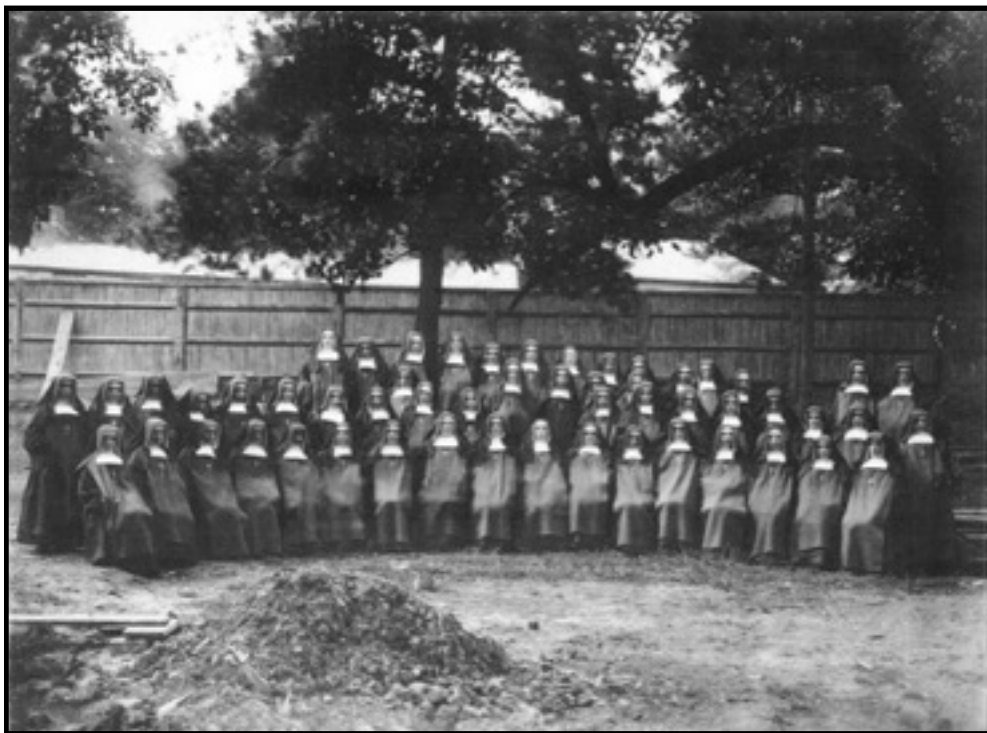
Mary's recollections of life at St Marye's were mixed. Though there was a strong sense of family which was comforting and provided protection for vulnerable women (some of whom, during this period, had learning disabilities and some who did not) the emphasis on hard work was often gruelling and difficult to understand without a very solid grasp of the theological rationale that lay behind. Indeed, the dark themes that the anonymous *Aetheneum* reviewer discerns in Millais's *The Vale of Rest* might have sounded some plangent tones with Mary Adams, too.

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<sup>322</sup> Adams, p. 28.

## Chapter 7

# GOD'S OTHER ARCHITECTS: CONVENTS AS NEW SPACES OF DISCOURSE



**Figure 7** Sisters of the Poor Servants of the Mother of God on the building site of St Mary's Convent, Roehampton. Source: National Archives

*'Our good God will not take us to account for being bad architects...although we must do our best when this becomes part of our duty.'*

Anonymous Sister of the Good Shepherd, 1872<sup>323</sup>

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<sup>323</sup> P. Hughes, 'Cleanliness and Godliness' p.164.

The architectural historian Stephen Welsh left an invaluable legacy to researchers of nineteenth-century Roman Catholic architecture. From the 1960s until his death in 1976 he documented the works of little known Roman Catholic architects, producing not only gazetteers of these works but a large archive of letters, notes, photographs and plans. Many of these related to convents (a number of which are no longer extant) and much of the information on buildings that was held in convent archives was shared via letters exchanged between Welsh and religious sisters before it became practice to allow academic researchers access to convent archives. After his death, his papers were donated to the RIBA archives and provide a vital resource for scholars of Roman Catholic architecture. It would have been almost impossible for me to have constructed a picture of Roman Catholic convents in the nineteenth century without this extraordinary collection.

Not only did these papers provide key information on the buildings, however, they were also valuable in laying bare the tendency on the part of historians to ignore or marginalise the contribution of women. The example provided in chapter 5 of the building of an infirmary wing at the Poor Clares Convent in Baddesley Clinton, illustrates this point. The following, quoted earlier, is from the letter written to Welsh by Sister Mary Paula in 1964 describing a disagreement between the sisters and the architect Thomas Turner in the 1880s: 'The design for the new infirmary (in the north wing) by Thomas Turner was never carried out. For some reason, he didn't prove satisfactory and they abandoned his plan and the abbess and the builder together designed the quarters now used for the infirmary'.<sup>324</sup> In his bio-

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<sup>324</sup> Stephen Welsh Papers, Notes on A.E. Purdie, File 178

graphical note on A.E. Purdie (one of the architects who worked on the Poor Clares Convent) Welsh sums up the building of the infirmary wing, thus: 'The North wing was erected in 1881-2, the builder William Gascoyne, carrying out the work to his own plans'<sup>325</sup>

Both Welsh and I read the letter from Sr Mary Paula and both of us drew different conclusions - though the letter clearly states that the builder *and* the abbess drew up plans, Welsh chose to ignore the contribution of the abbess, perhaps assuming that it was unlikely that she played any part in the design. Given the very significant role, outlined in this thesis, that women religious played in convent building, there seems no reason to doubt that Sr Paula's information was correct and that the abbess did, in fact, contribute to plans for the infirmary wing. Were I to be as free as Welsh in drawing inferences from Sr Paula's letter, I might say that the abbess's role in the design was likely to have been considerably more significant than the builder's.

Convent architecture has been overlooked by architectural historians and I suggest that it is for the very reason that this example illustrates; in complicating the design, women complicated the role of the architect, making it difficult to for historians to locate convents in the trajectory of an architect's oeuvre. Timothy Brittain-Catlin is one of the very few scholars to have looked at English convents and the problems outlined above are clearly present in his analysis of this building type. As he perceptively observes,

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<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

convents were the only revived medieval buildings that Pugin did not write about (despite the fact that he was so attached to monastic architecture that he built, at his own expense, a monastery attached to his home in Ramsgate). Brittain-Catlin suggests that, though Pugin himself never deviated from his insistence on reviving rather than inventing, his convents were seemingly at odds with this: though he professed to be a purist, he in fact experimented with 'ahistorical' forms in the design of his convents (and only his convents). I suggest that the reason Pugin did not write about convents was because his schemes were very often compromised and frustrated by the stipulations of the women for whom he designed them. Perhaps he pictured those that he had completed as architectural mutants - it is certainly the case that none were as faithful to his vision nor had the purity of form as his highly legible monasteries - a building typology that, in contrast to convents, the anthropologist Richard Irvine describes as an 'architecture of stability'.<sup>326</sup>

The convents of active communities are, by their very nature an architecture of instability: they are accretive, messy, and seemingly unreadable. In attempting to make sense of Pugin's perplexing convents, Timothy Brittain-Catlin laments the 'tendency on the part of historians to rely on architects' words rather than their buildings.'<sup>327</sup> Brittain-Catlin is right to challenge those who listen uncritically to the voice of the architect but how do we read

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<sup>326</sup> R. Irvine, 'The Architecture of Stability; Monasteries and the Architecture of Place in a World of Non-Places', *Etnofoor* Vol. 22 No. 2, 29-49. Irvine's work is concerned specifically with nineteenth and twentieth century male monasteries - much of his thesis is drawn from having spent a year with the monks at Downside Abbey.

<sup>327</sup> Brittain-Catlin, p. 371.

a building without the context that words provide? Perhaps the real failure of historians is that they have not been listening to enough voices.

### **Ordered spaces, separate spheres**

All histories are, of course, subjective but, as suggested in the introduction, architectural history has been especially ungenerous to women. How then do we enunciate women's role in design and construction?

Convents ranged in scale from the monumental purpose built sites at Bartestree to the utilitarian adaptations of standing architecture made by congregations such as the Poor Servants of the Mother of God. The building programmes sometimes involved celebrated architects such as the Pugins but more often local architects, whose names were never engraved in the canon. All of these projects, however, were activated by and engaged the labour of women; from commissioning, design and decoration to negotiating deals, hiring contractors, site-managing and manual building. This was unprecedented and unmatched between the years 1829 and 1939 - indeed, even today, very few women undertake such a diversity of construction roles in buildings that are designed for their exclusive use. But they were not, in any sense, feminist spaces.

In her novel, *Herland*, written in 1915, Charlotte Perkins Gilman imagined a world designed by women.<sup>328</sup> In Gilman's utopia, the absence of men has obviated gender distinctions and broken down hierarchies - all work together for the good of all, in a peaceful, equal society. Written into the premise, is Gilman's assumption that self-governing female communities were a fantasy but, in fact, micro-societies populated entirely by women existed in reality in the form of convents. The heterotopias that women religious created, however, conspicuously reproduced and reinforced the very power structures that Gilman and other first wave feminists fought against.

In convents, women religious enjoyed sufficient economic, administrative and creative freedom to shape spaces of their own choosing. What they used this liberty to create were highly ordered spaces and rigidly separate spheres - imaginary ones and real ones. They articulated this in the language of prescriptive ideology and in ways that unambiguously deferred to it and they continued to do so long after women in wider society had won the rights to own property, enter the professions, and vote.<sup>329</sup> But in submitting so conspicuously to separate spheres, they unintentionally distorted it and revealed its flaws.

Active women religious believed that other women were passive. They believed that other women belonged in the home, they believed that other women were placed on earth to procreate and they believed that it was

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<sup>328</sup> C. Gilman, *Herland*, New York, Dover Publications, 1998.

<sup>329</sup> The social attitudes of women religious began to shift after the war and were transformed by the modernising forces wrought by the Second Vatican Council. This has not been universally welcomed as indicated by a 2008 investigation by the Vatican into the increasing secularisation and influence of feminism in women's religious communities in the US. 'Vatican backs down and gives mild rebuke to American nuns', *The Guardian*, Tuesday 16th December, 2014.  
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/16/vatican-inquiry-american-nuns-mild-rebuke-pope>



their place to maintain and restore this order when it broke down. To do this, they incorporated within convents an architectural simulacra of domestic space that emphasised women's traditional roles and operated as a means of making themselves and other women meditate upon them. And yet, self-evidently, convents could never be family homes because the female religious community, no matter how much it recreated notions of family within its structures, explicitly rejected family life. These were women who chose not to marry and have children but to spend their lives with other women and to perform roles that separate spheres ideology had assigned to men.

In recent years the conceptual framework of separate spheres has been widely rejected in favour of a view that suggests that: firstly, there is a discrepancy between what women were exhorted to do and what they actually did and secondly, that there is an uneven chronology of changing attitudes towards the domestic that does not track the economic changes wrought by industrialization. This has problematized the notion that, beyond prescriptive literature, the idealised 'angel in the home' had any greater social or cultural currency in the nineteenth century than in the seventeenth. The new discourses suggest that in reality more rather than fewer opportunities were available to women in the nineteenth century and that relatively few women felt themselves tethered to the private, domestic sphere - indeed the skills that enabled women religious to run convents (from managing investments and negotiating deals, to animal husbandry and machinery maintenance) were often those with which, as the daughters of farmers, tradesman, shopkeepers and so on, they were already equipped before entering the convent.

We may suppose, then, that women in wider Victorian society did not, as Amanda Vickery rightly suggests, uniformly live their lives according to a set of Ruskinian separate spheres principles but we may need to further interrogate the reasons why. Can we assume that this was because they chose not to or do we have to consider the possibility that they embraced it in theory and had to rationalise reasons for failing to live according to it? It is clear that a very large number of Roman Catholic and Anglican women from a cross-section of English life, acquired and applied typically masculine skills in the running of convents whilst at the same time, fully subscribing to the principles which urged them against doing so. In the case of active women religious, separate spheres ideology did not fit their lives but far from rejecting it, they wrote it into the paradoxes that defined their overarching spirituality and made sure that they rolled it out in the operation of their vocations.

Could they have done otherwise? It is clear that the umbrella under which they functioned - the institutional Catholic Church - was theologically and culturally committed to separate spheres but there were no specific instructions to women religious on how to shape their Rule or their architecture - those that were papally endorsed, in particular, had a great deal of latitude. The idea of segregating women to the extent that was stipulated in the GSS Rule, for example, can be attributed entirely to the foundress of the order, Mother Pelletier. Similarly, the decision by Frances Taylor to incorporate refuge work loosely based on the GSS model was her own and the Common Rules relating to this were certainly written by her. The layout of the chapel at St Michael's, Waterlooville as we have seen, was the idea of the

nuns, drawn from an example they had seen at Dalbeth; they were given the authority by the Bishop to look for whatever design suited them.

There were exceptions of course. Cornelia Connelly consciously chose religious over family life and after doing so, appears to have resolved to never again capitulate to the demands of men. She did not choose to found magdalen institutions but instead established schools that followed her own curriculum - one that had the express aim of improving the quality of female education. She encouraged the sisters to work, learn, meditate and write and her communities, though certainly not democratic in structure, are perhaps a little closer to Gilman's utopian vision than those of the refuge orders.<sup>330</sup>

### **Masculine and Feminine**

Though we might not be able to read convents as feminist spaces can we read them as a 'female' architecture? In her analysis of Anglican convents, Susan Mumm considers the gendered tensions in Victorian religious space and suggests that there is a peculiar relationship between the Gothic style and convent architecture, 'No one seems to have considered the irony of these all-women organizations choosing the Gothic, a style that was

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<sup>330</sup> It is interesting to note, however, that, according to Judith Lancaster, Cornelia Connelly was a personal friend of Coventry Patmore. J. Lancaster, *Cornelia Connelly and her Interpreters*. Oxford, Way Books, 2004.

praised by Victorian architects and artists for its 'manliness'.<sup>331</sup> Her observation, which contrasts with Rosemary Hill's reading of one Gothic convent, St Mary's, Handsworth as 'a cheerful, pretty building, feminine in scale yet robust' begs the question whether it is possible (or legitimate) to consider architecture or architectural vocabularies as gendered and if so, how we might read the design of convents through this lens.

Gender metaphors no longer feature prominently in the language of architectural scholarship but the notion of buildings as 'masculine' and 'feminine' underpinned critical readings until the early twentieth century.<sup>332</sup> Gothic was often regarded by Victorian architects and critics as 'masculine' in contrast to the 'feminine' qualities of Classicism. Beresford Hope, for example, described the two in terms that, though veiled, leave the reader in no doubt about the gender of Classical and Gothic architecture, 'Classical architecture is horizontal, Gothic architecture is vertical; Classical is an architecture of superposition, Gothic of germination and continuity.'<sup>333</sup> Ruskin also underscored the contrast between the masculine Gothic and the feminine Classical suggesting that, 'the root of all that is greatest in Christian art is struck in the thirteenth century...that the temper of that century is the life-blood of all manly work thenceforward..'.<sup>334</sup> Similarly, William Burges notes that Gothic (especially early French Gothic) was characterized by "boldness, breadth,

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<sup>331</sup> S. Mumm, 'Making Space, Taking Space' p. 2.

<sup>332</sup> A. Forty, 'Masculine, Feminine or Neuter?' in Ruedi, K., Wogglesworth, S. and McCorquodale, D. (eds.) *Desiring Practices: Architecture Gender and the Interdisciplinary*, London, Black Dog Publishing, 1996.

<sup>333</sup> Quoted in C. Wainwright, 'The legacy of the nineteenth-century' in P. Greenhalgh (ed.) *Modernism in Design*, London, Reaktion, 1990, p 34.

<sup>334</sup> J. Ruskin, *The Stones of Venice in Three Volumes* (Vol. 2), London, J.M. Dent and Sons, 1925 p. 242.

strength, sternness, and virility'.<sup>335</sup> Where Anglican architecture began to depart from Gothic from the early twentieth century, it revealed gendered and queered fault lines. David Hilliard suggests that, as a particular 'camp' strand emerged in Anglo-catholicism in the early to mid-twentieth century, churches were increasingly fitted out with classical and baroque interiors.<sup>336</sup>

Though, as discussed in chapter 5, much was made among Protestants of the effeminacy of High Anglican and Roman Catholic aesthetics, scholars such as Lori Miller and Anhuradha Chatterjee suggest that, ironically, 'muscular christianity' found its earliest expression in Tractarianism, a movement which sought to revive the ritualism and ceremony of the medieval liturgy and exerted a powerful influence over the emergence of the Gothic style.<sup>337</sup>

Masculinity assumed a different significance in ritualistic worship to that of other Christian denominations. This is not to say that the organisation of the Protestant Church allowed for greater female authority but that the sacerdotal structure of the Roman Catholic and Tractarian churches bestowed sacred qualities on, if not manliness, then certainly the 'male'. The concept of the priest acting 'in persona christi' or in the person of Christ - a theologically complex moment in which the priest both communes with and is inhabited by the physical presence of Christ - meant that the sanctuary was an exclusively male space. Moreover, the presence

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<sup>335</sup> Quoted G. Stamp, 'How is it that there is no modern style of architecture? 'Greek' Thomson versus Gilbert Scott', in Hvattum, M. and Hermanson, C., (eds.) *Tracing Modernity: Manifestations of the Modern in Architecture and the City*, London, Routledge, 2004. p. 107

<sup>336</sup> D. Hilliard, 'Unenglish and Unmanly: Anglo-Catholicism and Homosexuality' *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Winter, 1982, pp. 181-210.

<sup>337</sup> L. Miller, 'The (re)gendering of High-Anglicanism', in A. Bradstock, (ed.) *Masculinity and Spirituality in Victorian Culture*, New York, St Martins Press, 2000. A. Chatterjee, 'Ruskin and the female body: the feminine as the theoretical precondition for architecture', *Fabrications: The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand*, Vol., 19, Issue 1, 2009.

of rood screens, separating the nave from chancel, was meant to convey the distinction between the transcendent and immanent and emphasised the division between lay and clergy. The devotional, liturgical and organisational model of the Roman and Anglo-Catholic churches then was paternalistic and patriarchal in the broadest sense and a marked reaction to the democratisation of worship that characterised the evangelical church.

Importantly, however, masculine attributes were not the preserve of men and could apply with ease to women. In his study of Victorian Christianity and masculinity Norman Vance suggests: 'manliness... generally embraced all that was best and most vigorous in man, which might include women as well. The Reverend S. Pugh holds up the example of Christ and St Paul who combined the virtues of both sexes in their manly energy and gentleness.'<sup>338</sup>

Further evidence of the fluid nature of gender and virtue in Victorian theology, is the tradition of nuns choosing male religious names. This was (and continues to be) a widespread practice that raises questions over whether it reflects a culturally specific version of masculinity within female religious communities. Certainly it is the case that sisters frequently praised the masculine virtues of their foundresses; one anonymous biographer of Cornelia Connelly, for example, commented that, 'Though there was nothing masculine about her manner or ways her judgment was sound and her power of reasoning swift and clear as that of any man.'<sup>339</sup>

This notion of gendered attributes echoes those expressed by Ruskin in *Sesame and Lilies* and is perhaps further evidence that 'separate spheres' ideology had significant currency within the convent. It seems less likely,

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<sup>338</sup> N. Vance, *The Sinews of the Spirit: The ideal of Christian Manliness in Victorian Literature and Religious Thought*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

<sup>339</sup> Anonymous, *The Life of Cornelia Connelly, 1809-1879* p. 250.

however, that women religious had a clear idea of the masculinity of Gothic as an architectural style or if they did, that they considered it in any way inconsistent that they should employ it in their buildings rather than the 'feminine' Classical style. I suggest that Rosemary Hill's reading of the architecture of St Mary's as 'feminine' is problematic. At a fundamental level, the fact that Handsworth was, like all convents, designed for the exclusive use of women indicates that gender was a significant factor in the design brief - the provision and location of washrooms and the centrality of laundries and sewing rooms varies from male monastic buildings and signals gender differences. But to explore this question in a meaningful way, it is important to acknowledge that, though architecture was perceived as 'masculine' and 'feminine', gendered characteristics in Victorian religious culture could transcend the boundaries of biological sex. This meant that a building that was perceived as 'masculine' would be suited to any function that had masculine properties (in the case of convents; industry, learning, labour and prayer) regardless of whether these functions were operated by men or women. Moreover, the characteristics of 'masculine' and 'feminine' were not necessarily the same as contemporary ones. Thus, although we can reasonably infer from Rosemary Hill's reading of Handsworth as 'a cheerful, pretty building, feminine in scale yet robust' that she refers to a male **and** female hand, it might be just as fair to say that the femininity is reflected in Pugin's decoration and the robustness in McAuley's rational plan, as the other way round.

Hill's reading of Handsworth reminds us that gender, however problematic, continues to have currency as an organising principle in architectural histories. As Adrian Forty suggests: 'Even if gender metaphors are no longer a normal part of the language of criticism, gender distinctions still apparently structure our thought processes. The absence of the metaphor

does not mean that the distinction has ceased to exist.<sup>340</sup> We might say then, that although Susan Mumm's observation about the relationship between nuns and Gothic is pertinent and deserves consideration, it would seem ultimately, to raise more questions about the difficulty of reading architectures as 'male and 'female' than it reveals about the nature of convents.

For all of the reasons explored above, convent architecture *seems* to defy a comprehensive or over-arching application of critical approaches. We cannot read convents as a 'female' architecture and nor can we make a feminist reading of a space that tells us in the most certain terms that it opposes the social emancipation of women. Though we can certainly apply Foucauldian discourses on discipline or Bourdieu's interpretation of habitus to a reading of magdalen institutions, can we also apply them to Cornelia Connelly's Mayfield? If we consider Foucault's description of heterotopias as places in which '...all the other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted', then convents, in their synthetic reproduction of different social worlds, might certainly be read as heterotopias. And in the accretive and collective ways in which the architecture emerges we cannot consider them anything other than socially produced spaces.<sup>341</sup> But does this, ultimately, enable us to understand them? And if we were to finally conclude that these spaces are too diverse to be considered a building type it would miss the fact that they are bound together by the enormous and unique bearing that women's spir-

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<sup>340</sup> Forty, p. 153.

<sup>341</sup> M. Foucault, "Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias." *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (1984): 46-49. In *The Spiritual City: theology, spirituality and the urban, the religious historian*, Phillip Sheldrake makes a case for considering monasteries as heterotopias despite Foucault...



ity made on all convents. We must, therefore, read them as a typology and we might do so most effectively through the lens of theology

## **Theology**

The particular charism and vocations of a community are clearly legible in the architecture of their convents. As this thesis has described, we might reasonably conclude, for example, that a site that included laundries, packing and ironing rooms and large dormitories was built by a magdalen order such as the Good Shepherds and The Sisters of Our Lady of Charity. Similarly, we would expect to see school rooms in or attached to the convents of teaching orders such as the Society of the Sacred Heart or the Society of the Holy Child Jesus. We might even be able to infer something of the cultural background of an order from the architecture of their convents - we might, for example, expect to see recurring Sacred Heart motifs in those with a Counter-Reformation heritage or in later nineteenth and twentieth century convents we might see French or Italian architectural influences which hint at the roots of a particular community. These features help us to identify, describe and classify sites but they do not allow a deep understanding of them because women's religious communities were more than the activities that they performed and the nations from which they emerged.

I suggest that to understand convents, we must read them as a collection of deliberately contradictory spaces because the spirituality of nineteenth and twentieth century women religious (both active and enclosed) was planted in mystic traditions that embraced paradox. Mystic spirituality was articulated very clearly in the production of material and visual culture in the convent but reading space as an expression of personal interiority is a challenge; the private, internal world, in all logical senses, is just that.

For William Lethaby, writing in 1892, the expression of mysticism in architecture comprised a 'symbolism that was comprehensible by the great majority of spectators'.<sup>342</sup> Though the symbolism in convent architecture was purposeful it was certainly not 'comprehensible to the great majority of spectators'. Even those charged with creating the convent struggled to understand it, as the example of George Goldie's failure to correctly juxtapose a processional cloister with an industrial laundry demonstrates. The chief problem was that the convent was not the 'temple' that Lethaby describes: it was not a formal place of worship and did not, therefore, contain a set of recognisable or legible liturgical features. And yet it was a profoundly religious space in which a different but no less important form of devotion took place; the paradoxical prayer that Ignatians describe as 'contemplative in action'.

To be contemplative in action required spaces that acknowledged and permitted it. Hence, industrial spaces could be places of prayer as much as the oratory - in the laundry or work room, women physically engaged with the public, material world whilst at the same time inhabiting a private, interior one. In the fan-shaped chapel, all could be present in the same space en-

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<sup>342</sup> W. Lethaby *Architecture, Mysticism and Myth*, New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2004, p. 7.

gaging in the same activity, whilst under different roofs: each group knew that the other was there but were able to willingly suspend their disbelief in just the same way that Frances Taylor asked the SMG sisters to visually shut out a penitent if she happened to pass her. It was not only in the magdalen institution that the imaginary was brought into play with real spaces, as the example of *Mater Admirabilis* illustrates: if a human supervisor could not be present, a divine one could be conjured on the wall to watch over nuns at their embroidery. And this miraculous supervisor could be reproduced full-size in convents across the world to supervise and guide women religious and school children in their work. These images were not simply symbolic - as with Transubstantiation, a miraculous image could assume living properties.

Though they might reflect elements of it, the convents of apostolic sisters were not the product of separate spheres ideology but neither are they expressions of proto-feminism; they were not liturgical spaces and were not constrained by the theology of the institutional Roman Catholic Church; they were not articulations of medievalism anymore than they were poster-architecture for the Counter Reformation style. It was the tightly bound relationship between interior spirituality and active vocations that shaped this architecture. They were simultaneously different combinations of traditional and modern; institutional and domestic; private and public; emancipatory and oppressive; Gothic and Roman; sacred and profane. And in this respect, they were expressions of a complex, paradoxical and distinctively female theology. As suggested in chapter 5, we might use the space and material culture of women religious as a new way of understanding the narratives of mysticism. That, as Grace Jantzen rightly argues, mysticism re-

treated into the private sphere in the nineteenth century does not mean that it ceased to be a productive and enabling spirituality for women. Indeed, the fact that women found new ways of influencing formal Roman Catholic theology (which was increasingly feminised throughout the nineteenth century) and disseminating their own vernacular spiritualities in their parish work, demonstrates its potency.

Very far from the architectural stability of monasteries, convents were a dynamic architecture that were rarely (if ever) complete and were never the product of one vision - they constantly adapted to the changing needs (and often changing vocations) of the community. Moreover, the fact that humility was fundamental to the spirituality of all women religious meant that most of the designs, additions and adaptations that were directed or undertaken by women were done so anonymously. In this way the convents of active women might be considered an uncompromised expression of socially produced space. This makes the task of celebrating individuals extremely difficult - how do we go about identifying these women if humility dictates that they would rather not be identified? Indeed, might this art and architecture, in fact, lose its authenticity when the veil is lifted?

The complexity of these spaces has, as outlined here, made them difficult to understand as a typology. This has had significant implications for the protection of convents as, in planning policy, they exist in a liminal space; being simultaneously none and both of all of the categories listed above means that it has been difficult to place them. They do not have ecclesiastical exemption because they are not places of worship but neither can they be regarded simply as residential buildings. Moreover, the fact that they are extra-diocesan means that they rarely fall within the purview of surveys of

religious architecture. The legacy of this typological uncertainty is that convents are significantly under-represented in the statutory list and, as sites which are often difficult to re-purpose, have become particularly vulnerable to demolition.

### **Modernity and beyond**

The directives issued by both the Second Vatican Council in 1963 and The Decree of Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life in 1965, gradually transformed the lives of women religious and those in the lay community to whom they ministered. Among the new decrees, women religious were directed to:

The manner of living, praying and working should be suitably adapted everywhere, but especially in mission territories, to the modern physical and psychological circumstances of the members and also, as required by the nature of each institute, to the necessities of the apostolate, the demands of culture, and social and economic circumstances.<sup>343</sup>

This injunction, combined with increasing interventions by the state in the provision of social care, health, safety and fire regulations and disability ac-

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<sup>343</sup>[http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_decree\\_19651028\\_perfectae-caritatis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_perfectae-caritatis_en.html)

cess, altered the fabric of historic convents in significant ways. In addition, the decreasing emphasis on monasticism in active convents meant that social relations between the sisters gradually changed which impacted on the organisation of space. The changes wrought by these social and theological shifts can be seen clearly in the alterations at the SMG convent of St Marye's, Portslade that took place from the 1960s onwards. The lay women's dormitories were subdivided and turned into rooms that accommodated one or two residents and eventually incorporated private bathrooms. Lifts and ground floor bathrooms were added to improve access for the disabled and a TV lounge for the nuns was created.

Such interventions are often problematic. In a dispute that echoes that at Mayfield between E.W. Pugin, George Goldie and Cornelia Connelly, some 150 years earlier, at St Mary's Mercy convent in Handsworth, an application to remove one of Pugin's original staircases in order to accommodate a lift was initially opposed by English Heritage. After much negotiation, the staircase was finally taken out and stored (at some expense to the sisters) off site.

Despite a similar recruitment decline in men's orders, the post-war years saw a number of significant monastic building projects in the UK. At Worth Abbey in Sussex, the liturgically radical Church of Our Lady of Help was designed by Frances Pollen (who also, in 1972, designed the octagonal library for the Monks at Downside). At Douai Abbey, Michael Blee's bold completion in 1988 of Arnold Crush's traditional abbey church (left incomplete in 1933), Frederick Gibberd's 1963 cloisters and residential blocks and David Richmond's RIBA award winning library comprise a set piece of

late twentieth century modern architecture.<sup>344</sup> Perhaps the most architecturally and theologically significant monastic site of the late twentieth century, however, was Gillepsie Kidd and Coia's St Peter's Seminary in Cardross, completed in 1966. The seminary was a direct response to Le Corbusier's highly influential 1959 Couvent Sainte-Marie de La Tourette in Lyons - a building that captured the atheist Corbusier's quasi-mystical vision of space, interiority and ineffability. As he expressed it:

'Into my work I bring so much effusion and intense inner life that it becomes something almost religious...a desire that one occasionally has to extend beyond oneself, and to seek contact with the unknown'<sup>345</sup>

In practical terms St Peter's Seminary, Cardross was not a success - it closed in 1980, just 14 years after it was completed. As an articulation of the spatial and spiritual themes that Corbusier explores at La Tourette, however, it is unmatched in Britain. A final, perhaps fitting twist is that the future of the seminary seems tied to its failures - recent plans proposed by the public arts organisation NVA and the architects Avanti and Nord, and ERZ include preserving some parts of the site as ruins. As the architecture critic, Rowan Moore notes: 'Farquhar and his team are not proposing the complete restoration of the original design, but its stabilisation and restitution in various degrees of ruined-ness. This is both practical and true to the

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<sup>344</sup> A. Powers and K. Jordan 'Monasteries, Convents and other Sacred Spaces', notes accompanying Twentieth Century Society Event, July, 2014.

<sup>345</sup> Denis McNamara discusses the relationship between Le Corbusier and Fr Marie-Alain Courturier O.P who commissioned Corbusier to design the monastery and described the significance of Corbusier's versions of spirituality on the specifications for the site. D. McNamara, 'Almost Religious: Couturier, Le Courbusier and the Monastery of La Tourette', *Journal of the Institute for Sacred Architecture*, Summer 1999 [http://www.sacredarchitecture.org/articles/almost\\_religious\\_couturier\\_lecorbusier\\_and\\_the\\_monastery\\_of\\_la\\_tourette/](http://www.sacredarchitecture.org/articles/almost_religious_couturier_lecorbusier_and_the_monastery_of_la_tourette/)

tempestuous spirit of the place.<sup>346</sup> As we have seen, the above approach is not entirely pioneering: indeed the incorporation of monastic ruins within a dynamic, functioning building has, as described in chapter 2, a precedent at Mayfield.

The trend of declining numbers amongst women religious appears, however, to be in reverse. Figures released by the Bishops Conference National Office of Vocation in 2015 indicate that the numbers of women entering religious life is now at a 25 year high. While it is not clear what the factors are that account for this, Fr Christopher Jamieson, Director of the National Office of Vocation suggests that it may be attributable to religious communities developing a 'clearer identity'.<sup>347</sup> The life that appears to have been breathed into these communities is reflected in a number of new developments that seek to bring monastic spirituality into the twenty-first century.<sup>348</sup> Austen-Smith Lord's Carmelite monastery in Liverpool, completed in 2014 comprises a range of simple brick buildings that echo traditional monastic plans and structures. According to the architects: 'The layout embodies the daily cycle of prayer, manual labour, communal mealtimes and private reflection. The design is a modern interpretation of the monastic tradition. Silence and light articulates the architecture which is calm, ordered and uplifting.'<sup>349</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/jan/17/st-peters-seminary-glasgow-second-coming-for-scotlands-modernist-masterpiece>

<sup>347</sup> <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2015/04/23/women-entering-religious-life-in-england-and-wales-at-25-year-high/>

<sup>348</sup> It is interesting to note that the most architecturally significant building programmes have been those for enclosed rather than active communities

<sup>349</sup> <http://www.austinsmithlord.com/projects/carmelite-monastery/>



It is at Stanbrook Abbey, however, a site that owes almost a great debt to La Tourette as St Peter's, Cardross, that the synthesis between tradition and progress in twenty-first century convent architecture is truly animated, as the following review by the architectural historian Flora Samuel, in *Architecture Today* captures:

And this is one of the reasons Stanbrook Abbey is so intriguing, and why it could be said to invite comparison with Le Corbusier's La Tourette, because it expresses something very fundamental about the tensions and potential of monastic existence in the twenty-first century...The cells almost inevitably feel like a quotation of those at La Tourette, but without the masochism. The same muted tones and warm materials as appear in the corridor continue the feeling of hush. No mirrors are allowed in the convent so they cannot be used to magnify the space inside each tiny en-suite bathroom. Instead a vertical clear glass panel opens up into the cell giving the nuns a view of the landscape as they carry out their ablutions. I found this panel vaguely shocking as it leaves the inhabitant of the bathroom exposed in a manner that many of us might feel uncomfortable with, let alone a nun. Yet there is something very intriguing in linking the landscape with the act of washing in this way. Nuns' cells are not designed to have visitors, certainly no children, so the architects were able to bypass standard building regulations to create the most minimal of wire enclosures on each balcony. In this way the cell is open to the extreme beauty of the vista beyond. With its dignified presence this building focuses attention on the passage of time, the movements of the sun, the

colours of the landscape and the sound of the wind. Together with the nuns, who had much to say on the development of their abbey, FCBS has achieved something remarkable here, a truly sustainable building, one that recognises the preciousness of natural resources and the sensitive balance of the life within.<sup>350</sup>

Though it is not Samuel's reading of the space, the 'life within' might just as easily refer to the inner spiritual world of the nuns as to the interior of the building. At first glance it would seem difficult to reconcile the Corbusian interpretation of spiritual space at Stanbrook with E.W. Pugin's articulation of the same, at the abbey's vast Gothic predecessor and namesake - the surface language of the two has almost nothing in common. And yet the mystic, contemplative spirituality of the nuns provides a thread that binds them together. Tracing the impact of monastic spirituality on architecture beyond the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and into the modern and postmodern era might yield valuable insights into the themes that underpin this thesis.

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<sup>350</sup> Samuel, F. 'Fielden, Clegg Bradley Studios: Stanbrook Abbey, Wass, North Yorkshire' *Architecture Today*, 2/11/09 <http://www.architecturetoday.co.uk/?p=1475> Interesting comparisons might also be made between Stanbrook and Gillespie, Kidd and Coia's St Peter's Seminary in Cardross - neither sites were built for women.

## Postscript

The title of this chapter plays with Rosemary Hill's 2007 biography *God's Architect: Pugin and the Building of Romantic Britain*. I have given some considerable thought, throughout the course of my research, to whether the God of Victorian Roman Catholics would have appointed Pugin his architect. Pugin was a man driven by a desire to extinguish what he regarded as blasphemous 'paganism' in ecclesiastical buildings and to set out a new (or at least revived) set of principles. He was, as Hill describes, impassioned, hubristic and unswerving in his convictions and when he was compelled to compromise, he seems to have done so with rather bad grace. His liturgical architecture was dogmatically faithful to medieval precedents, even when it clashed with the prevailing Roman Catholic theology and impeded the performance of the most commonly conducted rites. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that Pugin answered first and foremost to his calling as an architect

Another set of architects who might make a claim to the title are those who have been described in this thesis; architects of otherness who created spaces of otherness that were meant to serve God above and beyond all else - for whom architecture was but one of many duties performed in the service of a higher calling.

## EPILOGUE

In the years since my visit to St Marye's convent in Roehampton, I have found much to say and write about the architecture of convents but it took me some time to understand them.

During a visit to the SMG archives in 2011, I came across an obituary of Sr Mary John Southworth, whose oil painting of Mary Magdalene I had been shown on my visit to Roehampton, some months earlier. It is, like the painting, unassuming; a short history of a humble life. Sr Mary Southworth did not have the obvious leadership skills of Catherine McAuley - she did not found an order, write a Rule or commission building programmes. Nor did she have the force of personality, charisma and vision of Cornelia Connelly. She did not produce architectural plans, negotiate with famous architects or build convents with her own hands. And while she was both talented and profoundly spiritual, she did not produce any miraculous paintings. But her quiet, gracious life, earnestly captured by an anonymous sister in the snapshot that follows, tells us a great deal about the ordinary women who made convents, how they did it and why.

I leave the last words of this thesis, then, to the anonymous biographer of Sr Mary John Southworth;

**Sister M. John Southworth (Helen Richardson) 1904-2001**

Sister M Southworth lived a long and useful life as an SMG and was respected and known by many in her lifetime. She was a great artist and many of her paintings are to be found in SMG houses notably in St Mary's Streatham.

Sr M Southworth spent many years in St Mary's Streatham also engaged in repairing statues in many of our houses. She was excellent at painting banners - the most important being that of St Mary Magdalen, specially painted for the Profession ceremonies in Maryfield. She also did great work renovating statues in a very professional manner. Her expert work in altar cloths, vestments, tabernacle curtains can be seen right to this day....One Sister writes: "Sr Mary Southworth was an artist and a very suffering person. She always did the dining room for St Patrick's Day and was gentle and gifted".

Sr Mary Hickey remembered that has she was always 'herself' at visitation time and on one occasion she danced for "Mother" a beautifully graced passage from some ballet. Mary remembered this with much appreciation.

Another sister writes: "It was a great privilege to have known and lived with Mary Southworth in her latter years in Streatham. Sister was such a gifted and deeply spiritual person, which she often expressed in her paintings. . . . one very special occasion was her dream of the knocking down of the Berlin Wall (this is on display in St Mary's to this day among many others)"

What a legacy she has left us! The staff had a great love for Sister Southworth and some frequently reminded us that she was a saint. She was very austere with herself, and lived quite an ascetic life. . . . She had a deep love for and trust in God and spent many hours in front of the Blessed Sacrament. I was always impressed by her devotion to the Eucharist and the hours she spent in prayer especially on the first Friday and during the Holy Thursday adoration of the Altar of Repose. She would often be seen coming from English Martyr's Church obviously very cold having prayed for a very long time. . . . Sister too enjoyed life and loved to go for a tea and musical recitals when she was more mobile. Classic FM was her constant companion during her latter years. Sister herself was a great musician and played the organ and piano with great gusto. My memories of Sr Southworth are of a very noble, straight and just person with wonderful gifts which she used to praise God.<sup>351</sup>

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<sup>351</sup> SMG Archive ref II/H/2 'A.M.D.G. The Poor Servants of the Mother of God. Necrology. Book VII, 2000-2005 (for community use only), (2007)' pp. 60-61

## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1

J'y meditais silencieuse, regardant avec emotion les saintes murailles de ce lieu ou la Très Sainte Vierge avait prononce l'Ecce ancilla Domini, quand une lumière de grace eclaira soudain les paroles sacrees; je repetais cet Ecce ancilla. Il me semblait que j'etais la, présente au grande mystère de l'incarnation: 'Vous avez été servante de Dieu, dis-je a la Très Sainte Vierge, me voulez-vous être la votre jusqu'a la mort? Je fis sur ces mystères de longues meditations, jouant le role de la petite servante. J'en conclus que Marie, qui avait elle-meme dicte a Manreze les Exercices de Saint Ignace, m'avait aussi inspire d'entrer la dans une intime union a tous les mystères de sa sainte vie.

### APPENDIX 2

Depuis notre visite a Mater Admirabilis, son culte n'a fait que s'etendre; sa gloire est allé de la mer jusqu'a la mer, et du fleuve jusqu'aux extremités de la terre.

### APPENDIX 3

Il a eu l'heureuse idée d'y appliquer le style roman di XII siècle....Le style roman convient surtout aux monastères par sa noble et grave physionomie; il va bien a l'austérité du cloitre par son calme doux et mystique.

## APPENDIX 4

'The primary idea was that each house should have some industrial work by which the members living therein should be supported wholly or in part, while labouring among the poor, but experience proved this plan to be unfeasible. The employments by which religious women can gain their bread and the bread of the poor are not numerous, and it was found that laundry work was the best occupation for the purpose that could be found. And laundry work is carried on to the best advantage in a country place and on a large scale. So by degrees the community acquired land at Roehampton and in time a large steam laundry was erected. It was another 'white day' when in May, 1878 the Bishop of Southwark, (the late lamented Dr. Dannell) came to bless this building and was met by Father Jones S. J. (then Provincial) Father Porter, several other Jesuit Fathers, Lady Georgiana and Mr. Fullerton and a few other friends. The Bishop gave Benediction in the chapel and afterwards, with Father Jones went among the novices with those bright and gracious words that leave great, pleasant memories in a religious house. And Lady Georgiana was with them beaming with delight.'

'Memories of the Early Days by Sr Mary Katherine' n.d. [post-1884] (ref SMG Archive ref C.D.11)



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