

St Edmund's College Chapel

1853~2003



An abridged version of the historical guide to the Chapel written in 1977 by the late Fr Michael Garvey, former Headmaster and an expert on the Chapel

Bishop Thomas Griffiths

Received into the Church as a boy, Thomas Griffiths walked barefoot to Mass after his father tried to prevent him by removing his footwear. He was the first bishop of modern times to be educated wholly in England. He came to St Edmund's – into Rudiments – in 1805. Thirteen years later, at the age of just 27, he was President of the College. For the previous ten years the College had been in dire straits, both financially and in general discipline, but during Dr Griffiths' presidency such improvements took place in these affairs as to justify his title as a second founder of the College.

As bishop of the London District he was renowned for his simplicity of life and exceptional sanctity. He maintained his close connection with the College, and was determined to build a chapel worthy of the College's place in Catholic England. In

1844 he commissioned Augustus Welby Pugin to draw up the plans, scraping together the money to build the Chapel. The building work began in 1846, but both Bishop Griffiths and Pugin died before it was completed. The main Chapel building was not finished until 1853 when it was consecrated by Cardinal Wiseman.

Cloister

The Chapel is approached through a small cloister, known as Monument Lane, in which there are a number of graves and memorials. The most noteworthy graves are those of the Vicars Apostolic, of whom no less than six are buried in this cloister and two elsewhere in the Chapel. These were the bishops who watched over the Church in this country when the Catholic religion was still outlawed. They led hard lives, undistinguished in the sight of men, and they were devoted to holding fast to the faith and preparing English Catholicism for the expansion that was to come. The memorials on the walls commemorate Edmundians, most of whom are not buried in the College chapel.

Ante-chapel

Entering the door you step from the cloister into the south transept and ante-chapel. In fact, the roof of the ante-chapel is only 56 feet above the floor, but such is the harmony of Pugin's design that the effect is one of lofty spaciousness.

An original feature of the ante-chapel is the set of Stations of the Cross. These were given by Mgr Fenton, a past President, in 1898, and were designed to fill the west wall. The stations are painted on mahogany panels and are framed in an alabaster setting.

Griffiths Chantry

In the south transept is the Griffiths Chantry or St Thomas's Chapel. Bishop Griffiths died in 1847 while the Church which he had founded was still being built. It was determined that he should rest beneath a fitting monument in his chapel, and Pugin was invited to design a chapel and tomb. At this time, it was intended to have a Lady Chapel in the south transept, and accordingly Pugin designed a Lady Chapel in which statues of St Thomas would be incorporated as a memorial to Bishop Griffiths.

By the time the Chapel was built it had been decided to have the Lady Chapel elsewhere, and Pugin's design was modified so that the chapel would be dedicated to St Thomas. Below the altar are two bas-reliefs depicting the Annunciation - the only remnant of the original intended use.

Rood Screen

The Rood Screen may justly be regarded as the principal feature of the chapel. Thought to be the most beautiful work of its kind and time when it was built, it still stands as a monument to all that was best in the Gothic revival of the nineteenth century. A double screen of seven graceful arches, built of Caen stone, it is supported on slender pillars. Between the arches are six finely-carved quatre-foil medallions representing scenes from the life of our Lady – the Betrothal, the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Nativity, the Presentation of Our Lord and the Coronation. Above is an open parapet of trefoiled lights, surmounted by quatre-foils.

The great Rood is of carved Riga oak with a painted pinewood figure of Our Lord. At the extremities of the Rood are the emblems of the four Evangelists; on the reverse side are the emblems of four Doctors of the Church.

The Rood is approached from within the chapel by a spiral staircase. There is also an outside approach – the Ward staircase – so called after Dr W G Ward, Professor of Theology in the middle of the nineteenth century, who presented the original organ which was placed on the screen. Beneath and within the screen are two altars, dedicated now to Saints Peter and Paul.

The Gothic Reliquary, which now stands between the Galilee doors, was presented in 1911. It was thought to have been designed originally by Pugin for Cardinal Wiseman. Amongst the relics contained here, the English martyrs Saint John Southworth, Saint Philip Howard and the Irish saint Oliver Plunket are perhaps the most revered.

Choir

Eighty feet by thirty, the Choir is divided into five bays, in each of which there is a stained glass window of three lights on either side. The east end is dominated by a cast window above the altar, filling the east wall and interlaced with delicate tracery. On either side of the Choir are three rows of oak stalls, simply carved, the uppermost being surmounted by an impending canopy. The roof-beams have been left bare, except above the sanctuary where there is a painted ceiling.

Sanctuary

The High Altar is carved in white stone, set off by four slender marble pillars at the ends of the reredos. The altar itself is divided into three parts by carved stone pillars, each portion being decorated by carved bas-reliefs.

On the altar is a stone Tabernacle, with brass doors ornamented with crystal bosses. Above it is a pinnacled throne for the Blessed Sacrament. On the four pinnacles are angels; on the top of the throne is the Pelican, feeding her young with her own blood. At the back of the throne is a stone crucifix bearing the emblems of the evangelists, with Our Lady and St John on either side. Behind the altar, the reredos has eight niches in which angles are carved in stone. It is surmounted over the whole length by an impending pinnacled canopy.

The Sanctuary was panelled in oak in 1934 to commemorate the Sacerdotal Golden Jubilee of Cardinal Bourne, a munificent benefactor of the College and its Chapel. At the same time, the floor was covered in inlaid parquetry and the marble steps were built. It was originally intended that the stonework of the reredos would be continued right round the sanctuary. That was never done, and whether it was desirable is questionable. What is quite certain is that the carved panelling admirably chimes in with the oak stalls and at the same time sets off the stone altar. The emblazoned arms of some of the great names associated with the history of the College are placed in the panelling on either side. On the Gospel side are the arms of Bishop Douglass, Cardinal Bourne and Bishop Challoner; on the epistle side, Bishop Griffiths, Cardinal Allen (founder of the college at Douay) and Bishop Talbot.

The ceiling above the sanctuary was painted to Pugin's design and under his direction. It is notable in that most of the work was done by students. Alfred White, with some assistance from John Virtue, painted most of the panels in 1848 and 1849. They completed fifty-seven of the sixty panels; the other three were painted professionally and are said to have cost as much as the amateur fifty-seven. The scheme of decoration included the monograms of Our Lord, Our Lady, St Edmund, the Cross, and St Peter's Keys.

East Window

If the rood screen can be described as the principal feature of the chapel, the east window runs a close second and quite dominates the choir. It is more than thirty feet high and tracery gives eloquent testimony to Pugin's good taste.

The upper row of figures depicts Christ, in the centre, holding a cross in one hand and giving a blessing with the other. On the left are Our Lady, bearing a lily, St John the Baptist, with the Agnus Dei emblem, and St Peter, carrying a book and key. On the right are St John the Evangelist, with chalice and snake, St Andrew, with cross, and St Paul, with book and sword.

In the lower row, St Edmund is in the centre, bearing his archiepiscopal cross. On the left are St George the Great, wearing the tiara, St Bede, depicted with crozier (though he was never a bishop!), and St Augustine of Canterbury, in mitre and cope.

On the right are St Thomas of Canterbury, a sword behind his head, St Erconwald in mitre and cope, St Charles Borromeo in scarlet.

Sanctuary Windows

The four windows on either side of the Sanctuary were all presented by The Edmundian Association, and all represent scenes from the life of St Edmund.

The first window on the gospel side portrays scenes from St Edmund's boyhood. The first light shows St Edmund kneeling with his mother Mabel Rich, while the monks sing the Divine office at Abingdon Abbey. In the second light, St Edmund is seen consecrating himself to the service of God and Our Lady by a vow of perpetual chastity. In the third light, the saint and his brother, Robert, are departing for the university at Paris; their mother has just given them hair shirts as a parting gift.

The second window on the same side portrays St Edmund as a teacher. In the first light, St Edmund is teaching mathematics at Oxford. The second light records a vision of his mother which the saint experiences several years after her death. While still teaching mathematics at Oxford, his mother appeared to him in his sleep and drew his attention to better things: the study of theology. This she did by tracing three circles in which she wrote the names of the three divine persons. This emblem of the Blessed Trinity has been associated with St Edmund ever since. In the third light, St Edmund is seen preaching the crusade in 1227.

The window nearest the altar on the epistle side portrays St Edmund as Archbishop of Canterbury. In the first light, St Edmund is being persuaded by the Bishop of Salisbury and his canons to accept this important office, in 1234. In the second light, St Edmund is seen crossing the Channel for the last time.

The other window on the epistle side deals with St Edmund's death. In the first light, he is seen receiving the last sacraments, surrounded by monks, at Soissy. In the third light, St Edmund is lying in state. St Louis, King of France, is kneeling at the bier; in fact, St Louis is kneel at St Edmund's tomb on the occasion of the translation of his body after the canonisation in 1247. The centre light shows St Edmund in glory, blessing the College. The panel below is a representation of the altar and shrine of the saint, as it existed in 1884.

It will be noticed that the last window differs somewhat in colour from the first three. The first three windows were erected in 1869 for the celebration of the first centenary at Old Hall. The fourth was not erected until 1884, and was destroyed by bomb blast in 1940. It was replaced in 1952.

Choir Windows

The sanctuary windows, as we have seen, are fittingly devoted to our patron; the remaining windows in the Choir deal, in the main, with the history of the college. None of the windows are memorable as examples of the art of stained glass, but all of them tell a story or have special significance for Edmundians.

Lady Chapel

Cut off by a graceful stone screen in the north transept, the Lady Chapel was built in 1861, as the result of the generosity of the Luck brothers, students of the College, their father, and Canon Tilbury, all of whom contributed £100 towards its erection.

The outer part of the chapel is dominated by the statue of Our Lady and the Infant Jesus; this statue is the chief centre of devotion to Our Lady in the college, and has thus played an important part in the lives of Edmundians since it was put up in 1853. Divines and boys together contributed their pocket money to pay for this statue, wishing, in the absence of a Lady Chapel, to provide a focus for devotion to Our Lady.

Augustus Welby Pugin was already dead when it was decided to commission the Lady Chapel in 1861, and the work was therefore entrusted to his son, Edward Welby Pugin. He decided that the chapel should lead out of the north transept, and be so built as to form the base of a future church tower. An archway was therefore broken through the east wall of the transept, and the new chapel was built with stout walls and buttresses. The chapel has a solid groined roof, supported by eight pillars with marble shafts and stone bases and capitals. From these spring the arches of the vaulting in which there are carvings of the Coronation of Our Lady, the Annunciation, and of angels.

The altar-piece is a stone carving within an arch, portraying the Holy Family attended by St John the Baptist and an angel. A lamb approached the Blessed Virgin. The moulding of the arch is decorated by carvings of angels and lilies, and is surmounted by an angel bearing a crown. The shelf for the crucifix is supported by angels. The whole altar-piece has been painted in bright colours, presumably because, since the building of the Shrine Chapel, there has been no window to illuminate the altar and carvings.

The tabernacle is of alabaster, with a brass door decorated with a carving of the Pelican. The gradines are topped with marble; over them is a stone inscription: 'Sancta Maria ora pro nobis.' The front of the altar has three marble pilasters and bas-reliefs representing the Adoration of the Magi and the Flight into Egypt.

Shrine Chapel

In 1853, Cardinal Wiseman presented the College with the great relic of St Edmund – the fibula of the left leg, taken from the Saint's body, which is at Pontigny. The relic was first housed in a recess in the outer part of the Lady Chapel, where the present triptych reliquary hangs.

The Relic has always been an object of great devotion at the College and has played a part in many cures of serious illness which have been attributed to the intercession of St Edmund.

One of the earliest cures took place in 1871 and led to the erection of the altar, which now stands in the Shrine Chapel. In 1871, a student named Cecil Heathcote was so seriously injured by a fall that his life was despaired of. The President, Mgr Patterson, made a vow to build an altar to the Saint for the recovery of the youth, who was apparently in extremis. Very shortly after the relic had been applied to the unconscious youth, he began to recover. The new altar was placed before the relic in the Lady Chapel and was removed to its present place when the Shrine Chapel was built. The inscription on the altar: 'S. Edmundo voto soluto,' records that it was given in fulfilment of the vow.

The Chapel, which reaches through the Lady Chapel, was built in 1904 at the suggestion of The Edmundian Association to celebrate the Golden Jubilees of the College Chapel and the Association, both of which took place in 1903. The Edmundian Association undertook to pay for the reredos of the new Shrine.

Painted glass has made the interior of the chapel so dim that it has been necessary to paint the Chapel walls and reredos in bright colours. It thus presents a very different appearance from when it was opened in 1905. We have some cause to regret the glass, for the reredos, now painted predominantly in green and gold, is carved in bath stone, and must have been more impressive in its natural condition. It represents St Edmund, holding his three-ringed emblem of the Blessed Trinity, with angels on either side bearing shields showing St Edmund's arms and the pallium.

The Reliquary is in the recess behind the altar. The relic is in a cylinder of ruby glass mounted in silver scroll work, and surmounted by a silver cross set with amethysts and topazes. This reliquary is borne by two kneeling angels wrought in brass; behind it is an aureole of rays in brass. On the base of the reliquary is a silver representation of a mitre, crozier and archiepiscopal cross surrounded by flowers.

Galilee Chapel

The oak doors in the west wall of the chapel lead to the Galilee chapel, which provides a marked architectural contrast to the rest of the church.

It is probable that two things influenced the Cardinal in his determination on a Galilee chapel; the cost of a nave would possibly have been prohibitive, and he was very struck by the Galilee chapel at Durham Cathedral. That chapel had been remodelled by Cardinal Langley in the fifteenth century, was dedicated to Our Lady, and contains the Cardinal's tomb. The points of comparison of our Galilee with that of Durham are obvious.

It is of bath stone within and without. Central pillars divide it into bays, but do not completely obscure the altar for any member of the congregation. The internal roof is of Columbian pinewood, arched and panelled.

The altar stands, as at Durham, at the east end of the chapel. It is raised on four pillars of carved white alabaster. The reredos is a triptych, depicting in the centre Our Lady of Pity; the other two pictures are of St Peter and St George.

Before the altar is the tomb of Cardinal Francis Bourne (1861–1935), who built the chapel in 1922. The remains of his cardinal's hat still hang above the tomb.

Scholefield Chantry

Turned left upon leaving the Chapel, the pointed arch at the end of Monument Lane leads into the Scholefield Chantry, built in 1862 in memory of Edward Scholefield, whose remains lie in the vault below. The Scholefields had no known connection with the College other than being friends of a one-time Vice-President.

Designed by Edward Pugin, four steps lead up to the Chantry which is directly over the Scholefield vault. The walls and roof of the chapel, entirely of stone, are elaborately carved and groined.

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The unabridged version of Fr Garvey's historical guide may be obtained from The Edmundian Association.