

The Church of the Sacred Heart, Henley-on-Thames

A threatened dismantling of the Pugins' High Altar

Roderick O'Donnell *Inspector of Historic Buildings, London Region*

The re-ordering of Henley Catholic Church went to inquiry. English Heritage's assessment of the proposal to dismantle the altar is explained.

Changes to the Catholic liturgy following the Second Vatican Council (1962–5) included the use of the vernacular rather than Latin in the Mass, with the priest facing the worshippers. Since then, many churches have been radically stripped of their furnishings to enable this revolution in worship.

The Church of the Sacred Heart at Henley-on-Thames (Grade II), built in 1936, was designed by the architect ASG Butler to include a magnificent high altar of 1848–56 by AW and EW Pugin. The altar, originally commissioned for a private chapel that was demolished in 1908, had been in storage. In his new church, Butler reinstated AW Pugin's flanking statues and EW Pugin's reliquary and columnar mensa or 'table' altar, with its tabernacle, gradines, magnificent figured sculpture reredos, and the stained glass window of 1862 as the climax of the east end ensemble.

As with many Catholic churches, the sanctuary had been temporarily re-ordered over the period of 40 years since the Second Vatican Council. The Pugin altar was unused, and temporary furnishings, including a fine wooden table altar by the architect Francis Pollen, were introduced to allow Mass to be said facing the congregation.

In 2002, the parish priest applied to the Historic Churches Committee (HCC) of the Archdiocese of Birmingham for a Faculty to install a new altar, chair and ambo, and to change levels within the sanctuary. The proposal involved the truncation of parts of the altar, by lowering its steps and dismantling the columns and stone table (which were to be stored). The tabernacle – the heavily decorated

cupboard in which the wafers consecrated at Mass are stored – was to be relocated at a slightly lower level on a lesser sub-structure supported on two new columns. The gilt wood reliquary box under the altar, a rare survival, was to be relocated within a new stone forward altar. The liturgical thrust was thus to

The Church of the Sacred Heart, Henley-on-Thames (Grade II). The east end.



© R O'Donnell

reduce the emphasis on the former east end arrangement.

Following consultation, English Heritage and the local planning authority both objected to the proposals, as did the Victorian Society, the Pugin Society, individual experts and members of the congregation. Following approval of the application by the HCC, the case was referred to English Heritage's Places of Worship Panel. Our particular concern here was not the philosophy behind the liturgical reform but the high art-historical value of the altar, as the work of AW Pugin and his son. Following 40 years of vigorously pursued liturgical re-ordering in the

Birmingham Archdiocese, the altar was the last surviving example of a particularly magnificent altar ensemble.

English Heritage and others pursued their objection through to appeal – uniquely, third party appeal is allowed under the Roman Catholic procedures – which was held in June 2003, when the scheme was refused permission. A revised application submitted a year later was granted permission, and we hope that the former high altar will be repaired and conserved as a worthy element in the re-planned sanctuary.



© Graham Miller

The Church of the Sacred Heart, Henley-on-Thames (Grade II). The reliquary, altar, tabernacle and reredos.