



## Case Study

# St Mary and John Catholic Church

### Architecture and Built Environment

#### 6CN002 – Facilities Management

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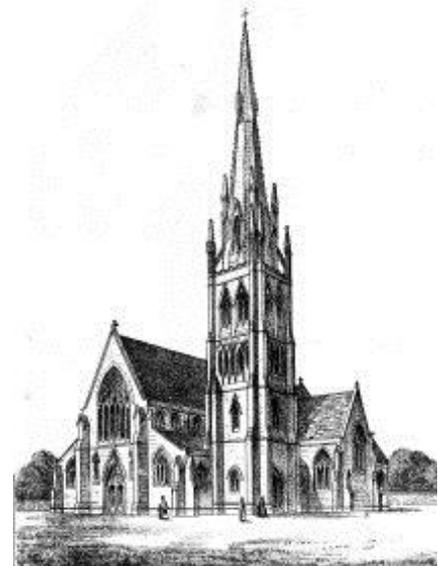


The Grade II\* listed St. Mary and St. John in Snowhill is a good example of a mid-Victorian Catholic church, notable particularly for its rich interior fittings and the excellent naturalistic carving of corbels and capitals. Originally known as St. Marie's and St. John, it was designed by Charles Hansom from Bristol and was built between 1851-1855 and cost initially £10,000. Hansom was an exponent of the Gothic style and he enlarged the east end between 1879-80.

Hansom also designed a large bell tower,

almost detached, on the uphill side of the church. Without this vertical feature the building is somewhat undramatic. But the tower was never built; the entry point for the proposed tower can be seen just inside the Sacred Heart Chapel.

The main driving force behind the building of the church was John Hawksford, who later became Wolverhampton's first Catholic Mayor. He purchased land from the Duke of Cleveland's 'Garden's' adjoining Snowhill. The purchase price was £2,550, a large sum but worth it as the site was a valuable one. Bishop Ullathorne laid the foundation stone in 1851 and the work carried out by the Wolverhampton builder, Richard Wullen, whose name is remembered in 'Wullen Street', Whitmore Reans. However, the construction of the church unfortunately coincided with the Crimean War, which led to delays and increased costs.



The reason the tower was not built is unknown; it may have been linked to the war and connected to cost or even with the conduct of the builder, Richard Wullen. It is evident that he tried to skimp on materials and to increase the agreed price of £3,248. The stone used from a local quarry was unproved as a building material and the industrial atmosphere of the time played havoc with the fabric. Eventually Wullen went bankrupt and skipped the country as soon as the church was finished.



The friable nature of the stone revealed itself in flaking masonry and general decay and in 1907 was rendered to prevent further deterioration with what was initially thought to be 'Metallic Cement'.

The render itself was removed in the 1990's due to its porosity but traces examined by electron microscopy and X-ray micro analysis suggests that it was 'Sorel Cement' (a variation of Magnesia Cement) – an artificial stone.



Left: Southern Elevation - Buttress.  
Above: Tympanum over the West Entrance.

When first opened, the entrance at west front had a double doorway with a central stone pillar that has since been removed. Inside the nave and aisles were much as they are today except that the capitals and corbels had not yet been carved, there was also a solid wall behind the soaring chancel arch.

When the east end was enlarged, the original pillars in the nave were scraped to match the new stone of the chancel and the three medallions containing angels were carved at the base of the pulpit for the occasion.

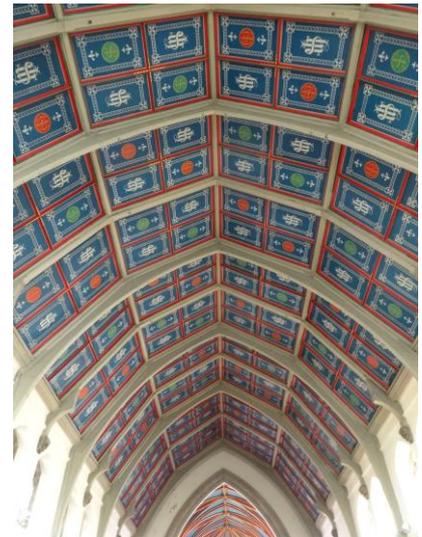
As it stands today, the entire length of the building is 150 feet, but it is its width that is so noticeable, being 35 feet from centre to centre pillar. In 1917 the quarry tiles on the floor were removed and replaced with wood blocks. By 1923 the Sanctuary floor was found to be badly affected by inadequate drainage and ventilation and was replaced. The following year the original organ was removed and a new one installed, the choir gallery being extended to accommodate it. In 1992 the whole complex was restored. The chancel was redecorated and a new roof for the whole church was put in place. The presbytery was refurbished and new gates and railings were installed in 2001.



However, these facts convey nothing of the interior design of the church, for it is stunning building. Elegant, calm and with a wealth of symbolism, the apsidal chancel, which is vaulted unlike the nave, really does soar and the dark blue paint, though now peeling, enhances the effect. At the intersection of the nave and chancel, decorated bosses carved in floral patterns cover the ribs.

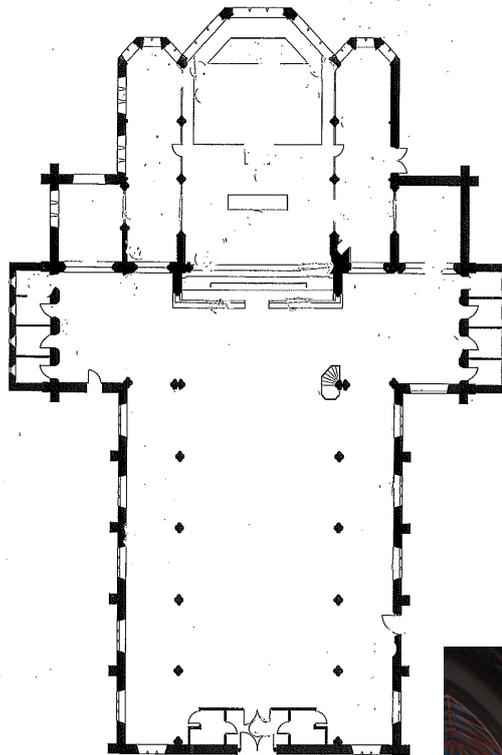
A feature of the 'Gothic Revival – early decorated' style is the use of symbolism. In this church there are three lancet windows, three arches on either side of the chancel, three

windows in the apse each with three lights, symbolising the Holy Trinity.



The whole plan is cruciform. Above the arches there are clerestory windows with depressed pointed arches.

North Transept



South Transept

The Nave Roof

The side aisles are twenty feet high and fifteen feet wide and are lit by pointed windows each with three Lancet windows; narrow windows with pointed arches at the top. "Lancet" so named from the resemblance to a lance. This architectural motif was copied from typical Gothic ecclesiastical structures of the earliest period.

Ant' Hatfield with acknowledgements.

