



Historic England

# 19th- and 20th-Century Convents and Monasteries

Introductions to Heritage Assets



# Summary

Historic England's Introductions to Heritage Assets (IHAs) are accessible, authoritative, illustrated summaries of what we know about specific types of archaeological site, building, landscape or marine asset. Typically they deal with subjects which lack such a summary. This can either be where the literature is dauntingly voluminous, or alternatively where little has been written. Most often it is the latter, and many IHAs bring understanding of site or building types which are neglected or little understood. Many of these are what might be thought of as 'new heritage', that is they date from after the Second World War.

Between the middle of the 19th century and the earlier 20th, convents and monasteries were built in large numbers for the re-established Roman Catholic Church and also for new Church of England communities. The arrival of these new institutions coincided with the 'true' gothic revival, based on the authentic historical appreciation of medieval buildings and modern constructional logic. Some of the highest-regarded monastic buildings are gothic revival ones, and in particular the design and fitting out of convent and monastery chapels, and the emphasis on communal living inspired by the Middle Ages, have left a vivid picture of one particular aspect of Victorian life.

This guidance note has been written by Timothy Brittain-Catlin and edited by Paul Stamper.

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## Front cover

The listed cloister at St Mary's Benedictine Abbey, West Malling, Kent. 1962 by Maguire and Murray.  
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# Introduction

Convents and monasteries are residential buildings used by members of Christian communities so that they can live a daily religious life detached from everyday pressures. Although the words ‘convent’ and ‘monastery’ can be interchangeable, the former is most often used for buildings established for all-female communities, whilst the latter are usually for men. Even communities – properly, religious orders or congregations – that are dedicated to working within wider society have always required a secluded, self-contained home with a chapel, a refectory, and other communal spaces so that members can retire when necessary to a completely private environment.

These buildings are known collectively as ‘religious houses’, a term which refers both to the buildings and to the communities within them – as if they were inseparable. From earliest Christian times, these religious houses took different forms; depending on their history or location, institutions for both sexes might have been known as priories (under a prior/prioress) or abbeys (under an abbot/abbess), or nunneries if they housed only women. Monasteries followed the 6th-century Rule of St Benedict, which provided regulations with some architectural implications for the conduct of daily life. But Henry VIII’s dissolution of the monasteries from the mid-1530s closed down every religious house in England. They made a short comeback during the brief reign of Henry’s daughter Mary I (1553-8), but then vanished, at least from public sight, and were banned by law. From 1559 to 1791, English Catholic religious life had to find refuge on the Continent, especially in Flanders and France; in the aftermath of the French Revolution, some religious communities there were allowed to settle, or resettle, in England. The subsequent revival of religious houses here was due to

the eventual acceptance by parliament that Catholics and their religious traditions should be reintegrated into British society.

Convents and monasteries were built in large numbers for the Roman Catholic Church but also for new Church of England communities. Some religious houses were in rural isolated settings, but others were in urban centres, and in some towns large areas of suburb were visibly dominated by complexes of religious institutional buildings. These might include asylums for ‘fallen women’, orphanages and schools. In many cases existing houses were remodelled or extended for monastic use, and these too form part of the history of the building type. The great period of construction lasted from the 1850s right up to the First World War, although some remarkable buildings were still being built later on. Today most new buildings are modest replacements for complexes which have become too large for generally much-reduced communities.



**Figure 1**  
A.W.N. Pugin's Mercy Convent at Bermondsey, 1838  
(demolished), his first purpose-designed religious  
community building, seen from the north-east and

drawn for the Architectural Review in the 1890s by  
Francis D. Bedford.

# 1 Historical Background

## 1.1 Founding new institutions

The first purpose-built monastery to be erected in England after the Reformation was a modest structure built in 1795 near East Lulworth in Dorset, for a refugee community of Trappist monks from France, and in 1820-3 the first new monastic buildings of significant size went up, at Downside in Somerset. It was, however, a monastery and a series of convents built in quick succession from the late 1830s, all designed by the gothic revival architect A.W.N. Pugin and inspired by medieval precedents, that established for most people the form, layout and style of the modern religious house. So strong was this image that the principle architectural elements of many of the buildings that followed over the next 50 years scarcely varied from it, except in terms of their growing size.

The reason for the revival of the religious house was the gradual emancipation of Roman Catholics in mainland Britain. Until the last decade of the 18th century, English Catholics were not allowed to worship in public at all, let alone congregate in residential communities. Catholic church services were restricted to the chapels of foreign embassies in London, backstreet chapels, and the private chapels of landed Catholic families. For most people, the medieval idea of the secluded religious community was associated with Roman Catholic worship, tradition and politics, all of which they had been taught to despise from earliest childhood.

This situation changed rapidly because of a series of events and processes that swept across British politics and society. The Catholic Relief Act of

1791 finally permitted Roman Catholic worship, although under considerable restriction. Public response to this was perhaps more favourable than it might have been, because British politicians prided themselves on having offered refuge to French priests forced to leave their homeland as a result of the 1789 revolution. It was in fact for a colony of English monks, originally exiled from England and now from France too, that Downside was originally founded in 1814. In 1829 the Catholic Emancipation Act was passed as a result of political developments in Ireland. Thereafter, it became possible to build residential communities for Roman Catholic orders in Britain, even if in many places these had to face hostility from their neighbours. In fact, some attribute the somewhat fortress-like appearance of new convents and monasteries precisely to a desire for self-protection from angry mobs.

The arrival of these new institutions in the 1830s and 1840s coincided with another development in English history: the 'true' gothic revival, based on the authentic historical appreciation of medieval buildings and modern constructional logic, launched in 1836 by both Charles Barry and Pugin's winning design for the new Palace of Westminster and by the publication of Pugin's book *Contrasts*. The growing influence of the revival ran hand-in-hand with the commissioning of new religious buildings of all kinds, to the extent that some of the highest-regarded monastic buildings are gothic revival ones. Revival architects directly addressed church leaders, who were anxious to demonstrate their authority through the erection of prestigious buildings. Because of the eventual worldwide influence of

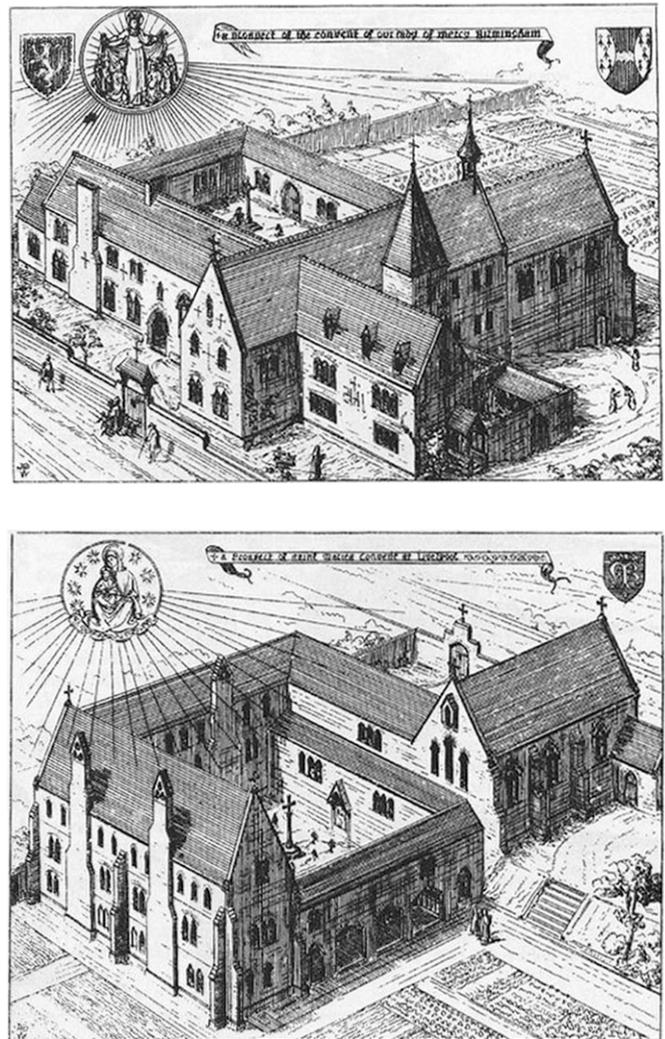
English revival architects and their arts-and-crafts successors, this partnership gives additional historical and cultural importance to the religious buildings associated with them. In particular, the design and fitting out of convent and monastery chapels, and the emphasis on communal living inspired by the Middle Ages, have left a vivid picture of one particular aspect of Victorian life.

## 1.2 Location and form

Pugin's design for Mount St Bernard's, in the Charnwood Forest in Leicestershire, was not executed precisely in its original form, but it provides the exemplar for the Victorian monastery. It was designed in 1839 for the Cistercian order which since its foundation in the 12th century had sought an isolated setting for its houses. In common with the many community buildings that were to follow, this one was funded with private support, led by the landowner Ambrose Phillipps de Lisle, a local lay figurehead associated with the Catholic revival. Here the architect envisaged a complex that would closely resemble one of its medieval predecessors: a magnificent chapel with a tower and transepts, far bigger than a parish church, with generous communal rooms and cells organised around quadrangles, all set in a landscape suitable for cultivation by the monks. Over the course of about a century this vision was gradually realised, as was notably the case also at Downside Abbey, where Pugin himself was briefly involved.

Pugin's convents, on the other hand, were designed for a new community, the Sisters of Mercy, which ministered to the poor on the fringes of towns and cities which had recently become home to many Irish immigrants who had fled poverty and famine in their homeland. The first was by the River Thames at Bermondsey (1838; Fig 1); others followed at Handsworth (Fig 2), which at the time was a small village near Birmingham; Mount Vernon (Figs 2, 4), on the eastern edge of Liverpool; on the western fringe of Nottingham; and at Old Swan, then a hamlet outside Liverpool. Pugin also designed a small convent at Cheadle, Staffordshire, as part of a complex of buildings

designed for his patron, the Earl of Shrewsbury, who had led the funding campaigns for many of his buildings: the site here is dominated by his splendid church of St Giles and a small school, and a house in a neighbouring street was converted into a presbytery. Wherever possible, Pugin tried to realise his vision of pious medieval life by grouping buildings closely together so that they would form a critical mass visually.



**Figure 2**  
A.W.N. Pugin's 1842 bird's eye views of his Mercy Convents at Handsworth, in the West Midlands, 1840. (top, mainly extant; listed Grade II\*) and Mount Vernon, Liverpool, 1842 (bottom; demolished), illustrating their medieval-style cloister plans and easily identifiable major rooms. This illustration was published in his twin articles *On the Present State of Ecclesiastical Architecture in England* of 1841-2, his influential description of his current projects.

Pugin's convents at Mount Vernon in Liverpool (from 1841) and Derby Road, Nottingham (from 1844), provide a precedent in their overall form, size, and components for a large number of similar institutions that were to follow over the second half of the century. Both were initially designed for around 20 nuns, or 'sisters', although each was later extended organically and coherently to house larger communities, and eventually included schools. Both were organised around a courtyard; the major rooms comprised a chapel, a refectory and a community room, and these were boldly expressed externally with, for example, different types of fenestration, in keeping with the principles of gothic revival architecture. Cells were located off a central corridor located on the upper floor, and the planning here allowed those who were ill to attend chapel from a balcony. The courtyard design enabled Pugin to incorporate long walkways that he called 'cloisters'; these allowed the nuns to take long contemplative walks and to organise religious processions out of sight from the world beyond. Finally, the two convents included 'parlours' which were meeting spaces for visiting lay people, located by the front door and constituting an interface between the community and the outside world.

Some convents, including Pugin's at Handsworth (Figs 2-3), eventually grew to include substantial 'magdalen asylums', or 'mercy houses': residential institutions for 'fallen women'. These were not only a Catholic phenomenon: by 1903 there were 238 Anglican penitentiaries for women. In some suburban areas these religious complexes were eventually built on so large a scale, and in such close proximity to one another, that they dominated the townscape. In Childwall, to the south-east of central Liverpool, the Ordnance Survey map of 1927 shows in almost continuous succession along the Woolton Road, a Convent of Mercy, the St Joseph's Home for the Incurables (formerly Oswaldcroft, a mansion built for a Catholic philanthropist by Pugin), the Convent of Poor Clares, the Nazareth Home for the Aged, the Bishop Eton Redemptorist Monastery, the Etonfield Presentation Convent, and the Good Shepherd Convent Home for Reformation

(incorporating a magdalen asylum, based around a large laundry in which the women worked, and, eventually, with an unusual 1930s V-plan chapel so that nuns and working women could worship in separate naves). In some cases this was because a benefactor intentionally bought up land for the purpose, as was the case for example when the Duchess of Leeds supported the foundation of a convent at Mayfield (East Sussex), and immediately afterwards of two large Catholic orphanages nearby, in 1863-8. Convents and monasteries could also be located within groups of large, similarly styled but Nonconformist, Jewish, municipal or other lay residential institutions, especially in south-coast seaside resort towns: the 1939 Ordnance Survey map of Broadstairs, Kent, shows three such buildings immediately adjacent to one another. Many of these institutions across the country have been demolished, but old maps – alongside reminiscences on local history websites – testify both to a vanished culture of mass community living and also to a 19th-century idea of charity that were once such dominant features of English life.



**Figure 3**  
The cloister at A.W.N. Pugin's 1844 extension to his original Mercy Convent, Handsworth. Listed Grade II\*. Photographed in 2006.  
© Timothy Brittain-Catlin

# 2 Chronology and Development of the Building Type

## 2.1 Early convent and monastery building

By the time of the founding of the new religious communities in England, architects and church leaders had access for the first time to accurate information about the appearance of medieval precedents. Pugin's monastery at Mount St Bernard's was gothic in style, and was intended to resemble an historic building, as was his even more ambitious unexecuted scheme for Downside. This was not really true, however, of his series of influential convents, all of which were built in brick for economic reasons. Their chapels had pointed windows with tracery and stained glass, and fittings throughout the buildings were based on Pugin's knowledge of historic examples; but for the most part they were loosely based on late mediaeval or Tudor vernacular buildings while the planning was early Victorian, derived from current ideas about religious life.

The English gothic revival demanded that the design of every room, including its location, should clearly demonstrate its function and relative importance. This resulted in asymmetrical layouts, and changing rooflines. Beyond this, early Victorian propriety – for Pugin, a key property of gothic architecture – demanded layouts designed around the daily work of residents; the long cloisters in new convents and monasteries not only provided (as noted above) spaces for contemplation and for processional purposes, but



**Figure 4**  
A.W.N. Pugin's Mount Vernon convent in Liverpool was extended many times by its original architect and others before its demolition. The central block seen here is part of the 1842 courtyard scheme.

could also emphasise architecturally the different natures of the major rooms that were linked by them by varying the details of their ceilings and windows as they progressed through the building. Propriety also required modern planning for water closets (common by the 1830s), and for the subsidiary rooms that serviced a sizable kitchen. Beyond this, the revival itself required coherence between work of different types – that is, decorative stonework, carpentry, joinery, metalwork, tiles and stained glass – which were to be related in style to each other and, where

the budget allowed it, designed especially for their particular location. All of these ideas were in place during Pugin's lifetime, and they can be seen in the work of other architects working for the Catholic church. One good example is the Dominican convent of St Dominic, Stone, Staffordshire, designed by Joseph Aloysius and his brother Charles Hansom in 1852, and much extended a few years later by Charles Hansom and then Gilbert Blount in matching styles. This demonstrates a further advantage of the gothic revival: a building could be extended indefinitely without its original style being compromised.

## 2.2 The spread and development of convents and monasteries

The Hansom brothers, sometimes individually and sometimes in partnership with each other or third parties, were prolific architects for religious houses, and built larger and more expensive buildings than Pugin did, and over a much longer period, but on more regular and conventional plans. In 1850 Charles Hansom designed first a church and subsequently an expensive stone-built house (now demolished) for the Passionist order in Woodchester, Gloucestershire. Ten years later, he designed a large convent for the Poor Clare Sisters a short distance away, built of rubble limestone, which still exists. Projects such as these expanded further the architectural vocabulary deployed by the Hansoms and other Catholic architects of the period, for example to include gabled entry porches. In reflection of more prosperous times for Catholics, these new features soon began to be included in relatively small projects. Carmel Road, Darlington (Co. Durham), provides a minor example of the type of suburban development of large religious institutions described above; here in 1856-7 J.A. Hansom designed St Clare's Abbey around three picturesque courtyards, repeating the porch feature three times across the site with variations. There is a tall gabled entryway to the convent from the street, and there are two different decorative porches attached to the building complex itself. The chapel at this small convent was richly fitted to Hansom's designs from

the start, with a reredos panel carved by a 'Mr Farmer', probably William Farmer, later of Farmer & Brindley, and with stained glass by Maycock of Clifton (Bristol). J.A. Hansom died in 1882, and his brother in 1888: the architectural style of Charles Hansom did not change significantly over the course of his long career, nor did it vary across the country except to a limited extent to reflect the availability of local building materials. Other prolific Catholic architects of, or for, convent and monastery complexes are George Goldie and his son Edward, George Goldie's former chief assistant F.A. Walters, and James O'Byrne. At Chilworth, near Guildford (Surrey) Walters revived the plan of an English medieval Franciscan friary in 1890-2 for Chilworth Friary (from 2011 St Augustine's Abbey; listed Grade II).

## 2.3 Anglican religious communities

By the mid Victorian era Catholics were not alone in building religious houses. The Tractarians, members of the High Anglican movement launched in Oxford in the mid 1830s, had always aimed to create almost enclosed residential communities, governed by a 'Rule' for day-to-day living in emulation of mediaeval foundations. There had been no continuous tradition of such Protestant communities anywhere in Britain, and the great majority of Anglicans were at best sceptical towards them. The architectural originality of buildings designed for these 'communities' or 'societies' (as orders are generally termed by Anglicans) was assured by the fact that they were often designed by some of the most inventive architects of the high gothic revival, often with substantial means at their disposal, creating a new and distinctly British building type. In fact, the progress of the revival, and thus of much of British institutional architecture generally, was closely linked to the religious reforms of the 19th century. Its leading designers contributed many convent and monastic buildings which, if arguably marginal to Anglican history, are important to architectural historians for their originality and richness in construction and detail, and their eventually spread across the English-speaking world.



**Figure 5**

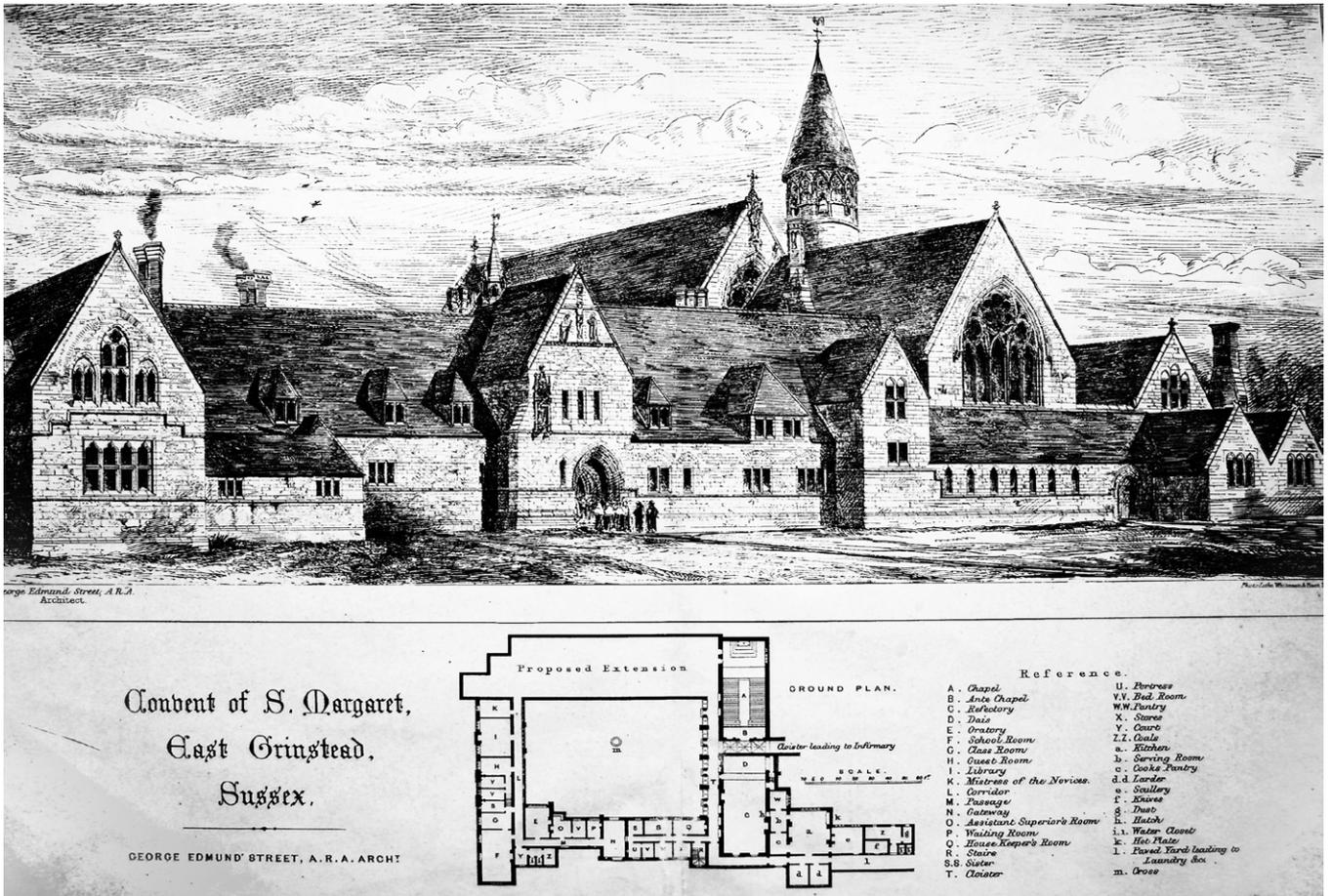
St Mary's Convent, Wantage, Oxfordshire, was designed in 1855 by George Edmund Street and extended in stages by other leading gothic revival architects over the course of 80 years. The central block here, with the

tall chimneys and dormer windows, is part of Street's original design. Listed Grade II.  
© John East

In 1848 the Tractarian vicar William John Butler set about turning his parish at Wantage in Oxfordshire into a model community of High Anglican churchmanship. In 1855, together with Elizabeth Lockhart, he commissioned the architect George Edmund Street to design the buildings for a small community for women, the Sisterhood of St Mary the Virgin, one of the first Anglican religious houses. This (Fig 5) followed the Pugin pattern, with distinct chapel and refectory blocks, and was designed around two courtyards. In contrast to Pugin's brick buildings, however, St Mary's convent was built of coursed and dressed limestone, a sign that well-to-do members of the Anglican establishment were behind the project. The complex was enlarged over time by other leading Gothic revival architects: a wing was added in 1878 by William Butterfield, and in 1887 J.L. Pearson further extended St Mary's with another block, and a larger chapel. This chapel in turn was extended and decorated in gothic style

by J.N. Comper in 1923-4, making the convent as a whole a record of the progress of the gothic revival, at the hands of four of its most original and assiduous designers, over nearly 70 years.

St Margaret's convent, East Grinstead (West Sussex; Fig 6), is one of Street's most important buildings. It was designed from 1865 for an order named the Sisters of St Margaret, founded in 1855 by the Tractarian priest and hymn writer John Mason Neale, who by then was warden of nearby Sackville College, an early 17th-century almshouse foundation which he had revived along high-churchmanship lines. St Margaret's was established as a nursing order for his college pensioners, but eventually became primarily a school and orphanage for girls, managed by the convent's sisters. The community operated autonomous convents, which meant that the local mother superior could interpret the 'Rule', and thus its architectural interpretation, with some



**Figure 6**  
George Edmund Street's perspective and plan for his convent buildings at East Grinstead, West Sussex,

designed for the Anglican Sisters of St Margaret from 1865. Now divided into separate residences and listed Grade I.

degree of flexibility. Here, St Margaret's is a large, picturesque and ornamentally-carved building; the blocks are adorned with tall chimneys, there is a bellcote over the courtyard entry arch, and the tall tiled roofs are pierced with dormers. Street's chapel of 1879-85 and its short but decorative adjoining cloister are especially impressive.

In 1884-5 Butterfield, a prominent supporter of the Tractarians, was commissioned to design a large chapel at Ascot Priory in Berkshire. This was for Lydia Sellon, for whom he had already designed a small convent in Plymouth. On this later project he employed a rich late-Norman style apparently in reference to the 11th-century church of St Mary's church at Iffley, in Oxfordshire, but with a banded red and white stone interior. Butterfield's chapel dwarfs both the earlier parts of the complex that had been designed by Charles Buckeridge, a pupil of George Gilbert Scott, and

a later wing of 1901-3 by the Catholic architect Leonard Stokes in an arts-and-crafts vernacular style. Taken as a whole, Ascot Priory demonstrates how Anglican monastic orders could be patrons of the highest quality architecture over many decades. In fact, G.F. Bodley started to build a lady chapel to the east of Butterfield's, and this was eventually completed to a different design in the 1930s, by which time his last partner Cecil Greenwood Hare had installed a painted wagon roof over Butterfield's chapel. Butterfield designed no monasteries, but his theological and other residential buildings, for example Keble College (Oxford) and St Augustine's College (Canterbury) – the latter, on the site of a major Norman (and Saxon) abbey, for the training of missionaries – as well as his smaller clergy houses and school buildings, can be seen as part of the history of Victorian Anglican monastic building.

## 2.4 Late and post-Victorian convents and monasteries

The great majority of convent and monastic building since the mid 19th century has nevertheless been Roman Catholic, and sometimes produced buildings that were extremely large, and consequently more at risk in recent decades from abandonment or unsympathetic change. Edward Welby Pugin, A.W.N. Pugin's eldest son, designed a number of convents, of which several have been demolished and none serves its original purpose. In 1863-7 he completed a substantial wing housing a Franciscan friary as part of his large church complex at St Francis, West Gorton, Manchester, in his by-then characteristically flamboyant French gothic style, but architecturally the most remarkable of these projects is the chapel he designed for Stanbrook Abbey in Callow End, Worcestershire, built in 1869-71. A further project of interest is his monastic building for the Benedictine order at Ramsgate (Kent), where in 1860-1 he added to his father's vision for a Catholic community comprising several different types of building. E.W. Pugin also added big chapels to existing religious houses, most notably in 1853-4 at the Benedictine monastery at Oulton, north of Stone (Staffordshire). His younger brothers Peter Paul and Cuthbert, and their cousin Sebastian Pugin Powell, practising as Pugin & Pugin, continued to design a substantial number of large convent and monastery buildings, in a scarcely varying economic gothic style, over several decades from the early 1870s, and in every Catholic diocese in England. A characteristic Pugin & Pugin project was their eventual addition of 1895-7 to E.W. Pugin's scheme at Stanbrook.

In Hammersmith, to the west of central London, two convent buildings that together form part of a characteristic concentration of Catholic building demonstrate work by a series of leading Catholic architects of the late Victorian period. Nazareth House, on Hammersmith Road, is largely hidden by tall walls: even as late as this, city convents maintained the almost fortified appearance which had originally derived as much from fears about the safety of residents from anti-Catholic protest



**Figure 7**

The Abbey Church of St Gregory the Great, Downside Abbey, Somerset. Listed Grade I. The abbey buildings, by several hands, went up over about 150 years and show the continuing influence of the gothic revival. The transepts and base of the tower were begun in 1882-4 by Dunn and Hansom. Giles Gilbert Scott added the nave in 1922-5, and completed the tower in 1938.

© John East

as from the desire to express a sense of retreat from the urban world. It includes a main wing parallel to the main road (1857) and chapel (1866) by Blount; additions of 1885 and 1889 by Leonard Stokes; and a children's wing of 1908 by Pugin & Pugin – together creating a large, brick, open-courtyard building, all the parts of which are in a utilitarian, minimally gothic style, four storeys high and with a regular roofline and no expression of use beyond its projecting chapel on the main road side and some modest gothic decoration. Nearby to the west and on the historic site of a clandestine late seventeenth-century convent is the more original and ornamental Convent and High School of the Sacred Heart, originally designed as the seminary of St Thomas in 1868, but not started until 1876 and converted to its new use in 1893. The main buildings, in the form of a quadrangle around a cloister, were completed

in 1881, and the adjacent chapel directly facing Hammersmith Road followed in 1887. Although the overall form of the Sacred Heart convent is not dissimilar to that of Nazareth House, this is a building that demonstrates the richness of the late gothic revival. The architect was John Francis Bentley, renowned as one of the most thorough church architects of his period; he took particular care over the design of original internal fittings and details as A.W.N. Pugin had called for many years before. In fact at the time (and until their demolition in the mid-1920s) Pugin's own nearby buildings at the Convent of the Holy Shepherd at the northern end of Fulham Palace Road would have offered a precedent. Other types of Catholic institutions, originally reaching as far as the northern end of Brook Green, make this an important cluster of buildings.

Bentley's attention to detail meant that he designed few buildings – perhaps especially once he had started working on the commission for the Roman Catholic cathedral at Westminster from 1894 – but he was responsible for a small convent for Franciscan nuns in a red-brick vernacular early Tudor style at Bocking in Essex in 1898. He also carried out work at other religious houses – for example, fittings in the chapel at the Bishop Eton 'monastery' of the Redemptorists in Childwall, Liverpool, referred to above, a building originally designed by A.W.N. Pugin in 1851 and then executed and extended by his son Edward and others over the course of the following decade. In some cases, the concentration of high quality work by leading designers working in each others' footsteps over a small geographical area has given convent and monastery buildings further historical significance.

## 2.5 Twentieth-century religious houses

Continuing work at Downside Abbey (Figs 7, 12) demonstrates how far the gothic revival continued as the dominant style of religious houses into the 20th century – at least in their churches and chapels. Here the principal block of the monastery, and the transepts and chevet of the abbey church, were designed by Dunn & Hansom and built from 1873-94. Thomas Garner, Bodley's

former partner, completed the choir in 1906, followed by Comper (lady chapel furnishings, 1898-1924), and Giles Gilbert Scott (nave, 1922-8); thus the complex as a whole provides a picture of the stylistic development of the gothic revival in the hands of different designers over more than a century. Scott was also the architect of the substantial gothic abbey church at Ampleforth in Yorkshire, built from 1922-61.

A contrast might be drawn between this characteristic type of development and a project which adapted the traditional elements of the Victorian monastery into a large coherent complex of quite different appearance. The abbey at Quarr (Fig 8), near Fishbourne on the Isle of Wight, was designed by Dom Paul Bellot, a French monk, and built from 1907-14 for the Benedictine Order. It is built of Belgian brick, with some structural and exposed concrete, and is organised around a traditional courtyard; the planning is comparable to English Victorian examples, but its style may be derived from the northern European tradition, seen in the great brick churches of the Baltic coast with their stepped gables and flat, blind arched panels. The abbey church, for example, has a wide porch of this type, and behind it the church nave is topped at its west end by a horizontal parapet with brickwork that seems to imitate machicolations. The sanctuary end of the church takes the form of a tall, broad and squat tower with pyramidal brick turrets at each corner, and further stepped gabled wings project from its base. In general, the complex at Quarr continues a tradition of introducing continental decoration and ambience into traditional British architecture through the medium of religious buildings. In this way it follows on from St Hugh's Charterhouse, a very large Carthusian monastery at Parkminster (West Sussex; Fig 9) of 1875-83, designed in a French gothic style by the Calais architect Clovis Normand. Both the Quarr and Parkminster complexes housed communities which had relocated to England as a result of anticlerical policies in their home countries, and this enforced exile perhaps explains their desire to employ architects from their homeland.



**Figure 8 (top)**

Quarr Abbey, near Fishbourne on the Isle of Wight, was designed by Dom Paul Bellot, a French Benedictine monk, and built from 1907-14 in a style that merged English monastic traditions with continental styling. Listed Grade 1.

© Andrew Abbott

**Figure 9 (bottom)**

St Hugh Charterhouse, Parkminster, West Sussex, is an example of a French institution that relocated to England following political changes at home. The designer was the Calais architect Clovis Normand and it was built in 1875-83. Listed Grade II.

© Facelift GB



**Figure 10**

The monastery of the Olivetan Benedictines at Cockfosters, on the far northern fringes of London, was designed by Dom Constantine Bosschaerts. Although built in 1940 in a form that was much reduced from that originally proposed, the building is remarkable for its Dutch Expressionist style, more associated with cinema architecture.

© John East



**Figure 11**

View from the north-west of the new Abbey Church at West Malling, Kent, designed by Robert Maguire and Keith Murray, 1962-6. The community moved to the vicinity of the ruins of the old church (currently used as chapter house), visible in the background, in 1916. Convent building listed Grade I; refectory and church Grade II.

© John East

In 1940 the Olivetan Benedictines opened a monastery at Cockfosters (Fig 10), just beyond the northern edges of Enfield outside London, that had been designed (like Quarr Abbey) by a Benedictine monk, Dom Constantine Bosschaerts. The building is in a modern Dutch Expressionist style, and, in its eventually realised and much reduced form, comprises a single block, lined with continuous horizontal windows, and with a church incorporated into it – a form that would have already been familiar to many in western Europe, but which to the English would have suggested a modern cinema. The Grade-II listed abbey church

at West Malling (Kent; Fig 11 and cover) was designed by Maguire & Murray and built in 1962 as part of a new complex which was added to the ruins of a Norman-era church and nunnery for an Anglican Benedictine community. The buildings reflect continental ideas about liturgical reform, closely resembling in layout and style some recent churches, particularly in Germany. It is possible that European designers built further structures – or imported or carried out decorative work – that have yet to come to notice within the walls of other monasteries or convents.

# 3 Associations

Convents and monasteries are part of a family of large institutional buildings that grew up alongside the religious revival movements of the 19th century, and which are indissolubly linked with the history of the gothic revival in Britain. This family of structures includes seminaries, missionary colleges, orphanages, almshouses and residential schools, and to some extent also clergy houses; over time, institutions were created that combined several of these uses on a single site. All of the complexes in this wider category share a number of features: a chapel, a refectory, a dormitory or cell areas, a kitchen, a sickroom, and community rooms. Where new institutions were designed in accordance with the basic tenets of the gothic revival, these functions are expressed through distinct volumes and forms of decoration. Unlike most of the other buildings mentioned here, however, the plans of most convents and monasteries above a certain size were sometimes influenced by medieval courtyard precedents, the original form and structure of which were becoming known to architects and antiquarians at exactly the time that both religious and architectural reform started in earnest, in the late 1830s.

In at least three other respects these 19th-century convents and monasteries have associations with other building types. Some religious reformers wanted to return to the historic ruined sites of medieval religious houses. The convent at West Malling, refounded in 1893, was one of these, but there are others, ranging from the convent of the Holy Child, Jesus, in Mayfield, East Sussex, founded in 1863, which re-used the remains of a medieval palace of the Archbishop of Canterbury, to the modernistic Prinknash Abbey in Gloucestershire, which was not completed until 1972 and lies just to the north of an ancient abbatial grange. Secondly, the chapels built for convents and monasteries – sometimes for the community's private use, and sometimes also serving as parish churches – connect these buildings with the history of the churches of the gothic revival and, from the mid 20th century, with the developing course of the liturgical movement

which emphasised community involvement in worship and the use of sacred spaces inspired by early Christian architecture. In some cases fittings and furnishings, murals, metalwork, stained glass windows and other examples of the decorative applied arts clearly associate these chapels with better-known examples of church architecture from the period. Because of their essentially private nature, however, many of these fittings are at risk, and much has been lost already as communities contract and move into new, smaller, accommodation. And finally, some significant architects of the period saw their designs for religious houses as an important step in the development of their work as a whole, which means that a convent building such as that at East Grinstead by George Edmund Street belongs to the same chapter in architectural history as his well known Royal Courts of Justice in the Strand.



**Figure 12**

Francis Pollen's library at Downside Abbey, 1972, continued the monastery's building tradition into the recent past. To right is the abbey church (listed Grade I), the result of building campaigns by Dunn and

Hansom, Thomas Garner, and Giles Gilbert Scott, with fittings by Ninian Comper, a rich exemplar of the gothic revival in several talented hands over many decades.

© John East

The proximity of these buildings and other church institutions to each other in the centre of some towns, as at Hammersmith, in resort towns and in suburbs such as Childwall in Liverpool, and at many other places across England, created a distinctive type of urban landscape of a sort that testifies to a vanished communal, institutional life. They demonstrate the importance and strength of all those involved in the building process – as clients, patrons and charitable organisations, as well as masons, carpenters,

joiners, and others – working during a period when the quality of their workmanship was at its zenith. But perhaps most of all they are evidence too of the sweeping nature – in terms of scale and of the sheer quantity of the buildings – of the gothic revival in Britain, which in turn was itself part of a long, continuing story about how people and communities in England, whatever their origins, have seen buildings as the embodiment of their history and society.

# 4 Change and the Future

Today, as increasingly over past decades, the religious communities which built and sustained monasteries and convents over 150 years are in decline. Communities which are much reduced in size, and often with straightened finances, can find themselves unable to support often large, elaborate, and expensive to repair complexes, and take the pragmatic decision to move to new accommodation. This can place at risk not only the historic buildings themselves, but also the examples which often lie within of the applied arts such as stained glass and joinery, and also liturgical objects.

Finding a new use for these complexes can be a challenge, irrespective of whether or not they are listed. Some still lie in relative isolation, meaning that the possibility of a market for any residential conversion is unlikely. Even where an urban or other setting offers this possibility, the complexities of plan form, the internal arrangement of buildings, and inbuilt liturgical fixtures and fittings make sensitive conversion difficult. The sometimes barn-like spaces of chapels pose particular challenges, especially where their high architectural quality gives them special interest.

A further difficulty is that sensitive re-use demands a sophisticated understanding of an asset type, as well as the individual example, and until now little has been written about convents and monasteries. This overview offers a short introduction, but remains for now an interim statement: a fuller, and richer, treatment is overdue.

# 5 Further Reading

There is not yet any comprehensive study of English 19th-century convents and monasteries, but some detailed studies have highlighted the principal themes described here. *Downside Abbey: An Architectural History* (2011), edited by Dom Aidan Bellenger, is a richly illustrated book with contributions by a range of architectural historians that sheds light on the continuing development of monastic architecture on this site over more than a century.

Roderick O'Donnell's *The Pugins and the Catholic Midlands* (2002) provides a gazetteer for the work of this prolific 19th-century family of architects across the east and west Midlands. The E.W. Pugin gazetteer on the Pugin Society website maintains an up-to-date list of his convents and monasteries: it can be found at <http://www.thepuginsociety.co.uk/convents-and-monasteries.html>. Paul Thompson's monograph *William Butterfield* describes in detail the architect's output for religious communities, from entire colleges to decorative details. The other major convent and monastery architects still await a comprehensive study.

A.W.N. Pugin's book *The Present State of Ecclesiastical Architecture in England*, first published in 1841-2, describes with illustrations his own seminal monastery and convent buildings as they were originally designed. The book includes Pugin's own ambitious and unexecuted scheme for Downside Abbey. The book is available in a facsimile paperback (2004), with an introduction by Roderick O'Donnell. An article by Timothy Brittain-Catlin called 'A.W.N. Pugin's English convent plans', published in the *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* [of the US] in September 2006, provides an interpretation of their originality and significance.

Susan Mumm's 1996 article "'Not worse than other girls': the convent-based rehabilitation of fallen women' in Victorian Britain (*Journal of Social History*, 29(3), pp. 527-47), describes Anglican penitential institutions for women; similarly, Peter E. Hughes' 1985 dissertation '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' (Brunel University; available online at <http://bura.brunel.ac.uk/handle/2438/4976>) describes in detail a Roman Catholic equivalent.

# 6 Acknowledgements

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