

AN APPRECIATION
OF THE PRESENT
CARMELITE BUILDINGS
AT
WHITEFRIARS STREET

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The group of buildings in the care of the Carmelite friars consists of a large church capable of seating 2,000 persons, a priory, a school which has catered for 2,000 pupils, and a food centre. The buildings occupy two-thirds of a rectangular block bounded on its eastern side by Aungier Street and on the other sides by Whitefriars Place, Whitefriars Street and Great Longford Street and penetrated from the northern side by Longford Lane. The total area of the Carmelite holding is 75,000 sq. ft., 'of which approximately half is covered by the buildings.' The earliest of these dates back to 1825 with extensions or improvements occurring at intervals down to the present day.

Father John Spratt engaged the services of George Papworth to design and construct a church on the site originally occupied by the Carmelites. The site was restricted, no more than 40 ft. wide and although the proportions of the church were very difficult to handle the descriptions written at the time were full of praise. Such proportions (200 ft. long x 34 ft wide), must have created serious problems for the priests and the congregation. The need for a church may have been paramount but this building must have proved indeed an embarrassment and was not allowed to remain unchanged for very long. Adjoining property was secured and plans drawn up for an extension which would treble the width of the church.

The second stage of the development of this site took place in 1842 and mainly consisted of using the existing church as the south aisle of the new church, adding a new nave and north aisle. This was cleverly contrived and the style of the original faithfully copied. The sanctuary and high altar remained at the Aungier Street end indicating the continuing importance of Whitefriars Street, and it is to be assumed that when the Aungier Street frontage became available, it was thought best to develop it as a priory. Records time this a few years before the main addition to the church (1840) and show that there was little to distinguish the building from other Georgian terrace housing in the area.

This extension to the church was the most important undertaking on this site up to the present day. It firmly established one of the largest churches in the city on a very limited site with the main approach from a narrow street that was rapidly dwindling in importance. The priory was also firmly established at the sanctuary end and no doubt worked very well in such proximity but we know that the perversity of the city's growth was to upset the planning arrangements, making it necessary to provide a main entrance from Aungier Street through the priory.

The church as it is at present is virtually the same as it was in 1844 if we omit St. Teresa's chapel, and place the high altar at the east end. Unique in that it grew as an extension of the original, it may be described as Romanesque although the proportions are out of character and the columns and capitals show a distinct baroque influence. The aisles are roofed with shallow panelled vaults and the ceiling of the nave in quadripartite vaulting, both in plaster on timber framing. The following description

appeared in the *Irish Catholic Directory* of 1844: “We are delighted to see that the elegant church of the ancient and venerable order of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, Whitefriars Street is at length finished, as to its interior, in a style of exquisite beauty, far surpassing anything of the kind seen, except the gorgeously ornamented churches at Munich and the Madelaine at Paris. Too much praise cannot be bestowed on Mr. Boylan of Grafton Street, Dublin to whose exquisite taste and judgment, we are informed, the metropolis is indebted for the introduction and execution of this bewitchingly beautiful mode of adorning churches. Mr. Boylan’s artists have so closely imitated the various rich and costly marbles, of which the altar, columns, pilasters and entablature appear formed, that the eye of the connoisseur could, with difficulty, distinguish them from the most select works of nature. The variety and harmony of the different colours of the walls and ceiling, the splendid dazzling effect of the crimson, white, and gold, in the ornaments of the capitals, scrolls in the ceiling panels, etc., renders this the most chaste and magnificent temple in these kingdoms. We understand that as usual in Ireland, the principle portion of the funds collected for this grand undertaking has been freely given by the poorer and middle-classes of the inhabitants of Dublin in pence and sixpence.”

It is interesting to consider how strong has been the influence of the first building. With the very rapid growth of the city towards Rathgar and the South Circular Road, Aungier Street developed in importance and was established as a main artery to the city, whereas Whitefriars Street was built up on both sides and restricted severely in width. This partly resulted from the influence of Carlisle bridge, Richmond bridge and the advent of the tram in Aungier Street. The result of this change of emphasis was a church with its altar at the wrong end.

George Papworth was a brother of John Buonarotti and studied under him. The elder brother was widely known as a classical stuccoist and practised extensively in England, helping to develop structural steel in warehouse construction. He was one of twelve architects responsible for the formation of the British Institute (1834). George followed the tradition but developed his practice in Dublin. He is reputed to have had a strong influence in the design of Sir Patrick Dunn’s hospital and to have designed Kingsbridge and Grattan Bridge.

There was little further development until the end of the century, although the *Irish Builder* noted the installation of an organ in 1865 by Messrs. White and Sons. In 1894 and with the services of Mr. J. L. Robinson, R.H.A., a new school was erected at a cost of £6,497. This building, three storeys high and with a total floor area of 16,000 sq. ft. was positioned beside the church and close to it. It replaced three houses which had been recently acquired by the friars and demolished to make room for the new building. This now forms part of the present school and although beginning to show its age has filled a great need for many years.

Many would condemn the siting of a school block so close to the church, but it must be remembered that the community were striving to meet the needs of the Dublin people and with very little means of raising large sums of money for building projects. Expansion has been restricted to acquiring the minimum space to meet urgent necessities, and immediate pressing requirements have been solved in the best possible way at the time. But expediency, while solving problems of the moment, often may preclude vision and here we find the first condition of a restricted site eased only for short periods with a very high density of building bounded on three sides by public roads and only very recently on the fourth by the yards serving new corporation flats. A few business houses make up the remainder of the square.

1914 was the next significant date in the annals of building on this site when the priory buildings and hall fronting on Aungier Street were built under the priorship of the Rev. J.L. McCabe. The appointed architect, C.B. Powell of Rathmines, extended the priory accommodation at this time to include a library, refectory, new oratory and cells. The original contract drawings show that concrete suspended floors were used, reinforced with “expanded metal” [sic]. This was a progressive step, and significant, stressing the permanency of the structure and firmly establishing the priory beside the sanctuary at the eastern end.

A dominant note was struck by Papworth originally. The greater proportion of his designs were finished both inside and out with plaster gaining for him contemporary recognition as a “great Stuccoist.” Although the school was built completely in brickwork without external plaster, Powell followed Papworth. He designed a monumental façade for Aungier Street completely faced and decorated in plaster in the style of the Renaissance with again one curious overtone, the entrance canopy whose curves suggested *art nouveau* influence. But the use of plaster and the style did and still does harmonise with the south wing and uniformity of detail and finish has obtained an effect of strength and dignity.

It is difficult nowadays to obtain the same very high standard of plasterwork. The light nap is uniform in texture with an incredible precision of line and surface. For a considerable time it must have been impressive but such a finish does not weather pleasantly in city areas and gradually the surfaces have been darkened by smoke and dust, giving a sombre character to the elevations. Great care and attention to detail is to be seen here and the stonemason’s art is reproduced faithfully in plaster with towering pilasters on a monumental plinth capped by a classical entablature. Quite recently, this became unstable and the greater portion had to be removed in the interests of safety. The apex was 70 feet above pavement level and the street width less than 50 feet.

No new building or alterations were carried out in the following thirty-five years. It should be noted that the school was extended in 1928 of course, but this was far

removed from the church proper, a functional job, significant in that it emphasised the considerable increase in children attending the school at the time. The next major work, the most recent, was undertaken by Rev. C. Haughey in 1951, who engaged a son of the above named school-architect, John J. Robinson, to solve the many planning problems resulting from an ever increasing congregation, particularly changes between Masses on Sundays. The entrances were inadequate and indirect being concentrated in Whitefriars Street while the great majority of traffic was coming from the opposite end behind the high altar. This was further complicated by the presence of a second Communion rail right across the church, dividing the nave into two parts.

Mr. Robinson's solution was simple and direct, involving minor structural alterations only. His scheme reversed the church completely, placing the high altar at the west end and building on a sacristy. Now direct access from Aungier Street on the central axis was available. A slight adjustment in floor levels, giving a slope towards the high Altar improved general visibility and corresponded nicely with outside pavement levels. The new sanctuary is spacious and ample for all and the graceful ivory commands the attention of all on the high altar, the most significant instrument in the liturgy. The gallery was also reversed and the original carved woodwork front remounted in the new position.

During the progress of this work it was decided to form a new chapel off the north aisle similar to the shrine of St. Teresa of Lisieux. To reproduce it exactly was impossible having regard to the cost, but the same feeling was contrived by adopting a similar plan-shape and a simplified Romanesque style. Five altars are contained in this side chapel, each dedicated to saints of particular significance for us, St. Valentine, whose relics were given to the Carmelites by Pope Gregory XVI in 1835, St. Jude, St. Anne, St. Pius X and the principal altar, St. Teresa, in whose honour the chapel was built. Each saint is represented by a statue in a niche of gold mosaic, over their altar.

The ivory is worthy of detailed study, reaching to within a few feet of the vaulted ceiling, it dominates the whole church, commanding attention even when glimpsed through the nave columns. Only by recent developments in reinforced concrete design can such a dome be supported on four slender columns. Continuity in the reinforcement eliminates horizontal joints or the problems of jointing materials. The columns are faced with Peche Rose marble, with Kilkenny black podiums, and the dome and pendentives with Italian glass mosaic.

The sanctuary floor is particularly pleasing in the muted tones of antique travertine with the steps picked out in second statuary and Italian black and gold. The high altar is of classical design with Irish limestone slab, and white Italian base relief panels, signifying the Blessed Eucharist. Cleverly concealed lighting apart from serving practical needs, gives clarity to the whole design.

Above and behind the high altar, Our Lady of Mount Carmel is depicted in stain glass, a small window which has been positioned carefully at the centre of the dome curve and the marble wall line. It can be illuminated from outside during evening services. But while it is a beautiful thing in itself, it is a very small element in a very large space, unrelated to its surroundings.

Other elements introduced into the church at this time include mahogany screens to the entrance, glazed with copper strips and antique tinted glass, the new Communion rail reconstructed from the old ones, a beautifully equipped priest's sacristy and a new lino covering to the circulation spaces in the church. This lino is a very fine example of precision cutting. It is generally in tile form representing an early Christian pattern. That it was cut in Lancaster and delivered to Dublin as a complete floor is a remarkable achievement but when we see the fineness of the work, realising that it forms a series of long passages joined at the crossing, it is incredible. After ten years it shows little signs of wear and the colours are still sound.

Papworth's original windows appear to have been leaded with a plain Gothic pattern, but these have all been replaced by stain glass by Meyer of Germany and Early Studios, of Dublin. The Meyer glass is generally of poor quality but the Flemish antique supplied by Early Studios is rich in strong hues and subtle tints.

Our Lady of Dublin shrine remains in the same place, a small wrought-iron rail having been added. This shrine is well known for its Mother and Child wood carving dating back to the Middle Ages. Now it stands, the centre-piece of a highly decorated shrine, above a Gothic altar and reredos, in fact such a confusion of line, texture and pattern that for some the power of the statue itself is lost. Although nothing definite is known, this Irish oak carving has been attributed to a pupil of Albert Dürer's school to whose time and manner it seems to belong.

From very modest beginnings has grown this important group of buildings close to the city centre. George Papworth could not have realised what was to follow, nor the successive priors, the tremendous increase in the scale of their work in this area. But recent reversing of the church was a radical step which has not yet been completed. What was done was right in every sense, but like the ill proportioned beginnings, must prove an embarrassment to the community until it is followed by a new priory to the rear of the site beside the sanctuary and the opening up of the main approach from Aungier Street. There are many contingent problems, the future of the school buildings and food centre, Carmel hall (part of the present priory), and the site development. The church should be present to the people, be a part of them, with the community withdrawn as much as possible from the bustle of the city thoroughfare. This can be done in time if the principles are accepted and carefully followed in the coming years, their buildings must not restrict this expansion, but rather serve their purposes economically and in keeping with their high office.