



4. Architects and Artists

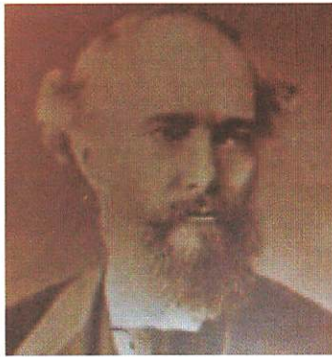
We owe the beauty of St Mary's to the imagination of the architects who, at different moments in its history, created a sacred space for the prayer and recollection of a growing worshipping community, and to the artists and craft-workers who adorned the building.

The majority of these are anonymous – the iron workers who made the screens, the stained-glass window makers, the carvers of wood and stone, the painters and the tile-layers. As in most Catholic churches, much of what we find in Clapham is repository art – the mass-produced statuary or holy pictures provided by big name producers. One of the best known providers of statues and stained glass for Catholic churches throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was the German firm of Mayer, founded in 1847, and which was soon exporting its wares to Britain, Ireland and the United States where there was a surge in new church buildings. Some of the statues in St Mary's were provided by this firm. But there is also a good deal of original work that testifies to the growing self-confidence of the English Catholic community in its artistic heritage.

The First Architect: William Wilkinson Wardell

The architect who laid out the plans for St Mary's was William Wilkinson Wardell. Born in 1823 in Poplar, London, where his parents were in charge of the workhouse, Wardell

embarked on a career as a civil engineer, but soon switched his interest to architecture under the influence of Augustus Welby Pugin (1812–1852). Pugin was a revolutionary force in British architecture in the Victorian age. In 1834 he converted to the Roman Catholic faith, which his French *émigré* father had abandoned. Two years later, he published a book called *Contrasts*, which was not only a call to return to the ideals of medieval art and architecture, but also to return to the faith and social structures that supported them. In many respects, Pugin's artistic revolution fed into the Oxford Movement which was calling for a reappraisal of the Catholic roots of the Anglican Church. It is scarcely surprising that Wardell became a Catholic at the age of twenty, and adopted as his motto the words, *Inveni quod quaesivi* ("I have found him whom I sought") from the biblical *Song of Songs*. His architectural practice was helped by his association with Pugin. On the strength of it, he was able to marry a few years later. It has been estimated that between 1846 and 1858 he designed, or was responsible for major refurbishment of, more than thirty churches in England.



William Wilkinson Wardell was the architect of St Mary's

Wardell was chosen as architect for the proposed Redemptorist church at Clapham by the superior, Fr Frederick de Held. His plans were for a church with a sanctuary, nave and two aisles. Only one thing in the original plan did not meet with de Held's approval. Pugin made the medieval "rood screen" a feature of the internal design of his churches. The rood screen was an elaborately carved wooden partition around the sanctuary, surmounted by a crucifix, often flanked by the figures of Mary and the Beloved Disciple. Although it had been a feature of medieval churches, and examples can still be seen in many English cathedrals, its original function had been essentially practical rather than decorative – to shield the clergy from cold breezes during the celebration of the long offices in choir. Counter-reformation changes in the style of building and decoration of Catholic churches meant the end of the rood screen, as it blocked the people's view of what was going on at the altar. As can be seen from St Mary's, de Held won and the view of the celebration of Mass at the altar was uninterrupted.

Ill-health forced Wardell to emigrate to Australia where he became the leading Catholic church architect and a major figure of his generation in Australian architecture. His most important churches are the cathedrals of Sydney and Melbourne. He was a genuinely devout man: in his homes, whether in England or Australia, a room was set aside as a chapel where he prayed several times daily. His rosary beads and prayer book, the traditional English *Garden of the Soul*, have been preserved and show signs of constant use. A prayer he composed addresses Our Lady as "my patroness, my mother, and my advocate with God ... I consecrate myself for ever, with all that belongs to me, to thy service."

John Francis Bentley 1839–1902

John Francis Bentley is best known as the architect who designed Westminster Cathedral, the most prestigious Catholic building planned and built at the intersection of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Born in Doncaster in 1839, he belonged to a family of seventeen children. His religious background was Low Church and, according to his daughter and biographer, he retained all his life a certain Puritanism of life and habit (Winefride de l'Hôpital, *Westminster Cathedral and its Architect*, vol 2, 1919, 359). As a young man, he was apprenticed first to a builder who discerned that his talents lay more in the field of architecture. By the age of twenty, Bentley had worked on some church projects, including the extension of the Jesuit church in Farm Street, London. It was at this time that his religious search led him into the Catholic Church. It is said that recovery from serious illness which he ascribed to the Blessed Virgin shortened the journey, and he was baptised by Cardinal Wiseman in 1862. For the next ten years or so of his life, Bentley's work was in the line of relatively small religious commissions.

During this time, he made the acquaintance of the Redemptorists, particularly Frs Coffin and Vaughan, who remained friends all his life. Through this contact, he did his first work for the Redemptorist church of the Annunciation at Bishop Eton, Liverpool. The church on the site had been designed by Edward Pugin, but when the Redemptorists took over the house and planned an extension to the church, Bentley was appointed architect and, among other works, he designed a new high altar and a shrine for the icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, the first to be venerated in England.

Professional success made it possible for Bentley to move house into the comparatively affluent suburb of Clapham where he became a member of the parish, and, as his daughter wrote, "the passing of the years was to bring an ever growing intimacy with St Mary's and on which for as long as the building may endure, his seal is now indelibly impressed".

Bentley made three major contributions to the site. The first was the exquisite chapel in honour of Our Lady of Perpetual Help, the second the monastery building and finally the south transept with its accompanying modifications of Wardell's existing building. He also designed some of the stained glass. Details of the work will be considered in the appropriate contexts elsewhere in this guide.

John F. Bentley died in 1902 and was buried from St Mary's. The following year, his widow paid for the decorative grille around the sanctuary: her husband is commemorated in a bronze plaque let into the sanctuary steps. Bentley was succeeded as head of the firm by his son, Osmund, who also contributed to the work on St Mary's, notably the construction and decoration of the chapel in honour of St Gerard, which mirrors his father's Lady Chapel on the opposite aisle.

Bernard Cox

The next architect to make a major contribution to St Mary's, Clapham, was George Bernard Cox of Birmingham. Many of the churches he designed survive in the Midlands, including the Franciscan Friary, Olton, the Assumption, Maryvale, and the Sacred Heart and St Margaret Mary, Birmingham. The addition of Bentley's transept was not sufficient to cope with the growing congregations at St Mary's. There was little room for extension on the site. Two shops fronting on to Clapham Park Road were acquired in 1926 and Cox drew up plans for an extension which was completed and blessed in 1930.



The Community Chapel restored by Ninian Comper

Sir Ninian Comper

John Ninian Comper was a Scottish-born architect, and the last in a line of distinguished architects of the Gothic Revival. His contribution to St Mary's is limited to work done in the community chapel, which is not open to the public, at the time of the celebration of the centenary in 1948. Together with his son, John B. Sebastian Comper, he was consulted regarding the restoration of the chapel which was part of Bentley's transept. Comper was eighty-four years old when he undertook the work. He re-gilded Bentley's reredos and added to it images of four saints: St Joseph, and three Redemptorists: Alphonsus, Clement and Gerard. Sebastian Comper designed the frontal for the altar and a sunburst display of rays behind the large crucifix, and planned the stencilling of the walls. Wisely, they decided to leave Bentley's ceiling untouched. The chapel is a gem of the Gothic style. Sir Ninian Comper was knighted in 1950 and lived to the advanced age of ninety-six. His ashes were buried in Westminster Abbey.

Joseph Anton Settegast

Joseph Anton Settegast (1813–1890) was the German artist responsible for the fresco of the Last Judgment on the chancel arch. He was one of the last members of a movement of German-speaking Catholic artists called the "Nazarene School" (*Nazarener Schule*). The "Nazareners" were young artists in the early years of the nineteenth century who aspired to return to a form of art which embodied spiritual values and highlighted the importance of narrating a story through the use of colour, seeking their inspiration in artists of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, whose work was essentially religious. The "Nazareners" were, in many respects, the forerunners of a similar British movement known as the "Pre-Raphaelites". Settegast was living in Koblenz when he was given the commission to paint the arch. Koblenz at that time was the seat of the vicar general of the Redemptorists for the region north of the Alps, so it is likely that Settegast's work was familiar to Redemptorists like Fr de Held who probably chose him for the work in Clapham.

There are other interesting associations between the "Nazareners" and the Redemptorists. One of the founders of the movement, Johann Friedrich Overbeck, was a member of the circle of St Clement Hofbauer in Vienna, and Settegast's teacher, Philip Veit, was the son and stepson of two other members of the Hofbauer circle, Dorothea and Friedrich Schlegel. Veit had revived the art of fresco-painting among the "Nazareners" and probably initiated Settegast into the technique. It took the artist six months to complete the work, as he had to work directly on wet plaster.

From a series of letters between the artist and his wife (published in an article on the fresco in the *South London News*, 5 January, 1977), we know that the work took place between August and October 1854. The letters are often humorous in their comments. Settegast mentions, for example, that Cardinal Wiseman wanted to see the work in progress when he came to celebrate the feast of St Alphonsus, “but naturally being such a heavy man, he could not mount the scaffolding”. He also observed that, while English churches attempted the great Masses of the German masters like Mozart and Haydn, they were not very good, lacking as they did the orchestral accompaniment of the originals, and had to rely on the organ alone: Mass for the feast of St Alphonsus was “particularly bad”.

By the early twentieth century the fresco was deteriorating. It was restored by the Belgian firm of *Van Linthout* in 1926, who chose the expedient of re-painting the scene on canvas and then fixing this over the existing mural. Little is known about *Van Linthout*, but the firm is associated with the artwork in some of the Cox-designed churches mentioned above, and, since he was beginning his work at St Mary's at this time, it was probably he who chose them to restore the fresco.

Margaret Agnes Rope (Sr Margaret of the Mother of God ODC)

Only a few of the designers of the stained glass windows can be identified with any certainty. The two earliest, the great window over the high altar and the one near the organ, are in the style of the Gothic Revival, reminiscent of some of the surviving windows of the elder Pugin and which Wardell or someone from his workshop imitated. Bentley certainly designed the St Clement window in the south transept, the windows depicting the Old Testament “types” of Mary in the Lady Chapel and the “window of the angels” over the confessional next to it. Another artist whose work can be identified is Margaret Agnes Rope. Like many of those associated with St Mary's, Margaret Rope (1882–1953) was a convert from Anglicanism. After the early death of her husband, Margaret's mother converted to Catholicism, bringing five of her six children into the Church with her. Margaret studied art in Birmingham, specialising in stained glass and enamelling. She entered the Carmelite Convent at Woodbridge, Suffolk, where she was able to continue designing glass and so contributed to the community's income. For Clapham, she designed the Holy Family window at the rear of the church and a set of three lancets in what was then St Alphonsus's chapel in the tower: that space is now occupied by a small repository. The subjects are a Virgin and Child, the Crucifixion and the Blessed Sacrament.

