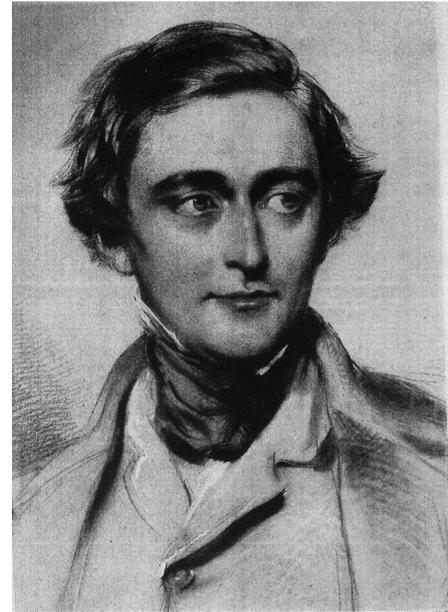




**Heritage Features
of
the Church
of
St John the Evangelist
Sandymount**

THE BENEFACTOR

Opened for worship on Palm Sunday, 24 March 1850, the non-parochial church of St John the Evangelist at Sandymount owes its existence to Sidney Herbert (1810-1861), later Lord Herbert of Lea, younger son of the Earl of Pembroke whose ancestral home was at Wilton in Wiltshire.¹ On the death of his father, George Augustus, the 11th Earl, in 1827, Herbert had become the heir not only to the considerable Pembroke estates in Britain but to further extensive Irish estates bequeathed to his father in 1816 by the childless Viscount Fitzwilliam of Merrion.² Herbert's ne'er-do-well elder half-brother (Robert, who lived permanently in exile) became the 12th Earl of Pembroke, but the Fitzwilliam estates passed not to him but to Sidney Herbert and then to his two sons, the 13th and 14th Earls respectively.³ Dublin press reports of the time record that Sidney Herbert originally donated the grounds on which St John's was to be built and added a donation of fifteen hundred pounds towards the building.⁴ At some later point he took up the whole cost, paying £6,000 for the construction and fitting of the church.⁵



The young Sidney Herbert

In the circumstances, it would be reasonable to suppose that Herbert himself had a large part to play in the commissioning of the English architect Benjamin Ferrey (1810-1880) to design and construct the church. A pupil of the elder Pugin and class-mate of the younger Pugin, Ferrey was to become one of the most gifted and prolific church architects of Victorian England. Appointed diocesan architect of Bath & Wells in 1841, he was later elected Hon. Sec. to the Architects Committee for the Houses of Parliament at a critical period of reconstruction. Significantly for St John's Sandymount, Ferrey invented and patented a method for stamping plaster moulds.

In studying the history of the church, it would be useful to avoid stereotyped assumptions about British landlords. Sidney Herbert was a liberal in the most liberal sense of the term. As a student at Oriel College, Oxford (1829-32), he had close contacts with Newman and Pusey (Fellows of the college at that time) and had also been close to Henry Edward Manning (later Cardinal) and William Ewart Gladstone. He first came to Ireland to review his Fitzwilliam inheritance in April 1832, writing to his mother, "*The first day we went over the city part of the estate, yesterday over Ringsend, Irishtown, and Sandymount*".⁶ He was to have little time ever to return. Later that year, after passage of the Reform Bill, Sidney stood for election to Parliament as Tory member for South Wiltshire, to find himself serving under the reforming leadership of Sir Robert Peel. Active in parliamentary debate, serving as Secretary at War and for the Colonies under Lord Aberdeen, he also threw himself into

the task of total restoration of the decaying parish church of Wilton. The gorgeous internal decoration of Wilton parish church, completed in 1845, might later have served as an indication to Ferrey in Sandymount of his patron's leanings. Somewhere between the completion of the church at Wilton, Herbert's marriage in 1846, and the start of the Crimean War in 1854, Herbert found the time to return to Dublin to acquaint himself with the needs of his estates and their residents, and subsequently to endow the non-parochial church of St John's.

It can be safely assumed that for Herbert, Her Majesty's Secretary at War, the priorities of his estates were eclipsed not only by the disastrous losses of the Crimean war (regularly denounced by the fiery Irish war correspondent of *The Times*, W.H. Russell) but, above all, by his mountainous task in supporting against all odds the heroic work of Florence Nightingale at the grossly inadequate military hospital at Scutari (see Cecil Woodham-Smith's pioneering investigation of Nightingale's life's work, *Florence Nightingale. A biography based on private papers and letters never before made public*, 1950). It was Sidney Herbert who, as Secretary at War, appointed Florence Nightingale as head of the first proper nursing corps in the British Army, and he who bore her unending tirades of frantic outrage and disappointment: the combination of circumstances finally broke his health in 1860, but "the lady of the lamp" persuaded him to stay on as Secretary at War, and he died in that office a year later. Woodham-Smith quotes Florence Nightingale's own correspondence to show how distraught and bereft she was after Sidney's early death: "*He takes my life with him. My work, the object of my life, the means to do it. All in one depart with him.*" She even railed against God for not preventing Herbert's death, which "*involved the misfortune physical and moral of five hundred thousand men*" and required "*but to set aside a few trifling physical laws to save him.*" The indomitable founder of the modern hospital lost her reason and became herself seriously ill as a result of Herbert's death.



Florence Nightingale

THE CHURCH: CONCEPT AND DESIGN (EXTERIOR)

The structure and the history of the church of St John the Evangelist are shaped by its foundation as a non-parochial church, i.e. an estate church with an independent liturgy, financed outside the usual sources of the protestant diocese. In the tense denominational differences of the late nineteenth century this was to lead to ecclesiastical, architectural, and financial dispute between incumbents of the church and the Church of Ireland diocesan authority of Dublin – and yet, the circumstances of Sidney Herbert's life indicate that it was not in his conciliatory temperament to build a church in a spirit of conflict.

Early Norman Romanesque

The style and motifs reproduced at St John's by Benjamin Ferrey are those of early Norman Romanesque architecture, inherently carrying contrasting and simultaneous emblems of disorder in the living world and tranquillity in the spiritual life. It is a style which, predating the schisms of the Reformation, combines a macabre vision of the physical world on the one hand and a strong sense of spirituality and aesthetic order on the other.



An early postcard of St John the Evangelist Church in Sandymount. Note the horse-drawn carriage on the right of the picture

The end of the Napoleonic wars had re-opened the frontiers of France, allowing access to the flood of antiquaries and students of architecture who had for so long been deprived of the opportunity to visit the early Romanesque churches of Normandy and beyond, forebears of English ecclesiastical architecture. Ferrey himself was a keen student of the Romanesque, and one of his earliest projects had been the restoration of the magnificent pre-Norman priory of Christchurch (Hants), in collaboration with the younger Pugin. In the 1830s Herbert himself had made an excursion to Normandy and delivered an enthusiastic account of what he had seen to his mother (the second wife of Sidney's father), Catherine Woronzoff, daughter of the Russian ambassador to St James's. Legend has it that both he and his mother admired the eleventh-century Romanesque church of St Pierre at Thaon, near Caen. Although there is a striking resemblance between the three church towers of St John's Sandymount, St Nicholas at East Grafton, and Thaon, there has not yet been found any proof that members of the Herbert family ever travelled to Thaon.

As it happens, St John's Sandymount is an extended replica of Ferrey's earlier church of St Nicholas at East Grafton (Wiltshire), built in 1844: it was his first church and, with its original gargoyle-bedecked tower still in place, remains intact. (see illustration). This enables us to envisage the tower roof of St John's as it was before its adornment of grotesque figures was removed on the express command of the Church of Ireland diocese of Dublin. This was but one of a long series of episodes reflecting the distrust of the established church for the real and metaphorical "smells and bells", of an alternative Anglican liturgy.



St Nicolas, East Grafton, Wiltshire. Note the gargoyles on the roof

Fortunately, not all the symbols of a demonic presence in the world have been eliminated from the exterior of St John's. Lining the gutters around the apse, in true Norman Romanesque style, are a series of nineteen grotesque heads (or "modillons" in French); unlike gargoyles, they have no practical function as water spouts. In addition, in a playful improvisation on the occasional fantasy of skilled medieval sculptors, the



Griffon Design on Chimney.

chimney on the S.E. corner of the apse is adorned with a writhing serpent, doubtless waiting either to torment the hapless faithful as they emerge from prayer or to propel them even faster towards their orisons. It was recently pointed out by a long-standing resident of Sandymount that the serpent is, in fact, a griffon – the heraldic emblem of the Herbert family, also visible on a plaster mould inside the church. Under the guidance of Benjamin Ferrey, modern machinery of the nineteenth-century thus contrived to re-create the sculptural innovation and artistry of medieval masons.

Many of the token emblems of evil and moral ugliness which were originally to be found on the exterior walls of St John’s have been destroyed by inclement weather and the passage of time; this includes most of the window corbels and the figures at the end of the west and east



Heads being restored on the gable walls of St. John’s

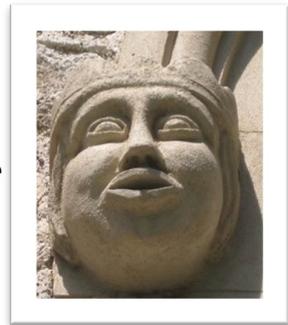
gables, but careful restoration work has ensured that, in addition to the nineteen *modillions*, no less than thirty-two “horrible heads” remain in place around the edge of the tower roof, shepherded by four worthy-looking heads at each corner.⁷ With the nineteenth-century removal of the gargoyle heads from the roof, these four worthies now bear a lighter burden, and



Arch decoration and modillions on a window at St John’s

the corpus of exterior sculpted work is now less threatening than it would have been. External emblems of harmony are not, however, lacking. The three main door arches (west, east [chancel], and north) have characteristic Norman decoration of **chevrons** and ornamental **corbels** which have been carefully restored. There are, of course, the string courses at different levels, whose presence (although technically essential in their original function as a verification of alignment) create a reassuring sense of aesthetic balance and control,

as do the window-less, Romanesque (i.e. rounded) arches of the belfry. There is a total of sixteen *arcatures aveugles* grouped in pairs on either side of a main Romanesque open arch on each of the four sides of the upper tower, therefore visible from all points of the compass.

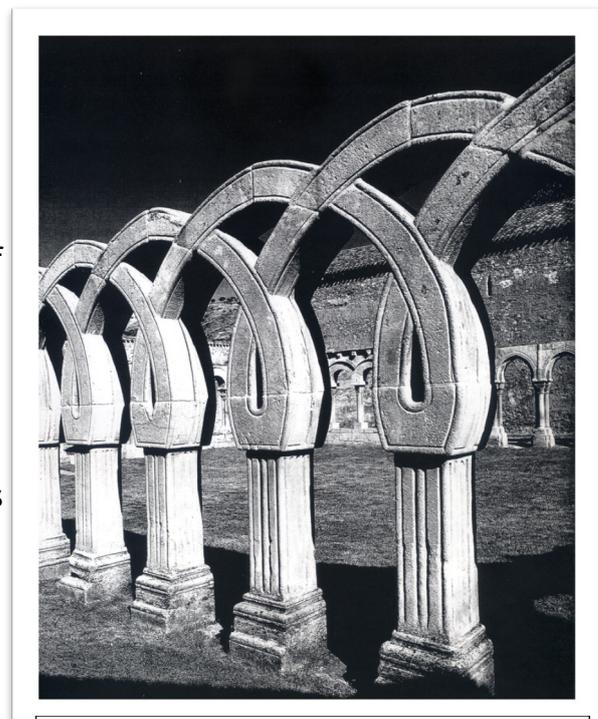


The most striking form of *arcature aveugle* on the church exterior is the sculpted sequence of interlacing Romanesque arches on the west front. Unusual in that particular location, presented as a main feature without any figures of the Gospel to animate or enhance it, this motif was reproduced in countless churches and ecclesiastical buildings across Europe in the middle ages. It seems to have suggested an infinite spiritual progression: self-reproduction, survival, continuity, order, and harmony.⁸ Ironically, it also indicates its own demise, the supplanting of Romanesque style by the emergent Gothic, in the implicit shapes of the ogival (Gothic) arches) created by the interlocking pattern. As if to confirm the authenticity of the design, the external walls also include the use of genuine Caen stone from Normandy, but the most striking emblem of *provenance authentique* is the distinctive sculpted cross which stands over the west gable: it is a duplicate of the cross to be found over the east gable at Thaon, and over the west gable of the church of La Trinité at L'Abbaye aux Dames, built by William the Conqueror in Caen for his wife Matilda.

CONCEPT & DESIGN (INTERIOR)

If the exterior of the church bristles with threatening heads, the interior sends (in contrast) clear signals of a knowing and erudite design to express intimacy and complicity with the visitor. This is accomplished in a sharply focused, sequential manner. The most immediately striking features are: the design of the font; the motif on the pulpit; and the moulded arch which soars over the entrance to the chancel.

1. It has been suggested that the font is a replica of the one to be found in Winchester cathedral⁸, but it is, in fact, much more like the one in the church of La Trinite a l'Abbaye aux Dames, in Caen. In truth, it probably resembles the font of many other churches of Saxon or early Norman Romanesque as well, because it is a pastiche designed to capture



Interlacing arches in Jan Juan de Duero (Spain)

critical elements of a widespread design. Far from slavish reproduction, the intention of the architect appears to be the creation of a modern aesthetic code, pitched in the key of Anglo-Norman Romanesque. One dares to suggest that the only church interior in Christendom to resemble that of St John's Sandymount is at East Grafton in Wiltshire – also, of course, the work of Benjamin Ferrey. The most effective way to appreciate the architect's modern manipulation of historic design is to join in his game of matching symbols.

2. The design of interlocking *arcature aveugle* on the pulpit is the first to strike the eye upon entry to the church, because it has already been announced (and commented upon) on the tower outside. The repetition of this characteristic romaneseque design serves to trigger further reflection on its many possible interpretations: windows to truth or the growth of understanding.

3. On approaching the pulpit, one's attention is caught by the detailed design of the archway to the chancel: it is, in fact, comprised of several arches, each with its own motif, which make up the ensemble; on turning to the arches along the nave one recognizes that each has its own separate style of ornament: chevron, frette, cable, and billeted moulding are all there, and all are reproduced and synthesized in the large central archway. The carving on the wooden lectern also reproduces these designs. Each individual pattern is a traditional Norman Romanesque design, but with his mastery of the techniques of moulding plaster Ferrey is able to create a modern fusion of them all.

Having appreciated how, in contrast with the bristling exterior, the aesthetic innovation of the interior design contributes to a particularly focussed spiritual space, visitors may then turn to contemplate the organ loft, immediately noticing that just as the pulpit captures motifs from the tower so does the organ loft, with its *arcatures aveugles* now sculpted in mahogany rather than in stone. If one is able to lift the altar cloth, one will find the same motif there, as on the carved wooden communion rails.



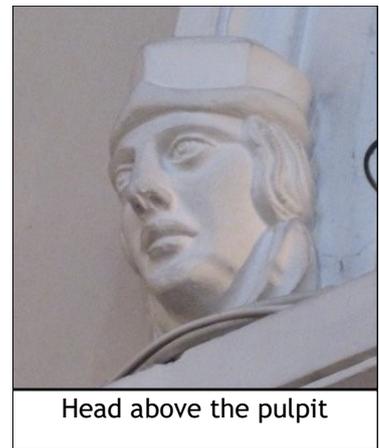
The Font at East Grafton



Decorative tiles in the chancel

At the same time, decorated tiles reputed to come from Pugin's workshop will be observed on the chancel floor. The icon-like figures of the chancel mosaic will be further studied in the section below. Nor should the plaster mould corbels of Ferrey's original work be neglected; like figures from a novel by Dan Brown or Iain Pears, they lend themselves to imaginative interpretation.

If the emblem of the Herbert family griffon can be identified in the moulded escutcheon above the stack of prayer books, is it not too fanciful to imagine that the handsome face seen in profile over the left shoulder of the priest in the pulpit not resemble the church's original benefactor, Sidney Herbert himself?



This, then, is the presentation of the original structure and design of the church. Those who say their prayers at St John's are very fortunate that further contributions by

subsequent benefactors of the church have maintained the same high level of attention to craftsmanship, beauty, and spiritual support. If the coherence of the design is clear, it should not be allowed to inhibit individual exercises of invention and discovery within the church.



Later benefactors will all have had their own ideas in mind when contributing the many magnificent items which adorn the interior: from colourful silk and damask or the magnificent windows to the plain plaster medallions illustrating the stations of the cross created by the French sculptor Roger de Villiers, brought back from Paris by Evie Hone, they all have a story to tell, or yet to be discovered. The harmony of these lovely constituent parts in such a simple plan makes an important contribution to the climate of spirituality in the church.

The use of mosaic work in the church is an entirely appropriate addition, taking up the recorded ornament of the original apse in the church of San Giovanni Evangelista in Ravenna, the first church known to have been dedicated to the Evangelist: built in the fifth century by Galla Placidia (daughter, wife and mother of Roman emperors), it was irreparably damaged by Allied bombs in World War II but remains a powerful testimony to the continuity of faith.

Notes

1. Most of the elements pertaining to the construction of St John's, and to the diocesan controversy surrounding it, come from the papers of the late Jennifer Moreton, a stalwart of the congregation of St John's, who died before her planned history of the church could be completed: her family have, however, kindly made her invaluable papers available to the present congregation of the church. Material derived from her work is identified by the initials *JM*.
2. Although devoting a whole chapter to the Pembroke estate in her admirable *Dublin* (The Buildings of Ireland series, Yale U.P., 2005, pp. 554-595), Christine Casey does not extend her inventory into the suburban areas of the Merrion estate in Ringsend and Sandymount .
3. The front pew of the church, which still bears a reservation plaque in the name of the Earl of Pembroke, thus passed successively not to the 12th Earl but to Sidney Herbert's two sons,
4. His father had set an example by granting the site for construction of the Pepper Canister church in 1824 (*Casey*, p.559).
5. *JM*. A verification of contemporary records reveals that these were astronomical sums of money for the time. Bateman's *Great Landowners of Great Britain & Ireland* (4th edition) 1888), reveals that Lord Massarene's 9,238 acres of land in Louth and Meath were valued at £9,238.
6. Lord Stanmore, *Sidney Herbert, Lord Herbert of Lea. A Memoir*, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1906), vol. 1, p.15.
7. Important restoration work on the corbels and grotesque figures was completed by Henry Snell, master stone-mason for Conservation and restoration (a Sisk Group Company)
8. Helen Bartlett, "Church of St John the Evangelist", thesis completed in part requirement of B.A. (Trinity College, History of Art), March 1991

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Rick Caldicott has carefully researched the history and spiritual intention of St John's over many years. We are very grateful to him for his meticulous work. He is a graduate of Trinity College and the University of Aix-Marseille, and professor-emeritus of French at UCD. Many of the photographs were taken by Mary Ena Pyle and Michael Jenkins

