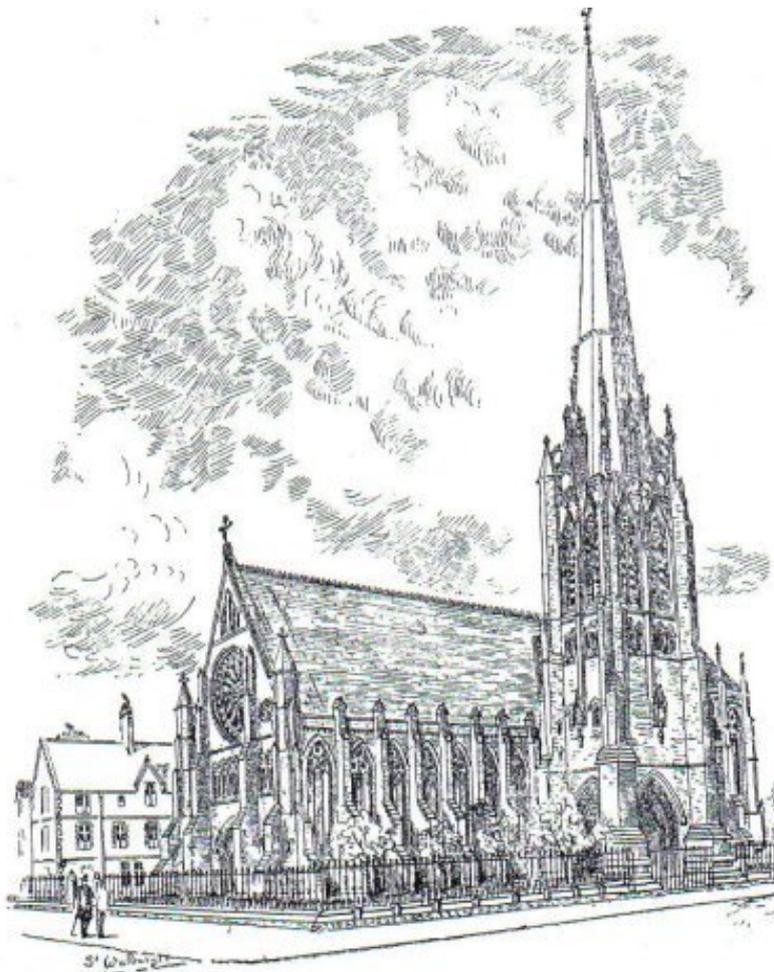


‘We will build as far as we have the means’

Raising St Walburge’s, 1850 to 1866

Tom Smith



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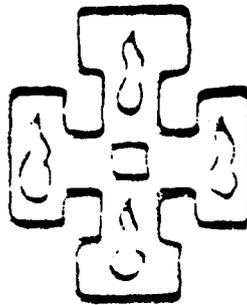
The cover illustration, by courtesy of the Talbot Library, shows St Walburge's,
Preston.

The cross on the title page is derived from the arms of William, Cardinal Allen.

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Wigan

2006

‘We will build as far as we have the means’:

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As in many towns throughout the country the population of Preston increased rapidly in the first half of the nineteenth century from 11,887 in 1801 to 69,450 in 1851. An important feature of this growth was that it contained a higher percentage of Catholics than any other town in the country. The mission censuses of the Rev. Joseph Dunn taken in 1810 and 1820 show on both occasions that Catholics represented about 21% of Prestonians. A study of the burial returns of the local public cemetery shows by 1860 that Catholics had increased to 35% of the local inhabitants, about 26,000. This growth naturally required the building of more schools and churches for them. ¹

By the 1840s the town had four Catholic missions: St Mary’s (1761), St Wilfrid’s (1793), St Ignatius’ (1836) and St Augustine’s (1840). The first three of these were Jesuit foundations and the fourth, St. Augustine’s, was established by the Lancashire district on the southern side of Preston and staffed by secular priests. To cater for the increasing population to the west, where more factories were being built from the 1830s onwards, the Jesuits decided that another school and church were needed. Their first step was taken in March, 1846, when they bought a large site from the Preston and Wyre Railway Company. Unfortunately it was purchased leasehold and not freehold and when the debt on the church was eventually cleared it could not be

consecrated for this reason. It was not until 1936 that this legal and canonical complication was overcome.²

This site was on the edge of one of the older parts of the town where two monastic institutions had been established in the thirteenth century. In 1221 the Grey Friars had built a monastery and in 1293 a hospital. The latter, on what became known as Spittals-moss, was mainly for the treatment of skin diseases which apparently were quite prevalent in this part of Lancashire at the time. It was dedicated to the patron saint of lepers, St Mary Magdalen, the pronunciation of which in medieval times was 'Maudlin', accounting for the present name of the locality which is Maudland.³

The purchase of the site coincided with the arrival in Preston in 1847 of the architect Joseph

Hansom. He must have considered that the growing number of Catholics in the area would require more schools and churches and his assumption was correct. He had already worked for the Society of Jesus at Spinkhill and St.Asaph and was given the task of planning their proposed school. His design consisted of two large classrooms with an entrance between which eventually became a cloakroom but was initially used as a chapel. It was a common practice at the time to erect a school which could also be used as a chapel before investing in the building of a church. These two classrooms were as large as many halls in modern schools and had fine timber roofs each with six hammerbeam principals.⁴

The estimated cost of the school was £2,000 and £1,750 of this was immediately donated by a local Catholic cotton manufacturer, William Talbot. His generosity was recognised by naming the building after him as the Talbot Catholic Schools which they remained until their closure some twenty years ago. Nowadays these two large rooms are used as a parish community centre and by the Talbot Library.

When the chapel was ready for use is not clear. The *Preston Guardian* stated it would be open for divine service on 18 May 1851, then a year later that the first Mass would be said there on 27 September 1852. In the meantime positive steps had been taken towards the erection of the church at a meeting of the prominent Catholics of the town in the Upper Schoolroom, Fox Street, on 15 January 1850. There it was announced that to add to the sum of £1,800 which had already been collected, the Jesuit superior had agreed to donate a further £300. The new church would stand as a monument to the Society of Jesus ‘who have done so much for this town.’ When outlining the plans for raising the money it was described how many of the poorest families had already pledged to give £1 a year; many trades people £5; and that collections would be made by ‘captains’ going around houses in their area on a weekly basis. Promises had even come from Back Canal Street and Hope Street, two of the poorest in the town and known as ‘the beggars’ colony’. During the next two years a variety of events took place and by autumn 1852 over £6,000 had been raised of which £800 had come from the Maudland Bazaar held earlier that year.⁵

An estimate of the cost of the church was between £7,000 and £8,000 but the task of raising this amount was undertaken with typical Victorian optimism. Preston,

however, was passing through periods of economically hard times. The majority of its people were dependent upon the cotton trades and there were regular fluctuations in local prosperity. The general health of the operatives was poor, their life expectancy at the time was only 18.28 years, and over a half of their children died below the age of five. In 1848 there were 2,460 Prestonians living in cellars, and respiratory and intestinal diseases were widespread throughout the poorer classes. Their situation was worsened by the Great Lock-Out which took place from October 1854 to May 1855 when 25,000 cotton workers in the town were put out of work. Already paid less than operatives in other Lancashire towns they were simply seeking a pay restoration following a 10% reduction in their wages. They were unsuccessful and eventually returned to work dejected and defeated.⁶

The effect of the local economic situation on the new church was to delay its completion. There were also some Catholics who reasonably considered that the approved plans for the tower and spire were too ambitious in such hard times and should be modified. A meeting to protest about this to the rector of St Wilfrid's, Fr J.E. Etheridge, was attempted at the beginning of 1853. At the time, however, he was at St Bueno's in Wales. In a written reply to the protesters he refused to agree to any changes in the architect's plans and stated that 'We will build as far as we have the means.' and went on to urge the collectors to redouble their efforts.⁷

On 24 May 1847 when the foundation stone was laid the building was named the 'Chapel and School of St. Joseph'. Yet even by the time the collections for the church had begun it was already being referred to as St Walburge's. It was not actually until 1860 that St Joseph's chapel and school were built on the eastern side of the town and its church in 1874. This change of name was apparently brought about by several amazing medical cures which took place and were attributed to St Walburge's Oil.⁸

St. Walburge was born in 710, a daughter of St. Richard, King of Wessex, and she entered a convent at Wimborne ten years later when her mother died. In 750 she went to help her brothers in the conversion of Germany to Christianity and eventually became the superior of a convent and a monastery. She died in 778 and a convent was built in her honour at Eichstadt where her relics were put in a bronze shrine on a marble base. Each year this marble 'perspires' and the drops are collected in a silver vase. This liquid, known as 'St Walburge's Oil', was reputed to be capable of curing all manner of physical ailments.

It was while the building of the church was being projected that a series of remarkable cures took place in Preston attributed to the application of this 'Oil.' Alice Holderness, a housemaid at St Wilfrid's presbytery, fell at work and broke her kneecap. When it failed to mend and medical opinion declared it incurable one of the priests, Fr Norris, applied St Walburge's Oil to it and, according to an eye-witness, 'The bones snapped immediately together and she was perfectly cured.' Similar spectacular results were obtained with young Mary Meagher in treating her facial

affliction and with Sister Bradley at Winckley Square Convent who was relieved of a serious stomach complaint. Naturally these cures were given wide publicity and a devotion to St Walburge developed in the area. The priests at St Wilfrid's had no doubts about the miraculous nature of the cures and decided that their daughter church should be named in honour of St Walburge.⁹

The commission for planning the new church had already been given to Joseph Hansom by the time of the first public meeting to discuss its erection. His past work for the Jesuits and local satisfaction with the Talbot Schools had won their approval. During his career he worked on fifty churches, ten convents, seven monasteries and many schools and presbyteries yet he is probably best known for his design of a Patent Safety Cab in 1834. He made little money out of this venture because he was never paid the purchase money for his patent. The hansom cab, as it became known, nevertheless brought him fame for, as Gillow wrote, 'It is given to few to see their name spelt with a small initial, a distinction which assured marks extreme celebrity'.¹⁰

The Jesuits favoured a style of architecture similar to the one used at the Talbot Schools: a large rectangular hall, without aisles, and with a hammerbeam roof. They wanted a simple plan at an affordable price and with the embellishment of the interior left to the future. The design was widely praised though some doubt was expressed about the idea of such a large single-span roof. In a speech at a dinner following the laying of the church foundation stone Hansom expressed his confidence in the

concept of such a roof, which was similar to that used to cover the Great Hall of Westminster constructed some five hundred years earlier. He felt that ‘Considering the greater facilities we possessed these days, arising from the advances made in mechanical and structural sciences . . . we should be successful in roofing over large spaces’. He was still actually defending this principle of the single-span roof some seventeen years later. By 1872, however, it had become apparent that the weight of the church roof, unsupported by pillars, was creating undue outward pressure on the walls and that there was danger of collapse. The remedy was to strengthen the walls with buttresses. Even so it was a roof which was later described as ‘perhaps the most masterly ever put over *any* Victorian church’.¹¹

Hardly an accident took place during the building of the church except on 23 July 1853. During the week the workmen had been engaged in hoisting the massive timbers of the roof and by Saturday four pairs of principals had been fixed in their places. No violent storm was expected in July but at 4.30 the following morning an alarming hurricane arose and three of the four principals, each weighing six tons, fell from a height of over 80 feet and were badly shattered. Fortunately no one was injured but the damage was estimated at over £200.¹²

When they first moved into Preston the Hansom family lived at Canal Cottage before later moving to Greenbank House from where the growing shell of the church was clearly visible. During this period Joseph and his wife Hannah took part in fundraising activities such as the Maudland Bazaar in September 1852. Mrs Hansom

was one of the management committee for this event, which was held in the town's Corn Exchange. In 1854 their eldest daughter, Sophia Louise, married George Bernard Maycock in St Joseph's chapel just ten weeks before the opening of the new church. Maycock was a local man who became a designer of stained glass windows for the firm of John Hardman in Birmingham.¹³

Although the building was unfinished, St Walburge's church was solemnly opened on 3 August 1854 by Bishop Brown of Liverpool. Also present were three more bishops, 120 clergy, about 200 laity, a thirty-four piece band and a choir of forty-one voices. The cost of reserved seats was ten shillings, five shillings and two shillings and sixpence and over £400 was raised by this entrance money. A collection taken for the building costs added a further £105. Cardinal Wiseman was to have preached but was unable to attend and the sermon was given by the Jesuit provincial, the Rev. Fr Randall Lythgoe S.J. It was an occasion of great pomp and ceremony, which might have enabled the thousands of spectators from the surrounding area to forget the harshness and poverty of their daily lives. It was a day, said Bishop Brown 'on which Catholics might exult with a truly pious and religious exultation towards God'.¹⁴

The church was built in the early decorated Gothic style and its basic plan was a rectangle 165 feet long by 55 feet wide, divided into thirteen bays and constructed in a brownish freestone. The main feature of the western façade was the wheel window, some 22 feet in diameter and filled with geometric tracery. Sometimes known as the Apostles' Window because of the twelve roses around the centrepiece, it was donated

by the Misses Roper who periodically made other generous gifts to the Catholics of Preston. At the time of the opening the church did not have the present sanctuary. Since it was felt that the original was too small S.J. Nichol was asked in 1870 to design one which was more in keeping with the rest of the church. Additional fundraising events followed and these, together with the admission costs for another splendid ceremony in March 1873, helped to pay the £2000 costs of the new fine sanctuary. Undoubtedly the outstanding feature of the church interior is the stupendous high-rising hammerbeam roof of fourteen principals, each tipped with the standing figure of a saint, but Nichol's sanctuary also has many supporters. One of Hansom's main aims in church design was to improve the quality of accommodation to enable the poor parishioners, who were usually at the back of the church, to have a proper view of the altar and this he certainly achieved at St Walburge's.¹⁵

Before serious consideration could be given to the erection of the tower and spire Fr Weston and his assistants needed a presbytery next to the church, for they had spent the previous ten years in a rented house in nearby Wellington Place. Hansom was also the architect of this new presbytery which was completed in November 1860. It is not, however, the present one which stands between the church and the Talbot Library. That one was built in 1906 because its predecessor had failed to withstand the vibration of the trains that frequently passed only a short distance away.

Collections for the erection of the tower and spire had been taken since the opening of the church. The base of the tower had been completed with the church, because it housed the organ and choir. By the time Fr Weston retired as mission priest

in 1863 over £1,900 of the required £2,600 had been raised. In a speech in May, 1858, Joseph Gillow, a prominent local Catholic, confidently assured the clergy of Preston that the townspeople 'would not rest satisfied until they saw the spire of St. Walburge's church completed'. It proved to be a promise more easily made than fulfilled.¹⁶

There is an unproven tradition that because of the sandy nature of the subsoil that the foundations of the tower were laid on bales of cotton. It may well be true because such a base would have had the added advantage of reducing the vibration caused by passing trains. The early building of the tower was done by different contractors who later withdrew: Joseph Hansom initially supervised it, then a Mr Thomas from Wales was engaged to take it higher but he too failed to last long. One particularly noticeable feature of the lower part of the tower is that the limestone blocks to a height of thirty feet are different from those above. This is because they had been previously used as sleepers on the Preston to Lancaster Railway until that company replaced them with wooden ones to provide a more comfortable ride, and such limestone going cheaply was a bargain Fr Weston could not afford to ignore. Apart from some Welsh limestone imported during Thomas's time, the remainder of the upper tower and spire is Kendal limestone which was transported from there to Preston down the nearby canal. There then followed a period when the work came to a standstill when there was a shortage of money to finance the building resulting from the trade depression created by the Cotton Famine.¹⁷

In 1860 there was confidence that the building would be completed in reasonable time and without too much trouble. Much of the required amount had been collected and it was anticipated that the remainder would be forthcoming for the erection of the tower and spire to begin again the following spring. The start, however, was delayed because the architect's plans were not ready and this was followed by a steep decline in subscriptions because of the Cotton Famine which began towards the end of 1861. This resulted from the war between the Northern and the Southern States of America over the question of slavery. Raw cotton exports stopped and the trade of Lancashire was almost paralysed until 1865. By December 1862, the worst month, over 40,000 people in the town had to receive assistance, and four months later forty mills had to close leaving 15,000 unemployed. The Catholic guilds suspended their collections, and those for the tower and spire naturally received a much lower priority than physical survival.¹⁸

Little progress could be made until autumn, 1863, when, with the worst of the depression over, another effort was made to restart subscriptions. The building of the tower was resumed by the firm of Edward Bickerstaffe, a local contractor, and, apart from natural delays during the winter months, the tower began to rise again slowly but steadily. Then in 1865 a most successful financial event was a prize draw which produced £1000. This amount also received a further small addition because 'The

pony won by Miss Hennessy of Dundalk had not been claimed and was likely to be sold'.¹⁹

Despite the lofty height at which the builders worked, as with the church, not a single accident took place during the construction. The spire was finally completed in September 1866, when the main spectacle took place with the fixing of the fifteen-foot cross on the top. This was a work of real difficulty for the lower portion of the cross had to be passed down thirty feet through the head of the spire before being bolted to large interior stones. To view this perilous task at an altitude of over 300 hundred feet a large crowd assembled on the afternoon of 5 September 1866, many with telescopes and binoculars. What amazed the people most was the skill with which the men moved about on the high scaffolding. Once the cross had been fixed in position the builders waved their caps and the crowd below responded with rounds of cheering. The bell was put in position in the tower the following day and the lightning conductor and weather vane on the spire some weeks later, again witnessed by a large crowd.²⁰

The entire cost of the building was later estimated at £50,000 but as a result of the essential constant maintenance that such a building requires the present debt stands at over £600,000. Fr Thomas Weston, the first mission priest from 1850 to 1863, died four years after his retirement in 1867. He worked unremittingly raising the required capital during hard times and must be one of very few nineteenth-century Catholic priests to have the street in which they built a church named after them. His labour

helped to erect a spire which is the third tallest in the country and a church which is second only in height to St Paul's, London.²¹

St Walburge's has remained the most conspicuous building in the city of Preston and is listed Grade One. It was granted this status not only for the quality of the interior with the masterly carpentry of the superb hammerbeam roof, but also for the exterior where the soaring grace of its silvery limestone spire contrasts so beautifully with the darkish stone of the nave. Yet until electric lighting was put in the roof in 1907 it was said that the marvellous principals with their twenty-four canopied saints could only be properly seen when the late afternoon summer sun shone through the Apostles' Window in the western façade for normally the ceiling was too dark and gloomy to be appreciated. The last person to climb and inspect the exterior of the spire was Fred Dibnah shortly before his retirement. It must have been on the calmest of days for it is claimed, with authority, that in a high wind the spire moves as much as four feet.

Pevsner described St Walburge's as 'a church no one is likely to forget' and with good reason. Its tower and spire are the outstanding features of the local skyline, whether sunlit during daytime or illuminated after dark. They were obviously intended to be the chief landmark of the surrounding countryside for many miles and were a clear statement by the Catholics of Victorian Preston of the importance of their presence in the town and of their growing confidence in the future.²²

NOTES

1. A. Hewitson, *History of Preston in the County of Lancaster* (Preston, 1883), p. 44; J. Dunn, *Census of the Catholic Congregation of Preston, 1810 and 1820* (Preston, 1993) transcribed by Margaret Purcell; annual statistics of the Preston Burial Board were published in local newspapers in January each year from 1856 onwards.
2. B.W. Kelly, *Historical Notes on English Catholic Missions* (London, 1907) , p. 322.
3. P. Whittle, *History of Preston*, II (Preston, 1837), p. 26.
4. J. Gillow, *Biographical Dictionary of English Catholics*, III (London, 1855), p.119.
5. *Preston Guardian*, 25 May 1850, 17 May 1851, 26 September 1852, 2 October 1852; *Preston Chronicle*, 19 January 1850. (Hereafter referred to as *P.G.* and *P.C.*)
6. Hewitson, *Preston*, pp.178-9; L. Warren, 'Hard Times in Catholic Preston' in J. A. Hilton (ed.), *Catholic Englishmen* (Wigan, 1984), p. 45.
7. B.F. Page, *Our Story, The History of St. Walburge's Church, Preston* (Preston, 1929), p.17.
8. *Ibid.*, p.5.
9. Atticus (A. Hewitson), *Our Churches and Chapels* (Preston, 1869), p.117.
10. Gillow, *Biographical Dictionary*, III, p.118.
11. *P.G.*, 25 May , 1 June 1850 ; *The Builder*, 21 September, 1867; B. Little, *Catholic Churches Since 1623* (London, 1966), p.132.
12. *P.G.*. 30 July 1853.
13. Page, p.15.
14. *P.G.*, 5 August 1854
15. *P.G.*, 29 March 1873.
16. Page, p.26; *P.G.*, 22 May 1858.
17. Hewitson, *Preston*, p.510; S. Sartin, *The People and Places of Historic Preston* (Preston, 1988), p. 30.
18. *P.C.*, 28 September 1861, 31 May 1862, 21 June 1862; Hewitson, *Preston*, pp.189-194.
19. *P.G.*, 15 October 1864, 19 August 1865.
20. *P.G.*, 6 September 1866.
21. Hewitson, *Preston*, p.511.
22. N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: North Lancashire* (Harmondsworth, 1969), p. 32.

'We will build as far as we have the means': Raising St Walburge's, 1850 to 1866 is an account of the building of St Walburge's church, which towers above Preston.

This paper was presented at a meeting of the North West Catholic History Society in 2005 at the Talbot Library, Preston, which is housed in the former Talbot Catholic Schools, next to St Walburge's.

Tom Smith is the author of several studies of Catholics in nineteenth-century Preston.