

A VISIT TO ST ANNE'S CATHEDRAL

On a wet and blustery day in January, in the brief lull between storms Isha and Jocelyn, a sizeable group of Trust members enjoyed a visit to St Anne's Roman Catholic Cathedral in the centre of Leeds.

We began with a detailed tour, led by Robert Finnigan, the Diocesan Archivist, who drew our attention to the many remarkable features of the cathedral and explained its history. This was followed by a talk from the Cathedral Architect, Richard Williams, in which he focused particularly on the re-ordering and restoration of the interior in 2005-6. Finally, we were treated to a short recital from the magnificent organ, which has also recently been restored. This was followed by tea and biscuits in the adjacent cathedral hall.

The cathedral is Grade II* listed and has the distinction of being the only cathedral in England, of any denomination, built in the Arts and Crafts style. The distinguished architectural historian Patrick Nuttgens described it as 'a wholly original and distinctive church building' and an 'outstanding example of the architecture which gave the country a special reputation at the turn of the century'. Do we, in Leeds, fully appreciate its special position in our national heritage?

One of the members remarked to me, as we assembled, that it seems bigger inside than you would expect. This tardis-like quality was mentioned during our tour, and it is something that I have noticed for myself on previous occasions. This time I tried to work out what it is that creates this impression. Key to it, I think, is that our first assessment, from the outside, is that it looks fairly small and appears a bit cramped — and indeed it is small for a cathedral. But it also seems small, when looked at from the outside, because it is bounded by city streets, has no space around

it, and there is little clear evidence of the separate architectural elements that make up a traditional cruciform cathedral. Yet internally the architects, John Eastwood and his talented assistant Sydney Greenslade, who was responsible for much of the detail, were ingenious in creating something of an optical illusion.

The nave seems amply wide, but that is only because it is wide relative to its short length; the side aisles, though marked off by columns, are not divided from the nave as sharply as they often are, and so we see the full width of the cathedral in one glance; the transepts are short; and the side-chapels of the nave and transepts are shallow. In fact, the building — most unusually for a cathedral — is essentially square, as well as relatively small. Nevertheless we see all the expected architectural elements (nave, sanctuary, transepts, side-chapels) present in a very open aspect, and our brain then interprets what we see by scaling it up. In other words, we think we see something bigger than we are actually seeing. And now the effect of internal space is enhanced by the recent restoration, which has thoroughly cleaned the stone, re-ordered the sanctuary into a much more open configuration and repainted the arched ceiling in its original light colours. Clear-glass windows, which were part of the design from the outset, illuminate the nave; the only stained glass is in the end walls of the two transepts.

The cathedral, built between 1901 and 1904, was not consecrated until 1924 because the debt incurred in building it had first to be cleared. Modifications to reduce the cost were proposed as the work progressed, even including doing away with the tower, but the then bishop insisted on proceeding with the original scheme. Even so, in an effort to save money, not all

the niches inside were filled with saints, as we could see for ourselves. Remodelling of the east end took place in the 1960s in response to the Second Vatican Council, with a free-standing altar in the middle of the sanctuary so that the priest could celebrate mass facing the congregation, but there were many aspects of this that were not successful, and so the latest restoration made significant changes.

One of the historic glories of the cathedral is the reredos in the Lady Chapel, fully restored in 2007. This was designed by Pugin in 1842 for the first Roman Catholic Church of St Anne, which had been built in 1838 looking down Park Row on the site now occupied by Browns Restaurant and the Radisson. It was intended to be a 'statement church' and, with its prominent position and 148 ft spire, it was fitting that when the Catholic Diocese of Leeds was created in 1878, St Anne's Church became St Anne's Cathedral. But this did not last long. The cathedral was subject to compulsory purchase by the Leeds Corporation at the turn of the century and was demolished as part of a street improvement programme, and the diocese accepted the Corporation's offer of the present site for the new cathedral. Pugin's reredos was one of the few items brought from the previous building. Another was the baptismal font, now at the west end of the nave with a new font lining and surround, dating from 2006. But what makes the Cathedral so special is its integrated design in the Arts and Crafts style, even down to the details of the door handles. It is one of the great treasures of Leeds and is undoubtedly worth a visit.

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