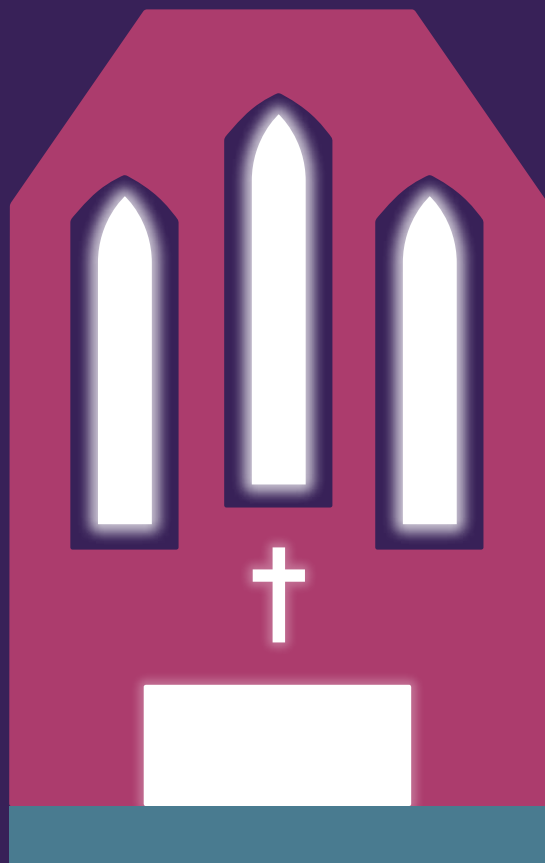


Saint Stephen's

ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH BLAIRGOWRIE



A tale of conservation and renewal





The Right Reverend Stephen Robson
Bishop of Dunkeld

Saint Stephen's Church is one of the oldest and loveliest churches in the Diocese of Dunkeld. As a creation of E. W. Pugin, of a famous Victorian architectural family, it is therefore listed on the register of significant buildings and was therefore eligible for grant aid, especially from the Heritage Lottery Fund. We thank all those grant awarding authorities for the generosity of their grants.

However such grant application processes are onerous tasks and I wish to thank Father Gregory, your parish priest and his building and fabric committee for their tremendous hard work in raising

such a great deal of money for the restoration project. But many parishioners of Saint Stephen's have been involved in this great project and must be congratulated and thanked also.

A church building is the House of God and in it, during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and the celebration of the sacraments, we anticipate on earth the heavenly kingdom and encounter the presence of the Risen and Crucified Lord. It is vital therefore that our churches are worthy and beautiful as well as safe and maintained: our churches ought to summon us and inspire us to worship.

Very many congratulations, Saint Stephen's, for pulling together to show what a committed Catholic community can do and for not being daunted by such an enormous project.

Every blessing,

Bishop Stephen Robson
BSc MTh JCL STD
BISHOP of DUNKELD



Saint Stephen's – a brief history

THE STORY of the origins and construction of St Stephen's Church mirrors the revival and re-growth of the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland in the first half of the 19th century.

In 1836 a room was hired in Blairgowrie where 11 Catholics came together to celebrate mass once a month with a visiting priest from the Perth mission. Only a few months later a feu had been purchased and two houses built in what is now Bank Street – the upper floor of one house being arranged as a place of worship.

The ongoing Highland Clearances, the onset of potato famines in Ireland and the south-west of Scotland, forced

hundreds of families to seek to make new means of livelihood wherever possible. The industrialisation of the spinning and weaving processes first of linen then of jute and the construction of mills along the banks of the River Erich attracted a great influx of willing workers from the west and the Highlands, and by 1849 the Catholic congregation numbered over 200 and the upper floor arrangement was quite simply inadequate with the congregation crammed in with standing-room only for a goodly number and no appropriate place for the instruction of children. The steadily increasing congregation asked to have their own priest and in 1849 the Rev. John Carmont was installed



St Stephen's 50 years ago.

and was soon appealing to the Bishop of Dunkeld to provide a church. It was decided that, indeed, the ever-growing Blairgowrie congregation should have their longed-for church and an architect was appointed,

Edward Welby Pugin, a renowned and prolific ecclesiastical architect of over 100 churches, was invited to design the church. The resultant building is a Neo-Gothic masterpiece and the first of only three churches of EW Pugin's design built in Scotland. The church, with its central nave, side aisles, stone altar, vibrant stained glass and soaring roof, was constructed in only eight months, dedicated to St Stephen and opened for worship in January 1856, by which time the congregation numbered 500.

In 1863 the wing of the church now used as a hall was built on to the original church to provide a day school – soon outgrown. At the beginning of the 20th century a fine organ, partly funded by Andrew Carnegie, was installed in the upper gallery.

Naturally a building of this age and architectural importance has been the subject of an on-going maintenance and renovation programme, but none quite so extensive as recent Heritage Lottery funded work. Thanks to the Heritage Lottery fund and to the generosity of private sponsors, this beautiful sanctuary will remain a significant place of Christian worship for generations to come.



View towards organ gallery.



Internal scaffold to access high level knave ceiling.



Conservation and renewal

ST STEPHEN'S is a Category B-listed building dating from 1856 and is situated in the central area of the Blairgowrie Conservation Area.

What seemed to be isolated problems, due to what at first appeared to be limited dry rot, rising damp and water ingress in various parts of the building, were assessed and it was quickly realised that repair and renovation work was likely to be more extensive than at first suspected with the likelihood of resulting costs amounting to tens of thousands of pounds.

When the appeal for Heritage Lottery assistance was made, St Stephen's was described as being a listed building at risk "*primarily due to significant water ingress and rising damp*", and "*the overall integrity of the building requires to be restored through an extensive repair process.*" The application stressed that the work was both "*essential and urgent*".

The firm, James F Stephen, Architects, advised that intensive investigation would be necessary to assess just how much repair work would, in fact, be necessary.



Stripping and re-slating of principal elevation.

To summarise very briefly the initial assessment of the main external repair work required was:

- The roof – stripping and re-slating, the installation of breathable membrane; replacement of water-ingress-damaged sarking and rafters; inspection and replacement of all lead sheet/zinc gutters, flashings and weatherings; inspection and replacement of cast iron rainware.

- The increase in rainfall in recent years, associated with climate change, is affecting the harling over all the building, showing evidence of likely water ingress and additional cast iron rainwear was required to remove this water, directing it from the roof to the below-ground drainage network.

Within the church, from under the floor to the ceiling, dry rot, wet rot and rising damp were evident as was the need to repair the extensively cracked lath and plaster sections of the ceiling. The extent of the rot problem would, indeed, only become clear as the affected areas were stripped down.



Timber roof repairs in progress.



Chimney and roof repairs in progress.



Skew stones removed from John Street gable.

Dry rot and rising damp so often can be doing their insidious worst for years, well hidden from view.

A pressing priority was ensuring the safety of the very fine stained glass windows three of which are believed to be contemporary with the building of the church. These depict Mary, Joseph and the child Jesus, St Stephen and St Anne. Behind the stone altar there is a large triple stained glass

window made in the 1960s by the monks at Pluscarden Abbey depicting Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

A further problem identified on the interior of the building was the use of non-breathable paint applied to the masonry framing the windows. The consequence of this has been that rain water simply ran off this paint and into the harling, finding its way between the harling and sandstone beneath.



Preparation of replacement studs for installation on Sanctuary gable.



Plaster repairs being processed to knave ceiling.



Intrusive invasion to assess fabric condition.



Tooling of window dressing on John Street gable.



John Street gable shrouded in scaffold to enable masonry repairs.



Access scaffold erected to allow high level roof repairs to principal elevation.

Re-decoration of
knave ceiling and
Sanctuary gable.



If this remarkable classified building was to be saved for posterity, indeed even for its current congregation, the work required was not only essential but urgent.

With generous contributions from the Heritage Lottery Fund, Historic Scotland, the Diocese of Dunkeld and several Trusts confirmed, contracts to undertake the work were awarded and the vital work begun – and another page was turned in the story of St Stephen's.



Timber roof repairs nearing completion at John St gable wall head.



Re-decoration of organ gallery.



Edward Welby Pugin c. 1865.

E. W. Pugin

EDWARD WELBY PUGIN (1834–1875) was the eldest son of Augustus Welby Northmore Pugin, renowned in his day and remembered chiefly today for his Gothic Revival style of architecture and his design of the interior of the Palace of Westminster.

AWN Pugin had three sons, all of whom became architects. But only one, Edward, had much of his father's creative ability and on the death of Augustus in 1852, Edward, at the age of only 18, took over the architectural business, eventually going into partnership with his half-brothers Peter, Paul and Cuthbert Pugin.

Edward had a remarkably prolific career in ecclesiastical building, designing more than one hundred Roman Catholic places of worship including St. Colman's Cathedral in Cobh, Ireland.

Most of EW's churches are, however, in England and only three designed completely by him were built in Scotland, of which St Stephen's in Blairgowrie is one – and considered his finest.

With the steady growth of the St. Stephen's congregation throughout the 1840s it was clear that the provision of a larger sanctuary was vital. A generous private donation provided the means to purchase further fees in Bank Street and E.W. Pugin was invited to submit a plan for a church to seat a congregation of up to 500, plus eventual accommodation for a schoolroom.

The 22-year-old Edward Pugin's design was of a building in the Gothic Revival style with its nave separated from two side aisles by stone pillars and painted arches, its wood-beamed ceiling and upper walls resting on stone cornices. E.W. Pugin's work has been criticised in some quarters for over-elaborate decoration but certainly this does not apply either to the exterior or the interior of St Stephen's. Sadly, inherent in the design were some of the causes of the problems that urgently required to be addressed over 150 years later.



Completed knave ceiling.

It has been written of Edward Pugin that he inherited much of his father's talent without his genius. And yet it has also been claimed, "*his style and plans became normative for Roman Catholic churches in the British Isles in the second half of the nineteenth century.*"



Ballustrade detail to organ gallery.

St Stephen's, Blairgowrie, as a rare example of his work in Scotland remains a building to be cherished and the restoration work financed by private donation and generous Heritage Lottery funding, will secure the future of this church which, along with its architect, ought to be better known.

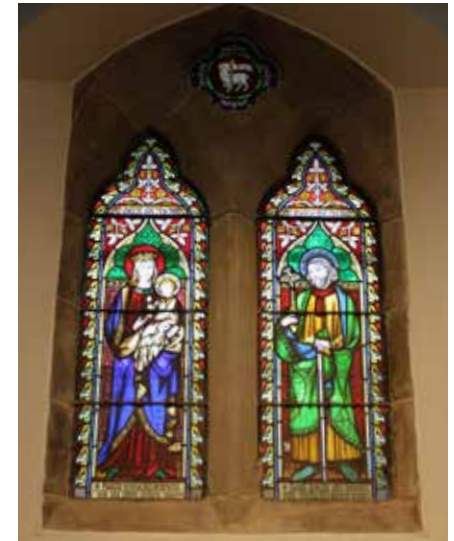
To that end an annual Pugin lecture is planned to be held in St Stephen's, attracting architects, students, and historians. More information can be found at our website: www.st-stephens-blairgowrie.org.uk



Post conservation and cleaning of Good Shepherd stained glass window.



South east aisle repairs completed.



Detailed stained glass windows south east aisle.



Ornamental altar detail.



Columns and arches in the Gothic style.



John Street gable following masonry repair.



Father Gregory Umunna
Parish Priest

A message of thanks and acknowledgement from the Parish priest

ON behalf of St. Stephen's RC Church, I write to salute parishioners and priests who have worked hard over the generations to build, maintain and improve this important and historic building.

How can we forget that in October 1849, the Rev. John Carmont was appointed as a resident priest in Blairgowrie. Overcoming many difficulties, and with the financial assistance of Mr. and Mrs. Trotter of Woodhill, he was able to purchase further ground, on which St Stephen's Church was built. Designed and built by the famous architect Edward Welby Pugin in 1856 as a Gothic detailed, rectangular plan church with 5-bay nave and steeply pitched roof; adjoining 5-bay rectangular-plan hall; tall, narrow nave with gallery, it is adorned with fixed timber pews manufactured from Japanese oak, small arcaded aisles, and chapel to NW and adorned with hammer beam-type roof. Mass was celebrated within the Church before the end of 1855, with the solemn opening taking place on 13th January 1856.

Years of wear and tear necessitated urgent essential repairs and restoration

work to the building, and associated elements, to make the Church wind and watertight, improve safety and stop the building falling into further disrepair. I, therefore, salute the courage of parishioners who took up this challenge, volunteered selflessly and generously gave countless hours to this restoration work. I also wish to thank many others who took up many initiatives, raised funds and made donations towards this project. Permit me to thank Mrs Evelyn Hood for her generous professional services to us in the area of an Audio-visio presentation of the restoration of St. Stephen's, and Ian Kirkwood for his professional photographs and designs. Deserving of an outstanding mention are the members of my Fabric Committee: Jim Graham, Alan Scot, Mike Coyle and Marion Duffy. My special thanks go to them for their collaboration, tenacity, selfless commitment and dedication, from the commencement of this Church restoration work, to its completion.

I wish to acknowledge and express our warmest gratitude to the Heritage Lottery Fund and Historic Environment Scotland for assisting us with a substantial grant to embark on the project. Gratitude goes to the Garfield Weston Foundation, All Churches Trust, Scotland Churches Trust, Jimmy Cairncross Trust, Perth and Kinross Heritage Trust, The Baird Trust, Dalrymple Donaldson Fund and the Diocese of Dunkeld for their generosity and support. With all your support, this major restoration project will help assure St. Stephen's future for many generations to come. At the completion of this task, I salute and thank you all for a work well done!

Rev. Gregory Umunna MA STL PhD
ST STEPHEN'S PARISH
BLAIRGOWRIE



The renewed Interior of St Stephen's.





St Stephen's, the completed exterior.

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