

# Reversal of Fortune

**A DERELICT WONDER OF THE VICTORIAN AGE,  
MANCHESTER'S ST. FRANCIS AND GORTON CHURCH &  
MONASTERY MAY ONCE AGAIN TAKE CENTER STAGE**

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**E**ven in fragments, the monastery church of St. Francis and Gorton commands our attention. Built in the mid 1860s at the height of Manchester's industrial prosperity, St. Francis and Gorton was in its day the largest parish church built in England since the time of the Reformation. Yet within a century of its completion, it stood in ruin—its once magnificent interiors fallen prey to vandalism and decay. How, one wonders, could such a masterpiece of ecclesiastical architecture, designed by Edward Welby Pugin (1834–1875), one of Britain's leading exponents of the high Gothic style, come and go in a blink of the eye?

Located in Gorton, just four kilometers east of Manchester city center, the church looms over an area that a century ago lay at the heart of seemingly endless prosperity. By 1845, a railway linking Manchester to Sheffield had been completed, its railhead at Gorton—an economical town, yet an accessible distance from the city center. In 1846, the Great Central Railway established its main manufacturing plant in Gorton, and within a decade, Manchester became Britain's leading producer of locomotives, carriages, and wagons. Complementing these industries, Manchester was known as a textile center specializing in items made of cotton. As production increased, so did the city's workforce—and within a few years, small neighboring villages, including Gorton, witnessed unprecedented development as they absorbed a burgeoning population. The new arrivals were predominantly Irish emigrants lured to the area by the prospect of employment.



A CHAOTIC MASS OF HIGH GOTHIC ORNAMENT  
LAYS STREWN ABOUT THE SANCTUARY OF  
ST. FRANCIS AND GORTON,  
ABANDONED SINCE 1989.



In 1861, four Franciscan friars from Douai in northern France arrived in Manchester to minister a growing Catholic population. The following year, the friars acquired a site for a new friary: Bankfield Cottage, a four-acre plot of land between Gorton Lane and the Corn Brook that cost £2,200. In May 1863, Canon Benoit laid the first stone of the friary, which was to have three separate wings. In June 1866, Bishop Turner laid the first stone of the church. The friary was completed in 1867; the church some four years later. Financial necessity meant the construction of the friary and church had to be carried out by the brothers and a team of enthusiastic volunteers from within the community. The brothers enterprisingly set up a special stone-carving workshop on the grounds of the friary, while Brother Patrick Dalton scoured every corner of the city in search of precious bricks.

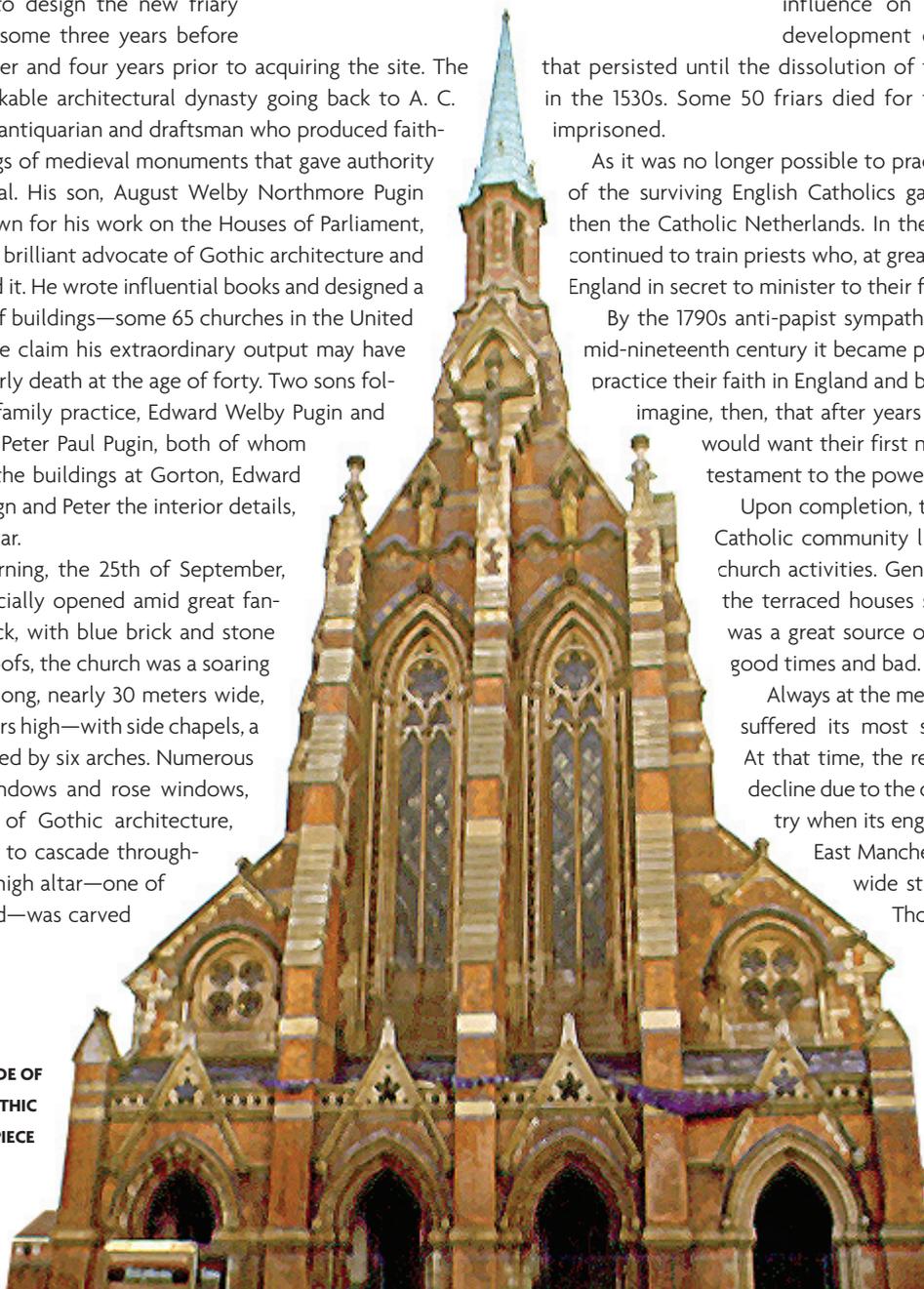
It is interesting to note that the friars had engaged Pugin, 24, to design the new friary and church in 1858, some three years before coming to Manchester and four years prior to acquiring the site. The Pugins were a remarkable architectural dynasty going back to A. C. Pugin (1762–1832), an antiquarian and draftsman who produced faithful measured drawings of medieval monuments that gave authority to the Gothic Revival. His son, August Welby Northmore Pugin (1812–1852), best known for his work on the Houses of Parliament, was a passionate and brilliant advocate of Gothic architecture and the faith that inspired it. He wrote influential books and designed a prodigious number of buildings—some 65 churches in the United Kingdom alone. Some claim his extraordinary output may have contributed to his early death at the age of forty. Two sons followed him into the family practice, Edward Welby Pugin and his younger brother, Peter Paul Pugin, both of whom were involved with the buildings at Gorton, Edward with the overall design and Peter the interior details, including the high altar.

On Thursday morning, the 25th of September, 1871, the church officially opened amid great fanfare. Built of red brick, with blue brick and stone dressings and slate roofs, the church was a soaring structure 56 meters long, nearly 30 meters wide, and just over 30 meters high—with side chapels, a nave, and aisles divided by six arches. Numerous pointed, arched windows and rose windows, a particular feature of Gothic architecture, allowed natural light to cascade throughout the church. The high altar—one of the largest in England—was carved

**THE GLORIOUS FACADE OF PUGIN'S HIGH-GOTHIC MASTERPIECE**



**THE FRIARY PORTAL WAS BOARDED UP TO PROHIBIT VANDALS FROM FURTHER DESTROYING THE BUILDING. AN ANGEL RAVAGED BY TIME, FACING PAGE, GRACES ONE OF THE MONASTERY'S MANY ARCHWAYS.**



out of Bath stone. The unveiling of Pugin's masterpiece was, according to the *Catholic Times* of 1872, nothing less than "a triumph of Catholic architecture."

Why an order historically dedicated to a life of poverty should have envisioned such grandeur for their congregation as St. Francis and Gorton might seem puzzling. Yet the history of the Franciscans in England may provide an explanation.

St. Francis of Assisi was inspired in 1209 to gather a group of "brothers," or friars, to work and preach in towns and cities, particularly among the poor and the sick, in contrast to the existing monastic orders, which tended to be isolated and remote.

The Franciscan Order was approved by the church in 1223 and by 1224 the first friars arrived in England. By the middle of the thirteenth century, virtually every town or city had its own friary, which had a significant influence on the religious life and urban development of the country—an influence

that persisted until the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII in the 1530s. Some 50 friars died for their faith; another 200 were imprisoned.

As it was no longer possible to practice their faith at home, some of the surviving English Catholics gathered at Douai, in what was then the Catholic Netherlands. In the centuries that followed, they continued to train priests who, at great personal risk, would return to England in secret to minister to their flock.

By the 1790s anti-papist sympathies began to wane, and by the mid-nineteenth century it became possible for Catholics to openly practice their faith in England and begin to build again. It is easy to imagine, then, that after years of oppression, the Franciscans would want their first new church to be a magnificent testament to the power of their faith.

Upon completion, the friary became the focus for Catholic community life with its schools, clubs, and church activities. Generations of families grew up in the terraced houses surrounding the church, which was a great source of pride and inspiration in both good times and bad.

Always at the mercy of economic forces, Gorton suffered its most severe blow during the 1960s. At that time, the region's economy was already in decline due to the contraction of the cotton industry when its engineering base, largely located in East Manchester, collapsed due to a world-

wide structural shift in manufacturing. Thousands of jobs were lost and the population dwindled.

Although a last fundraising campaign in the 1980s yielded enough money to repair the roof and exterior walls, it was far too little to sustain the church. The Franciscans said a final mass in the sanctuary in 1989.

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The buildings were deconsecrated and sold to a property developer to convert into flats, but the scheme failed and the developer went bankrupt. Left empty and unprotected, the buildings fell victim to vandals and thieves. Twelve large statues, which originally lined the nave, turned up for auction as garden ornaments at Sotheby's.

Despite its condition, the church had not lost its place in the memory of the community, now scattered far and wide, who recalled it with great affection and warmth.

In 1996, Paul Griffiths, a former altar boy determined to rescue St. Francis and Gorton, founded a trust to purchase the buildings from the receivers and raise funds for their restoration. The following year, the plight of the monastery gained international recognition when St. Francis and Gorton was placed on WMF's 1998 list of the *100 Most Endangered Sites*, based on its architectural significance. Within months of Watch listing, WMF was able to provide more than \$350,000 toward the preservation of the monastery through the generosity of American Express, the Kress Foundation, and the organization's Robert W. Wilson Challenge, monies that were complemented by matching funds from English Heritage, the Heritage Lottery, and a number of European donors. To date, some £6 million has been raised to begin the restoration.

For the supporters and volunteers in Gorton, it has been a slow and frustrating journey at times, taking more than seven and a half years to pull together the necessary money and expertise. But it has been more than worthwhile. Today, the monastery stands poised for rebirth as the centerpiece of a major redevelopment and urban-revitalization scheme. It is the kind of boost that cannot come quickly enough for Gorton, an area with a notoriously low skill base and high unemployment.

If all goes according to plan, church buildings will become an exciting multi-use venue for conferences, exhibitions, and events—and a training facility for architects, engineers, and those in the building arts and conservation. Further down the line a clinic will be added to the facility to address the healthcare needs of the community, which has some of the worst health statistics in Manchester.

The trust's art and education director, Ilma Scantlebury, is convinced that news of the monastery's multi-million-pound salvation is already breathing new life into the Gorton area. "We are using the regeneration of a building as a toll for the regeneration of a community," says Scantlebury. "During its heyday, this building was at the center of this community. We aim to put it back there—but in a modern setting. The world has moved on—Gorton has certainly moved on—but people's needs remain the same. In many ways, we're not really deviating from the Franciscans' mission to bring education, spirituality, and social cohesion to the people here, to enrich their lives. It's just that now it's in a multi-ethnic, multi-faith setting. It has the potential to become the center of pride again in the locality. If we can use existing spaces, but look at them in a fresh way, there is a huge potential to make them work; Gorton Monastery is a wonderful example of that."

For a century, St. Francis was an anchor in the Gorton communities. When it closed, it came as a blow to people who had tried everything to keep it going, leaving a void just as the loss of industry had. Yet it remains a special place. In the coming years it will be transformed from a redundant relic into a valuable place for the benefit of those who live nearby. It is one of the most innovative ways of ensuring that future generations can truly benefit from the legacy of the past. ■

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**REMNANTS OF A ONCE LAVISH POLYCHROMED INTERIOR, FACING PAGE AND BELOW, AND AN ALTAR STRIPPED OF ITS ORNAMENT, ABOVE, ARE WHAT REMAIN OF WHAT HAD ONCE BEEN HAILED AS "A TRIUMPH OF CATHOLIC ARCHITECTURE."**

