Butterfield in Australia: 
High Victorian or Mainstream Gothic Revival?

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William Butterfield has associations, in varying degrees, with the cathedrals of Brisbane, Melbourne and Adelaide. His designs were used for St Paul's Melbourne and St Peter's Adelaide, though he saw neither project to completion, and though stylistic changes by others gave an overall effect in the mainstream of Gothic Revival rather than the high Victorian Gothic he intended.

Unlike the timing of the quarrel that arose over the Melbourne cathedral, Butterfield withdrew amicably from the Adelaide cathedral project before building had begun. The project, with Butterfield's drawings, was then handed over to Edward John Woods, who was responsible for supervising the construction, providing working drawings, and for all aspects of the cathedral building that did not adhere to Butterfield's initial design. While one can say, therefore, that Butterfield was responsible for a formal conception of St Peter's Adelaide, I think it will be shown that E. J. Woods, through his choice of when to adhere to Butterfield's designs and when to deviate from them, was not only responsible for the practical manufacture of the building, but also for a conceptually different cathedral.

William Butterfield provided three different proposals for St Peter's Adelaide. Initially he supplied Bishop Short with drawings in 1847, as the latter left England to assume his bishopric in Adelaide. This design was to suit, abstractly, any city site of about 40,000 square feet. These drawings are now lost. Twenty one years later, in 1868, he provided two similar propositions for the present North Adelaide site. One survives only in an ink and watercolour east elevation. The other survives in seven ink and watercolour drawings, showing complete aspects of a design.

To fully understand Butterfield's designs and his involvement with this cathedral, one must first see what lay behind the choice of him as architect.
In 1820 Augustus Short (later Bishop Short) had gone up as a student to Christ Church College, Oxford, with which place he remained closely associated throughout his career. While there he became part of the so-called Oxford Movement, a conservative high-church movement that emerged partly as a reaction to the abolition of a Church of England monopoly in areas like the civil service and education. Because its members disseminated their views by means of published tracts, they were also known as Tractarians. A crisis came for the movement in the 1840s when high-church sympathies led some of its members (like John Henry Newman, later Cardinal Newman) to convert to Roman Catholicism. From then on the movement tended to concentrate on the less controversial issue of ecclesiastical design, centering on the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society, which saw the revival of the Gothic style as somehow synonymous with Tractarianism.

Butterfield’s religious opinions were entirely commensurate with, and in part derived from, the Oxford Movement. He was also closely associated with the Oxford Architectural and Historical Society, for which he prepared drawings and carried out major restoration work on the east end of Dorchester Cathedral, Oxfordshire. Butterfield also designed two colleges/cathedrals in Scotland in the 1840s, for one of the society’s members. These acted as missions, proliferating Church of England doctrine at a time when the Anglican hold on education was weakening.

All this should be borne in mind when one considers that in 1847 Bishop Short came to South Australia, a place where conformism and non-conformism had little meaning, and where the Church of England faced the same obstacles to survival as any pioneer. Particularly important in this respect is a letter Bishop Short wrote on 17 March 1847, introducing himself to Major Robe, the Lieutenant-Governor of South Australia. In this letter he outlines his aim to build a church that would be ‘an ornament to the town and not unsuitable for the Cathedral Church of the Bishopric’. In the same letter he also makes clear his intention to institute a collegiate school ‘combining some Classical and Mathematical instruction with the lower branches of education’.

Initially Butterfield provided Bishop Short with complete drawings for a cathedral, bishop’s palace, and a college. Since the drawings are lost
very little is known of this design, although the Ecclesiological Society (the Cambridge Camden Society, counterpart of the Oxford Movement) did describe it in December 1847, the month Bishop Short was enthroned. It was to be exceedingly tall, although no bigger than a moderately-sized parish church, and built of brick.

During the 1850s St Peter's College and a bishop's palace were built, both possibly to designs by Henry Stuckey. A legal wrangle took place over the cathedral being situated in Victoria Square and new designs for the cathedral were drawn up by Messrs Habershon. Of these drawings nothing survives.

In 1862 the present site in North Adelaide was acquired. In 1868 Butterfield was again called upon to design a cathedral. Two designs survive from this period, one as one drawing, and the other seven drawings, as already noted. The former I take to be the earlier as it includes this note in a hand from Butterfield's office:

N.B. This building must be set out as regards the ground level so as to come to the North end, A as shewn on this drawing. If the ground falls Southwards as I believe it does additional steps must be put to the doorways at the South to suit the fall. The level of the site from the North to the South end of the building must be sent to me as soon as the building has been set out.

and this note in another hand:

Plan preserved by the architects, Messrs. Woods and Bagot.
Believed to represent the original design of Mr. William Butterfield for Bishop Short.

The second design assumes that the site has been levelled. It was presumably supplied because of reconsideration by Butterfield or further requests from Adelaide. Either way it may have been due to increased finances. There is a vast increase in the moulding of buttresses, corners and wall surfaces as well as far greater window space. It should be noted, however, that what greater intricacy there is is restricted to the windows. The increased articulation of features like corners and buttresses enhances the sense of mass distinctive of high Victorian Gothic Revival architecture, a style which Butterfield pioneered. This is in contrast to the delicacy and intricacy one associates with the mainstream of Gothic architecture.

1 Ecclesiologist, LXIII, December 1847, pp.141-142.
Instead of turrets and tracery, the walls of this design are decorated with colour, so-called 'structural polychromy', whereby bands of colour follow the brick and stone courses, or the direction of architectural members. Here bands of bluestone and sandstone accompany bands of red brick. The designs give no indication of what sort of colour was proposed for the interior. None was used. The new site meant a twist in the direction of the design, the ecclesiastical 'east end' now being to the north.

Two facts immediately link these designs to the 1847 design. The 1868 designs have two transepts, but the main crossing only projects one buttress-width beyond the aisles. In the 1847 design the single crossing does not project. One cannot reconstruct the portal front of the earlier 1868 design, but on the second design the main portal is set well forward of the five-light window above it, reminding one of this phrase from the 1847 description: 'In the west elevation there is a five-light window above a noble double door, which gains dignity by a great thickening of the lower part of the wall'.

The two 1868 designs have striking overall compositions. They have double transepts and flat-ended sanctuaries. This is traceable to a peculiarity of English medieval design. Good examples of this arrangement are the cathedrals of Lincoln, Worcester, Salisbury, and Hereford. This arrangement itself has overtones of the high-church reverence for the clergy, because that portion of the building on the altar side of the main crossing may be 'read' as a cruciform structure, a complete church adjoining the lay section of the building. The 'crossing tower' is on the sanctuary transept.

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the designs, and the present building, is the lantern. On its rectangular base sits an octagonal drum with a two-light window on each face, and small abutments in the resulting corners. Above this is a spire of eight faces. Again there is only one source for Butterfield, and especially so for Bishop Short: the unique bell-tower over the entrance to Christ Church College, Oxford, Augustus Short's college. 'Tom Tower' at Christ Church is Christopher Wren's piece of Gothic Revival, designed in 1682 to blend with the mediaeval college. In Adelaide, however, Wren's pinnacles and ogee arches are diluted to the high Victorian style of Butterfield.
The surviving ink and watercolour elevation of what is presumed to be the first of two schemes prepared by Butterfield for St Peter's, Adelaide in 1868. (All illustrations provided by the author)
Butterfield's more elaborate scheme for St Peter's, Adelaide.
E.J. Woods front elevation for St Peter's, Adelaide.
As part of the Gothic Revival movement, Butterfield was an intelligent architect who never set out to copy exactly the Gothic models. By developing what he saw around him Butterfield gave Bishop Short a specifically English cathedral for the Church of England. And he gave him a cathedral imbued even more specifically with references to the religious attitudes and theology of the Oxford Movement that Bishop Short brought to South Australia.

It would appear that the reasons for Butterfield resigning from the cathedral project, and possibly selling his unused design to the cathedral chapter, centred on his use of colour and materials. It seems that the nuances of colour were either disliked or were too expensive for the budget concerned, while the use of exposed brick was considered inappropriate for the grandeur of a cathedral. I have not found any firm proof as to why the project changed hands, but the result was that from 29 June 1869, when the foundation stone was laid, E. J. Woods was the cathedral architect, and saw its entire structure to completion. The construction can be neatly divided into two phases. Between June 1869 and January 1878 the sanctuary, choir, transepts, and one bay of the nave were built. After this phase Woods's attention was diverted to the post of city architect. Eventually, in 1890, he was succeeded in that post by John Grainger (the father of Percy Grainger), and his efforts were once more directed to St. Peter's. Between May 1899 and April 1904 the nave and portal facade were completed, and the lady chapel and transept portals added.

In the first phase Woods produced a monochromatic version of Butterfield's last design, save for a few minor alterations in the proportions. In 1878, when in London, Bishop Short showed Butterfield photographs of the first phase, and he was much charmed. Short's respect for Butterfield was obviously undiminished by the latter's resignation, whoever caused it, for Short asked him to design a reredos, a font, and a pulpit for the cathedral. The reredos is now in the lady chapel. The font is at the opposite end of the building. There is no traceable result of the pulpit commission. The reredos and font now appear as vestigial gems of Butterfield's colour against the sandstone.²

² See letter from Short to Charles Marryat, August 1878.
The colourful reredos for St Peter's, Adelaide, designed by Butterfield.

The communion flagon at St Peter's.
When William Butterfield saw a project to completion he would assume control over all the visual aspects of its design. That is, in addition to the structure, he would design the furnishings, fittings, tiling, and in relevant cases the murals and stained glass. He would also design the church-plate. It was in the field of metalwork that Butterfield first established his reputation. In the long run, his metalwork designs achieved a far wider audience and influence than his architecture, and a suite of church-plate at St Peter's deserves mention in connection with his name. Of prime importance are a communion flagon, a communion chalice and an alms dish, made of silver and hallmarked in London in 1847. These were presumably brought to the new bishopric by Augustus Short.

To appreciate the historical position of this plate we must turn our attention from Oxford to Cambridge, where the Cambridge Camden Society formed a counterpart to the Oxford Movement. Like the latter it was a high-church movement much interested in the ceremonies and forms of catholic worship; it was also accused of popishness so that it receded into the area of ecclesiastical design. But whereas the Oxford bias was architectural, the Cambridge society concentrated on Gothic fittings and plate, objects inextricably a part of ceremony itself.

In 1843 Butterfield wrote to the then Cambridge Camden Society suggesting greater control over the standard of Gothic church-plate design. The society soon adopted him as their supervisor and between May 1844 and April 1847 published twelve collections of his designs covering all aspects of church metal design. Because the society was a pioneer in the field Butterfield's designs - the 'Instrumenta Ecclesiastica' - became authoritative. He did for the Church of England what Pugin did for the Roman Catholic Church, and his designs were copied and imitated throughout the English-speaking world. His work of the late 1840s remains to this day the basis for most church-plate in the Church of England.

The flagon, chalice and alms dish in St Peter's are stamped either 'J.K.' or 'I.J.K.', referring to the London platemaker John Keith, platemaker to the Cambridge Camden Society. The items bear close comparison with published designs in the 'Instrumenta Ecclesiastica'. They are good examples of Butterfield's style of metal decoration and lettering. Typical also of Butterfield is the thin, knopped stem of the chalice, and the flagon's refined spherical body with tapered neck.
The lectern, too, has links with Butterfield, who in the early 1870s begun entrusting his designs to the firm of Hart, Son, Peard and Company. In 1876 Bishop Short received a gift enabling him to buy the present lectern. He chose one made by Hart, Son, Peard and Company; the design is not by Butterfield although by 1876 the company was freely adopting portions of his style.

Taking into account also the Butterfield-designed reredos and font, it is clear, therefore, that even though the cathedral was not begun until after Butterfield had resigned, he infiltrated substantially into its decoration.

In November 1881 Bishop Short retired and returned to England, where he died two years later, finally severing the links with the initial Tractarian conception of the cathedral. E. J. Woods in his turn, however, made his stylistic preferences structurally arise from the core of Butterfield's proposal, and thereby harmonise with it. It is a tribute to both architects that St Peter's is 'an ornament to the town and not unsuitable for the Cathedral Church', as Bishop Short originally specified.

In 1877 Butterfield was once again asked to design a cathedral in Australia, this time for Melbourne. He was approached by Bishop James Moorhouse and the cathedral committee, which said: 'Mr Butterfield was considered to be the best known architect in the world for the purpose'. Butterfield's design for St Paul's Melbourne reflects strongly the stylistic trends of his work during the 1870s. At the same time it is an interesting revival of certain aspects of his designs for Adelaide, which, had they been executed on both buildings, would have meant interesting architectural connections between the two.

By the time Butterfield came on the scene, the battle of the proposed sites for an Anglican cathedral in Melbourne had been concluded, and the corner of Flinders and Swanston Streets had been prepared for rebuilding. Butterfield initially intended his cathedral to be orientated in the usual east-west fashion; the cathedral committee, however, wanted to present a grand 'front' to the southern entrance to the city. This provoked a letter from Butterfield, railing against the view that Gothic could be designed with various facades. (He had done the same in connection with St Peter's entrance.) Due to the disposition of the site, and the determinatin of the
committee, the cathedral was eventually placed with the portal elevation on Flinders Street. The site also necessitated a very short transept. This is reminiscent of the 1847 and 1868 Adelaide designs. However, it also helps unite the entire design to other Butterfield work of the 1870s.

Butterfield's important ecclesiastical commissions of the 1870s are St Augustine's Queen's Gate, London, St Andrew's Rugby, and St Mark Dundela, Belfast (for the moment we may omit the school chapel for Rugby School, and the college chapel for Keble college, Oxford). All three designs have wooden ceilings of polygonal section, with transverse wooden arches resting on shafts, which are corbelled out above the nave piers. They all employ alternating stripes of stone courses. This system and interior decoration is used at St Paul's Melbourne. Of the three English churches, St Andrew's Rugby is the closest model for the interior of St Paul's. All three also have pierced chancel arches emphasising the equality of height between the chancel and the nave. This occurs at St Paul's Melbourne and is an important distinction from some Butterfield churches where the nave and chancel are distinguished to a high degree. This treatment of the entire interior as one long room, so to speak, de-mystifies the chancel by reducing the 'theatrical' element in the design.

At the same time the high altar is integrated into the architecture in an important way. At both St Andrew's Rugby and St Mark Dundela the blank arcading of the reredos is continued across the east wall (the reredos at St Augustine Queen's Gate is not by Butterfield). At St Paul's the increased height allows the massive reredos to be incorporated into three stories of blank arcading (consider the applied reredos at St Peter's Adelaide). There was to be no choir screen at Melbourne, and the reredos naturally serves to accentuate the altar. Because of these factors the high altar seems to be the architectural conclusion of the whole, united interior.

The bias of Butterfield's drawings for Adelaide restricted our discussion to the exterior. When we look at the exterior of St Paul's we immediately see the links with Adelaide.

The Flinders Street front displays the same 'five-light window above a noble double door', and the same 'great thickening of the lower part of the
St Paul's, Melbourne showing the south or front elevation.
Detail of St Paul's, Melbourne looking towards the north west corner.

Butterfield's elevations for St Paul's, Melbourne.
(The Building News, 16 May 1879)
The exuberant interior of St Paul's, Melbourne, where hues of coloured stonework, rich timber pews, tiled floor and stained glass windows combine to produce an effect of tapestry-like intensity.
wall' as seen in the 1847 and 1868 designs for St Peter's Adelaide. Similar, though less, thickening of the walls occurs on the other two projecting fronts, the sanctuary and that transept arm not attached to the vestry. Also occurring there is the feature of buttresses below windows, as at Adelaide. Butterfield's design for the crossing tower is an interesting relative to the crossing tower of Adelaide. Again an octagonal drum with abutments at the corners is surmounted by an eight-faced spire. Again a two-light window occurs on each face of the drum. As in the 1868 design, two-light windows are used in the clerestory, though in Melbourne they are linked by blank arches giving the impression of a continuous arcade. The two-light windows of this tower are given similar treatment.

The tower differs from its predecessor in Adelaide in its proportions and size. It should be borne in mind that at this stage Adelaide cathedral was still following the structure of Butterfield's design, and so Butterfield could still envisage two Australian cathedrals as stylistic relatives.

By the time Butterfield came to design St Paul's Melbourne, he had developed a less opaque, more reserved use of 'structural polychromy'. However in their use of stone the builders still diverged from his instructions; the masons changed Butterfield's desire for a rather random texture of rustication to neat, parallel chisel hatching. Also, those portions built to Butterfield's design (that area below the roof-line) deviated slightly from the proportions given in his drawings (this is aside from the accepted addition of another nave bay). Butterfield eventually resigned from the project in 1886.

Spires were finally added in the twentieth century, with a lightness that is a reversal of Butterfield's style. Butterfield obviously intended the cathedrals of St Peter and St Paul to reflect each other, being of one man's style and clothed with similarities and complementaries. In this he was thwarted but it is comforting to know that in the remnants of his attempt stand two very fine buildings.