

FEATURES / Catholic architectural treasures

Tablet readers have come up with a list of favourite churches in England and Wales that is full of surprises and delights / **By ELENA CURTI**

The ones that got away

WHO WOULD have thought that there is a Catholic church in Solihull full of wonderful modern art? Or one in Wallsend that is a glorious blend of “Modern Perpendicular Gothic, Scandinavian, Art Deco and Festival of Britain elements”? Or that another in a deprived area of Cardiff has an absolutely unique representation of the Stations of the Cross?

These architectural treasures and 25 more were submitted by *Tablet* readers in response to the editor’s invitation to choose a fifty-first church to add to those in my book, *Fifty Catholic Churches to See Before You Die*. The winning church was chosen by Sophie Andreae, an architecture historian and author who has spent her career working to protect historic buildings and promote them to the wider public.

The result is a selection that shows the richness and variety to be found among Catholic churches in England and Wales. The majority of nominations date from the twentieth century, but also in the list is one of the oldest churches in continuous worship, and one of the newest. There is a neoclassical jewel, two magnificent Gothic Revival churches, and a beauty in the Romanesque Revival style. Our winner, however, English Martyrs, Wallasey, designed by F.X. Velarde, defies categorisation.

The churches of the 1960s reflect the eagerness of priests and laity to embrace the liturgical changes, post-Vatican II, to encourage the active participation of all those present at the Mass. Sadly one example, St Raphael, Millbrook, Stalybridge, completed in 1963, has been closed for nearly a decade after the cost of repairs to the roof were considered prohibitive. The Diocese of Shrewsbury has been unable to sell the Grade II listed building, and its priority now is to save spectacular glass windows that relate the story of Tobias and the Archangel. These are by Pierre Fourmaintraux (1896-1974), one of the earliest exponents in Britain of a technique known as *dalle de verre*, in which thick slabs of glass are cut, chipped at the edges, then embedded in cement or resin. Robert Proctor, lecturer in architectural history at the University of Bath, who nominated the church, believes the windows are among Fourmaintraux’s best works.

Visiting the nominated churches during lockdown has not been possible, so I have often had to refer to the Church’s research

programme, *Taking Stock*, which assesses the architectural and historical importance of churches in England and Wales. Below are some of the highlights.

Our Lady of the Wayside (1966), Shirley, Solihull, West Midlands

Designed by a local architect, Brian Rush, this church has a slender white needle spire and a spacious interior barely altered since its completion. It was the choice of Christopher Kennedy, who says: “The church is a great example of successful twentieth-century architecture, designing a church ‘in the round’ with the congregation on three sides of the altar, and including lovely sculpture and stained glass work by Dame Elisabeth Frink (1930-1993), Walter Ritchie and Tom Fairs.” Frink’s gilded bronze sculpture of the Risen Christ is a graceful figure in a pose that shows him almost dancing for joy.

Our Lady and St Columba (1957), Wallsend, Tyne and Wear

An example of how *Taking Stock* is winning recognition for lesser-known masterpieces – in this case a Grade II listing by Historic England. The architect was Vincente G. Stienlet, a partner in Pascal J. Stienlet & Son, founded by Vincente’s father in North Shields and continued by his son, also called Vincente. Andrew Derrick, director of the Architectural History Practice, who nomin-

English Martyrs, Wallasey Architect: F.X. Velarde

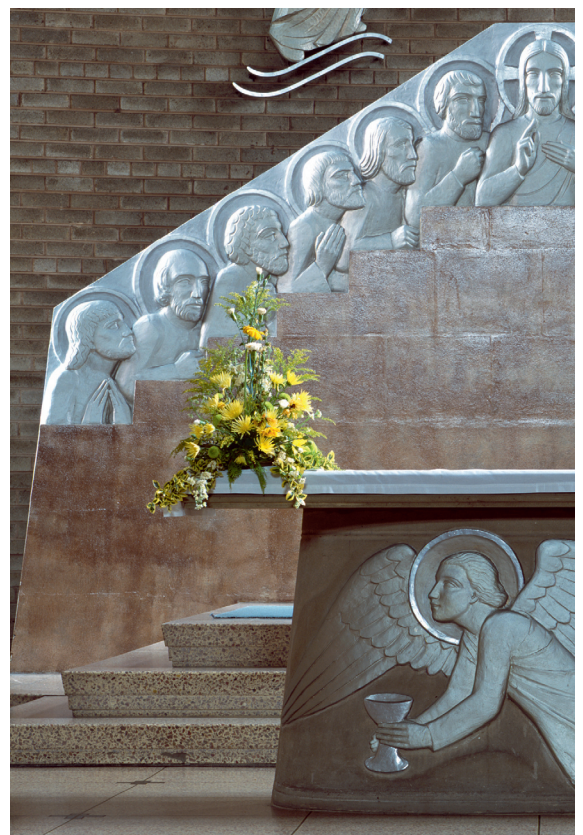
The judge of the winning nomination, **Sophie Andreae**, vice-chair of the Patrimony Committee of the Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales, explains her choice

I AM honoured to have been invited to choose the fifty-first church in *The Tablet’s* competition following the publication last year of Elena Curti’s fascinating and important book on Catholic church architecture, *Fifty Catholic Churches to See Before You Die*. The architectural quality of Catholic churches is still too little-known and under-appreciated in this country.

What is fascinating about the nominations is how many twentieth-century churches and, in particular, those built after the Second

World War, there are. It has been difficult choice but since I must select just one, it is Francis Xavier Velarde’s stunning Church of English Martyrs (also known as Holy Apostles and Martyrs) in Wallasey, built in 1952-53 and nominated by Andrew Derrick.

Velarde was born in Liverpool in 1897. He fought in the trenches and was gassed at Passchendaele before training at the Liverpool School of Architecture in the early 1920s. He later went on to teach there. A recent book,



ated the church, says these architects are little-known: possibly because they seem to have worked exclusively in the north-east and Yorkshire.

The Wallsend church is “a bold and impressive design” built to accommodate a growing Catholic population attracted to the local coal and shipbuilding industries. It is a large brick building with a copper-covered roof and 80-foot bell tower.

The interior is faced in brick and has a sleek Art Deco look. The post-Vatican II re-ordering was carefully done by Vincente Stienlet junior. Three other churches by this architect were nominated by another reader, Paul Walker. They include St Joseph (1986), Wetherby, which has an interior with fine artwork and furnishings that symbolise the spiritual journey through life.

PHOTOS: ALEX RAMSAY



St Francis of Assisi (1960), Ely, Cardiff

This is one of the finest of the Cardiff churches designed by Thomas Price of F.R. Bates, Son and Price. It has a distinctive skeletal openwork bell-tower and a hangar-like interior with exposed concrete beams. Running around the front of the gallery is a frieze of the Stations of the Cross by Adam Kossowski (1905-1986). It is a deeply moving work: the figures are in coloured ceramic against a subdued background of green and black. The church has been closed since last summer when two large ceiling panels came crashing to the floor. Repairs costing £140,000 have been approved for the Grade II listed building. Work begins on 25 May and is expected to last three months. If they do not win grants the parish priest, Fr David O'Donnell, is worried that parish funds will be wiped out, leaving them unable to meet

F. X. Velarde, by Dominic Wilkinson and Andrew Crompton (Liverpool University Press), has contributed to a renewed interest in his work. He died in 1960.

Most of Velarde's work was in Merseyside and the north-west and he mainly designed Catholic places of worship. His churches are highly original, owing more to European Expressionism than to International Modernism. His love of geometric shapes and his daring but, at the same time, subtle use of colour

characterise his work, creating interiors of great beauty and spirituality. At English Martyrs, his bold use of grey-brown brick in a style inspired by the Romanesque contrasts with the use of white gold detailing which shimmers in the soft pale blue light that filters down from the coloured glass in the clerestory windows. Strong sculptural elements, particularly the altar and the astonishing reredos, provide a striking focus. This church is one of Velarde's most richly decorated and least altered. Its listing was

rightly upgraded to Grade II* in 2013.

As with many buildings of this period, repairs are now needed to the roof and windows. A major application has just gone in to the National Lottery Heritage Fund but, somewhat alarmingly, the scheme for repair involves a great deal of replacement of original fabric with modern materials and a plan to divide the nave. Will Velarde's subtle colours and lightness of touch be able to survive this well-meant but heavy-handed approach?



English Martyrs, Wallasey, on the Wirral, Merseyside, above, and, left, the high altar

pressing needs in what is one of the most deprived areas of Cardiff: "The pandemic is not going away any time soon. What's going to happen when we get to the point when we have to help people to keep a roof over their heads and put food on the table?"

Chapel of the Holy Trinity (late thirteenth century), Stonor Park, Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire

The private chapel at the ancestral home of the Stonor family, which has remained Catholic throughout its long history. Graham Greene donated the Stations of the Cross by Jozef Janas, a Polish prisoner of war. All are welcome to attend Mass on Sundays at 10.30 a.m. The house is famous for its association with the Jesuit martyr St Edmund Campion, who printed his pamphlet "Ten Reasons" on a printing press hidden in the roof space. Nominated by Clive Flynn.

Stanbrook Abbey Church (2015), Wass, North York Moors National Park

The Benedictine community of nuns moved to Wass in 2009 from its huge Gothic monastery in Worcestershire, determined to build an ecologically sustainable new home. In the church, plain pale wood and stone glow in the soft light from large windows that look out on hills and big skies. The only major artwork is an icon crucifix, painted by Dame Werberg Welch OSB (1894-1990) in the

1930s. The church was chosen by Christine Pritchard: "The interior is totally stunning, fantastic for modern liturgy, and really needs to be seen to be believed."

St Edmund the Martyr (1837), Bury St Edmunds

Twin of the church of St Francis Xavier, Hereford, and by the same architect, Charles Day, in the Greek Revival style. It has the original box pews and underwent restoration in 2014. The chapel, of penal times, remains hidden behind the presbytery and is now the Blessed Sacrament Chapel. Sheila Fagan, a self-described "almost obsessive church crawler" believes St Edmund's was the first to establish the faith with a permanent foothold.

St Mary (1850), Great Yarmouth

When I visited this handsome knapped flint church two years ago, I saw fine wall paintings in the shrine to Our Lady of Great Yarmouth horribly damaged by damp. Happily, roof repairs have been carried out, paid for by a £150,000 grant from the government's Culture Recovery Fund. St Mary was designed by J. J. Scoles (1798-1863), a favourite of the Jesuits, and nominated by his great-great-nephew, Tom Longford, managing director of Gracewing, publisher of *Fifty Catholic Churches to See Before You Die*.

St Mary ("The Hidden Gem", 1848), Mulberry Street, Manchester

When I visited this city-centre church pre-Covid, there was standing room only at a weekday Mass. Designed by J.G. Weightman and M.E. Hadfield, it was the first Catholic Romanesque Revival church to be built in Lancashire and has a glorious interior that lives up to its popular name. It was nominated by Leigh Hatts: "This is a living church, always with people praying inside, and as popular as an Anglican church for carol services."

St Francis of Assisi (1859), Pottery Lane, Notting Hill, west London

Remarkable not only for the beauty of its French Gothic architecture, but also its association with convert architects and artists. It was designed by Henry Clutton, who became a Catholic in 1857: his assistant John Bentley extended and embellished the church and Nathaniel Hubert John Westlake (1833-1921), another convert, was responsible for a number of paintings. Influenced by Clutton and Westlake, Bentley himself became a Catholic and was baptised by Cardinal Wiseman in the new baptistery he had designed at the church, taking Francis as his baptismal name. Bentley went on to design Westminster Cathedral. Fr Peter Harris, chair of the Westminster Historic Churches Committee, who nominated the church, says: "They have just finished restoring all the altars and wall paintings – the interior is now stunning."

Elena Curti is a former deputy editor of *The Tablet*. *Fifty Catholic Churches to See Before You Die* is published by Gracewing at £14.99 (Tablet price £12.49).