

# A GENIUS ARCHITECT IN POYNTZPASS – WILLIAM J. BARRE

BY BARBARA BEST

*‘It is certainly a distinguished building, symmetrical in plan, with two large classrooms, three bays deep, set in parallel. The main front has twin porches with half-hipped gables and frilly bargeboards joined by a narrow recessed two-bay link. The architecture is striking chiefly because of the squat kneelered gable rising over the central link to support a jaunty little bellcote in ashlar with sweeping copings...’*

Kevin Mulligan in his book ‘The Buildings of Ireland, South Ulster’ describing Poyntzpass No.2 National School



## ***Poyntzpass No.2 National School***

We have all been aware that we have an interesting structure in ‘the old school’, the former Poyntzpass No.2 National School in Railway Street, now a listed building.

Until recently, it was conjectured that William Playfair, architect of Drumbanagher House, may have been responsible for its design. Then in 2014, Professor Paul Larmour of Queens University visited Poyntzpass to take a better look at the building he had often admired from the Belfast to Dublin train.

In Professor Larmour’s opinion, the school is ‘*a Barre building*’. This was exciting information for the local history society, William Barre being a local architect of

great standing who designed St. Mary’s Church of Ireland, Drumbanagher, and many noteworthy buildings in Newry, Belfast and beyond.

## EARLY SCHOOLS IN THE VILLAGE.

There were several informal schools in the village in the early 1800s and it appears that some of these amalgamated in the 1820s to form Poyntzpass Male and Female Schools in Railway Street, funded by the Kildare Place Society. Colonel Close of Drumbanagher built the school in Railway Street in 1828 (The Ordnance Survey Memoirs, 1838 by J. Hill-Williams) and continued to contribute £10 per year towards school funds.

The National Schools' Scheme began in Ireland in 1831 for children up to the age of twelve. Set up by local parishes and intended to be mixed religion, the parishes paid one third of the building cost, the balance paid by government. Sometimes these were separate boys' and girls' schools, sometimes infants' and seniors'.

The village school at Chapel Hill had joined the National Schools' system in 1832 and was designated Poyntzpass National School. Around 1840 the school in Railway Street became part of the National Schools' scheme and was thereafter known as 'Poyntzpass No.2 National School, the school in Chapel Street becoming 'Poyntzpass No.1 National School'.

Somewhere between 1855 and 1865, under the guidance of the National Schools Board, the school in Railway Street was renovated.

Some National Schools were designed by their own appointed architects; others were privately financed and in many instances conceived as part of the wider development of landed estates.

So, if Colonel Close was looking for an architect to design school renovations, where would he look?

At this peak of the Victorian era with its increased industrialisation and prosperity, architecture and building were booming – churches, factories, municipal buildings, houses grand and modest were in demand.

William Henry Playfair (1790-1857) had designed Drumbanagher House, completed in 1829. He was Scottish, not local, and nearing the end of his life when the school was renovated.

More locally, Thomas Duff of Newry (1792-1848) might have been a contender for Colonel Close's job. Duff designed, among others, the Newry Courthouse, Sandy Street Presbyterian Church, St. Peter's Church in Warrenpoint, The Star of the Sea in Rostrevor, and Roman Catholic Churches in Loughbrickland, Barr, Hilltown and Annaclone.

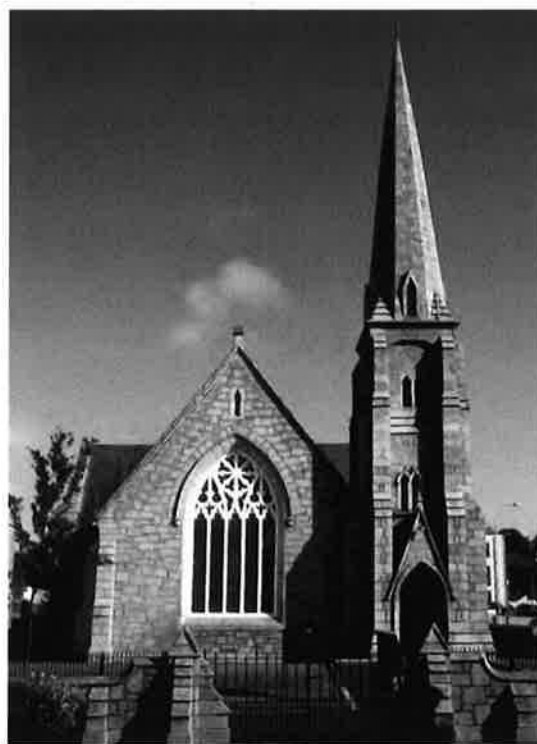
In 1837, Thomas Duff won the most important commission of his career, to design the new Roman Catholic Cathedral in Armagh. Unfortunately his work coincided with the period of the famine and some of his major enterprises, including the cathedral, were forced to stop. St. Patrick's was only just above window level, and when work resumed, Duff's designs were very much altered. His most outstanding landmark residence is that of the Hall family, Narrow Water Castle. Thomas Duff died in 1848 of apoplexy brought on by the early death of his only son aged fourteen and a daughter aged twenty one.

When Duff died, his young apprentice, WILLIAM J. BARRE (1830-1867), was left without a master.



*William J. Barre*

Born in Newry, William Barre found employment while "quite a youth" with a builder in Newry. Here he learned the practicalities of building – measuring, costing and all the skills which enabled him later to price any job accurately.



*1st Presbyterian Church, Newry (Unitarian)*

In 1847, at the age of seventeen, Barre was articled to Thomas Duff who recognised and encouraged his ability. When his master died in 1848, Barre went to Dublin and completed his articles under Edward P. Gibbon for whom Barre worked in Ireland and in England. During this time, Barre was involved in all the minutiae of construction – measuring, calculating, quantifying and

supervising which later gave him confidence in the accuracy of his estimates, and led to his reputation as one who always stuck to his quoted price.

Barre completed his articles towards the end of 1850, settled in Newry and set up his own business before he was twenty one.

At this tender age, Barre was chosen to design a new Unitarian Church in Newry in Needham Place (now John Mitchel Place). The old style for a Dissenting Meeting House was ungainly even for a barn. Barre used his courage and his judgement and departed entirely from the formula. He produced a beautiful, Gothic-style design with tower and spire. It was erected for the sum specified, to great plaudits, but it also marked the start of an entirely different style of architecture for the Protestant Dissenting community.

In 1855, aged twenty five, William Barre designed the very handsome Episcopal Church at Rockcorry, Co. Monaghan.



*Rockcorry Church*



*St. Mary's, Drumbanagher.*

In 1858, tenders were invited for the design of St. Mary's, and the church was built between 1858 and

1861, to designs by William Joseph Barre. St. Mary's is documented as Barre's work in Durham Dunlop's 'A Memoir of The Professional Life of William J. Barre Esq.' written the year after Barre's untimely death in 1867. It is also listed in the 'Irish Architectural Archive'.

Around the time of the building of St. Mary's, under the auspices of Colonel Close, the school was being renovated, or re-built, also under Colonel Close. Is this mere coincidence?

#### HALF-HIPPED GABLES AND FRILLY BARGEBOARDS.

To a knowing eye, architects, like artists or musicians, tend to have a distinctive style, a 'signature' that is evident even when not written. Two of William Barre's distinctive flourishes were half-hipped gables and frilly bargeboards.

In Tynan, the Erasmus Smith School (recently restored) is known to be by William Barre. It is dated 1860 and makes a useful comparison for the Poyntzpass school.



*Half-hipped gables of Tynan and Poyntzpass schools.*

Kevin Mulligan in his book *The Buildings of Ireland, South Ulster* describes Poyntzpass school as 'certainly a distinguished building, symmetrical in plan, with two large classrooms, three bays deep, set in parallel. The main front has twin porches with half-hipped gables and frilly bargeboards joined by a narrow recessed two-bay link. The architecture is striking chiefly because of the squat kneelered gable rising over the central link to support a jaunty little bellcote in ashlar with sweeping copings...'

Poyntzpass No.2 National School was renovated around the time that St. Mary's Drumbanagher and Tynan's Erasmus Smith School were being built. The Poyntzpass



*Friilly bargeboards - Tynan and Poyntzpass schools.*

school, as described by Kevin Mulligan is a building of note, and the 'knowing eye' of the professional, Professor Paul Larmour, is convinced that William Joseph Barre designed the school.

#### **YOUNG AND IMMENSELY TALENTED.**

The Irish Architectural Archive lists no fewer than 115 works by Barre, and that list is not exhaustive. He worked in counties Down, Antrim, Tyrone, Armagh, Derry, Sligo, Monaghan, Wicklow and Dublin.

Maybe he was so clever that he had it easy, or had family backing? No, he made his own way entirely through his ability and sheer hard work, which almost undoubtedly killed him.

Barre was a very ambitious young man; he wanted to be famous and his friends later said of him that '*his ambition to excel was irrepressible and boundless.*' Then as now, the designs for many public buildings and monuments were tendered by competition and William Barre competed relentlessly. In 1852 he entered the competition, with eighty or ninety others, to design the building for William Dargan's International Exhibition in Dublin. He was twenty one years of age and came seventh. This set a pattern – he learned from those who came first to sixth, improved what he did and looked for the next challenge.

On the death of Lord Londonderry, his Irish tenants proposed to erect a monument to his memory. A

committee was formed and a site selected on Scrabo Hill. Architects were invited early in 1856 to submit designs. Two prizes were offered, of £20 and £15, and the cost of the work was not to exceed £2000. This was William Barre's first successful competition. He visited the site, enquired about availability and cost of local stone and was awarded first prize for his design for an obelisk on a pedestal.

Placed fourth in the competition was the County Surveyor, Mr. Lanyon. In third place was Lanyon's Assistant County Surveyor. The placings were overturned, first and second lost out to third and fourth, and a design both inferior and costlier was substituted. What was to cost £2000 actually cost £3010 and the contractor was ruined in the process. With the same materials, it was reckoned later, William Barre's design could have been built for £1600.

In 1857, Barre successfully submitted designs for a memorial in Monaghan town to a member of the Dawson family killed in the Crimea. In the same year, he participated in a competition for the new Ulster Bank in Belfast. He came second to a Scottish architect by one vote. It turned out, however, that the winning design had a major defect in a flight of steps which caused the death of one of the directors of the bank.

By this time, William Barre's practice was extending. Primate Beresford engaged him to make extensive improvements in the Palace, Armagh and other church buildings.



*The Ulster Hall*

The citizens of Belfast were feeling the lack of a commodious hall for concerts and meetings. In 1859 a committee was set up, plans invited and prizes of £50

and £25 offered. Forty one designs were submitted from architects in England, Scotland and Ireland. William Barre came out on top with a London firm in second place.

Once again, one of the unsuccessful entrants tried to sabotage Barre's win by suggesting that although his design was admirable, he was surely too young and inexperienced to carry it out. Besides, it was said, Barre resided in Newry, too far away to supervise the project properly. This time the committee honourably stood their ground and when construction of the Ulster Hall commenced in 1860, Barre moved to Belfast, more than ready for greater scope for his talent. His business connections increased extensively. He had genius, taste and skill, and commanded success by truly labouring to deserve it.

More competitive success followed including churches for five different denominations, and the Crozier Monument in Banbridge, erected in memory of Captain Crozier of the Arctic Expedition.



*The Albert Clock.*

Barre's last and perhaps his greatest triumph as a competitor was still to be achieved. In 1865, a competition was launched for a memorial to the late Prince Consort, Prince Albert. The instructions to the architects were that the design should make provision for a clock to be not less than ninety feet in height from street level and the total cost of construction, exclusive of foundations and the clock, was not to exceed £1800. Prizes were £20 and £10.

Seventy six designs were submitted. The Selection Committee charged with choosing a design for the monument to Prince Albert picked Barre's clock; the General Committee, of which Mr. Lanyon was a member, chose to overrule in favour of Lanyon's design. This time, however, public outcry from 'The Newsletter' and others was sufficient to restore the original decision, leaving us with Belfast's best known, if somewhat skewed, clock tower (it is tilted by over a meter at the top).

In the 1856 Londonderry monument case, Barre had been young, unknown and unfriended. Now in 1866, William Barre stood proud and honourable. He had fame, prosperity, friends and esteem.

Building of the monument got under way and the fuss died down. Barre was at the peak of his powers, and then the fatal disease which was to kill him, quickened into development. He was consumptive.

In August 1866 Barre spent some hours walking about in wet grass marking the site for a villa near Downpatrick. He had been very busy for some days and had received several wettings but travelled on without changing his clothes.

A sore throat persisted and despite eventually taking the advice to winter in the south of France, Barre returned to Belfast and to his work in March 1867. He died in September of that year.

The Belfast Newsletter said "*In the midst of his popularity and usefulness, the man of genius, the warm-hearted friend, the kind citizen and the accomplished professional is cut down....*"

*Mr. Barre was fortunate in possessing both genius to invent and taste to guide and control the operations of fancy."*

When he died, William Barre was working on alterations to the courthouse in Omagh, improvements and additions at Tynan Abbey, for the Earl of Charlemont on conversion of an old house, at Belvoir Park for Sir Thomas Bateson, for a splendid new house for Samuel Barbour; he was working on the construction of the largest and most complete mill in Ulster for the Edenderry spinning Company and a linen warehouse in Amelia Street in Belfast; churches at Dungannon, Moy and Crossgar; additions to the General Hospital, (now the Royal Victoria Hospital, founded by James McDonnell GP from the Glens of Antrim); and others.

### POSTSCRIPT - HIS WILL

William Barre's will, written in May two years before his death, tells us a little more about Barre's life. He was not married, or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that he was married to his work and ambition. He did however leave £250 to one *'Anne Gillespie formerly Macnamara and who formerly resided in Newry but now living I believe in or near Lisnakea in the county of Fermanagh the sum of £250 for her own sole and separate use and free and clear and independent of the control debts or engagements of her husband'*.



**William Barre Memorial in St. Patrick's Churchyard, Newry.**

Charles Acton Sherrie, his assistant, was to get £50 in *'consideration of the trouble he will have in assisting my executors and winding up my affairs'*.

His plans and drawings were to go to his pupils, and to his two closest friends who were also his executors – *'all my money goods chattels household furniture books pictures shares and other my personal estate and effects.....so long as they allow my mother to select such articles of remembrance of me as she may choose to keep'*. His mother was also to get the interest on investment.

His effects were listed as being under £7000.

His friends wrote

*'In peace and honour rest you here,  
Secure from worldly chances and mishaps!  
Here lurks no treason, here no envy swells;  
Here grow no damned grudges; here are no storms, no  
noise.*

*'In peace and honour rest you here.'*

His friends thought so much of him, that when he died, they raised a subscription list to pay for the publishing of a biography. Subscribers included many architects in Belfast, Newry and Dublin, and many of his clients. It is thanks to that biography, written by Durham Dunlop the year after Barre's death, that we have details of so many of his works.

Sources:-

The Book of Newry; PRONI Wills; The Buildings of Ireland. South Ulster. Armagh, Cavan and Monaghan by Kevin Mulligan; F. Watters 'Some notes on the history of Poyntzpass Old School, Railway Street'; Irish Architectural Archive; 'Before I forget..' Volume III The Judge Family; Buildings of County Armagh by CEB Brett; Belfast – An Illustrated Architectural Guide by Paul Larmour; Memoir of William J. Barre by Durham Dunlop. 1868.



**The Crozier Monument, Banbridge, by William Barre.**