

THE REVIVED ARTS AND CRAFTS OF THE MIDDLE AGES

INSIDE THE 'MEDIAEVAL COURT'

Michael Fisher

'A large greenhouse, very ingenious...but a beastly place to shew off Gothic work.' Such was the damning verdict pronounced by A.W.N. Pugin (1812-52) upon Joseph Paxton's Crystal Palace, and where he, along with John Hardman of Birmingham (1811-67) were to create their retrospective 'Mediaeval Court' at the Great Exhibition of 1851.



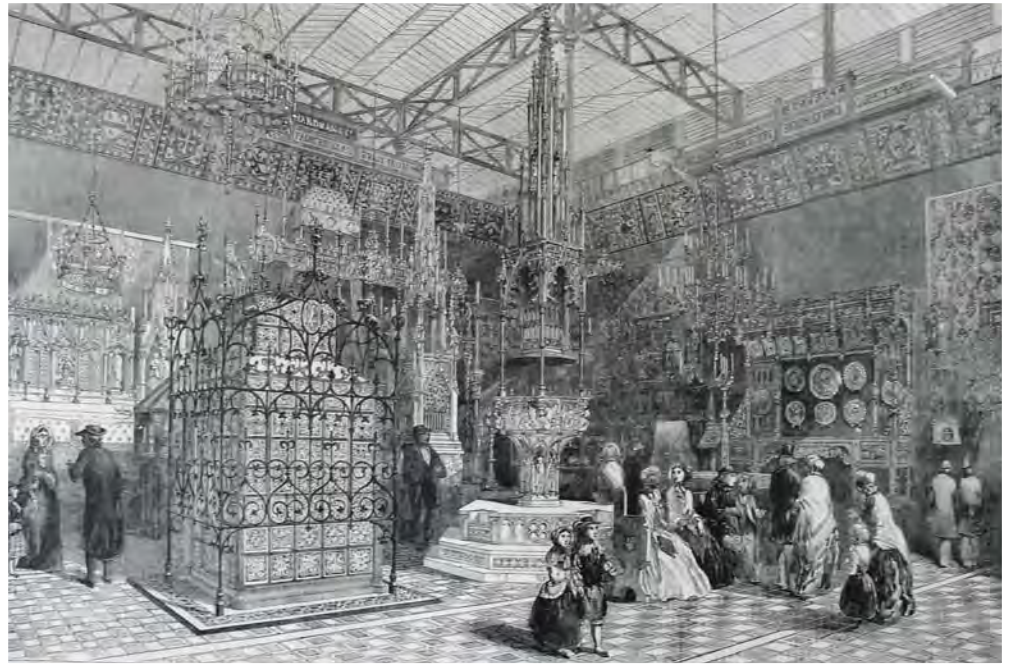
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The Mediaeval Court by L.Hague from *Dickinsons' Comprehensive Pictures of the Great Exhibition*, 1854. Hardman's church plate can be seen in the glass cabinet on the right and his candlesticks on and around the altars on the left. To the left is the hanging *corona lucis* from Alton Towers.

The other collaborators were the royal decorator and furnisher John Gregory Crace (1809-89), the builder and stone-carver George Myers (1804-75), and the potter Herbert Minton (1793-1858), all of whom worked to Pugin's designs in the revived Gothic style.

It was something of a paradox that one of the most popular and widely-reported displays in this avant-garde piece of constructional engineering was the 'Mediaeval Court' crammed with the revived arts and crafts of the Middle Ages; but such was the paradox of the whole Gothic Movement of the nineteenth century, driven, on the whole,

'He showed the world that Birmingham, stigmatised for the production of things false, was at the bidding of an earnest man, capable of producing things honest, truthful, noble and precious.'



A view of the 'Mediaeval Court' from the *Illustrated London News*, xix, 1851, p. 361. The Great Stove is in the left foreground, and on the far right is the sideboard laden with Hardman's gilt-metal dishes.

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by younger generations exemplified by the architect/designer Augustus Pugin and his friend, John Hardman of Birmingham.

In its reaction against the neo-Classical styles and fashions of the Georgian age, and often critical of the evils of the Industrial Revolution, 'Young England' unashamedly used modern materials and production methods in satisfying its passion for everything Gothic: the textile mills and Jacquard looms which produced Crace's fabrics, the steam-driven machines that roughed out Myers' statues, and the mechanised metalworking processes which extruded brass tubing by the yard for the stems of Hardman's chalices, candlesticks and gas-fittings.

John Hardman and A.W.N. Pugin

In 1838 John Hardman, in association with Pugin, had established Birmingham's Mediaeval Art Manufactory in Great Charles Street, producing a wide range of goods related principally but not exclusively to church buildings: metalwork, woodwork, textiles and stained glass. They enjoyed considerable success as the Gothic Revival advanced, and at the 1849 Birmingham Exhibition of Manufactures they had a stand which drew attention to the skills that were raising the profile of the city out of the realm of trinkety 'Brummagemware' to new heights of design and manufacture.

Henry Cole, who along with Prince Albert was one of the leading figures in the organisation of the Great Exhibition, praised the efforts of Pugin and Hardman at Birmingham, and this led directly to their prominent role at the Crystal Palace two years later.

Hardman and the Exhibition

Hardman entrusted the organisation of his part of the 'Mediaeval Court' to his chief decorator, Thomas Earley, who was sent down to

London at the beginning of March 1851. The floor-space allowed to them was 48 square feet, into which they had to pack a considerable quantity of goods.

Lord Granville, Vice-President of the Royal Commission for the Great Exhibition, wrote:

'... One side of this Court will be hung with Ecclesiastical ornaments, the other three sides with Domestic furniture, and in the middle there will be a mixture of Fonts, stoves, flower pots, armchairs, Sofas tables etc... The whole will be surrounded by a Frieze with the heraldic bearings of those who have bought largely Mediaeval Furniture.'

Contemporary illustrations of the Court confirm this arrangement. Although each of the four participants had his own 'side', Hardman & Co. predominated, having provided the largest number of items, and also because their metalwork adorned others' products too: Crace's wooden furniture, Myers' stone altars, and Minton's tile-clad stoves and jardinières. Examples of Hardman's stained glass were displayed on the north side of the Court, and ecclesiastical textiles worked by Hardman's sister, Lucy Powell, were also included.

Preparations continued through April, with important visitors arriving weeks before the formal opening. These included Queen Victoria, and Earley wrote proudly of his role on this occasion: '...only think, a Dirty painter holding conversation with our Sovereign Lady the Queen for some five minutes or more.' The Queen visited the Exhibition again in May, and, according to Pugin's biographer, she admired the parure of jewellery made by Hardman and which Jane Knill – Pugin's 'first-rate Gothic woman' – wore at her marriage to him in October 1848. Made of gold and

set with pearls and gemstones, the set included earrings, bracelets, head-band and necklaces.

Jane Pugin's set of jewels underlines the great diversity of the products of Hardman & Co., and they lost no opportunity to show this in the 'Mediaeval Court'. At the other end of the scale was the Great Stove, based on those Pugin had seen in Germany. Minton made the majolica tiles which adorned the exterior and radiated the heat, but Hardman made the ironwork of the stove itself, along with the brass pillars at each corner, and the elaborate wrought-iron guard which surrounded it. The heraldry reveals that the stove was destined for Alton Towers, where Pugin was carrying out structural and decorative work for the Earl of Shrewsbury.

Lighting equipment – from candlesticks to wall-sconces, multi-branched chandeliers and gasoliers – was to become something of a Hardman speciality. Visible too in the lithographs of the Exhibition is the enamelled brass corona from Lord Shrewsbury's dining-room, and a set of magnificent gilt-metal dishes resplendent with heraldic devices – the largest being 30" in diameter – displayed on Crace's huge sideboard.

Set within a free-standing glass cabinet was a glittering array of church metalwork, exemplifying the skills of the Hardman craftsmen who used a blend of industrial techniques such as spinning for the bowls of chalices, and handicraft methods such as saw-piercing, chasing and enamelling in the finishing processes.

One of the great strengths of the company was their ability to produce well-designed items across a broad price-range, so that – for example – candlesticks could be made to an identical pattern in either silver-gilt or gilt-brass, with or without the addition of engraving, jewels and enamels, according to what a client was able to afford.

A second cabinet contained secular items such as salvers, candelabra and jewellery, although the boundaries between sacred and secular were sometimes blurred. A ruby-glass flagon with silver-gilt mounts designed to hold communion wine could, by slight adaptation, become a claret-jug.

Funerary art was another aspect of the revival pioneered by Pugin and Hardman, particularly the re-introduction of memorial brasses. Usually set into the pavements of medieval churches, these medieval brasses were often beautifully engraved with representations of the deceased,



Photo: private collection

Ruby-glass communion flagon with silver-gilt mounts by Hardman. Similar ones, minus their religious emblems, were made as domestic items.

and surviving examples provided the models for new ones. At the Exhibition, there was a large brass engraved with the figure of a priest in full Eucharistic vestments under a Gothic canopy. Later on it was adapted as a memorial to Bishop John Milner at the church in which he had been buried in 1826 – St Peter & St Paul, Wolverhampton – where it may still be seen.

Achievements

For all that Pugin fretted over it, the 'Mediaeval Court' was a huge success. He and Hardman had made 'Gothic' both popular and affordable, and many came back from the Exhibition with ideas for their own homes, from *nouveau-riche* businessmen such as James Watts of Manchester, a Presbyterian textile wholesaler, who gave Abney Hall (Cheadle, Greater Manchester) a complete Gothic makeover, to members of the suburban middle class who wanted Minton tiles on their floors, or Hardman candle-sconces on their drawing-room pianos.

All of Pugin's colleagues received medals for their exhibits, but the jury

were 'more particularly impressed with the very perfect manner in which Messrs Hardman have developed the artist's conceptions', and in addition to the Council Medal the firm was awarded a Prize Medal for the collection of church-plate, some of which was bought for permanent display in the South Kensington Museum.

Towards the end of the Exhibition, the *Illustrated London News* eulogised the 'Mediaeval Court' as 'the most unique and best harmonised display of art and skill – art in the artist and skill in the executant', while its significance for Birmingham is contained in Hardman's obituary (1867): 'He showed the world that Birmingham, stigmatised for the production of things false, was at the bidding of an earnest man, capable of producing things honest, truthful, noble and precious.' ●

Michael Fisher is an authority on the work of A.W.N. Pugin and was consultant archivist for the firm of John Hardman & Co.

Further Reading

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