The Dublin Unitarian Church Building

The Unitarian Church at 112 St. Stephen’s Green, Dublin opened for public worship on Sunday, 14th June 1863.

Site
One hundred years before this church building project began, the west side of St. Stephen’s Green was known as French Walk, because of the many Huguenots who owned property there. The church site was previously occupied by the Synges, a prominent ecclesiastical family who provided five bishops to the Church of Ireland. The site is 60 feet wide, with direct street frontage. The existing houses on either side were at an angle to the street, so that none of the internal corners of the church are at right angles to each other.

Architect and builder
The Gothic Revival design from Belfast-based firm, Langon, Lynn and Lanyon was selected in an architectural competition for the church contract. Charles Langon was the civil engineer and William Henry Lynn was the architect. Lynn also designed St. Andrew’s Church (Church of Ireland) in Andrew Street in Dublin and one of his major works in Belfast was Queen’s University. In March 1862 the Dublin Builder journal recorded “Messrs Hammond of Drogheda and Dublin have been declared contractors. The expenditure will be about £5,000.00”.

Structure
The church is L-shaped and has a one-sided transept with gallery. The roof stands 50 feet above the floor, which is 10 feet above street level. The main body of the church is 58 feet long by 46 feet wide. The spire stands 97 feet above street level. The external walling is of squared granite rubble, and the decorative portions, both external and internal, of Bath stone from the Box quarries in England. The seating and aisles are designed to give prominent sight of the pulpit from anywhere within the church, in line with the Nonconformist view that the sermon is the most important part of the religious service.

Decorative features of note

Angels
At the top of each pillar in the main aisle of the church, the roof trusses are supported by carved angels. Those looking down on the transept are acting out the passage from St. Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians:

Stand, therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness, and your feet shod with preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, taking the shield of faith, wherewith ye shall be able to quench all the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

The angel on the south east corner is putting on the “girdle of truth”. The angel on the south west corner is putting on the “helmet of salvation”. The angel on the north west corner is holding the “shield of faith” on which “all the fiery darts of the wicked” can be seen breaking up in pieces, and the angel on the north east corner holds “the Sword of the Spirit” in one hand and “the word of God”, represented by the Bible, in the other.

The Beatitudes
The six marble plaques on the north wall inscribed with the Beatitudes were erected in 1912, the gift of the Right Hon. Sir Andrew Marshall Porter.

Windows — North-facing

The Wilson Memorial Window 1918
This window is arranged in five panels: Discovery, Truth, Inspiration, Love and Work. People depicted include Florence Nightingale, Galileo Galilei, Christopher Columbus, William Caxton and Martin Luther. The work was carried out by Sarah Purser’s celebrated An Túr Gloine (The Glass Tower) studio, to a design by A.E. Child; an example of the revival of the Irish stained glass industry in the early 20th century.

The window is dedicated to Thomas Wilson, head of Thomas Wilson & Sons, ship owners, of North Wall, Dublin, who was one of the prime instigators of the move to St. Stephen’s Green and a major financial donor. His father Joseph Wilson fought in the American War of Independence, where he was aide-de-camp to George Washington and subsequently became the first American consul in Dublin.

Windows — West-facing

Hutton Window 1865
Constructed in Tours, France. Erected in memory of Thomas Hutton, of the famous coach building family of Summerhill, which had a long and active association with the Unitarian Church. The Huttons built the Irish State Coach for Queen Victoria following her visit to Dublin in 1849. The coach continues to be used by the British monarch, most notably when travelling to Westminster to open parliament.

Suffer the little children to come unto me 1866
Designed by L. Lobin of Tours.

Palm Sunday 1867
Designed by L. Lobin of Tours.

Fruits and Flowers (no signature or date)
Fruits and flowers window inscribed with “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God” (left), and “Unto the upright there ariseth a light in darkness” (right). Dedicated to the memory of William Arthur Digby 1891.
Windows — East-facing

**Courage, Efficiency, Kindness. Trefoil Window 1943**
Margaret Huxley, a pioneer on behalf of the nursing profession, also organised and raised funds for the construction of houses on Cork Street, Dublin 8, known as Huxley Crescent.

**The Good Samaritan 1937**
Designed by Ethel Rhind, An Túr Gloine (The Glass Tower)
Inscription: *Which of these was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves? Go and do thou likewise – Erected in affectionate remembrance of Albert Sargent West and Martha Ann West by their daughter Elizabeth West of New York 1937.*

**Porch window 1868**
Porch window at the top of the stairs.
Designed by L. Lobin of Tours.

Relief panel sculpture 1980s

The relief panel entitled *Celebration* was made for the Dublin Unitarian Church by the sculptor Patrick McElroy, who was a long-time member of the congregation. The panel is constructed of forged steel, cast bronze, copper and hot-formed glass and depicts symbols of the major religions of the world.

Damer Hall

The basement housed the Damer School which provided education for the Unitarian population and also for many Jewish children. It closed in June 1954. The Damer Hall, as it became known, hosted a professional and amateur Irish-language theatre from 1955 until the late 1970s. The world premiere of Brendan Behan’s *An Giall* (The Hostage) took place there in 1957.

The Organ

The original organ was installed in the gallery, but after a fire in 1910 the Walker Organ was purchased in 1911 and constructed against the south wall where it is today.

Restoration

In recent years a major restoration project has been undertaken, including the cleaning of the stonework on the church front and the provision of disabled access. The organ is currently in need of remedial work, and is the subject of a major fundraising initiative.

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