

# **FRANCIS CRANMER PENROSE**

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**J. P. G. Taylor**

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Escrick enjoys the unusual, perhaps unique, distinction amongst English villages of having had three parish churches on different sites in the course of three-quarters of a century. The first was the Romanesque and Gothic church which stood close to the manor house in the centre of the old village at the top of the moraine and which served the parish for at least six hundred years. The second, the work of John Carr of York, succeeded the medieval church in the 1780s. Its site was a little to the west of the present third church which was consecrated in 1857 and was designed by the subject of this essay, Francis Cranmer Penrose. There would have been a small number of parishioners who knew all three churches. It is in fact quite possible that there were a few who were christened in the medieval church, married in the Georgian church and buried in the Victorian one. In the margin of the parish register for burials for 1857 - when the Victorian church must have been nearing completion - against the name of Ann Carr, widow, who died aged 90 on 18 January, the Rev Stephen Lawley, occupant of the new Penrose vicarage, has written in his neat hand:

She could recollect the old Church w<sup>h</sup> was removed by the Act of Parl. in 17—<sup>1</sup>  
by B Thompson esq.

Almost nothing remains of the two earlier churches, the third happily survives, an unmissable landmark on the York/Selby road, to outward appearance much as F C Penrose would have known it more than a hundred and fifty years ago, though internally, thanks largely to a devastating fire in 1923, much changed.

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<sup>1</sup>The date that escapes the Rev Lawley is 1781. Ann Carr's grave is unmarked.

## **Who was F C Penrose and how did he come to be chosen to design the current St Helen's?**

He was born at Bracebridge, just south of Lincoln on 29 October 1817; the son of the, Rev. John Penrose, himself the son of a vicar who was of Cornish origin. Francis's mother, Elizabeth (1780-1837), claimed descent from Henry VIII's Archbishop and principal architect of the English Reformation; hence her son's middle name. She was the daughter of the Rev. Edmund Cartwright, inventor of the textile power loom (besides a number of other industrial devices). She wrote popular histories for children, which were hugely successful, under the pseudonym 'Mrs Markham'. An aunt of Francis (his father's sister), Mary Penrose, was married to the great reforming headmaster, Thomas Arnold of Rugby. Their son, Matthew, poet and critic, was therefore first cousin to Francis and became a close friend. This varied pedigree suggests a network of influences which would determine the path the young Penrose's life was to take.

Francis's education was at Bedford Grammar School (1825- 9), and later Winchester ('three years of abject misery'). At the age of seventeen he became articled to the well-known architect Edward Blore<sup>2</sup> (1835 -8) and then, at the unusually late age of twenty, he went up to Cambridge, graduating with first-class honours in mathematics. He rowed in the Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race in 1840, 1841 and 1842, captaining the Cambridge boat on two occasions and winning on all three. He was a noted athlete: he walked from Cambridge to London in a day and skated from Ely to the Wash on the frozen Great Ouse (and presumably back again) - a round trip of some sixty miles. At Cambridge, he made the acquaintance of Charles Kingsley (they were both at Magdalene) and later, through Kingsley, F D Maurice, both founder members of the Christian Socialist movement. They remained friends throughout their lifetimes. Kingsley would be a guest at the consecration of St Helen's Church many years later.

In the three years after Cambridge (1842-5) Penrose, with the help of a travel bursary, toured the Continent, studying the architecture of France, Italy and Greece. He would return via Switzerland and Germany. In Athens he met by chance a

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Blore (1787 – 1879) was the co-architect of Sir Walter Scott's Abbotsford, restorer of Lambeth Palace, Hampton Court and Windsor Castle and builder of the Pitt Press at Cambridge and Thicket Priory. Thorganby (all in the favoured Gothic or Tudor-Gothic style). He also, in Betjeman's words, 'spoilt the front of Nash's Buckingham Palace.'

young fellow of Oriel, Oxford, Richard William Church. They found each other's company congenial and agreed to travel south together. They were unfortunately captured by brigands - for which Greece was notorious at this time, and warned that if they tried to escape within two hours they would be killed. Two hours elapsed. Penrose was the first to free himself from his bonds, 'but insisted on first sketching Church before releasing him and going to the nearest village in search of clothing and a lift home to their lodgings and financial resources.'<sup>3</sup>

Church would later become Dean of St Paul's and Penrose Surveyor of the Fabric of St Paul's and therefore in effect his employee. It is tempting to speculate that years later, during routine meetings of the Chapter, when some tedious matter like the condition of the roof was under discussion, the eyes of the elderly Dean and his Surveyor may have met and unspoken memories of this escapade from their youth would have come flooding back.

A more fruitful result of Penrose's months in Greece was his enthusiastic conversion from an exclusive passion for Gothic – and his youth coincided with the high tide of the Gothic Revival – to a deep admiration for Classicism. The mathematician in him responded to the subtle proportions of the Greek temples he was studying. He realised the significance of John Pennethorne's paper on optical corrections in Ancient Greek architecture (1844) and made detailed drawings and measurements of the Periclean monuments. This established the principle known as entasis, the slightly convex curve given to a column to correct the illusion of concavity produced by a straight shaft. The results of his observations were first published in 1847 and later expanded into a vast tome "*Principles of Athenian Architecture*", published in 1851.<sup>4</sup> His appointment as Surveyor of the Fabric of St Paul's Cathedral followed logically from this in 1852. He was only the fifth person to occupy this position since Wren, who was the first. Penrose's brief was to continue and complete Wren's unfinished work at St Paul's. He was thirty-five years old and the task he had undertaken would occupy the next forty seven years of his life.

For the first sixteen years of his time at St Paul's, Penrose had the good fortune to be working with Dean Henry Hart Milman (1791 – 1868), a civilised man who shared his surveyor's ideals and did all that was within his power to realise them. It was a

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<sup>3</sup>From an unpublished essay on Penrose by Canon John Halliburton 1995

<sup>4</sup> There were later editions in 1888 and 1973.

formidable task they had set themselves. For the whole of the eighteenth century and the first third of the nineteenth, the Anglican Church had been neglectful of its priceless architectural heritage. It required the energy, eloquence and controlled indignation of a few young men like Pugin and Keble and the Cambridge Camden Society to galvanize the somnolent Church of England into life and by the mid-point of the century dramatic changes in the care of existing buildings, the design of new churches and the liturgy were well under way.

St Paul's at the time when Milman and Penrose took charge was perhaps an extreme example of this criminal neglect. The Rev. Sydney Smith, a canon of St Paul's in the 1830s wrote:

We see beggars, men with burdens, women knitting, parties eating luncheon, dogs, children playing, loud laughing and talking and every kind of scene incompatible with the solemnity of worship, evils in which all sense of religion is destroyed.....the Cathedral is constantly and shamefully polluted with ordure, the pews are sometimes turned into *cabinets d'aisance* and the prayer books torn up; the monuments are scribbled all over and often with the grossest indecencies....

It was the considerable achievement of Milman and Penrose to restore St Paul's to a dignified place of worship and to resume the task of re-furbishing the Cathedral in accordance with the intentions of its great architect, Wren. In the words of Milman:

...instead of this cold, dull, unedifying, unseemly appearance of the interior, the Cathedral should be made within worthy of its exterior grandeur and beauty...

To this end, the use of the nave as a combined public park, playground, market and toilet was ended. Paintings and mosaics were commissioned. The marbling and gilding of columns and ceilings was started. Pictorial glass began to appear in the windows.

However, Penrose's ally the Dean died in 1868 and the balance of opinion in the chapter shifted, with the result that within a few years the Tractarians<sup>5</sup> found themselves in charge.

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<sup>5</sup> The Tractarians, otherwise known as the Oxford Movement, take their name from 'Tracts for the Times' published between 1833 and 1841. There were ninety of them and they started with a campaign to resist what the writers saw as

To them, all things 'Grecian', ( i.e. classical) were anathema: their champion was, ironically, the new Dean, Richard Church<sup>6</sup> , Penrose's companion and fellow hostage in Greece many years before. Penrose faced years of obstruction from the new chapter which must have taken its toll. It has been suggested that this may account for the increasing amount of time Penrose devoted to astronomy in his later years - as an escape from the wearing battles with the Tractarian ideologues.

In 1874, the chapter made the astounding decision to appoint William Burges as architect. Anyone less in sympathy with the architecture of St Paul's it was impossible to imagine. The most exuberant and extravagant of all of the architects of the Gothic Revival (see his churches in Yorkshire at Skelton and Studley Royal), Burges had openly expressed his contempt for Wren on several occasions:

We have fought and will fight against the Sir Christopher Wren abominations.

On another occasion he had referred to Wren as 'that wretch' and in the end it was Burges's loose tongue and extreme opinions that cost him the appointment at St Paul's. Penrose, bruised, was able to resume his unenviable task.

In spite of infuriating distractions like these, Penrose in his nearly fifty years at St Paul's did manage to achieve some positive results, which shape the modern visitor's view of the cathedral to this day. He designed the choir school (in very Italianate style), the choir seats and desks, the marble pulpit, the Wellington tomb in the crypt (of Cornish porphyry, set on a mosaic floor laid by female convicts); the memorial to Lord Napier; and achieved much else, like the re-arrangement of the steps at the west door and the exposure of the remains of Old St Paul's in the churchyard. A later generation was to record posterity's debt to Penrose by designating the upper north choir aisle the Penrose Aisle.

The wonder is that Penrose found the time and the energy to carry out other architectural commissions and to pursue serious separate careers as an archaeologist and an astronomer. Victorians appear to have had inexhaustible wells of energy that enabled them to follow several careers at once with equal vigour and equal success: one thinks of Trollope, Gladstone and William Morris.

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the dangerous increasing power of the state over the national church; they quickly widened their scope to affirm their links with the early church and to advocate a return to the dignity of worship of the seventeenth century, which entailed a physical re-ordering of churches' interiors. Their enemies dubbed the Tractarians Puseyites or Newmaniacs.

<sup>6</sup> Church's Oxford college was Oriel, the hotbed of the Tractarian movement; Newman, Pusey, Keble and Froude were all Oriel men

Late in life, Penrose wrote a comprehensive list of,

The most important architectural commissions with which I have been intrusted [sic]

Most of these are church-related and their distribution over the country can mostly be explained by family, college or cathedral connections. For example, his first commission, in 1846, appears to be the design of a rectory at Butleigh in Somerset, which was built for the Rev. Frederick Neville, the son of the then master of Magdalene. Hornblotton Rectory follows a year later; it happens to be a mere five miles east of Butleigh - clearly a matter of recommendation from one member of the clergy to a neighbouring clergyman.

Penrose's account continues:

1849 – 50<sup>7</sup> Escrick Rectory, near York, for the Hon. Rev. S W Lawley.

Following this, a small church at Kirby [Penrose means Kexby] near York for Lord Wenlock [Rev. S W Lawley's brother].



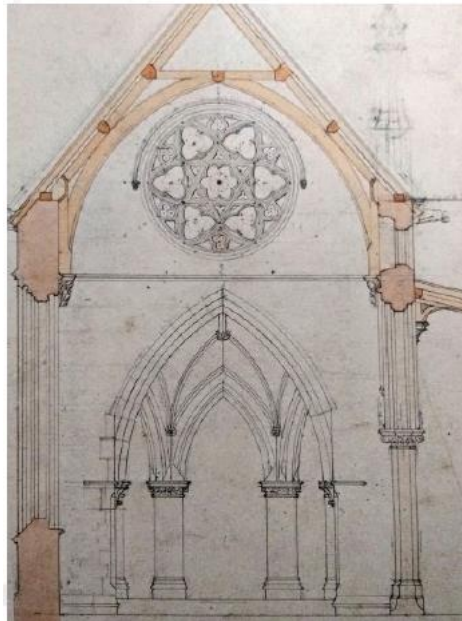
*In 1949 the rectory became part of Queen Margaret's School*

Escrick rectory is built in a restrained Tudor Gothic style, with steep barge-boarded gables, depressed Gothic windows under square hood-moulds, tall chimneys and – its one sign of extravagance – an oriel window over the front door. The commission to build a new St Helen's church flowed logically from this.

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<sup>7</sup> The date on the downpipes is 1848

1856 The rebuilding of Escrick church was the principal work on which I was engaged at the time of my marriage in 1856.



*Drawing of the Escrick baptistry by F C Penrose*

Penrose's bride was Harriette, daughter of Francis Gibbes, surgeon, of Harewood near Leeds. It may be worth pointing out that 1857, the year of the consecration of the new St Helen's, was the year of the completion of Wellington's tomb at St Paul's.

How did Penrose win the Escrick commissions? He built nowhere else in Yorkshire. One possible link is Edward Blore, to whom Penrose had been articled in his late teens. Blore had been engaged by the Lawleys in the late 30s to remodel Escrick Park. Nothing came of it, though the drawings survive. Perhaps Blore was approached, ten or so years later with a request for plans for a vicarage and church. He declined (let us suppose), perhaps understandably, but civilly suggested that the Wenlocks (which the Lawleys had metamorphosed into) look at a promising young ex-pupil of his, who was anxious for work. This is a supposition, but no other link readily suggests itself.

Penrose's other contribution to the fabric of Escrick is a pair of estate cottages in the centre of the village. They are L-shaped in plan and each consists of two dwellings dove-tailed together. The two- and three-light windows with their segmental relieving arches recall the Parsonage, as do their disproportionately tall Tudoresque chimneys. These would have been built by the Wenlocks to house the tenants who had been evicted from their homes in the old village up the hill. Penrose's



meticulous drawings (plans and elevations, with precise measurements of every component down to the last joist and chimney-pot) survive at the University of York's Borthwick Institute.

Penrose's output as an architect was comparatively small because of his commitment to St Paul's. Nevertheless, in the 1850s, 60s and 70s, he carried out a number of significant commissions, mainly ecclesiastical and mainly enlargements or embellishments of existing buildings, e.g. St Stephen's Walbrook (Wren's finest City church); St Cuthbert's, Bedford; All Saints, Chilvers Coton (Warks); the chapel at Rugby School; St Mary's Great Barrington (Glos); St Mary's Ludgershall (Bucks) formerly Wycliffe's church, comments Penrose; South Ormesby and Coleby (Lincs), the latter a largely Anglo-Saxon and Romanesque church to which Penrose added a vestry with, says Pevsner, 'a very large strange north window'. Coleby is only three miles south of Penrose's birthplace at Bracebridge. When he later came to build a house for himself and his family at Wimbledon, he named it Colebyfield, clearly a sentimental reference to a place remembered fondly from his childhood. Plans for Colebyfield and other work can be found at <https://www.architecture.com/>

This was one of a number of country houses he built or restored or extended, ranging from large mansions like Powerscourt in Ireland and Ickworth in Suffolk (where he designed the Pompeiian Room, for which he was eminently qualified as a classicist and an archaeologist) to more modest dwellings like Alderhurst at Staines (Middlesex), Ardencote (Warks); Brownsea Castle on Poole Harbour, Maids Moreton (Bucks) and a house at Wimbledon for Thomas Hughes, author of '*Tom Brown's Schooldays*' and a Christian Socialist whom Penrose would have known through Kingsley and Matthew Arnold. His own house at Colebyfield has already been mentioned: he had a growing family to accommodate. There were by this time five children, a son and four daughters<sup>8</sup>

Architects, more than most professionals, need to be stoical and resilient. Much of what they labour over gets no further than the drawing-board and never achieves three-dimensional form in bricks and mortar. This is Penrose's entry in his memo for the year 1868:

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<sup>8</sup> The eldest of whom, Emily (1858 – 1942) a distinguished archaeologist and linguist, became principal successively of Bedford College, Royal Holloway College and Somerville College, Oxford..

In 1866 I had been invited with five other architects [one of whom was George Gilbert Scott] to send in designs for rebuilding the National Gallery... The design of Mr S Barry<sup>9</sup> was chosen but it has not been carried out.

In 1973, Penrose returned to his old college at Cambridge to design two new ranges at Magdalene, the street front and entrance, and the river front. Only the first was carried out; but the layout of River Court and the very handsome wrought-iron gate next to Magdalene Bridge are Penrose's. So is one range of Chapel Court at the neighbouring college of St John's. Both are in the safe Tudor Gothic style judged appropriate to a collegiate setting. The Cambridge commissions coincided with the unfortunate introduction of William Burges to St Paul's and the subsequent, happily temporary, displacement of Penrose. The commissions must have provided a welcome distraction from the bitter wrangling in the Cathedral.

Penrose's other disciplines deserve a mention. Archaeology had been a pre-occupation since his student days. Reference has already been made to his pioneering study of Athenian architecture (which, almost two centuries later, has not been superseded). It was entirely fitting that Penrose would be invited to design the British School of Archaeology in Athens (completed in 1886) and that he would be appointed its first Director (1886 – 7). He was director again in 1890-1. The school still has its Penrose Library with a bust of the founder in pride of place.

His interest in astronomy, which he shared with his hero Wren - who had been Professor of Astronomy at Oxford before he took up architecture - stemmed in part from his enquiry into the alignment of classical temples. It took him to Denver, Colorado, in the 1870s to record the eclipse of the sun. He wrote a book on eclipses: *A method of predicting...occultations of stars and solar eclipses* (1869). A photograph survives of Penrose in his garden at Wimbledon gazing through a giant telescope next to the garden shed that served him as an observatory.

Honours were showered on Penrose towards the end of his life. He was awarded the Gold Medal of the RIBA in 1883; he was made an Honorary Fellow of Magdalene in 1884 (one of the first), a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1894 and of the Society of Antiquaries in 1898; both Oxford and Cambridge appointed him Doctor of Letters. The honour that most pleased him was his election as President of the Royal

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<sup>9</sup> This is likely to be E M Barry, son of the more famous Charles Barry, architect of the Palace of Westminster, who later (1871-5) was given the job of extending (not replacing) Wilkins's National Gallery

Institute of British Architects in 1894, a late official recognition of half a century's work at St Paul's. The occasion was marked by a specially commissioned portrait by the fashionable J S Sargent. A good copy of this<sup>10</sup> hangs in the Fellows guest room at Magdalene. It depicts a man in his late seventies, balding, with luxuriant muttonchop whiskers, sitting bolt upright, his powerful jaw thrust forward, fixing the painter with a confident gaze. By his side, propped against his gilt armchair, is a giant folio of his drawings. This is a man who looks as if he is still capable of captaining the Cambridge boat or skating all the way from Ely to King's Lynn.

Penrose enjoyed a vigorous old age, still lecturing in the last year of his life. He died at Wimbledon on 15 February, 1903, aged 85, and is buried there. His wife Harriette predeceased him by twelve days.

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<sup>10</sup> By C M Newton, 1902. This copy is a slightly truncated version of the original

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*Escrick – a village history*,  
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I would like to thank the Borthwick Institute of the University of York, the Parsonage Hotel, Escrick and the Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge for allowing me to view and copy plans, drawings and water colours by F C Penrose.

