

A PRELIMINARY COMMENT ON



BETHANIE HALL

HONG KONG

David Michelmore

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BETHANIE MONASTERY: A PRELIMINARY COMMENT

The historical context

Bethanie monastery was built in 1873, at a period when France was pursuing an aggressive colonial policy, not only for acquiring new colonies itself,¹ but also spheres of interests in China. In South East Asia, within the orbit of Hong Kong, France was pursuing an active policy of acquiring new possessions in Indo China, involving the annexation of states which in all cases had previously had a tributary relationship with Qing-Dynasty China. What the exact southern boundary of imperial China would finally be was then still unclear, especially since the south was in ferment following the Taiping rebellion. It was in 1873, the same year that Béthanie Hall was built, that the French siezed Hanoi and subsequently the whole of Tonkin. Although they occupied Hue, the Vietnamese imperial capital, in 1883, and forced a protectorate status on the Vietnamese court, these successes did not result in the peaceful annexation of Annam. Chinese imperial troops had been sent to Tonkin at the request of the Vietnamese Emperor Tu Duc and in fact succeeded in defeating French forces at Lang Son in February 1885, but in June of that year the court in Beijing signed a treaty renouncing claims to Vietnam and in September the enthronement of Emperor Dong Khanh as a French puppet in Hue ensured the long-term success of the French annexation of Vietnam. Further west, the French explored the course of the Mekong and annexed the petty kingdom of Luang Prabang, pushing northwards towards Yunnan, and by 1893 they had acquired the whole of Laos.

French missionaries were often instrumental in encouraging colonial ambitions, as in the case of the annexation of Tonkin, and the construction of the impressive Béthanie Hall should be viewed in this context. Although commercial interests would remain centred on



The narrow chapel with wider 'nave' beyond, derived from a medieval hospital plan



Because of the tropical climate, the 'nave' is surrounded by a two-storey arcade to provide shade

Shanghai, Hong Kong provided a closer base for activities in Yunnan and the parts of southern China which lay immediately to the north of areas where French conquests were being actively pursued. The Latin inscription on the memorial plaque to the first father superior in the chapel records that 'his bones lie in other parts' and reflects the fact that Béthanie Hall was primarily a base for missionary activities outside the territory of Hong Kong.



The windows have catches probably imported from France



Window shutters of French design

The design of Béthanie Hall

The design of Béthanie Hall is based on gothic architecture of the 13th century and the plan is clearly derived from the design of hospitals of that period, which were closely related to the plans of churches. The chapel is in the position of a chancel, while the 'nave' provided accommodation for 'patients' or the elderly. The most perfectly preserved hospital of this design is the 13th-century St Mary's Hospital at Chichester (UK). The chapel has a more complex design than would be likely in a medieval hospital, however, because of the need for individual secondary altars at which the priests living in Béthanie could each say mass – there are side chapels for six such altars. In a medieval hospital, the area of the 'nave' would have remained open, with the beds occupying private cubicles at most defined by wooden screens. At Béthanie Hall, in contrast, the accommodation was designed to reflect the comforts required by priests in the 19th century, with the 'nave' divided into eleven private rooms on each floor, some heated by fireplaces, reached by a central corridor on each floor which provided a view into the chapel. The use of a double-storeyed plan for the 'nave' is a logical progression when the space has been divided up into separate rooms, rather than retaining the open plan of its medieval prototype.

Below part of the nave are cellars. Most of these are fitted with extensive wine racks and wine bins, suggesting that the priests who stayed at Béthanie Hall enjoyed a bibulous lifestyle, drinking wine imported from France.

Detailing

It seems likely that some of the fittings for Béthanie Hall were also imported from France, although it might have been thought that British equivalents would have been more readily



Encaustic floor tiles probably imported from France



Art deco door - a 20th-century alteration

available. The form of the windows is entirely French and the window catches appear to French in origin. The encaustic floor tiles may also come from the same source, as they do not appear to be Minton tiles from Staffordshire.²

Later additions and alterations

Clasping the chapel is a two-storeyed U-shaped range which appears to be later in date than the original 'hospital' building. Originally this had a pitched roof, but it now has a flat roof. I have not yet inspected the interior of this range, so my comments on detailing concern the main building only. This U-shaped range appears to be 19th-century, but later in date than the original building. An internal inspection will probably give an indication of date which can be confirmed by documentary or topographical evidence.

The main building has what appears to be two phases of alteration in the 20th century. There are some good-quality art deco alterations, such as the main door leading into the ground-floor corridor from the port cochère, and the window grills in the flanking pavilions are also of good-quality art deco design. The added top storey to the 'nave', however, has detailing of an inferior quality and what are probably standard Crittall steel windows, im-

ported from the UK.



The two flanking pavilions are shown on the early photograph but their present detailing belongs entirely to the 20th century. Further investigation will no doubt show whether they were entirely rebuilt or represent remodellings of the 19th-century originals.

An audit of the building

An 'audit' of the building is required, both from a historical and a construction perspective. The proper understanding of the building and its development will provide a range of informed design options to provide a basis for proposals for reuse. It may well be a good idea to remove the added top floor of the 'nave' and restore the original form of the pitched roof, since this would greatly improve the appearance of the building and these particular alterations are of poor quality and little architectural value. The art deco ad-

ditions and alterations to the lower storeys, however, are of much better quality and should be retained, as should original detailing such as the doors, windows and shutters.

The materials used in the original construction and later alterations also require evaluation. Internally, original finishes such as lime plaster should be retained. Later outbuildings covering the curved terrace at the end of the site preserve sections of the original lime-rendered external finish of the building. However, it is now covered with a cement-based render. Although this material is not a suitable finish for a historic masonry building, it can be very damaging to remove and should probably be retained, since it appears to be in relatively good condition.

The roof of the chapel has been replaced in concrete. Although there have been some leaks at one end, which spalling of the concrete internally and exposure of the steel reinforcement, it would probably be sensible to retain this alteration, from the point of view of cost and the amount of work which would be required to remove it. The internal vault of the chapel is a separate structure, probably made of timber. There are signs of termite infestation, but this does not appear to be active, but should be investigated further. Termite control should take account of the environment of the building, as most tropical hardwoods used in construction are resistant to termites unless made palatable by prior infestation by fungi, which can only survive in favourable environmental conditions.

The section of the first floor of the 'nave' which has been exposed seems to be in good condition and utilises joists of log form, derived from comparatively small trees. Floor joists which require additional performance for a new use can be strengthened by the insertion of flitch plates, but this requires evaluation by a specialist structural engineer able to calculate timber structures. However, the comparatively small spans in the main part of



Original floorframe over the central corridor of the 'nave'

the building, in which the space is divided up by numerous load-bearing walls, may mean there is no problem.

The windows of the chapel have mostly been blocked by masonry. The reinsertion of leaded lights would not be unduly expensive, but it may be that the new use, perhaps as a concert hall, may require the retention of these window blockings.

Public use of the building may also make it desirable to keep the flat roofs of the later U-shaped extension, so that these can be used as terraces, where visitors could walk and relax.

These comments will be extended, following more detailed examination.

David Michelmore
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- ¹ Historians have commented that the British Empire expanded to protect existing British commercial interests and that the government consistently opposed further expansion, but that France acquired colonies where it thought that it might acquire commercial interests.
- ² The Hue Monuments Conservation Centre has been recording the different designs of French tiles imported into Vietnam and the data which they have collected may be useful for comparative purposes. However, since the French did not annexe Annam until 1884, the tiles there will be later in date than those used in the original construction of Béthanie Hall.



Blocked windows which lit the altars of the subsidiary chapels