

# Gothic Revival. What's the point?

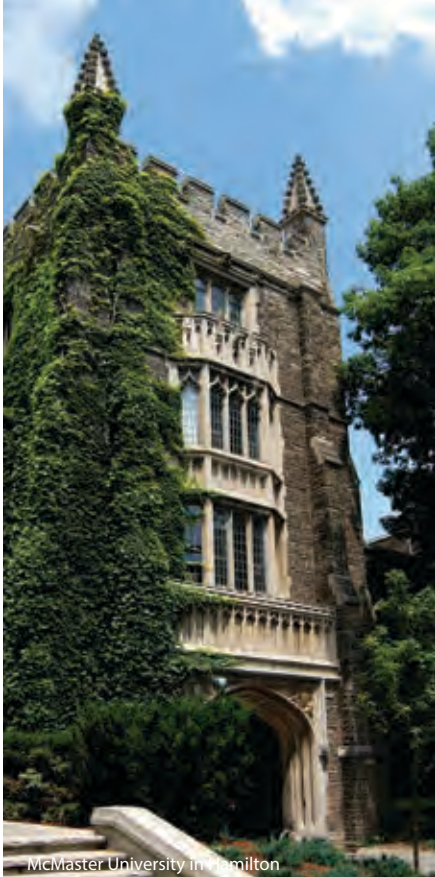
## Houses and Schools



Merrill Inn Picton 1934



Crockets at McMaster University



McMaster University in Hamilton



Label Stop at McMaster University



University of Western Ontario in London





House of Heads in Guelph

written by Shannon Kyles

When Canadians think of Gothic, they think of churches, colleges and universities, and very scary novels. The ivy covered stone of the Gothic tower is where most university graduates want their pictures taken, and the heavily carved portal of the Gothic church forms the perfect backdrop for a wedding. What some people may not have noticed is that many of these Gothic elements were translated onto residential and commercial buildings in Ontario. If the building has high gables with decorative wooden points on the top, like the Merrill Inn in Picton, it is Gothic Revival. Classical styles are very rigid in their interpretations of the classical orders, where Gothic is more organic. In a Classical Revival house, the façade is drawn, then the rooms are allocated behind it. In the Gothic, the building footprint and façade are more based on the function of the rooms.

While Gothic Revival houses in Canada are derived from European precedents, the style and ornament are unique to Canada. In Europe, homes and small commercial buildings were built in the medieval style, but the land and all the materials on it, during the feudal times, was owned by the local earl or marquis. For a man to cut down a tree to carve wooden shoes for his



Detail at House of Heads

children could mean death to a laborer in the 16th or 17th Century. By the 19th Century the situation for the poor had changed but not really improved. Britain was a good country to leave for a man with no money, few prospects, and a wife and children. Life in Ontario was governed by the amount of energy you were able to put into it. Raw materials in abundance were free to those with the desire to build something. Masons and stone carvers from Scotland and Ireland flocked to places like Fergus, Elora and Guelph where good stone was plentiful and not controlled by a king or bishop. Ship builders and carpenters found wood aplenty. Towns grew up where rivers and streams provided energy for mills. Once the civic and religious buildings were completed, builders started to adorn their own homes, and adorn them they did. In fact, to use the vernacular, they went nuts.



False Gable at Rock Castle

#### Gothic Revival Residences

The most impressive stone carving on a private residence in Ontario is the House of Heads in Guelph. The shape of the house is a typical L-shaped farm house. The front gable end is adorned with head-shaped corbels and label stops. The foliage-shaped crockets on the upper level are the best in the province. Crockets are usually found on the raking edge of finials, pinnacles and spires. Here they are on the top edge of an ogee shaped hood mould. Above the lower windows is a cornice with a pointed arch frieze and battlement along the top. Two heads adorn the ends.

Ontario is lucky to have a great many residences made of stone, both large and small. These are found where stone is the most available material, as it is in Hamilton. The natural geography of the growing industrial city allowed for impressive stone mansions to



Rock Castle in Hamilton

be located along the escarpment, giving the properties a scenic view of the city and the lake. One such mansion is Rock Castle built in 1848 for the owner of the Carpenter and Guernsey factory. The castle is perched on the side of the escarpment. It is three storeys high on the north side, and one storey high on the south. The plan is a simple centre hall design, with many projecting bays and windows. A lancet arched door with balcony on the second floor has a beautiful restrained hood mould. On the mountain side gable end there is an ogival false gable flanked by hexagonal pinnacles and crowned with heraldic feathers. Other details include a blind lancet arch and a coat of arms.

The first residential Gothic Revival home in England is Strawberry Hill, built for Horace Walpole, the son of the prime minister. Strawberry Hill is now part of a university; Rock Castle is now individual apartments. In both cases, the current owners take great pains to keep it looking beautiful. Other medieval mansions in Hamilton are still privately owned. Rosemount Cottage (1850) is a good example. When the boom came to the industrial city in the 1890s, many wealthy industrialists built Tudor Revival mansions in the same neighborhood. To the untrained eye, these could easily be mistaken for Gothic Revival. The Gothic, however, is a much earlier style, has no





Gothic Revival Cottage in Brookville



Fretsaw Gothic in Wellington



Fretsaw Gothic in Madoc



Door Detail in Madoc

half-timber boarding, no garrisons and jetties, and no herringbone brickwork.

Outside the urban crush of the city centres, stately homes have a better chance of survival. Claverleigh is one such example. Set in a clearing in the woods just outside the picturesque town of Creemore, Claverleigh is one of the very few Gothic Revival villas in Ontario. It is situated on a large country estate overlooking the Mad River. The view from the front is a gently sloping hill which leads into the valley of the river. A small flower pot lined bridge meanders across the river and leads to a horse paddock and field. The exterior finish is board and batten which emphasizes the verticality of the design. The wood detailing is finished in bright colours, but the board and batten is left in natural wood.

The west elevation of Claverleigh looks like a typical Ontario Gothic Revival Cottage with a central gable containing a pointed arch window. This entrance leads to a few fenced-in clearings that once protected the livestock. The south elevation is the visitor's entrance. It is composed of two massive gables with lancet arch windows, hood moulds, kingposts, and decorative verge boarding. The front entrance rests between these gables. Two superimposed gables with lancet arched openings provide a front door and a window onto the front hall. The door itself is beautifully carved and protected by both the gable and a substantial wooden hood mould.

In Early English construction, verge boards covered and protected the ridge pole and purlins which projected out from a gable wall. In Ontario, roof framing did not project in this way, but the verge boarding, later called barge boarding, was maintained for aesthetic reasons. The current owners of Claverleigh are doing a heroic job in restoring the building to its former glory. They are painstakingly replacing the intricate woodwork surrounding the doors and windows and perfectly matching the board and batten siding. There is a special place in heaven for people like this.

Fret Saw Gothic

Another kind of residential Gothic is affectionately



referred to by architects and craftsmen as Fret Saw Gothic. A fret saw is a saw with a very thin blade used to cut designs on furniture, homemade bird cages, and fancy architectural detailing like this one in Wellington. Finely carved detailing in wood is often called fretwork. The main shape of this house could be Italianate, but it is simply a double bayed Victorian brick house. The roof, however, is adorned with three magnificent gables that sport decorative verge boarding and finials.

A gable above a front door was originally extended out to prevent snow and rain from falling on the front door step. A kingpost is the structural term for the central vertical member in a pointed roof frame. All the boards terminate in the kingpost. On elaborate fretwork, these kingposts became a decorative rather than structural element, and then extended above the roof to form a finial or pinnacle. Most Victorian architecture has decorative woodwork around the doors and windows. If the woodwork extends above the roof into points, it is Gothic Revival.

This house in Madoc has beautifully detailed gables which echo the lancet arch of the

window. The woodworking on the front porch is a masterpiece of design; the structural members are firmly stated; there is a quatrefoil in the centre and, again, the lancet arch is echoed. The finials popping up above the roof give the building a distinctive silhouette.

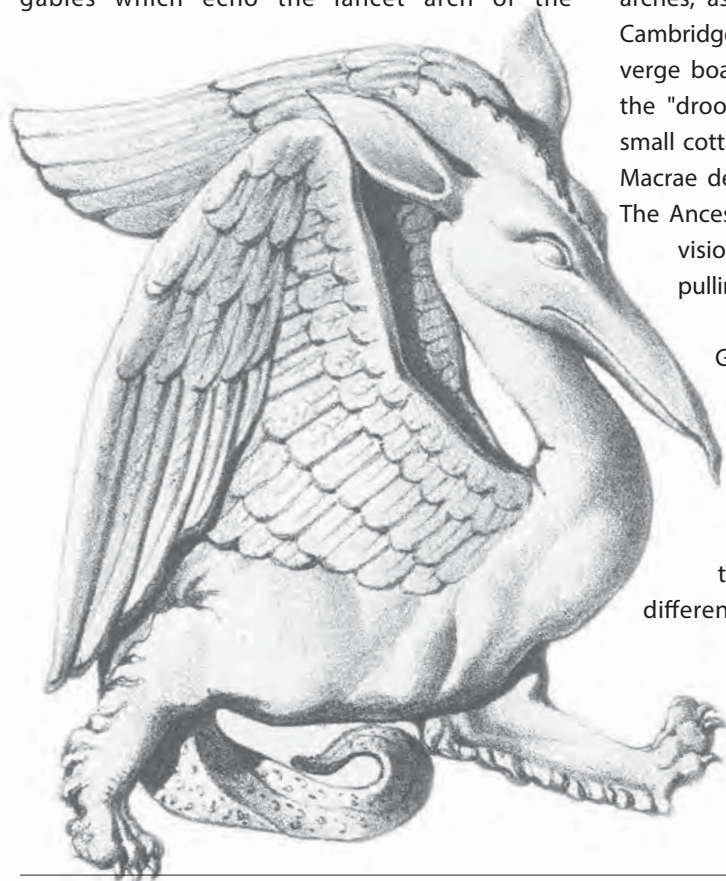
Board and batten is used on this building in Elora which exaggerates the verticality of the design. The gable end has decorative wooden scalloping under the edge of the roof. The highly pitched gables and the pointed arches place it firmly in the Gothic Revival style even though there are no finials.

Verge boards come in many different designs. There were pattern books available throughout the province, but many finish carpenters preferred to leave their own personal stamp on a house, or town, or county.

Another marvelous example of brilliant wood detailing can be seen in the Doctor's House in Dundas. The upper window is almost rounded, but it contains the set of double lancet arches from the decorated period. On the lower level, the door and window are both topped with four centred arches, as seen in the window at King's College Cambridge. The roof is topped with a finial, and the verge boarding on the roof is a Canadian classic, the "droop." The droop can also be seen in this small cottage in Peterborough. Here is how Marion Macrae describes this detail in her excellent book *The Ancestral Roof*; "The verge boards conjure up visions of many little buttered hands happily pulling molasses taffy."

#### Gothic Revival Cottage

Once you recognize the style of the Gothic Revival Cottage, you will not be able to drive anywhere in Ontario, or even eastern Canada, without seeing it. There are many types of cottages in Ontario, from many different eras. These cottages follow a specific pattern and floor plan although the exterior finish and details vary hugely across the province. This is a vernacular design meaning that it is made with local materials



not materials shipped in from another city or country. The reason it is called a Gothic Revival Cottage is partly because of the detailing and partly because of the original pattern. Canada Farmer magazine 1865 calls it "A Small Gothic Cottage." The same magazine, six months later, had a similar cottage, also with Gothic detailing, but with a second floor. These styles are so similar that they are often confused. If the cottage has a central gable, finials, lancet arches, trefoils or quatrefoils, it is a Gothic Revival Cottage.

Limestone is the material of choice in areas along the river bed. Both Brookville and Heaven have stone cottages with white trim made from this material. In both cases, the houses are situated to take advantage of the natural lay of the land. This is by design, not accident. The owners required a good view, access to water where possible, and natural light in as many rooms as possible.

Canada Farmer describes the Small Gothic Cottage as "a dwelling suitable for a small family, the main building having a hall six feet wide running through the centre and entering the kitchen." The central gable was intended to add light to the hall. Quite specific instructions were given on how this was to be constructed. "A small gable is raised over the front door, surmounted by a turned pinnacle, and having a simple piece of tracery fastened to the underside of the cornice and in the centre of this gable is a small trefoil window to give light and ventilation to the garret."

The trefoil window is difficult to find, possibly because it was much easier to draw than build. As for the pinnacle and tracery, sadly these are the elements of a design that are most vulnerable to the destruction of time and many of them have simply not been maintained. Awnings and front porches are more practical and thus tend to be better maintained. You can see from the examples shown of this small cottage that local materials are used. In Stratford the lime-rich yellow brick is used. Each area also boasted a few expert brick detailers. Stratford attracts thousands of visitors every year for the Shakespearean plays, so much of the town has been maintained and lovingly



Doctor's House in Dundas



Yellow Brick in Stratford





Red Brick in Kleinberg



Stucco in Simcoe



Gothic Revival Cottage in Stratford



Kingpost in Stratford

restored to its most pleasing small town glory. A wide variety of porches, terraces and verandahs can be found simply by walking through the residential districts.

The Gothic Revival Cottage in Simcoe has just about all the detailing that you can fit onto it. The front gable has the requested tracery and pinnacle; there is even scalloping under the horizontal eaves, and the windows have hood moulds. The gable window is pointed and has twin lancet arches. The finish of this house is rough cast, also described in Canada Farmer. If you are going to reproduce this house, the instructions are clear. "The plaster should be made at least eight or 10 days before being used, and mixed with a sufficient quantity of good dry cow hair."

The small cottage in Kleinburg has no tracery or pinnacle, but is in the colours suggested by Canada Farmer. It is situated on a raised terrace, and built with red brick with white brick corners. The porch is new, but maintains the style of the period and, situated on top of a hill, it is a perfect place from which to oversee the rolling fields in the Caledon Hills. The larger

Gothic Cottage is more prevalent, particularly in the country on farms where large families and seasonal workers needed shelter. Canada Farmer states, once again, that "The gables are to have simple tracery fastened to them with turned pinnacles." Again, these pinnacles and tracery are hard to find, though many valiant homeowners have made an attempt to restore them where possible.

The inhabitants of this area are vigilant in their care of the 18th and 19th Century buildings. There are beautiful examples of most of the early types of Ontario architecture in the three or four kilometers surrounding these towns.

Not too far up the road is Fergus, a town constructed largely from limestone found in the gorge and along the banks of the Grand River. Alternating red and grey stone is an effective treatment used throughout the area on large civic buildings, churches and houses. A trip along some of the beautiful radiating sideroads will provide you with several examples of a rare stone finish called "pointed stone" which makes good use of these two colours. Large stones are placed at regular intervals with an uncommonly wide vertical





mortar strip between them. Within this strip two or three smaller stones are placed creating a kind of checkerboard design. The mortar is then rubbed smooth to provide a flat, weather resistant surface. Clearly great skill is needed to do the job properly.

Laurel, Ontario has a wonderful orange brick Gothic Revival Cottage that has both the dichromatic brickwork known for the style and a little tracery above the window. The brick quoins on either side of the building are in a unique pointed pattern.

Canada Farmer specified a trefoil window on the one-storey model and pinnacles and tracery on the two storeys. Clearly, people simply built according to their own tastes and according to the available craftsmanship. In many cases, even the lancet window was replaced by a different style.

Romantic paintings of the time not only had a story that was indicated in the title and fairly clear to any educated person viewing it, but also had a moral. Similarly, Canada Farmer does not hold back when offering its views on the proper attitude toward constructing and maintaining your house.

"It is rather by attention to the aggregate of inexpensive details, than by large outlay on one particular object, that the comfort and attractiveness of a country house are secured. We are persuaded that a little more regard for what many consider trifles unworthy of notice, would yield a large return of real enjoyment and satisfaction."

#### Neo-Gothic

It has been said that the Gothic style is the architectural manifestation of the Christian religion. From Abbé Suger's original Gothic designs in the 11th Century at St. Denis to the most recent Gothic churches in Canada, the vaults, lancet windows, and exaggerated

verticality of the Gothic style were intended to point the observer towards heaven and produce a spiritually elevating experience.

The Neo-Gothic style can be seen as the second wave of Gothic influence in Canada. Gothic Revival was the earlier movement, brought over by craftsmen and masons from Europe in the early 1800s. These craftsmen were influenced by the writings of John Ruskin and others, and their buildings are constructed in the traditional manner using traditional, even medieval, methods.

The Neo-Gothic was an adaptation of the Gothic style of ornament to modern buildings. Unlike the earlier Gothic Revival where only stone, brick or wood were used, Neo-Gothic buildings are often made using steel grid structures. The plan of the Gothic Revival building was often irregular following the northern attitude of placing rooms, windows and entrances to suit the interior needs as opposed to the Classical attitude of adapting the interior space to conform to established conventions of external appearance.

The adoption of Neo-Gothic is perfectly understandable for schools and universities in the early years of the 20th Century. The style became so common for scholastic buildings that it is often called Collegiate Gothic. While the 19th Century Gothic Revival style was elaborate, dichromatic, and used for every type of building from the small Gothic Cottage to churches and government buildings, Neo-Gothic was monochromatic and on a much more grand scale. In essence, architects adapted the Gothic vocabulary to the requirements of large modern buildings. Wall buttresses and finials are added, but they are generally far too small to be of any structural benefit. Most students who graduate from a university that has Neo-Gothic buildings will want their picture taken in front of these buildings. The reason is they are so much fun.



This Fergus home has a pointed stone feature



Dichromatic Brick in Laurel



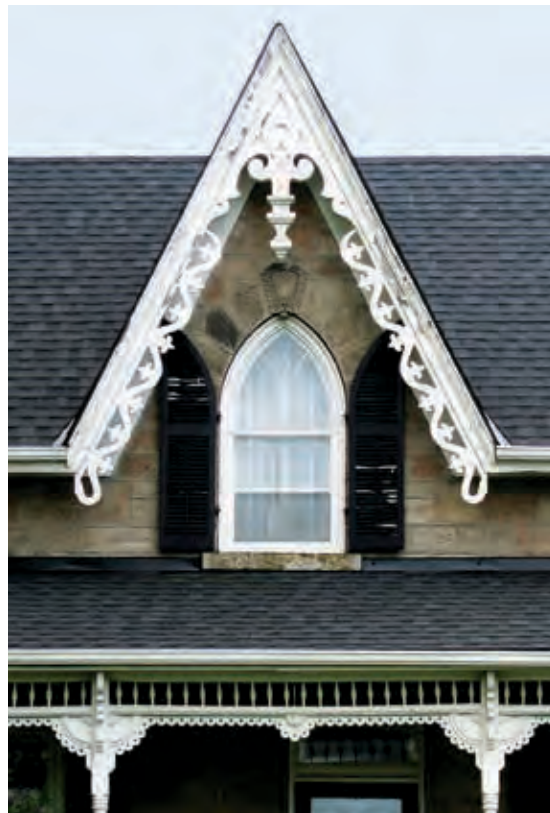


Fretsaw Gothic, Morriston

Along the door mouldings on McMaster University, for example, are icons representing each of the various disciplines taught at the university: the fish represent biology, the pick ax and shovel for mining engineering, the wheelbarrow for geology, the pallet for painting, etc. The label stops on the ends of these moldings are either graduates or, on the residences, footballs and tennis rackets.

So, what's the point?

From the Roman times with Titus and Hadrian to the Byzantine structures commissioned by Justinian, Europe had always had a central governing agency that acted as patron and taxed the people in order to provide them with a place to worship. In contrast, Gothic cathedrals were built by the people of the town who would often help with the construction on a volunteer basis. The representation of nature, birds, animals, leaves and flowers, found on the churches was translated onto residential and civic buildings of the period in tracery, moulding and stained glass. For a Gothic craftsman, once he had proven his



Gable, Morriston

skill to the people of the town or parish, he had more or less free will in determining the subject and style of his carvings. It was a diplomatic form of architecture, very different from the strict rules of the classical styles.

Most of the immigrants who arrived from Britain and Europe were hardy, free-thinking souls who were looking for freedom from the suffocating bonds of church and state that they had left behind. Sometimes within their own lifetimes, usually within a generation or two, these adventurers had established themselves in homes and towns that were far more prosperous than their circumstances "at home" would have permitted. The churches that were built reflected the beauty of the earlier Gothic forms, but were adapted to both the climate and the temperament of the new Canadians. For serious students of the Gothic, the one thing you will find missing in the Canadian adaptation of Gothic is the gargoyles. These fearsome beasts were useful in directing water away from the building, but were also meant as constant reminders to the people that evil demons awaited them if

they stepped outside the fold. In Canada, the European immigrants have always lived free of that type of fear.

In residential buildings, the forms of Gothic were used, particularly in the stone buildings, but there were many Gothic Revival adaptations that were never part of the European tradition. High gables with board and batten, fancy verge boards and decorative kingpost are a good example. Dichromatic brickwork is another. Different coloured bricks were used to outline pointed arch forms, diaper patterning, and quoining on residences in Ontario. Seen in High Victorian Gothic such as St. Pancras station, this was virtually never done on small residences in Europe.

Many lovely stories are attached to these beautiful rural buildings. A common one is that the lozenge or diamond pattern in the gable was inspired by the white diamond-shaped patch on the forehead of the family cow, often named Diamond. The cow lived with them on the property as the house was built and supplied them with milk and cheese in order to sustain them through the construction, thus deserving to be recognized as part of the family.

Many different banding patterns have similar stories. In Ireland, for example, the tradition was that each family in a county would claim a specific pattern for the knitting of sweaters, similar to a tartan pattern, but for smaller, non-aristocratic families. The womenfolk would use this pattern for each of her sons. A new line of cross stitching was added for each new child born to the family. This family pattern helped identify a person if they were from out of town or, in the worst-case scenario, if they had been injured and couldn't speak. The cross pattern on more than a few rural Ontario homes would indicate how many children were born to the family. It was not unusual to have eight children, and thus there were would be eight crosses in dichromatic brick above the front door.

The Gothic Revival Cottage is coming back into its own. There are even companies having great success reproducing this original style with new materials and modern insulation methods. While universities fall over themselves trying to offer prospective students the very best in student centres and Internet access, when the

convocation ceremony is over, the crowd rushes over to the Gothic Revival buildings for photographs. Glass and steel are beautiful and efficient, but as Coleridge said: "Gothic architecture is infinity made imaginable."



Dichromatic Stone, Fergus