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**The Work of National Architects in the Bristol Area**

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# The Work of National Architects in the Bristol Area

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IT would be an unrewarding task to try to decide which architects were of national status. Sir Christopher Wren certainly was, but then there is no Wren building in Bristol. Or is there?

James Paty's Theatre Royal of 1764 is frequently referred to as being a "faithful replica of the Drury Lane theatre of the day". If this is so, then he was no more than a "Site Architect" taking the design of another and adapting it to the peculiar site conditions. If this is the case it can indeed be said that there is, in the Theatre Royal, a Wren building in Bristol. However, on closer examination it does not appear as simple as that. About the Wren Drury Lane only too little is known. There is in the All Souls collection<sup>1</sup> a drawing of his 1674 design in section. This has absolutely no relationship to the Bristol theatre as we know it today, except only in so far as two buildings for the same purpose and designed in the same architectural period would inevitably have similarities. They both have, for instance, rows of seats facing the same way towards the stage, and circles at the sides in tiers, and the decoration is in each case Classical. In Wren's design however the tiers are supported at either side by wide piers with superimposed pilasters of full height. At the back they are supported on posts. In Bristol, except for the Stage Boxes (which are indeed very similar to Drury Lane), they are supported on slender ribbed Tuscan columns one above the other.

Now, in the drawing of Drury Lane after the Adams refurbishing of 1775, the tiers are shown supported on superimposed slender posts, not ribbed columns as at Bristol, but members of similar proportion. Was this alteration carried out by the Adam Brothers, or did they simply redecorate the auditorium in their personal style and had the wide piers been replaced by slender posts—for obvious reasons of vision—before they were appointed? That their refurbishing was thorough is known. For instance they removed the Classical mould-

<sup>1</sup> Reproduced in the *Wren Society Volumes*, Vol. xii, Pl. xxiii.

ings so that they could apply their own decorative scheme in flat paint with the modelling in trompe-l'oeil. Wren carried out major alterations to the theatre on more than one occasion prior to the Adam Brothers, but it is not known whether he so drastically altered the basic structure of the auditorium. Certainly in his 1696 alterations he remodelled the stage and proscenium. On these assumptions then it would seem that Paty was original in his design, and that the Adam Brothers copied him, nine years later, at Drury Lane.

But is the Theatre Royal auditorium now as it was left by Paty? The similarity of the bays nearest to the stage to Wren's design, and their incompatibility with the design for the remainder of the auditorium, suggest that the treatment of the stage boxes may originally have been carried all around the circles, and alterations made later, probably after the changes at Drury Lane. If this were the case, there would be evidence of alteration in the structural members of the circles, and Mr Ralph Edwards, who made a most thorough and detailed survey of the whole building during the war, saw no such evidence, though it must be admitted that it might be there though concealed behind the architectural mouldings.

In the stage, which has been altered many times in its history, such evidence is easily apparent, and has enabled Mr Richard Southern to reconstruct it in considerable detail as it was at various times of its history.<sup>2</sup> The stage has now been altered again, and far more radically, during 1971 under the direction of Mr Peter Moro, and can no longer be regarded as the work of Paty. As to whether or not the auditorium as it now appears is his—except for some Victorian applied decoration which can easily be removed if thought desirable—we do not know. Certainly if it is, then he was a pioneer, not least in the adoption of reeded Tuscan Columns, early for 1764.

But in one respect he must surely have been a pioneer. It is inconceivable that the general plan form was altered, and if it was, the building can no longer be called Paty's. Wren's Drury Lane was fan-shaped,<sup>3</sup> the Theatre Royal is a horse-shoe. John Latimer in 1893 repeats the claim that it is the first in England, and this in itself is sufficient to justify the assertion that there is no Wren building in Bristol.<sup>4</sup>

If there is no Wren building, then what of Inigo Jones? There is the so-called Inigo Jones wing at Ashton Court, but no evidence

<sup>2</sup> "The Georgian Playhouse", Richard Southern, *Pleiades Books*, 1948.

<sup>3</sup> "Wren's Drury Lane", Richard Leacroft, *Architectural Review*, Vol. 110, No. 655, July, 1951. The most thorough and concise analysis and reconstruction to date.

<sup>4</sup> *Annals of Bristol, 18th century*, by John Latimer, printed 1893, p. 365 under the year 1764. Latimer refers to the opening and first performance on May the 30th, 1766.



PLATE Ia  
The Theatre Royal Bristol; interior. (*The Architectural Press*)

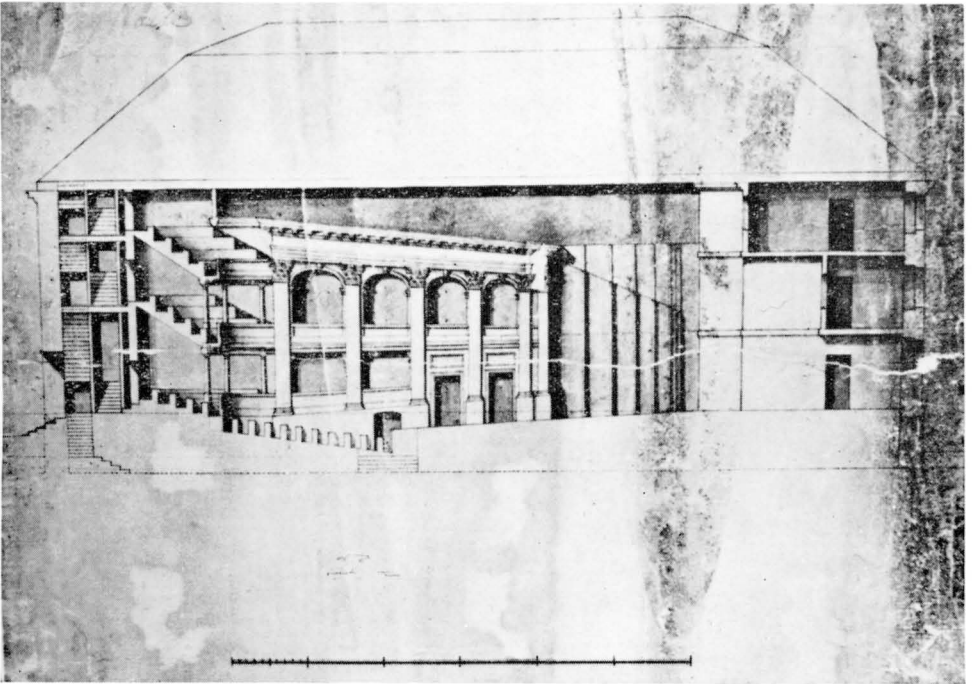


PLATE Ib  
Longitudinal section of Wren's 1674 design for Drury Lane Theatre.  
(*All Soul's Collection*)  
facing p. 6



has come to light that he actually designed it. If he did not, who did? In 1635, when it was built, Inigo Jones was completing the Queen's House at Greenwich (an entirely different conception). The Banqueting House in Whitehall was built in 1619. The Ashton Court wing is a refacing. The longitudinal ridge of the roof is still there, and on the north side so are the succession of gables in the traditional manner of an Elizabethan wing to a substantial Manor House. Examination of the timbers indicates that there were similar gables on the south, but these were cut out. A flat roof was substituted behind the new south façade. Bordering the lawn as decorative walls are two rows of "Dutch" gables. Tradition has it that these were removed from the roof when the new façade was built, and Collinson's view of 1791 shows that they were beside the lawn even then. This may well have been the case. Certainly, they fit, and this would be too much of a coincidence if they were simply garden adornments. They appear to have been largely rebuilt, and perhaps their state of decay may have been the original reason for removing them, and they must have been extended, unless there were others of similar size also removed at the same time. However, the façade itself shews a clean break with Elizabethan tradition, with classical windows arranged in alternate groupings of two and three, alternating segmental and triangular pediments to the ground floor and bracketed hoods to the first—all as at Whitehall—and roundels to the attic. Ferdinando Gorges was responsible for the façade. A staunch royalist throughout the troubled times it was in this year, 1635, that he resigned his patent for the New England trade to the king. Already the owner of the Great House in Bristol, Ashton Court came to him in 1629 when he married his fourth wife, his cousin Elizabeth, widow of his old friend Sir Hugh Smyth of Ashton Court. A true son of his time, Gorges was a man of boundless ambition and drive, ruthless in his trading ventures and his political aspirations.<sup>5</sup> With his ambitions at Court and close association with the king, would a man of his character have entrusted work on the great mansion he had so recently acquired to any other than the Royal Architect? It seems unlikely, and hence the tradition, but who, other than Inigo Jones, could have produced a design like this at so early a date? It even precedes Wilton by several years. Robert Cooke even dates it at 1633<sup>6</sup>. So, if there is grave doubt whether there is a Wren building in Bristol, it seems reasonable to believe that there is one by Inigo Jones.

<sup>5</sup> "*Ferdinando Gorges and New England*," C. M. Macinnes, the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association, 1965.

<sup>6</sup> "*West Country Houses*," Robert Cooke, published by the author, 1957, pp. 73/75.

If there is doubt about the great men of this period, there is no doubt about their successors. There is a major example of Vanbrugh's work at Kingsweston, and a charming but minor example of the work of Gibbs in the monument to Edward Colston in All Saints' Church. The effigy is also by a national figure, Rysbrack, who also was responsible for that outstanding equestrian figure of international importance in Queen Square, the statue of William III.

But why is it assumed that Architects started with Inigo Jones? John Harvey has made it clear that the medieval master masons were also Architects. So who designed the choir of Bristol Cathedral? Was it William Ramsey, for if so, he was certainly a national figure. Ramsey became King's Mason in 1336 after his completion of the Chapter House at old St Paul's in 1332, the same date as the completion of the Bristol Choir started in 1298. Pevsner drops a hint that he may have come from Bristol.<sup>7</sup> Certainly the dates fit, but whether or not it was he, the designer of the Bristol choir was a genius worthy of national fame, and a person of completely original ideas. Also, the fact that the Bristol vault, though itself an original variation in its omission of the ridge rib and the substitution of a cusped lozenge, so-to-speak, was only the second Lierne vault in the country, and that the first one was in the Royal Chapel of St Stephen Westminster of 1292, suggests that the designer was in close contact with the Court Masons.

The Bristol Choir has too many original features to catalogue here, but the boldness, even clumsiness, of its design makes it unique. Hall churches had been built before, though not in England, but in the retro-choir at, for instance, Salisbury, there is in effect a small Hall church, but the supporting pillars are slender and the vaults are supported like the foliage of a plant. Continental experience at that time shows that a similar treatment could have been adopted at Bristol even to its larger scale. But no, the Bristol designer preferred to provide a normal arcade (but not normal in detail as he left out the shafts and capitals and ran the mouldings around the arch soffits) and to support the thrust of the vault on stout bridges over the aisles and to vault them with little vaults set sideways-on. The transverse aisle arches supported the bridges with large eyelets in the spandrels. Nowhere else, it is thought, is anything like this to be seen in the Gothic World, except at the crossing at Wells, and Wells is a mere twenty miles from Bristol and the arch braces were

<sup>7</sup> "Bristol, Troyes & Gloucester," Nicholas Pevsner, *The Architectural Review*, Vol. 113, No. 674, February, 1953.

built only five years after the completion of the Bristol choir. This must have significance. There is something similar in the aisle vault to the original and unique vault in the ante-room to the Berkeley Chapel where the ribs are free-standing and support a flat ceiling. This was completed before 1309. And so it would be pleasant to think that, if one cannot be sure about any work of Wren or Inigo Jones in Bristol, one could boast the early work of a King's Mason, but in none of the three cases can it be more than conjecture.

From the middle of the eighteenth century onwards attribution is easier. The names of the designers of the more important buildings are common knowledge, and documentary proof is usually ample. But of the next example still there is no direct evidence of the designer. Redland Chapel used always to be attributed, without authority, to John Strachan, but on the evidence of Shiercliff's *Bristol & Hotwell Guide* for 1789 the Architect was William Halfpenny, though the building was well advanced when he came to Bristol in 1742, and his contract with John Cossins the Building Owner was for supervision only, and the original estimate for the chapel is not in his hand. That Strachan died also in 1742 leads one to suppose that Halfpenny was employed to complete his predecessor's work as Strachan had been the architect of the Court in the grounds of which the chapel stands. But this is surmise.<sup>8</sup> The fact remains that the chapel is an outstanding and rare example of Baroque in England in its purist form, the Baroque rather of Balthasar Neumann than of Bernini, but unlike either. Apart from the unfortunate Victorian stained glass windows which are so out of character the building outside and in is as designed, and fortunately one of the original windows with its fat glazing-bars still survives to ensure faithful restoration of the others when someone can be persuaded to carry out the work. However, Halfpenny was a "National Architect", even if only for his many publications, mostly "Pattern Books".

His Coopers' Hall in King Street of 1743 is a major work of national importance with a lofty colonnade over a rusticated podium supporting an attic with a pediment. It has recently been adapted—the interior out of all recognition—as a foyer to the Theatre Royal next door. His design for the new Exchange was rejected in favour of that by John Wood the elder.

Isaac Ware was another architect known nationally mainly for his writing. In his 1756 edition of his *Complete Body of Architecture*

<sup>8</sup> *Biographical Dictionary of English Architects, 1660-1840*, H. W. Colvin, John Murray, 1954, 1954, pp. 260/1 and 574.

he includes a plate of Clifton Hill House<sup>9</sup> apart from the carved cartouche in the pediment by Thomas Paty just as it is today.

In the early years of the next century many national architects designed buildings in Bristol. Sir Robert Smirke designed the New Council House in Corn Street in 1822, a restrained neo-classical building of great charm and sincerity, and St. George's Church, Brandon Hill in 1823, a dramatic building with a Doric portico (against the east end) above an immense flight of steps. The east end of the interior was much altered to suit high-church taste by Street and is quite out of character with the general design. Sydney Smirke designed the new Custom House in Queen Square in 1832 to replace the old one destroyed in the riots the previous year. It is a small building extremely chaste in design.

C. R. Cockerell designed several buildings for Bristol; the church of Holy Trinity Hotwells in 1829, the Hall for the Philosophical Institute (now the Masonic Hall) in Park Street in 1821, and the Bank of England in 1844. Holy Trinity is an entirely original conception with a large coffered semi-dome over an external re-entrant apse under a broken pediment and "Grecian" tempietto as a south entrance. The inside, altered later and then demolished by bombs, had a shallow central dome on Doric columns and private "boxes" flanking a central organ above the Holy Table on the east wall. A lofty pulpit was placed centrally before the Table, an arrangement traditional in 18th century Scandinavia and still to be seen there. The Bank of England, now waiting for a new owner, also has giant Doric columns, but these support an attic with semi-circular headed windows under a pediment, and set back behind a terrace with massive iron railings. These two Bristol buildings stamp Cockerell as an architect of stature and originality. He also carried out work at Blaise Castle House, but quite different is the work of John Nash in 1811 at Blaise Hamlet. This is a complete group of "Cottages Ornées" built for his tenants by the Quaker, J. S. Harford, all different, and grouped around a green complete with village pump. Fortunately this hamlet has survived and is now administered by the National Trust. Near Bristol is also a work by Scott & Moffatt of 1838, the Flax Bourton Almshouses, now Farleigh Hospital. This charming building is of standard pattern with the central low octagonal pedimented tower and long wings. Unfortunately one important early building is now no more. Since drafting this address the noble Baptist Training College in Stokes Croft, for many years the Christian Science building, has been demolished.

<sup>9</sup> *Complete Body of Architecture*, Isaac Ware, 1756, pl. 40.

It was designed by D. A. Alexander, nationally known as the designer of Dartmoor Prison, in 1806. It is a very great loss to Bristol. However, the adjacent Florentine warehouse by E. W. Godwin, then still a Bristolian, before leaving for London with Ellen Terry (then also of Bristol) to become "the Greatest Aesthete of them all", still survives in good condition. It was built in 1862.

Brunel may not have been an architect, but he must be included in this list. He was certainly "National". The façade of his Great Western Hotel, for many years known as "The Hydro", and more recently "Brunel House", is attributed to him, but two years later, in 1839, he was certainly the designer of the Temple Meads Train Shed with its wide hammer-beam wooden roof. This fortunately is preserved, though for what purpose is not yet decided, but his Jacobean Office Block in Victoria Street which backs on to this shed is still in danger of demolition for road widening.

To return to churches, Thomas Rickman designed Holy Trinity, St Philips and St Matthew Kingsdown, the former with Hutchinson. St Matthew of 1833 is traditional, but Holy Trinity of 1829, the same date as Cockerell's very different Holy Trinity Hotwells, is a masterly essay in Perpendicular Gothic, with twin towers after the manner of King's Chapel flanking the west front. And in 1842 there is Butterfield's first church, Highbury Congregational Chapel. The tower was by Godwin after Butterfield had linked himself indissolubly with the High-Church movement. Inside there is a charming feature to note, the Arnold Thomas memorial, carved into an arcade corbel, an early work of this nature by Eric Gill of 1926. Also, at Coalpit Heath not far from the city, is Butterfield's first Anglican Church. Neither this, dedicated to St Saviour and built in 1844, nor Highbury Chapel, shew anything of the "streaky-bacon" style which was to follow, but both have original features and have individual character. The Vicarage at Coalpit Heath is perhaps even more important. It is recognised as the prototype of the Street vicarages that followed and more particularly of Webb's Red House for William Morris, and thence the whole train of Art & Craft domestic buildings of Norman Shaw and Voysey culminating in Lutyens and Guy Dawber. That it was recognised at the time is apparent from a note in the *Ecclesiologist* of July 1845 "A very unaffected parsonage is building by Mr. Butterfield at Coalpit Heath near Bristol. We think that he has quite succeeded in giving the peculiar character required for such a building".<sup>10</sup> Praise indeed from that source!

<sup>10</sup> *The Ecclesiologist*, July 1845, No. 4, p. 189.

There was a major church by Street, All Saints' Clifton, but this was severely damaged by bombing and since, perhaps unnecessarily, demolished. But at Winterbourne Down, a few miles out, there is a small and typical church by him of 1858. His major contribution to Bristol was however the Cathedral nave. Started in 1868 it is a work of great scholarship of which, probably, only Street was capable. The general form of the choir is repeated to the extent of the Norman nave foundations, but in his detailing Street avoided the idiosyncrasies of the medieval designer and adopted traditional gothic details of the time, retaining the usual shafting and capitals to the arcade and providing a simpler vault. While providing aisles to the same height and in roughly the same manner as those of 1330, his vaults are longitudinal, not transverse. He has therefore while continuing the building to form an entity, avoided falsifying history. His design, as shown in a watercolour in the City Art Gallery, shows western towers more French in influence and with pyramidal roofs pencilled in. However, they were completed by Pearson after Street's death in 1878, and are slightly different from the original design.

Of other National Architects working in Bristol at the time might be mentioned Ewart Christian who extended Christ Church, Clifton, and C. F. Hansom who designed the original part of Clifton College. Lastly, in the 19th century, there is a small Insurance Office by Alfred Waterhouse of 1899, all Burgundian and red terracotta. He also extensively altered Goldney House, Clifton.

To start the present century, there is a small unfinished church by Bodley, St Aidan, Nag's Head Hill, of 1904. The grouping with the parsonage is in the best Arts & Crafts tradition. And Edwin Ricard designed the forecourt to the Victoria Rooms in the fluid Edwardian Baroque manner in 1911. This is a setting for a statue of Edward VII surrounded by swirling steps and bronze fountains, brilliantly treated on a site with a sharp cross-fall. The tall poles, in the manner of those outside St Mark's Venice, were taken down for cleaning and have not re-appeared. Without them the composition is incomplete.

Lastly, there is the Central Library. This is generally accepted as one of the master works of the early 20th century, and is by Charles Holden in 1906. Its sedate un-historical façade in stone harmonises with the Cathedral next door, but it is the back which is of greatest interest. The almost Expressionist handling of planes forecasts Dudok of twenty-five years later, but also Mackintosh of 1907. Did Mackintosh design the extension of his Glasgow Art School before Holden designed his Library? Certainly the Library was built first, and the Glasgow drawings are undated. This talk started with

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a query, and it must end with one. It must be sufficient to say that in places as far apart as Glasgow and Bristol two nationally famous architects produced designs at almost the same time which were as similar as they were original.