



THE  
GEORGIAN  
GROUP

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David Whitehead, 'Job Marston's Chapel',  
*The Georgian Group Journal*, Vol. II, 1992,  
pp. 79-81

## SHORTER NOTES:

### JOB MARSTON'S CHAPEL

David Whitehead

The knowledge that Sir William Wilson of Sutton Coldfield (1644-1716) secured three commissions in the Midlands — the tower of St Mary's Church, Warwick, Appleby School, Leicestershire and the stables at Arbury Hall, Warwickshire — which could have been attributed to Sir Christopher Wren, increases the interest of an otherwise minor provincial statuary-cum-architect.<sup>1</sup> The late 1940s and '50s witnessed a concerted search for Wilson's work. In *Country Life* Christopher Hussey, Tudor Edwards and Geoffrey Beard pieced together Wilson's career, providing the foundations for the summaries in Gunnis and Colvin's dictionaries which remain virtually unchanged today.<sup>2</sup> But Sir William Wilson's trail then went cold and, given his mannered style, it seemed unlikely that any Midland building where he could have been involved, had been overlooked. However, he had attracted a list of attributions, one of which was Job Marston's Chapel, the Church of the Ascension, at Hall Green, Birmingham.

To find this building in Pevsner's *Warwickshire* means an excursion into the seemingly endless list of comprehensive schools and office blocks in the Birmingham suburbs, but it is in this unrewarding environment that some lost jewels are still to be found. Pevsner gives Job Marston's Chapel — “an elegant little building of red brick with stone dressings, set in attractive surroundings” — about half a page.<sup>3</sup> The church deploys the full range of Classical ornament. Its body is decorated with quoins, pilasters, cornice and balustrade, on which there may once have been urns. On the tower base there are *oeil de boeuf* windows and above, a well-modelled belfry which rises in a very short space through three separate stages to a copper dome. This is polite architecture of about 1700 but the ornament has been applied with a freedom which owes more to the traditional skills of the artisans than the educated judgement of an architect.

Perhaps, because of the ambivalent position of the chapel — physically in Birmingham but, until recently, administratively in Warwickshire — it is not very well known. The *Victoria County History of Warwickshire* characteristically described it down to the last archivolt in 1913 but Marcus Whiffen missed it in *Stuart and Georgian Churches* (1948) and it was left to Tudor Edwards to link it with Sir William Wilson in 1950. The chapel was also attributed to Thomas Archer who was born a few miles away at Umberslade Hall and designed St Philip's, Birmingham Cathedral (1710-15). Local tradition held that that it was “the man who built the new part of the house” (Hall Green Hall) which was demolished in 1936.<sup>4</sup> Pevsner followed Tudor Edwards and mentions Sir William Wilson.

Quite recently, an irregular collection of probate material was catalogued at the Worcester Records Office which included the will of “Job Marston, Gent” (1637-1701) who left £1,000 to be spent upon “a handsome, convenient, firm and durable chappel” for the “circumjacent inhabitants who live at a great distance from their parish church”. Annexed to the will was a short building account for the chapel in which on July 30, 1704, Marston's executors paid £5 to “Sir William Wilson for Drawing several Draughts of a Chap. and for cutting an Inscription on a ston. on the west end of the Chappell over the dore” and also £698 to “Wm. Smith and Francis Smith Undertakers for Building the



Fig. 1. The west front of Job Marston's chapel.

Chappell and finding all Materials pursuant to Articles for that purpose".<sup>5</sup>

Thus, three of the most important figures in the architectural history of the Midlands are brought together upon this chapel — Wilson at the end of his career and the Smiths at the beginning of theirs.<sup>6</sup> All three were at this time rebuilding the tower of St Mary's Church, Warwick, which had collapsed once during the building proceedings but in 1704 was complete — a strange but memorable mixture of Classical and Gothic detail but as such not very helpful in ascertaining the origins of the Smith style. The Marston Chapel, on the other hand, is a more conventional essay in contemporary architecture and nicely summarises Wilson's style, but at the same time shows the roots of the Smith's brand of Baroque Mannerism.

The curious belfry which achieves every possible effect in a few short stages and the *oeil de boeuf* windows are unmistakably Wilson's. They appear on Sir John Moore's School at Appleby, designed by Wilson between 1693-97. He was one of those provincial masons who successfully made the transition from craftsman to designer but quietly ignored the Jonesian revolution.<sup>7</sup> All his work, including his own house, the Moat House at Sutton Coldfield, is pure Mannerism, relying for effect upon a surfeit of stone dressings and a tendency towards "vain glory". This obviously appealed to the Midland gentry who had only recently learnt to abandon their ornate multi-gabled and high-chimneyed manor houses. The Smiths, however, were men of their time; products of the well-ordered Augustan world but not averse to a little Baroque enthusiasm. The well-organised nave, three semi-circular windows, separated by well-proportioned Doric pilasters with a fully-articulated cornice, surmounted by a parapet is repeated on virtually every Smith house in the Midlands for the next 40 years. Even allowing for the later influence of James Gibbs upon the mature work of Francis Smith, Marston Chapel shows that the Smiths were the natural heirs in the region to their erstwhile master, Sir William Wilson, producing a robust architecture which owed much to his style.

As the Smiths contracted "by Great" for the building, very few details are given in the accounts of the interior furnishings. The communion table is original and the pulpit seems to be a cut-down version of an earlier three decker. Some of the wainscoting also dates from 1704 but the pews, west gallery and simple plasterwork came during a comprehensive refitting in the 19th century. In about 1860 the east end was modified to provide a new chancel and two transepts but this, like the more recent restoration in 1951-52, does not detract from the quality of the original work.

## NOTES

1. "A Biographical Note on Sir William Wilson (1640-1710)", *Wren Society* XI, 108-113.
2. *Country Life* June 15, 22, 29, 1935; November 9, 1945; July 17, 1950; October 8, 1953.
3. N. Pevsner & A. Wedgwood, *The Buildings of England: Warwickshire*, 1966, 177-78.
4. *VCH Warwickshire* III, 238, 242. *Country Life*, July 7, 1950, 45. L. Fisher, *The Story of Hall Green Parish Church*, 1979, 9.
5. Hereford and Worcester Records Office, b 008.7, BA 3590/4, ff. 438-443.
6. According to W.K.R. Bedford, *History of the Rilandis of Sutton Coldfield*, 1889, 19-20, William Smith acted as undertaker for Wilson's design for the Rectory at Sutton Coldfield in 1701. Moreover, a "Mr Smith" makes a brief appearance in a letter from Sir John Moore relating to the building of his School at Appleby in 1694. *Wren Society* XI, 92.
7. At Sudbury Hall, Derbyshire, in 1670, Wilson was paid £20 for a chimneypiece which Christopher Hussey compliments for having absorbed the Jones-Webb version of Classical detail. *Country Life*, June 29, 1935, 685-86.