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ROCOCO IN LEE: THE FLUDYER TOMB BY ROBERT CHAMBERS

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Sir Samuel Fludyer, Bt,¹ died in January 1768 and was buried in the churchyard of St Margaret, Lee in Kent (now in the London Borough of Lewisham), close to his seat. MP for Chippenham, deputy governor of the Bank of England and Lord Mayor of London in 1761–62, Fludyer was a massively wealthy clothier and West Indies merchant² whose reputation was somewhat tarnished by his alleged impropriety in a bankruptcy case. Some thought that his death of apoplexy had been hastened by this. He was remembered in two ways: in the naming of Fluyder Street immediately to the south of Downing Street,³ and in the erection of a notable Rococo monument.⁴

The tomb was erected in 1769 to the memory of Sir Samuel, his brother and business partner Sir Thomas Fludyer FRS, MP (d.1769) and their wives.⁵ It consisted of an elaborate *bombé* sarcophagus surmounted by armorial cartouches set between succulently splayed scrolled volutes worthy of a Houbraken engraved portrait surround. Above was an urn decorated with garlands: at some point since 1979⁶ it toppled off, and now lies in several pieces alongside the tomb. Much weathered, the monument is, nonetheless, among the most flamboyant of Georgian churchyard memorials to have survived.⁷

It can be ascribed to Robert Chambers (c.1710–1784) on the basis of a signed drawing⁸ entitled *the designe of a Canopy, to be placed in the Winter, over the Marble Tomb of Sir Samuel and Sir Thomas Fludyer* and dated October 21, 1769. This foul weather canopy is apparently unique. Designed to enwrap the top of the tomb, it consisted of an ogive boarded roof supported on four wooden posts. A gutter with spouts at two corners carried the water away, and a padlock secured the canopy in place. Damp, frost-prone England can be most unfriendly to outdoor statuary: Chambers' design was an ingenious shield against the elements, but one which would have been cumbersome to position and to store during the summer. That virtually all the inscriptions⁹ have now worn away demonstrates the necessity of such protection.

Robert Chambers¹⁰ was a peculiar figure. Mason, sculptor, architect and Hebrew scholar, he was born in Minchinhampton, Gloucestershire (where his earliest signed memorial, of 1749 to Joseph Iles, is to be found) and proudly referred in the preamble of his 1784 will¹¹ that he was "lineally descended from ffrancis Chambers an excellent mason who about the beginning of the Reign of King Henry the sixth performed the top of the Steeple of the Church of Minchin Hampton". He described himself in his will as a master mason and sculptor, but his name does not occur in the records of the Masons' Company of London. Mortimer's *Universal Director; or, the Nobleman and Gentleman's TRUE GUIDE to the Masters and Professors of the Liberal and Polite Arts and Sciences* of 1763 contained a lengthy puff for Chambers, whose yard was in High Holborn:

This ingenious Artist stains various Colours Ornaments and Emblematical Devices in Marble, and copies these in Mosaic Work, or ancient Tescillation, in their proper colours: he likewise draws Designs in Architecture: in Sculpture he executes Ionic, Corinthian and Composite capitals; and he performs Incriptions on Monuments, Tombs etc. in a manner which renders them more

durable than the method now in use. His art of staining Marble for Tables, Chimneypieces tec. has been approved by the Royal Society¹²

The most prominent example of this latter technique is the monument in Westminster Abbey to the 13th (and last) Earl of Stafford which is signed “invented and stained by Robert Chambers”. It seems quite likely that the Fludyer tomb sported inscriptions executed in this technique: an added reason for installing a protective canopy.

Chambers’ architectural output remains obscure. Colvin lists a number of exhibited and extant designs: they are diverse in subject, ranging from harbours and piers to ossuaries (all at Dover) and tessellated floors. It is clear from his will that Chambers died a wealthy man, leaving property in Leicestershire and Warwickshire as well as in Holborn and Clerkenwell. Quite where this wealth came from is unknown.

Mason, sculptor, architect, scholar of languages and apparently self-made man: Chambers has much in common with Sir Robert Taylor. Stylistically too, the Fludyer tomb strongly recalls Taylor’s designs for memorials both in terms of the sarcophagus profile and the selection and integration of ornament.¹³ Chambers may have absorbed this sepulchral Rococo through a spell in Taylor’s yard; he may even have secured the Fludyer commission through Taylor,¹³ who served under Fludyer at the Bank of England in the capacity of surveyor from 1764 onwards. Whether either Taylor or Chambers were involved in the re-development of Fludyer’s property on the south side of Downing Street in the mid-1760s remains to be established.

The monument presently languishes, like so many Georgian churchyard memorials, in a picturesque but precarious state of decay. The design for a winter canopy sheds interesting

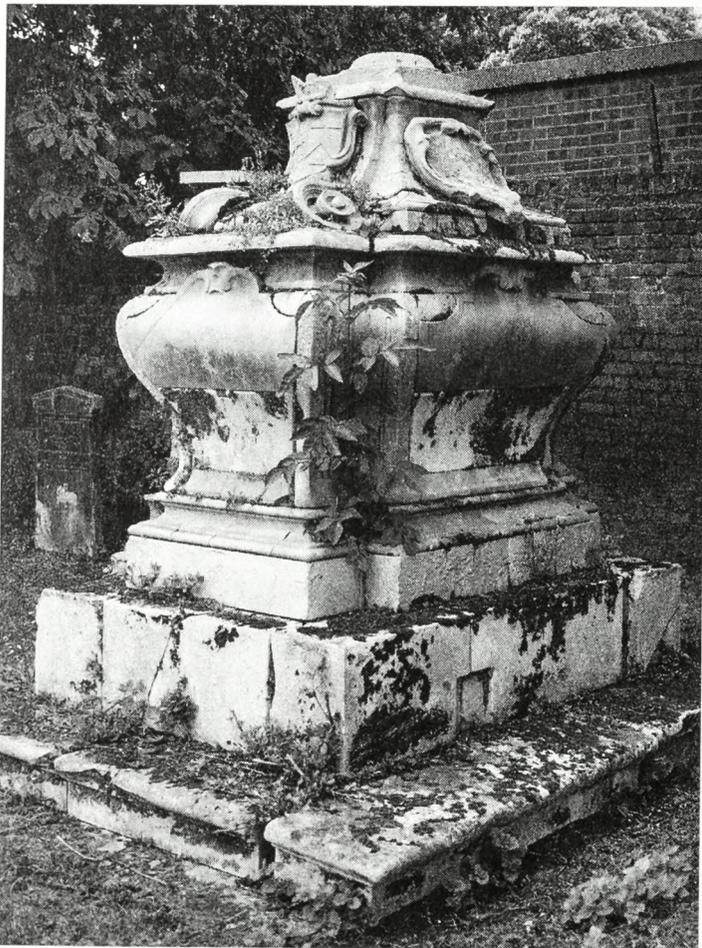


Fig. 1. Robert Chambers, tomb of Sir Samuel Fludyer, St Margaret’s Church, Lee, Kent, c.1769 (English Heritage).

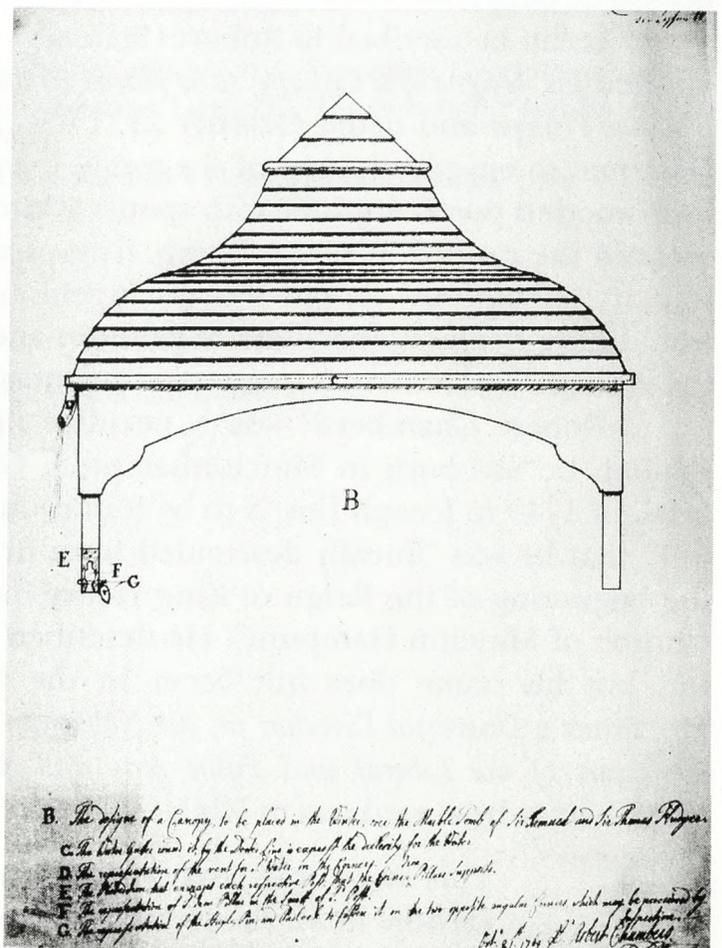


Fig. 2. Robert Chambers, design for a winter canopy for the tomb of Sir Samuel Fludyer, 1769 (Lewisham Local History Centre, Manor House Library).

light on how grand, yet delicate, monuments gradually shifted during the 18th century from inside to outside churches as space inside them became ever more at a premium, and as the reaction against intramural interment developed.¹⁵ The design also confirms Chambers as an unusual executor of Taylorian Rococo sculpture.

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I wish to thank Richard Garnier for spotting the tomb in the first place and suggesting a possible link with Taylor. Richard Hewlings kindly commented on a draft.

NOTES

1. On Fluyder, see Alfred Beaven, *The Aldermen of the City of London*, 1905, I, 105; II, 130 & 211; Sir Lewis Namier & John Brooke, *The House of Commons 1754–90*, 1964, II, 442–44 and E. & J. Birchenough, *Two Old Lee Houses: Dacre House and Lee House* London Borough of Lewisham, 1968, *passim*. Neither Sir Samuel or Sir Thomas's will makes any reference to a monument (PRO, PROB 11/936/59 & PROB 11/947/123).
2. *Gentleman's Magazine* 38, 1768, 47 reported his death and noted he was "reputed worth £900,000".
3. His house subsequently became the Foreign Office. Fludyer Street disappeared beneath George Gilbert Scott's replacement of the 1860s: see I. Toplis, *The Foreign Office. An Architectural Study*, 1987, esp. 5–7.
4. The only early view of the tomb is a crude early-19th-century watercolour by one Gosden in the prints and drawings department of the Guildhall Library (ref. L2/MAR).
5. Sir Samuel was married first to Jane Clerke, and then to Caroline Brudenell, niece of the 3rd Earl of Cardigan. Sir Thomas was married to Mary Champion.
6. A photograph in Lewisham local history centre of 1979 shows it still in place.
7. Thus it was illustrated in J. Burford & J. D. M. Harvey's *Some Lesser Known Architecture of London*, New York, 1926, pl. lxviii.
8. Present whereabouts unknown; formerly in the possession of J. H. McDonnell. Photograph of the original in Lewisham local history centre.
9. Given in D. Lysons, *The Environs of London*, 1792–96, IV, 505–06.
10. See Colvin and Gunnis. The tomb is St Katherine Cree, City of London to Barbara Shepherd (d.1768) may be attributed to Chambers on the grounds of its stained marble and other quirks. Mrs Esdaile was the first to notice his penchant for adding inscriptions in Hebrew: *English Monumental Sculpture since the Renaissance*, 1927, 100.
11. PRO, PROB 11/1121/497 dated September 7, 1784.
12. *Op. cit.*, 7.
13. On Taylor as a sculptor, see Malcolm Baker, "Rococo Styles in eighteenth century English Sculpture" in M. Snodin (ed.), *Rococo. Art and Design in Hogarth's England* (V&A exhib. cat. 1984), 282–83. Both the monumental designs by Taylor (now in his foundation of the Taylorian Institution, Oxford) illustrated in the catalogue (nos. S22 and S23) have a number of points in common with the Fludyer tomb.
14. Richard Garnier, following Horace Walpole, has drawn attention to Taylor's practice of "bosting", of leaving the execution of his designs to other sculptors and architects: "Sir Robert Taylor" in Giles Worsley (ed.) *Georgian Architectural Practice*, Georgian Group symposium, 1991, 49–50.
15. Compare Lady Webb's tomb in St Pancras churchyard, London Borough of Camden, of post-1740 which was placed outdoors because of her desire "to avoid the expense and vanity of a pompous vault": she "made it her deathbed request in compassion to the poor to be privately interr'd in the churchyard". Quoted in F. Cansick, *A Collection of Curious and Interesting Epitaphs . . . in the Ancient Church and Burial Ground of Saint Pancras Middlesex*, 1869, 38–39.