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UNBUILT GIBBS A FRESH LOOK AT HIS DESIGNS FOR THE 1711 ACT CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

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James Gibbs, of Scottish descent, was born in 1682 and died in 1754 at the age of 71 after a long and successful career, mostly connected with the design and construction of private houses, but including some important churches and public buildings.¹ He left several portfolios of drawings containing a record of his numerous large scale designs, not all of which were built, together with many examples of his smaller-scale work in designing garden buildings, ornaments and monuments of all kinds. On his death these drawings were bequeathed to the Radcliffe Library in Oxford and are now in the Ashmolean Museum. The collection includes a number of drawings for churches whose intended sites have not, so far, been identified. Most of these are from the first decade of his architectural career in Britain and were produced when he was one of the surveyors to the Commissioners appointed under an Act of 1711 for the Building of Fifty New Churches.² He was appointed to this post in 1713, succeeding William Dickinson who had resigned, and in competition with John James.³

Almost immediately, he was concerned with designs for the site near the maypole in the Strand, and completed the church for the Commissioners, after the foundations had been laid to a design by Thomas Archer.⁴ His best known parish church is St Martin-in-the-Fields (1722-26) for the Commissioners appointed under an Act of 1720.⁵ His work includes also the steeple for St Clement Danes (1719-20) and the Oxford or Marylebone chapel, later St Peter, Vere Street, (1721-24) for Edward Harley, Earl of Oxford. Outside the metropolis he designed All Saints, Derby, St Nicholas West, Aberdeen, churches at Shipbourne, Kent and Patshull, Staffordshire and private chapels for the Duke of Chandos at Cannons and the Earl of Oxford at Wimpole. Also to his credit are a small number of unbuilt designs, including those for St Giles-in-the-Fields.⁶

His appointment as surveyor to the 1711 Act Commissioners lasted from November 18, 1713 until the end of the second Commission, effectively December 1715, a span of approximately two years, years in which the Commission was particularly active. It was thus a busy time for him, with duties that included supervising the construction of and reporting on the churches already begun, examining and reporting on sites proposed for new churches and responding to the Commissioners Orders to provide designs for the sites acquired by them. It is with this last requirement, in particular with his unbuilt designs for them, that this paper is principally concerned. These designs are little researched and poorly documented. Our knowledge of them is derived from the Commissioners papers and what can be deduced from his drawings in the Ashmolean.

The Church in the Strand

There is no specific reference, in the papers of the Commissioners, to the intended location of the church for which Gibbs produced his early designs, nor for the models that were made from them. Nevertheless, most authors have concluded that at least one of these would have been for the site in the Strand. In addition to these and the design to which the church was built, there is a further design by him, ostensibly for the Strand site, reported in his *A Book of Architecture* as:

more capacious than that now built: But as it exceeded the dimensions of the Ground allowed by Act of Parliament for that Building, it was laid aside by the Commissioners.⁷

It is generally referred to as the “wide design”, distinguishing it from the church as built which, as it was of smaller dimension, north-to-south, is conveniently referred to as the “narrow design”.

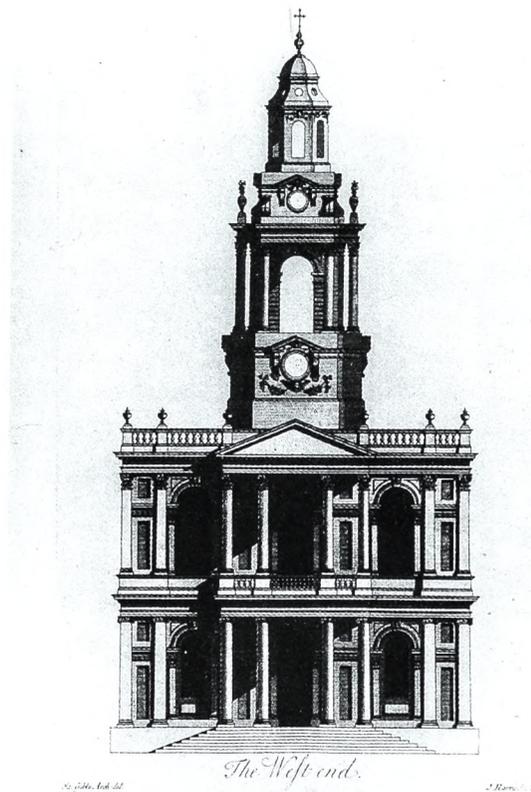


Fig. 1. Elevation of west front of the "wide design" (Conway Library, Courtauld Institute of Art).

There are two problems in considering this statement by Gibbs and the wide design to which it refers. The first is in the matter of timing. Friedman has suggested that the wide design was produced following meetings held on July 15 and October 28, 1714. Gibbs was undoubtedly designing for the Strand site in this period, but the outcome was the narrow design, not the wide. It was approved by the committee on November 2, and by the Commissioners on November 4. The call for submission of designs for the site in the Strand had been made on December 9, 1713 when the surveyors, Gibbs and Hawksmoor, were ordered to draw designs on paper. What Gibbs then produced is lost, but on February 4, 1714 he submitted, unsolicited, a wooden model, now also lost, but recorded by C.R. Cockerell in 1826 which can hardly be anything other than in support of his design drawn on paper.⁹ It is quite unlike the wide design, even accepting that the latter was later redrawn for publication. Gibbs's design was, presumably, considered by the Commissioners on April 29, 1714 when Archer's design was selected and those by Gibbs, Hawksmoor and probably also by John James,¹⁰ rejected. There thus seems to have been no time when Gibbs would have produced a wide design for the Strand.

The second problem arises from the width of the design. It is difficult to believe that Gibbs was the one man attached to the Commission who did not know the size of the building plot. What would the Commissioners think of a surveyor who did not know (or who did not trouble to find out) the limitations imposed upon the building? I prefer to believe that, as a competent surveyor responsible for the building of the church, Gibbs knew exactly both the size of Archer's design then in construction and the limitations of the site. But why then should he produce a design too wide for it?

There is no reference to this wide design in any of the contemporary documents other than his *A Book of Architecture*, which was produced by James Gibbs to advertise his own work. The purpose of including the wide design must surely have been to answer any criticism concerning the proportion of the narrow design. Is he not saying "but for the limitation imposed upon me, this is how it would have been"? This would explain his use of the design, but not the reason for its existence. The more one examines it, the more one suspects that Gibbs may have been economical with the truth. We simply do not have the full story.

The wide design is for a church of four bays (St Mary-le-Strand has five), double storied and with paired attached pilasters, rather than single columns to north and south fronts. It is the west front, (Fig. 1) which is most different from the church in the Strand, with its double, rectangular tetrastyle portico and balcony above. A wide staircase suggests that the church was intended to be galleried. Despite the differences, in style it resembles the completed St Mary-le-Strand, suggesting a date of 1714-15, the period of his surveyorship. Gibbs was not given to producing speculative designs and, rather than an alternative for the Strand, it may have been produced, originally, for some other site. The possibility that this site was Lady Russell's ground in Bloomsbury is considered below.

The Church in Hanover Square

In 1720, some time after he had lost his position as surveyor to the Commissioners, James Gibbs tried to obtain the commission for a new church on ground near Hanover Square in the parish of St Martin-in-the-Fields, a site donated to the Commissioners. He received support from the inhabitants of the area, and with their approval submitted a design. The Commissioners, however, had ordered their own surveyors, Nicholas Hawksmoor and John James, to produce a design for a church on the site. According to Friedman both James and Hawksmoor responded, although no record of any submission by Hawksmoor has been found.¹¹ James's initial design, amended to reduce the cost, was accepted by the Commissioners on November 14, 1720, that by Gibbs being then rejected.

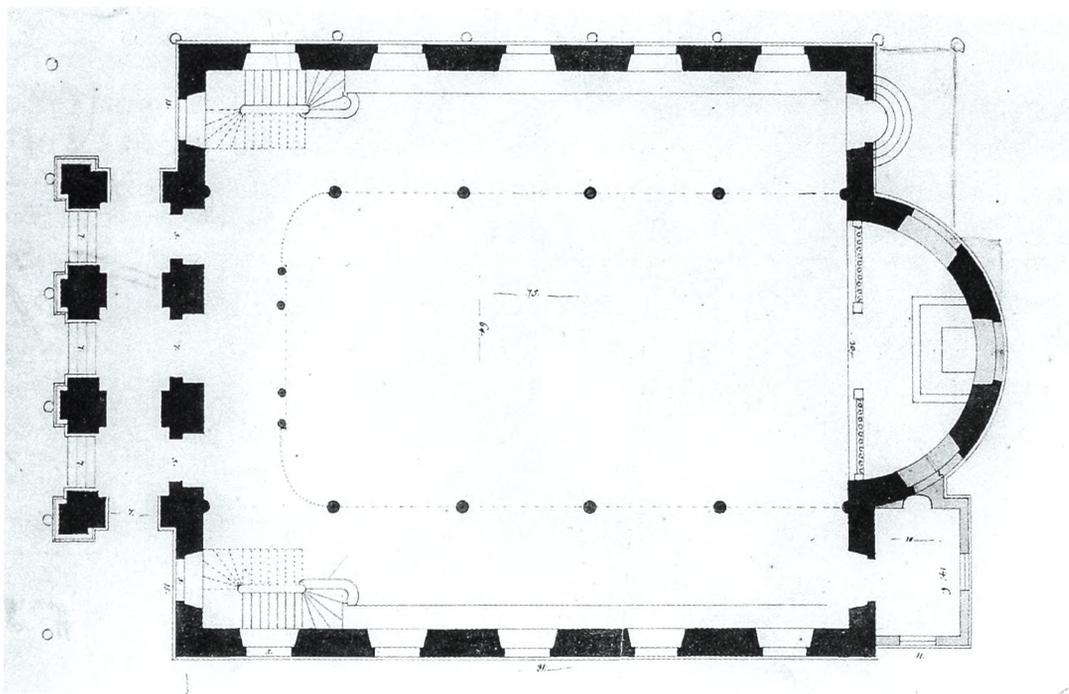


Fig. 2. Plan, by James Gibbs for St George, Hanover Square (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford).

Gibbs's design for St George, Hanover Square is known from drawings in the Ashmolean consisting of a plan, (Fig. 2) a section north-south and an elevation of the east front (Fig.3).¹² They represent a medium sized church occupying the full extent of the plot available. As an addition to the original drawing, it had attached columns on the north front and to the piers of the tetrastyle portico. The body of the church would have been well lit with windows in both upper and lower stories, the latter lighting the areas beneath the galleries which were supported on Corinthian columns raised on high bases. The church had a large apse one step above the nave with the altar raised two further steps.

These are not the only drawings said by Friedman to be for St George, Hanover Square, There is a further plan, (Fig. 4)¹³ and a set of five drawings,¹⁴ all described by him as variant

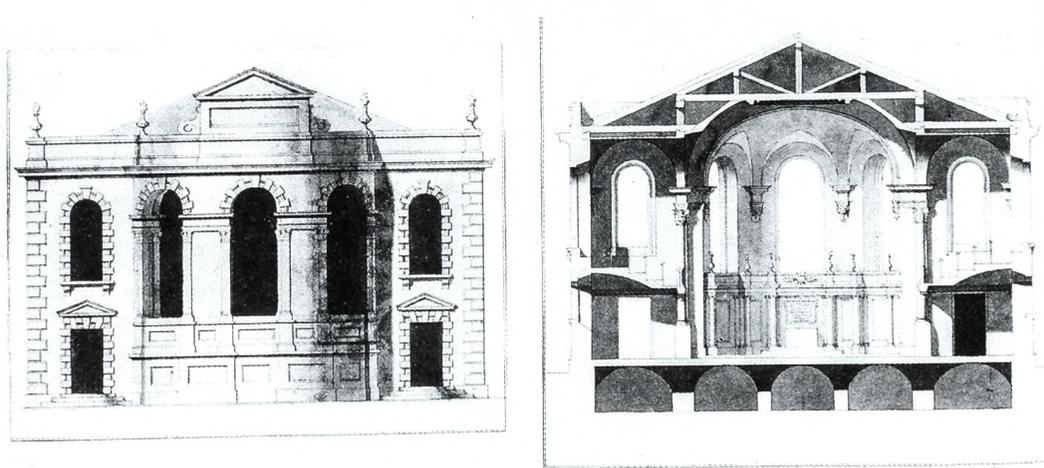


Fig. 3. Elevation of the east front and section north-south, by James Gibbs for St George, Hanover Square (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford).

designs. Of this set of five drawings, four — a plan and elevations of the east, north and west fronts — are here suggested as Gibbs's design for Lady Russell's ground in Bloomsbury and are considered in greater detail below. The fifth of this set,¹⁵ a ground plan (Fig. 5), also considered below, is likely to be for Lady Russell's ground, although not directly related to the remaining four. The further plan, referred to above (Fig. 4), is for a church too small to be St Martin-in-the-Fields and the wrong shape for the plot available for St George, Bloomsbury. It is very different from his design for St George, Hanover Square as shown in (Fig. 2), but nevertheless its shape and size suggests that it was intended for this site. It is probably a preliminary plan. It shows no site-specific details and the four large staircases are excessive for a church of this size. It is comparable in style with an early rectangular design for St Martin's¹⁶ but as a cut down version. It may have been produced for the Hanover Square site in 1719-20.

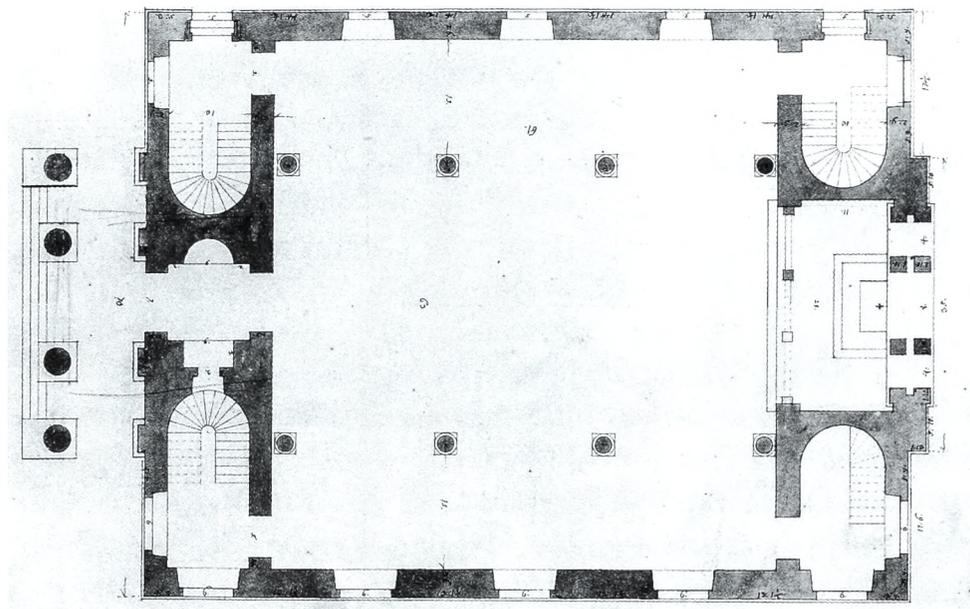


Fig. 4. Early plan by James Gibbs for the site in Hanover Square (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford).

The Church for Lady Russell's Ground in Bloomsbury

The parish of St Giles-in-the-Fields was one of the most populous to the west of the City of London and the Commissioners decided that it should have four of the 50 new churches. In the event only one of the four was built, St George, Bloomsbury, to the design of Nicholas Hawksmoor.

The site known as Plow or Plough Lane, or more simply, Lady Russell's ground, was suggested to the Commissioners in 1711.¹⁷ They first accepted it, then rejected it, finding it

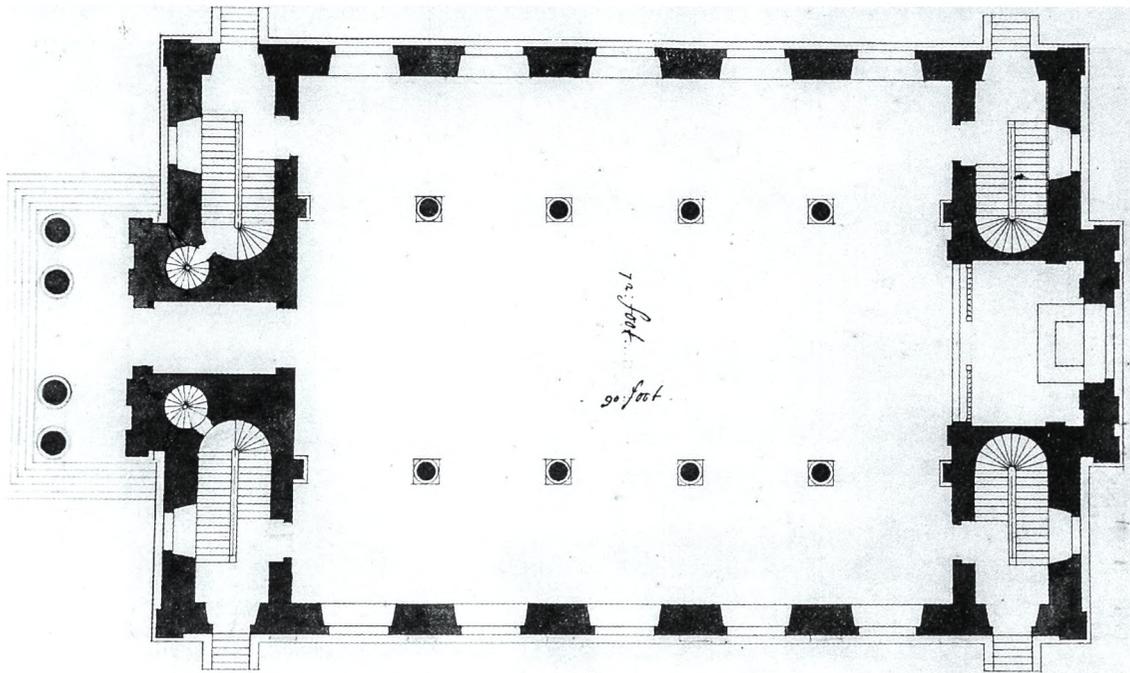


Fig. 5. Early plan by James Gibbs for Lady Russell's ground in Bloomsbury (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford).

“inconvenient and Lady Russell’s demand for it extra-ordinarily high”.¹⁸ Difficulties in finding an alternative site may have caused them to consider her ground once again and, on February 3, 1714 two of their number were asked to review it.¹⁹ Their report has not been traced. The Commissioners must, by then, have decided that they would accept the site with its major dimension (and hence the alignment of the new church) north-south. They had earlier discussed the problem of sites where the churches could not be built with their liturgical axis oriented east-west, and had agreed that they would accept them if special reasons existed.²⁰ These special reasons were never revealed, but their acceptance of Lady Russell’s ground indicates that failure to find an alternative site was sufficient. The Commissioners’ report was presumably otherwise favourable as, on February 24, Gibbs, newly appointed Surveyor to the Commissioners, was ordered to make a plan of it together with a “ground plan of a church to be erected thereon”. This he delivered on March 3,²¹ Lady Russell’s reduced demand of £1,000 was then accepted, “her making them a good title to it at her own charge”.²² A year later the Commissioners once again called upon their surveyors, Gibbs and Hawksmoor, to provide a site plan of the ground “if there is not one already made” and to produce designs for a church.²³

There is no record, in the Commissioners’ papers, of a submission by either of them, but it is unthinkable that either would have failed to respond. Both were servants of the Commission and, quite apart from their duty to respond to such orders, were men whose life’s work consisted of designing and building. They would not have ignored or overlooked the opportunity of providing a design for the new church. Discussion, if any, of their designs by the Commissioners passed unrecorded, but in May the decision was reached to build the church on Lady Russell’s ground to the design of Sir John Vanbrugh, placed north and south, “by reason it cannot conveniently be built any other way”.²⁴ The subsequent history of designing for this site occurred after James Gibbs had been dismissed from his post of surveyor. Vanbrugh’s design was not executed, the Commissioners authorising the building of the church to a design by Nicholas Hawksmoor.

No drawings for the church by Gibbs have previously been reported. The four drawings now suggested as produced for this site, were originally catalogued as a project design by him for St Martin-in-the Fields, but the general shape is inappropriate for the St Martin’s site, nor can the drawings be related to the known history of the St Martin’s project. The long and narrow shape of the church (Figs. 6-8) is inappropriate also for the site near Hanover Square and the

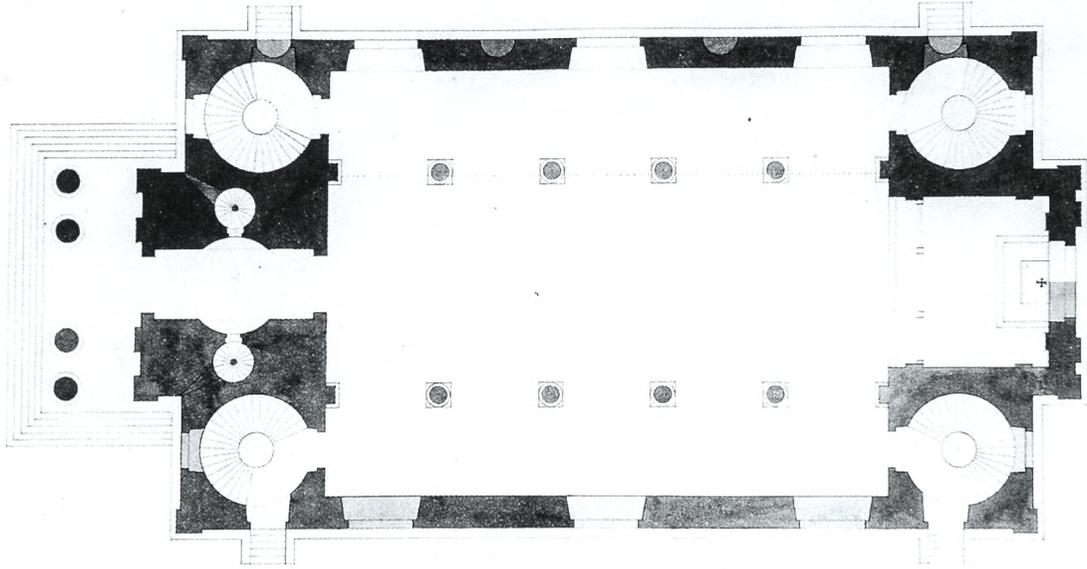


Fig. 6. Plan, Gibbs's later design for St George, Bloomsbury (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford).

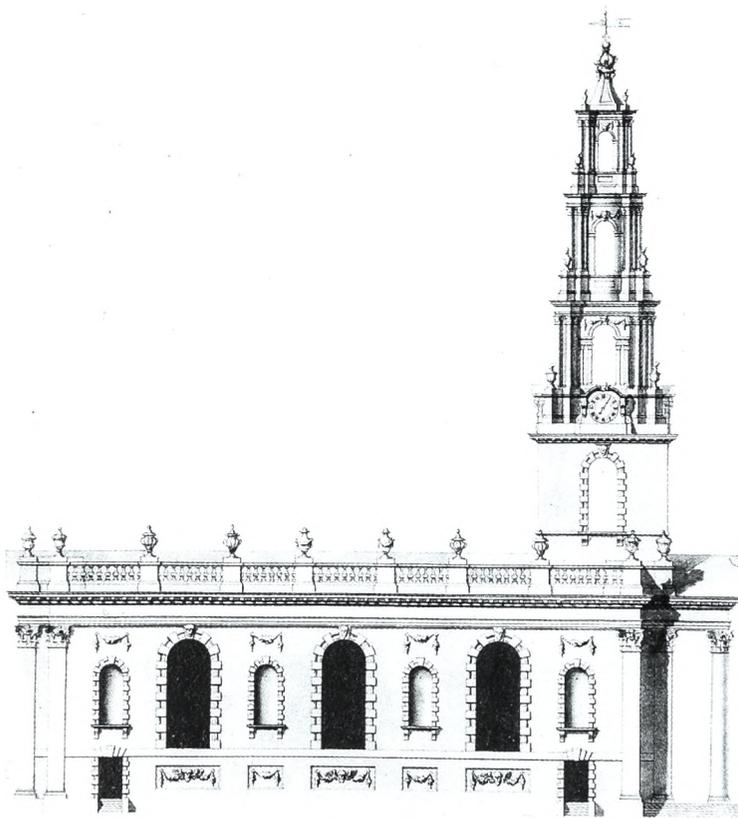


Fig. 7. Elevation of Gibbs's design for the (liturgical) north front, St George, Bloomsbury (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford).

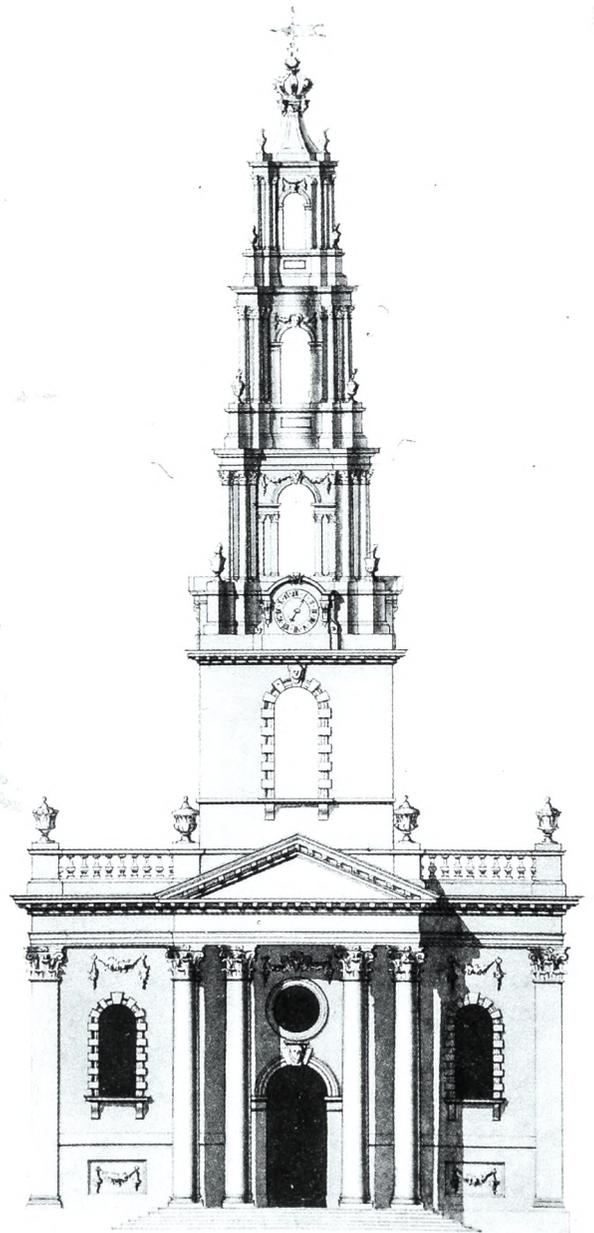


Fig. 8. Elevation of Gibbs's design for the (liturgical) west front, St George, Bloomsbury (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford).

design is too long for it. These drawings represent a church of about 140ft in length and 72ft in breadth, i.e. with shape and dimensions convenient and appropriate for Lady Russell's ground in Bloomsbury. Oriented north-south, Gibb's design would fit comfortably on site, with ample room for access.

The nave of the church had exterior niches occupying alternate bays. The chancel was approximately square with one large, plain window at the east end. This deep chancel was a major departure from the designs of Wren and Hooke in the City churches rebuilt after the Great Fire of 1666. Ideas had, however, changed and in all the churches built for them, the 1711 Act Commissioners had accepted that a well-defined place for the altar was appropriate.

All windows were to be decorated on the exterior with the rustication known as "Gibbs surrounds", and some had lion's head keystones. Entrances on the liturgical north and south sides gave to circular rooms with access to both nave and galleries supported on rows of four columns. The main entrance was through a tetrastyle Corinthian portico and a passageway at the base of the tower which, with the steeple, a three-tiered composition, has an affinity with the lower stage of the design for St Mary-le-Strand, to early designs for St Martin-in-the-Fields and also to St Stephen Walbrook then being completed.

The design was made at about the same time as Gibbs was designing St Mary-le-Strand and the two churches have much in common. Both have double-storied elevations which are devoid of windows at the lower level. This would give rise to poor illumination of the aisles below the galleries, as it was to do later in St Mary's.²⁵ The church also resembled St Martin-in-the-Fields, notably in the way the tower and steeple rose directly from the roof of the temple fronted portico, for which Gibbs was to be much criticised. More importantly, perhaps, as far as the Commissioners were concerned, the church did not follow the guidelines laid down by them, having neither rooms for vestments and consecrated vessels at the east end, nor a parish room to the west.

Gibbs did not think sufficiently highly of his design to include it with those of St Mary-le-Strand and St Martin-in-the-Fields in his *A Book of Architecture*. It is perhaps not surprising that he chose to omit his thoughts for Bloomsbury, rather than advertise a design which had been rejected in favour of the work of another architect.

The design by Gibbs intended for Lady Russell's ground in Bloomsbury (Fig. 5) referred to above, remains to be considered.²⁶ It is a plan for a church on the site, possibly drawn by him in response to the order of February 24, 1714 and thus predating the set of drawings discussed above, although a comparison of the two plans makes it quite clear that they are for the same church. As Gibbs had been instructed to produce a "ground plat", he may not have produced more, but this seems unlikely. He can hardly have produced a "ground plat" without considering the rest of the design and may even have completed it, waiting for the Commissioners' call for a design.

This plan of 1714 reminds us not only of the four drawings together comprising the 1715 design for Lady Russell's ground, but also of the wide design for the Strand. There are some marked differences, notably that this plan is for a five bay church and has a rectangular east end, rather than the four-bay, apsidal design for the Strand. These features of the wide design may, of course, have been introduced when it was redrawn by Gibbs for publication.

This resemblance suggests both a rational explanation for the wide design and also for Gibbs's statement concerning setting it aside because it exceeded with width of the Strand site. In the autumn of 1714 the Commissioners, needing a new design for Archer's foundation in the Strand, may have been aware (or were made aware) of Gibbs's design for Bloomsbury — it may have been offered to them as an example of what Gibbs could do. They rejected it for the Strand as being too wide for the site but left Gibbs free to redesign it as the narrow church, familiar to us as the church then built. Is this the true explanation of the wide design?

The church for Lincoln's Inn Fields

The history of the designing of a church for Lincoln's Inn Fields has recently been reviewed.²⁷ Seventeenth-century proposals for a church ("St Mary-in-the-Fields") to a design by Sir Christopher Wren apparently did not attract support and it was never built. Interest in the site by the 1711 Act Commissioners resulted in designs by Archer, Campbell, Gibbs and Hawksmoor; those by Gibbs being preserved at the Ashmolean.²⁸ They are for a circular church based upon the Pantheon in Rome. It is a galleried domed building with entrance through a tetrastyle Ionic portico. The design is not inspiring. Gibbs apparently produced it in anticipation of the call for designs, the call that never came.

Although Lincoln's Inn Fields was selected by the Commissioners as a suitable site for one of their new churches to be built in the parish of St Giles-in-the-Fields, opposition from both the inhabitants of the Fields and the Benchers of the adjacent Lincoln's Inn prevented all building on the site.

Three more sites

The Commissioners agreed, as early as November 1711, that the hamlet of Lower Wapping should be made into a separate parish and that a new church should be erected there. Ground belonging to a Mr Bastwick Johnson was proposed and viewed in 1714 by Thomas Archer, Christopher Wren Jr. and Nicholas Hawksmoor. There must have been doubt in the minds of the Commissioners as to whether the land would take the weight of a new church as later that year Vanbrugh, Christopher Wren and the surveyors, Gibbs and Hawksmoor were asked to examine the foundation and "report the charge of making it good or otherwise if the same be necessary".²⁹ On June 28, 1715 Gibbs was ordered to make a plan for a church "the most convenient that can stand east and west" for the ground already bought and another supposing additional land was purchased.³⁰ On July 5 the Commissioners agreed an extra £200 to Johnson for more land which, from a site plan of 1758³¹ can be seen to have increased the size of the plot available to about 160ft east and west and to about 480ft, north to south. This addition was probably on Gibbs's recommendation. There is no record of any discussion of a design by him, nor of any intention of proceeding with the building at that time.

Nearly two years later, on May 31, 1717, the inhabitants of the hamlet petitioned for the church to be built and the Commissioners agreed to proceed with all possible speed.³² On July 18 the surveyors (Hawksmoor and James) submitted a "model and design", the Commissioners agreeing that the church should be built according to it. There is no indication of which surveyor was responsible for it. They recommended piling and planking for the foundation³³ but there is no contract for this and no record of any construction. The financial embarrassment of the Commissioners which developed at about that time prevented further action. The site was let and eventually, in 1758, sold.

Gibbs would undoubtedly have responded to the Commissioners' order with alternative plans for the site, but there is no indication that these led to a fully developed design, nor are there any drawings in the Gibbs collection that can be identified with this site.

In 1715 ground in Stockwell was offered gratis to the Commissioners by Sir John Thorneycroft. Gibbs and Hawksmoor were ordered to make a plan for a church to be erected there.³⁴ According to Friedman,³⁵ both surveyed the site and made a plan of a church for it, but no site survey is now known and no plans by either architect have so far been discovered. The Commissioners' interest in the site soon disappeared. Fully developed designs are unlikely to have been produced. Also in 1715 Gibbs reported on a site in the parish of St Giles, Cripplegate owned by Thomas White.³⁶ He found the site unsuitable for building a church and is therefore unlikely to have designed for it.

In summary, it can now be seen that earlier attempts to identify the unnamed churches in

the Gibbs Collection of drawings were much in need of revision. The so called “wide design” for the church in the Strand, known only from Gibbs’s book of 1728, may be his revision of a drawing from 1714 for Lady Russell’s ground in Bloomsbury. A set of four drawings are now identified as the 1715 design also for Lady Russell’s ground.

Sufficient church designs by Gibbs are now known to enable his style to be followed from the temple designs of 1713 to the tetrastyle porticos of the domed circular church for Lincoln’s Inn Fields and the wide design for the Strand, both probably of 1714, the giant order tetrastyle portico of 1715 for Lady Russell’s ground (and probably also for St George, Hanover Square of (1719-20), his apsidal designs for St Mary-le-Strand and St George, Hanover Square, and ultimately to the hexastyle Corinthian portico of St Martin-in-the-Fields. In these developments he can hardly be described as innovative, with his semicircular porch for St Mary-le-Strand, and probably also the apse for the church, based upon the earlier design of Thomas Archer. The hexastyle giant order portico is from Hawksmoor’s St George, Bloomsbury. Even in the doubling of the portico at St Martin’s Gibbs can be seen as still following Hawksmoor at Bloomsbury.

NOTES

1. Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600-1840*, 1978, 337-39.
2. “In and around the Cities of London and Westminster and Suburbs thereof”, Statute at Large, 9 Anne c.22.
3. Lambeth Palace Library (LPL) MS 2690, August 13, 1713.
4. LPL MS 2690, April 29, 1714, June 10, 1714, July 21, 1714.
5. Statute at large, 6 George, c.22 (Private) also 10 George, c.13 (Private), promoted by the parish vestry.
6. The church of St Giles-in-the-Fields was rebuilt 1731-34 to the design of Henry Flitcroft in competition with designs from Hawksmoor, Gibbs and Shepherd, following an Act of Parliament (3 George II, c.19) authorising the 1711 Act Commissioners to allocate £8,000 from the coals due to the trustees for rebuilding. The designs by Gibbs for this church are Ashmolean III, 67-70.
7. James Gibbs, *A Book of Architecture*, London, 1728, vii.
8. Terry Friedman, *James Gibbs*, Newhaven and London, 1984, 312.
9. V&A, E3024-1909.
10. John James submitted a design for the rebuilding of St Alfrege, Greenwich was rejected by the Commissioners who then gave him leave to submit further designs. There is no record of having done so, but in the climate of the times it is probable that he did. The most likely church would have been St Mary-le-Strand, and his drawing for it may be that now in the All Souls Wren collection, I, 58.
11. Friedman, *op.cit.*, 309.
12. Ashmolean II, 5 and II, 38. The latter is endorsed “We whose names are here unto subscribed doe approve of this plan for the intended Church in Great George street near Hanover Square.”
13. *Ibid.*, II, 37
14. *Ibid.*, VII, 14-18.
15. *Ibid.*, VII, 15.
16. *Ibid.*, VII, 8.
17. LPL MS 2690, October 24 and December 4, 1711.
18. LPL MS 2693, November 17, 1712.
19. LPL MS 2690, February 3, 1714.
20. *Ibid.*, November 21, 1711.
21. *Ibid.*, March 3, 1714.
22. *Ibid.*, March 17, 1714.
23. *Ibid.*, February 23, 1715.
24. *Ibid.*, May 17, 1715.
25. City of Westminster Archives, Victoria Library, MS G1004. Galleries were erected along the north and south walls of St Mary-le-Strand in c.1818; they made the church very dark and were removed in 1828.
26. Ashmolean VII, 15.
27. Paul Jeffery, *Architectural History*, 31, 1988, 136-144.
28. Ashmolean II, 101-3. See also III, 35.
29. LPL MS 2690, February 16, 1715.
30. *Ibid.*, June 28, 1715.
31. LPL MS 2750, No. 19.
32. LPL MS 2690, May 31, 1717.
33. LPL MS 2714, f. 144.
34. LPL MS 2690, August 5, 1715.
35. Friedman, *op.cit.*, 304.
36. LPL MS 2690, March 16, 1715; MS 2714, f. 248.