



THE
GEORGIAN
GROUP

Anne Purchas, 'The Church of St Lawrence,
West Wycombe Ancient or Modern?',
The Georgian Group Journal, Vol. IV,
1994, pp. 65-69

THE CHURCH OF ST LAWRENCE, WEST WYCOMBE ANCIENT OR MODERN?

Anne Purchas

The church of St Lawrence, West Wycombe, Buckinghamshire, which is situated on the summit of the hill opposite West Wycombe Park was transformed in the middle of the 18th century by its patron, Sir Francis Dashwood Bt, (1708-81). Although part of the fabric of the medieval church remains,¹ the Classicism of the nave disguises the earlier origins of the church and the subtle alterations to the fabric, which provided the most practical and economical solution to its re-modelling, are not immediately evident. Thus the second baronet was credited with having built a new church.

A group of architectural drawings at West Wycombe Park illustrate how the ideas to transform the church evolved. These can now be attributed to John Donowell and evidence to support this attribution is to be found in a bound volume of Donowell's drawings at Hatfield House, Hertfordshire.² Donowell worked at Hatfield from about 1771 to 1778 for the sixth and seventh Earls of Salisbury. He was responsible for remodelling part of the interior of the house and designing a workhouse and a pair of octagonal lodges. The latter remain, one as originally executed and the other with later additions.³ His drawings which are monogrammed and dated, are also well annotated and inscribed. It is therefore possible to compare the shared characteristics in draughtsmanship, scale and handwriting which appear consistent with Donowell's drawings for the Church of St Lawrence.

At West Wycombe Donowell appears to have been acting as an executant architect for his patron, a connoisseur with unusually well educated architectural ideas. The drawings show Donowell's difficulties as he interpreted these ideas and together they provide an interesting chronological record of this enterprising scheme. The drawings are generally executed in pen

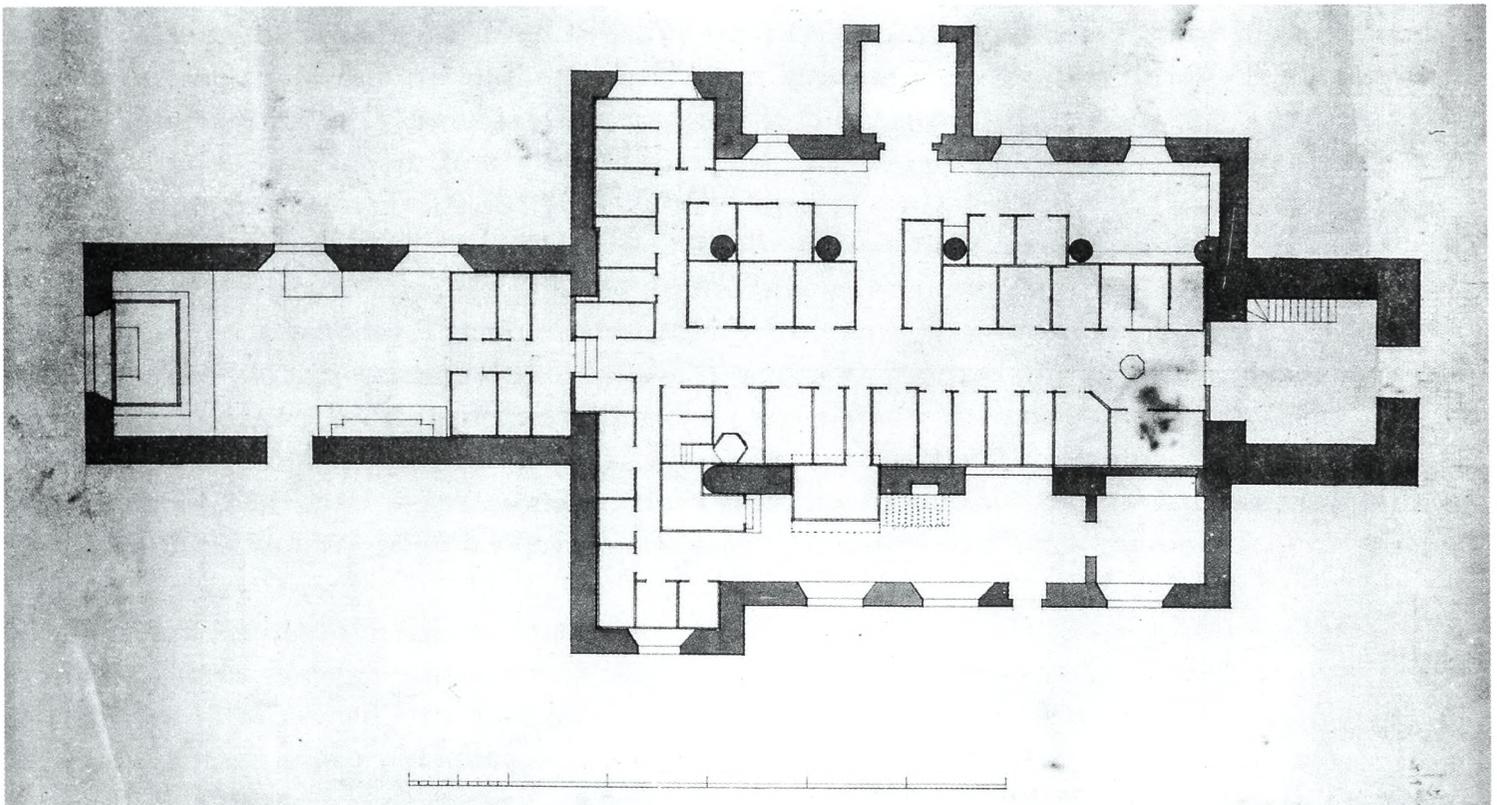


Fig. 1. Plan. A record drawing showing the medieval origins of the church.

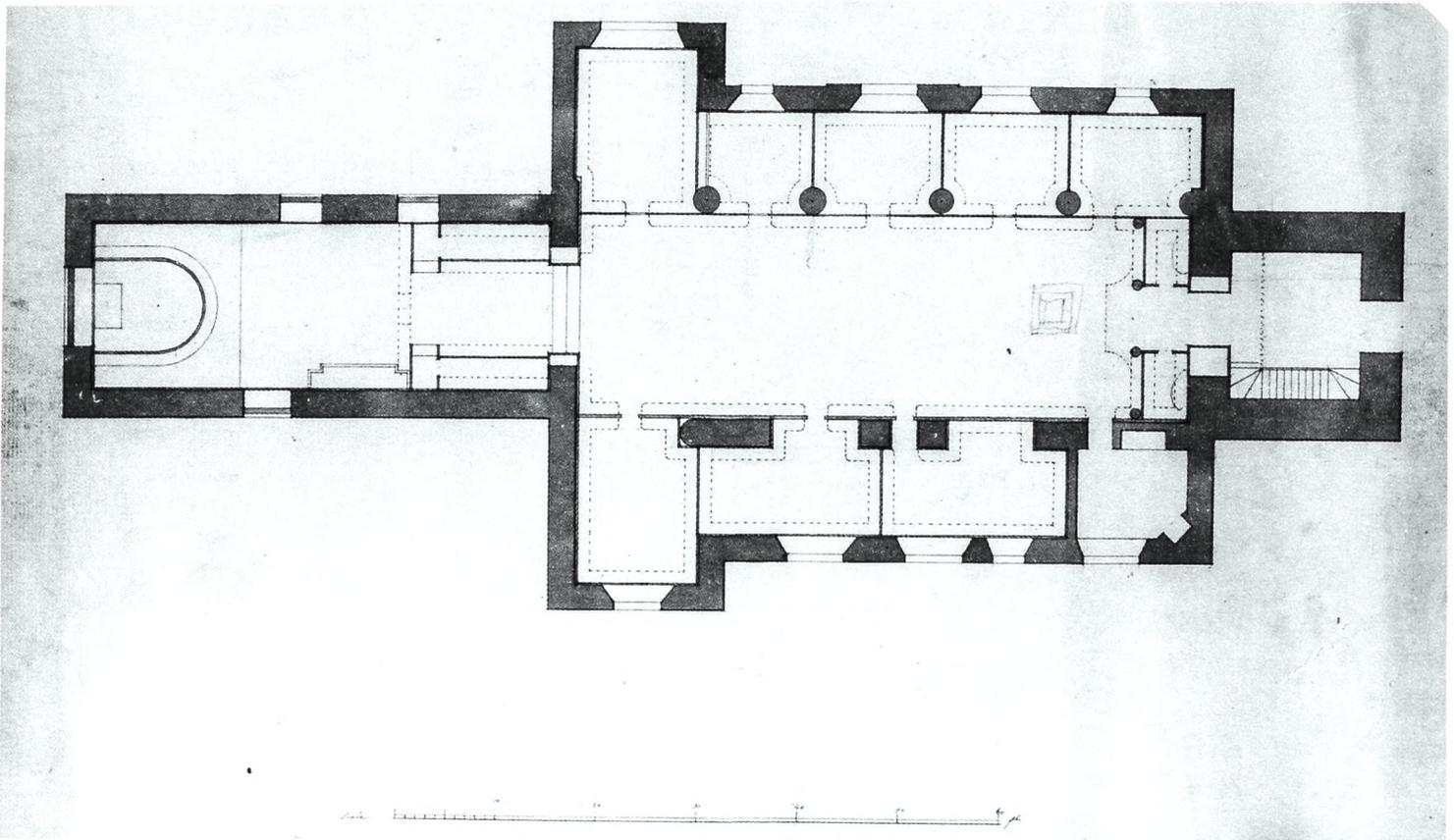


Fig. 2. Plan. Proposal for re-modelling the Church.

with pencil under-drawing and annotations and occasionally make use of a grey, brown or yellow wash.

The second baronet took responsibility for rebuilding the church from 1752 to 1762 and his inspiration here, as in much of his other work, was archaeological. The decoration of the nave was derived from the reconstruction of the Temple of the Sun at Palmyra¹ and the earlier chancel and tower were incorporated into the overall plan.

The earliest plan (Fig. 1), which is a record drawing, shows the medieval nave with a south entrance porch, transepts and an entrance to the north side of the chancel. The stairs in the tower are on its south wall. The numerous pews and a pulpit are shown in yellow and an octagonal font is positioned at the west end of the nave. Subsequently, the church, still with its south entrance porch and transept but with the raised tower and gilded ball completed, was depicted in one of William Hannan's "Views", about 1754, of the landscaped park at West Wycombe. The church could thus be seen in its new role as an "eye catcher" having been incorporated into the 18th-century landscape garden.

Indeed, the tower was well advanced in 1752 when Thomas Phillibrown recorded in his diary of October 5 that: "With some difficulty and a little fear, we at last arrived at the church . . . the tower of which Church Sir Francis has (at his own expense) for the sake of a prospect to his House and Gardens raised to twice the height it was before and on the top of the said tower is building a spire of timber, on top of which is built of wood a very large hollow globe, the diameter of which is 8 feet and the outside of it is to be covered with gilt. We just went within the Church and up as high as the bell loft but had not courage to ascend higher."⁵

The height of the tower was increased to 80ft and, its most striking feature, a 20ft gilded wooden ball added. The ball provided seating for eight. The various stages of its development are marked by a change in the use of materials visible in the interior. The earliest lower part of the tower was built with flint and chalk "clunch" which were local materials, while for the upper part bricks were used and the exterior was faced with cement.

A second plan (Fig. 2) shows the church without the south porch and a window has

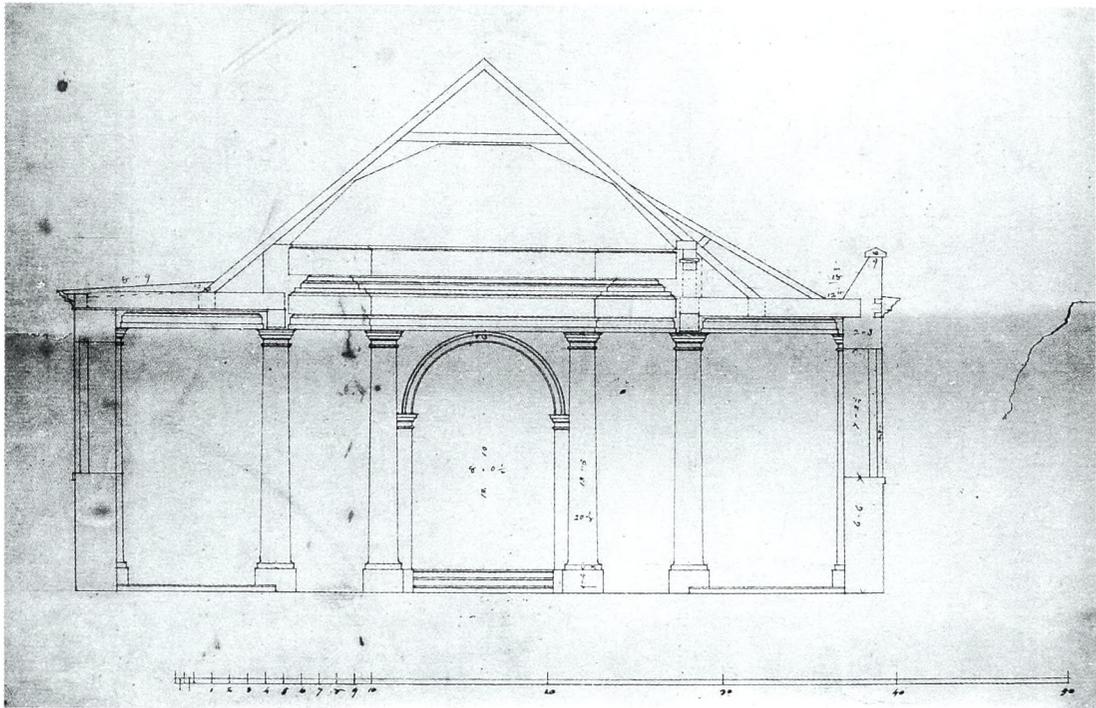


Fig. 3. Proposal for alterations to the interior.

replaced the entrance through the north wall of the chancel. The outline surrounding the altar represents the design as executed for the new paving, part of which is shown in Figure 1, while the new pews in the chancel and box pews in the nave are also indicated. The stairs in the tower have been extended and moved to the north wall. New windows are evident; the Perpendicular one at the east end was replaced by a smaller rectangular one. These changes were necessary to accommodate the suspended ceiling which replaced the barrel vault as depicted in Figure 3. An intriguing feature is the original painted ceiling which can still be seen through a small access hole in the exterior of the roof. The porch, which was built some time after the chancel, was slightly off axis but in the plan this is skillfully disguised; the north-western wall of the opening for the doorway into the nave has been increased by more than that on the opposite side, while at the entrance to the chancel the formula has been reversed to create an apparent symmetry to the building.

Two drawings (Figs. 4 & 5) show the transept removed, leaving a rectangular nave, and the evolution of the attached columns from Doric to Corinthian. There are alternative designs for the height of the pedestals, columns, entablature and frieze. The higher arched windows of the old transept are also reduced to accord with the other windows, for which there is a separate detailed drawing (Fig. 6).

A particularly interesting elevation is that of the exterior of the nave with part of the tower and chancel (Fig. 7). It clearly indicates the materials to be used on the nave. It also shows circular lights, which have been crossed out, above the arched windows. They may have been inspired by the original circular light at the east end of the chancel, the outline of which can still be seen above that of the Perpendicular window.

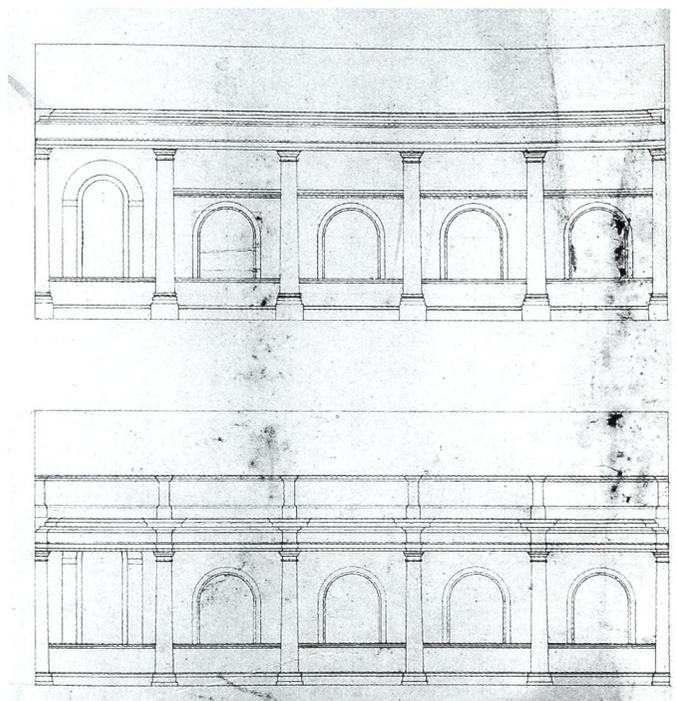


Fig. 4. Proposal for alterations to the nave.

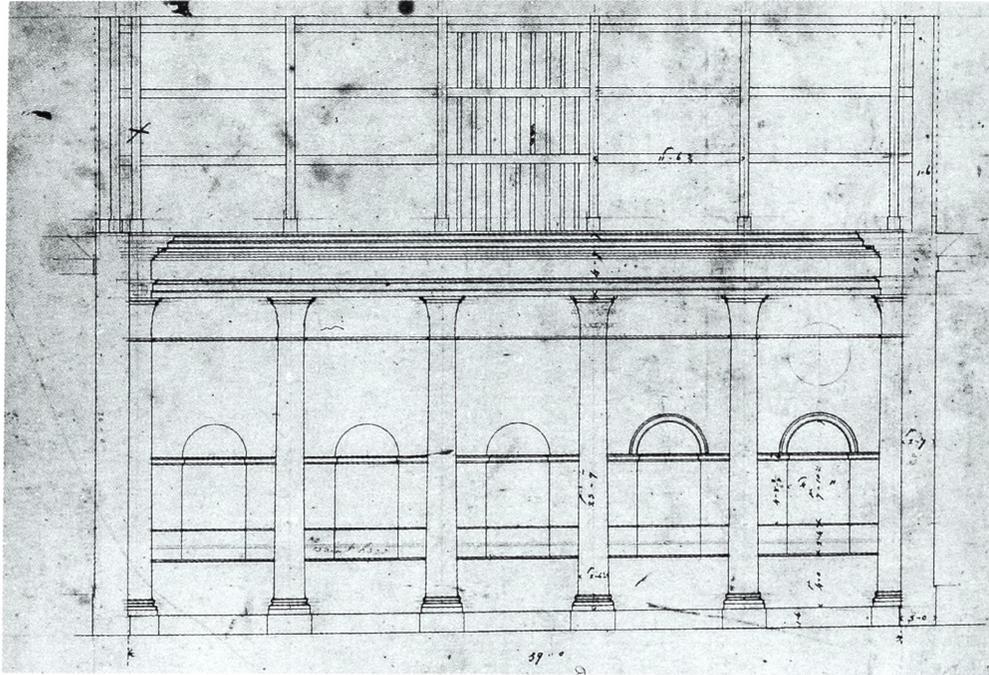


Fig. 5. Proposal for alterations to the nave.

However, they were clearly not appropriate to the Classical interior and were abandoned, although central roundels remain on the north and south elevations. The north one has the barely visible remains of a painting of St Lawrence on the gridiron, while that on the south is reputed to have contained a sundial and inscription: “Keep thy tongue from evil speaking, lying and slandering”,⁶ and another inscription already partly defaced in the 18th century.

Symmetry was essential to the Classical decoration of the interior, derived from the Temple of the Sun at Palmyra.⁷ However, the effect of the 16 giant attached Corinthian columns with no functional logic, elaborate frieze in high relief and stucco garlands, together with the richly painted ceiling, gave the impression, as a visitor in 1775 remarked, of “a very superb Egyptian Hall”,⁸ rather than a traditional church.

The church was officially opened on July 3, 1763 and was considered as one of the most

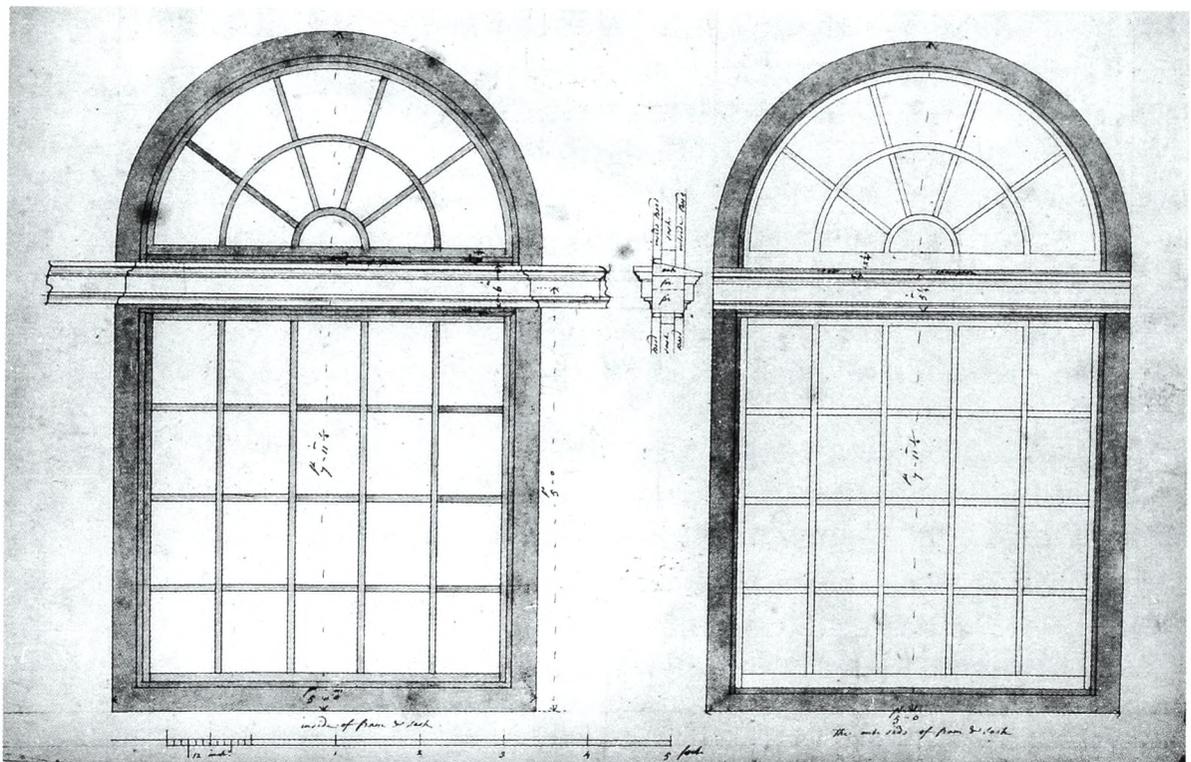


Fig. 6. Working drawings of new windows for the nave.

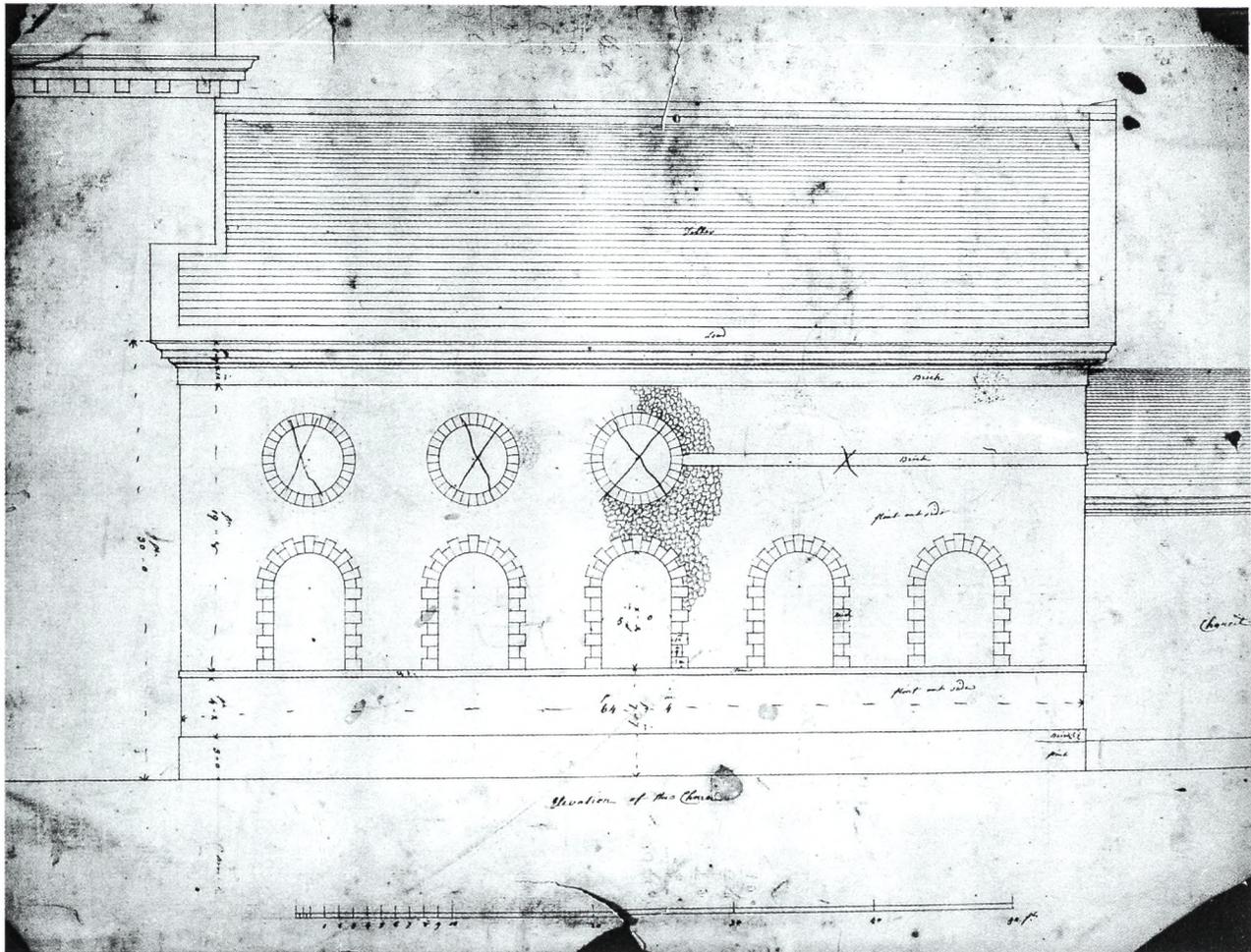


Fig. 7. Elevation. The nave with part of the tower and chancel.

beautiful country churches in England. Ironically, the following year Donowell was dismissed from Dashwood's service.⁹ John Tucker commented in a letter from Weymouth of August 11, 1764: "I am sorry Donowell has fallen under your Lordship's displeasure. I believe the Man is honest and does to the best of his Abilities, but these I am afraid from the experience I have had of him are not very extensive. I am persuaded he means well and wishes to please."¹⁰

Whatever the extent of Donowell's abilities generally, the church is a credit to the combined resources of an inspired patron and a provincial architect.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for the generous help which I have received from Sir Francis Dashwood Bt., John Newman, Geoffrey Fisher, Robin Harcourt-Williams and the librarians at the Bodleian and the County Archives, Aylesbury. Drawings attributed to John Donowell of the Church of St Lawrence, West Wycombe, Buckinghamshire. (Collection of Sir Francis Dashwood Bt. Photographs Courtauld Institute of Art).

NOTES

1. The chancel of the present church dates from the 13th century and the tower from the 14th century.
2. Hatfield House Plan Book.
3. Information provided by Robin Harcourt-Williams, archivist at Hatfield.
4. Robert Wood, *The Ruins of Palmyra*, London, 1753, pl .29.
5. Unpublished Journal, copy of relevant text, Dashwood papers, West Wycombe Park.
6. Thomas Langley, *The History and Antiquities of the Hundred of Desborough and Deanery of Wycombe in Buckinghamshire*, London, 1797, 421.
7. Wood, *op.cit.*, pl.19.
8. Nicholas Pevsner, *The Buildings of England: Buckinghamshire*, London, 1960, 288.
9. Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600-1840*, London, 1978, 270.
10. Bodleian Ms. D.D. Dashwood B 12/6.