Croome Church and Its Architect

Howard Colvin

The church of St. Mary Magdalen at Croome D’Abitot in Worcestershire stands high in the list of Georgian Gothic churches (Fig. 1). Less captivatingly rococo than the still anonymous Shobdon and less elegantly geometrical than Henry Keene’s Hartwell, it is nevertheless an excellent example of what a Georgian architect could make of a commission to design a Gothic church. The well-lit nave and aisles together form almost an exact square; the chancel, as Pevsner observed, is ‘long for an age that did its chancels short’,¹ no doubt in order to accommodate the Coventry family monuments; the tower, besides housing the bells, forms an effective feature in the landscaped park. The exterior is carried out in smooth ashlar, with battlemented parapets and pinnacles at the angles. Inside, those Gothic forms that appealed particularly to Georgian taste – the ogee arch, the quatrefoil and the cusped cornice, are much in evidence as plaster decoration, the tower alone having, exceptionally, an authentic stone ribbed vault² (Fig. 2). In fact the tower, with its set-back buttresses and pierced parapets (the latter of a type much favoured in Worcestershire

Figure 1. Croome Church from the South-West. Howard Colvin.

Figure 2. Croome Church: the vault of the tower-porch. Howard Colvin.
and Gloucestershire in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, as in the Abbey Gateway at Evesham), does suggest some first-hand observation of medieval prototypes. Otherwise no feature of the church appears to have been derived from any specific source: it was architect’s Gothic, elegant, sophisticated and without any claims to ecclesiological scholarship of the Victorian kind, the whole forming a polite and ornamental edifice quite different from the relatively humble village church which it replaced.3

The old church had stood inconveniently close to the north-west corner of the Coventry mansion, and after the 6th Earl had had the house remodelled and the park landscaped by Brown from 1750 onwards, he decided to resite the church on rising ground some 500 yards to the north-east. As an eighteenth-century visitor commented, ‘a church was not the building that should have been erected here: this was the place for the house . . . The expense, however, was perhaps too great. His lordship found the mansion where it stands, and therefore contented himself with altering a few of the rooms, and in general with giving it a fashionable exterior.4 Although it is often supposed that Croome Court is a complete Georgian house, the extent to which the main structure of the late seventeenth-century building was retained can be seen by comparing the plan as it exists today with a sketch-plan in the library of the Society of Antiquaries showing it as it was before Brown’s alterations began, and also by an accompanying note made in 1820 that ‘Will Lyes an old man says the Body of the House is as it was only coated. The four towers [containing at one end the gallery and at the other the library and staircase] were built from the foundation’.5

That Brown was responsible for the structural remodelling of the house and Robert Adam for the decoration of the interior is well established.6 The architectural history of the church is not quite so clear. The Faculty to rebuild it was granted on 16 March 1758, and with it in the diocesan records is the conveyance of the site, dated 4 July of the same year.7 Attached to the deed is a plan of a rectangular church with a tetrastyle portico (Fig. 3, upper). This, as A.T. Bolton observed,8 resembled the estate church which Brown was later to build at Compton Verney in 1776–9, and his authorship of it is confirmed by a receipt among the Coventry archives, signed by Brown on 3 June 1758, which acknowledges a payment of £70 ‘in full’ for plans, journeys and the measurement of work on the house and/or grounds, with an added note: ‘n.b. The Plan of the Church is included in this’.9

The fact that Brown was responsible for the plan of the intended classical church does not prove that he designed the Gothic one that was built in its place and consecrated on 29 June 1763 (Fig. 3, lower). Bolton thought that Adam, who designed the interior, must also have been responsible for the structure, but there are, significantly, no drawings for this in the Soane Museum, and all the indications are that in the church, as in the house, Adam was responsible only for the plasterwork and joinery. Marcus Whiffen was inclined to attribute the church to the amateur architect Sanderson Miller, of Radway in Warwickshire, who was a friend of the 6th Earl and who certainly advised him on the house and landscape, for when these were finished the latter wrote (in 1752) that ‘Whatever merits it [Croome] may in future time boast it will be ungrateful not to acknowledge you the primary Author’.10 Though Miller, whose interest in Gothic architecture is well known, may have played some part in the decision to build a Gothic church instead of a classical one, neither in his own extensive correspondence nor in the Coventry archives does there appear to be any evidence that he was involved in its design. Moreover, his activity as an amateur architect was much curtailed after an attack of mental illness in 1759.11 If neither Adam nor Miller can be credited with the design of the church, then Brown (who designed several other Gothic buildings in the 1760s)12 remains the obvious candidate. In fact, the attribution of the church to him goes
back at least to 1824. In his Historical and Descriptive Account of Croome d’Abitot, published in that year, W. Dean, the head gardener at Croome, says that the church ‘does honour to the taste of Brown, after whose design it was erected.’ Written in the time of the 7th Earl, who succeeded his father in 1809, and no doubt based on family tradition, this statement must be treated with respect. But what is the evidence of documents and drawings?

No systematic accounts appear to have been kept for the building of the church, and no further payments for making designs for it have been found, but there is sufficient evidence, chiefly in the form of original bills, to identify the craftsmen employed.

Figure 3. Croome Church Worcestershire, showing, above, the plan of the classical church designed by Brown in 1758, and, below, that of the Gothic church built in 1759–63, drawn to the same scale. Based on the plans published by A.T. Bolton in his Architecture of Robert and James Adam, 1922, with additions and corrections. The lower plan shows the fittings as originally designed before subsequent alteration. Howard Colvin.
Thus the masonry was performed by Robert Newman, a substantial Gloucestershire master-mason. The carpenter and joiner was John Hobcroft, a Londoner regularly employed by Brown, who was also an architect in his own right. The Westmorland slateing was done by another associate of Brown, the London builder Henry Holland (senior), whose workmanship he measured in 1760. The plasterer, Joseph Rose, and the wood-carver, Sefferin Alken, were leading London craftsmen who were also employed to execute Robert Adam's designs for the interior of the house.

No drawings for the church survive among the Coventry archives, but in Sir John Soane's Museum there are office copies of some of Adam's designs for the interior, and in the Victoria and Albert Museum there are two stray designs by him for coloured glass in the windows, neither of which was executed. These drawings throw no light on the responsibility for the design of the church itself, but in the collection of the late W. S. Lewis, the well-known Walpolean scholar, there are two drawings for Croome Church, a plan and a section across the nave. The section is illustrated in John Harris's *Catalogue of British Drawings for Architecture, etc. in American Collections* (1971). It shows the quatrefoil shaped columns and the timber roof (Fig. 4).

An inscription reads: 'Secktion of y' Church and Chancel for Ld. Coventry at Croome Worcestershire.' and there is a scale of feet. This drawing is certainly not from the office of Robert and James Adam, nor do the scale and lettering resemble those on the architectural drawings by Brown illustrated in Dorothy Stroud's biography. The handwriting does, however, correspond exactly with that of the carpenter Hobcroft, who would have been perfectly capable of making a drawing whose main purpose is to show the construction of the roof. Indeed, only two or three years later he was to draw out John Chute's Gothic elevations for Donnington Grove in Berkshire in a highly professional manner, and in 1768–9 he was to construct, and apparently himself to design, an elaborate Gothic chapel within the house at Audley End in Essex. But at Croome, Hobcroft was acting as Brown's subordinate and anything he drew would presumably have been to Brown's directions.

Does this review of the evidence demonstrate beyond doubt that Capability Brown was the unaided architect of the tower and body of Croome Church? Not quite. Hobcroft's role remains ambiguous. Was he merely Brown's architectural amanuensis or was he something more? We do not know. But the positive statement of 1824 by someone well acquainted with Croome and writing only sixty years after the consecration of the church, must carry considerable weight. Two of the workmen employed - Hobcroft and Holland - were men with whom Brown had a regular association. The fact that in 1760 he measured the latter's work on the roof shows him exercising one of the functions of an architect, and the existence of a working drawing by the master-carpenter is perfectly consistent with his own authorship of the design. In the last resort we cannot do better than follow Dorothy Stroud in including Croome Church in the list of 'Works known to be by, or attributed to, Capability Brown.'
NOTES

2 The tower stands on arches, of which the west one is open, the north and south ones blocked, probably as an afterthought carried out during, or soon after, the building of the church. The vaulting has every appearance of being contemporary with the building of the tower, but might be associated with the blocking of the north and south arches.
3 The church is depicted from the south in a view of Croome Court by Henry Beighton dated 1714 in the Library of the Society of Antiquaries of London, and from the north in another view dated 1750 that hangs in the Croome Estate Office.
5 London, Society of Antiquaries, Prattinton Collection, viii, 50. There is also a list of pictures in the house in c. 1820.
8 Bolton, *op. cit.*, 185. In the plan Bolton published on p.186 he seriously misrepresented the relative sizes of the unexecuted design and of the church as built. This has been corrected in fig. 3.
9 Croome, Croome Estate Trust, Coventry Archives, f.60a,1. I am grateful to the Trustees and to their Agent, Mr J. B. Henderson, for giving me access to the Coventry papers and permission to quote from them.
12 The Bath House at Corsham Court, the stables at Burghley House, and High Lodge in Blenheim Park. It is worth noting that the two-light Gohic window of the Bath House is similar in character to those in the walls of Croome Church.
14 Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600–1840*, New Haven and London, 1995, 499–500. At Padworth House, Berkshire, there is a Gothic fishing-lodge which he may perhaps have designed as well as the house itself [H. Avray Tipping, ‘Padworth House, Berkshire – ii’, *Country Life*, lxi, 23 September 1922, 374]. There are several specimens of his handwriting in the Coventry Archives.
17 Bolton, *op. cit.*, ii, Appendix, 3, [lists the drawings in the Soane Museum. The plan of the nave and chancel (vol. 50, no.20), has the same distinctive scale as Hobcroft’s section mentioned above, and must have been supplied to Adam either by Brown or Hobcroft himself. For the two drawings at the Victoria and Albert Museum see Alastair Rowan, *Robert Adam* (Catalogue of Architectural Drawings in the Victoria and Albert Museum), London, 1988, 50–1.