



THE
GEORGIAN
GROUP

John Harris, 'Chambers's Design for the
Gothic Cathedral at Kew', *The Georgian Group
Journal*, Vol. VIII, 1998, pp. 151-156

CHAMBERS'S DESIGN FOR THE GOTHIC CATHEDRAL AT KEW

JOHN HARRIS

At Sothebys on 23 May 1951 the 5th Marquess of Bute sold a collection of architectural designs that had belonged to his ancestor, John, 3rd Earl of Bute. Most of them came from the office of Sir Christopher Wren and Nicholas Hawksmoor, and had been bought by the 3rd Duke of Argyll in a sale by Langford, 4–6 April 1749, following the death of Wren's son Christopher in 1747. To these had been added drawings that had been bought from Hawksmoor's sale at Mr Lambe's 22–24 April 1740, and others relating to Argyll's own architectural patronage, notably designs by Roger Morris for Whitton Park, Middlesex, and Inverary Castle, Argyll, before they passed to the 3rd Earl of Bute, who, as Argyll's friend, had the choice from the Duke's library at his death in 1761.¹ The collection also contained various groups of drawings associated with Bute, including lot 26 'Buildings of Kew, etc', sold to John Hewett, the dealer.² Before the sale the Courtauld Institute of Art photographed all the drawings in anticipation of the National Art Collections Fund purchasing the most desirable lots, selected by Sir John Summerson. This was the first intervention by the Fund in the acquisition of architectural drawings – All Souls College, Oxford, the Royal Institute of British Architects, St Paul's Cathedral Library and the Victoria and Albert Museum being the beneficiaries.³ One of the endeavours of the RIBA Drawings Collection over the years has been to locate and retrieve those drawings bought and dispersed by dealers. Often the search has read like a detective story.

Lot 26 comprised 5 designs: lot 26 (1) was an elevation of Chambers's Alhambra as published by

him in *Plans, Elevations, Sections and Perspective Views of the Gardens and Buildings at Kew*, 1763, but with, according to the compilers of the catalogue, 'some minor ornaments omitted in the engraving'. It remains unlocated. Lot 26 (2) was Chambers's design for the Temple of Peace, in the possession of Ben Weinreb in 1965, but subsequently unlocated.⁴ Lot 26 (3) was a 'Gothic garden building, probably for Kew by Sir William Chambers'. For years this has eluded captivity, and because it was not available for study has escaped critical scrutiny. Lot 26 (4) was Chambers's design for the Kew Pagoda.⁵ Lot 26 (5) was Chambers's plan of the Nataraja temple at Chidambarum, India, made in December 1748.⁶

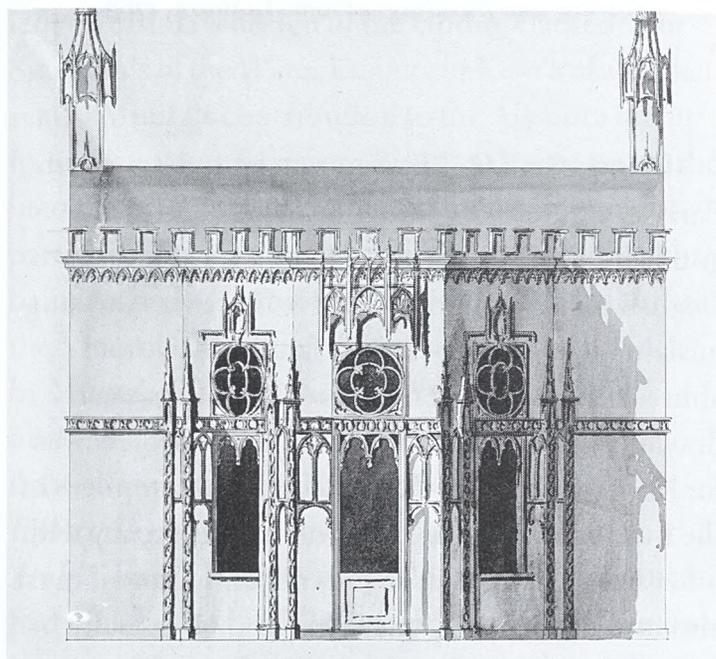


Figure 1. Sir William Chambers (attrib.), Elevation drawing of a proposal for the Gothic Cathedral, Kew Gardens. *John Harris*.

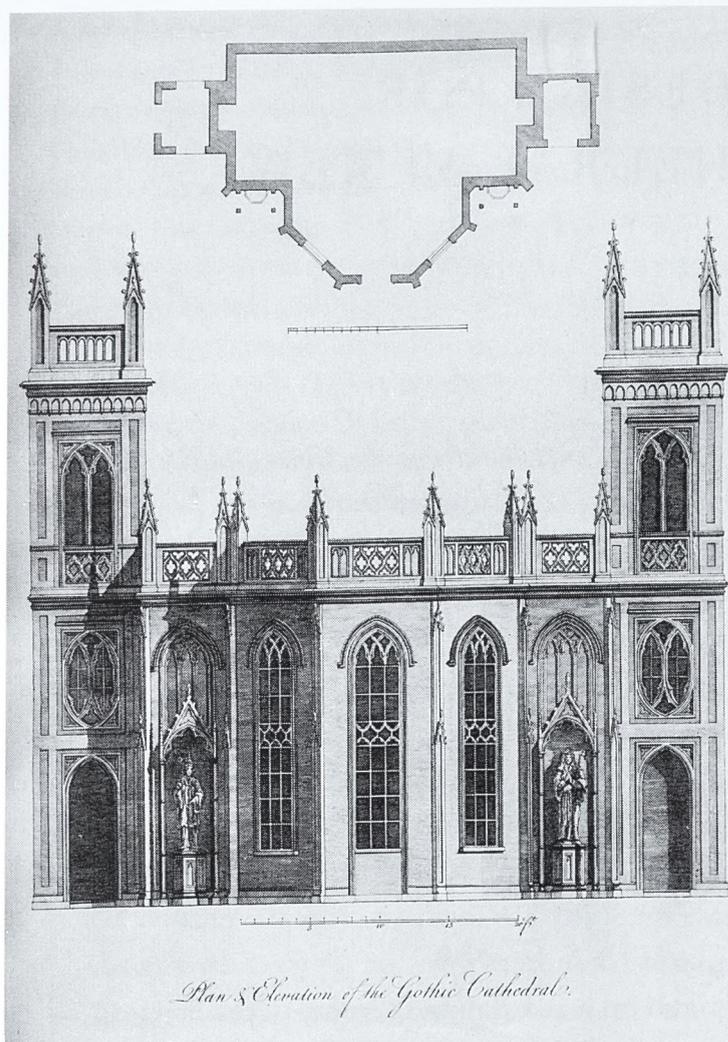


Figure 2. J. H. Muntz, Plan and elevation of the Gothic Cathedral, Kew Gardens, from Sir William Chambers, *Plans, Elevations, Sections and Perspective Views of the Garden and Buildings at Kew*, London, 1763.

In 1997 Niall Hobhouse spotted and bought in Paris an eighteenth century drawing (Fig. 1) of a gothic building that seemed to him for some English garden building – and lo, here was the long mislaid lot 26 (3)! It bears the familiar scale and abbreviation of feet common to Chambers's early drawings.⁷ It may be assumed that this project was for Kew Gardens – as suggested by the compilers of the Bute catalogue – because of its consistency with other Kew drawings from the collection; and it must also be considered for the Cathedral, eventually built at Kew to the design of J.H. Muntz⁸ (Fig. 2). The design for the Cathedral can only be dated by the fact of its inclusion in Chambers's *Kew* in

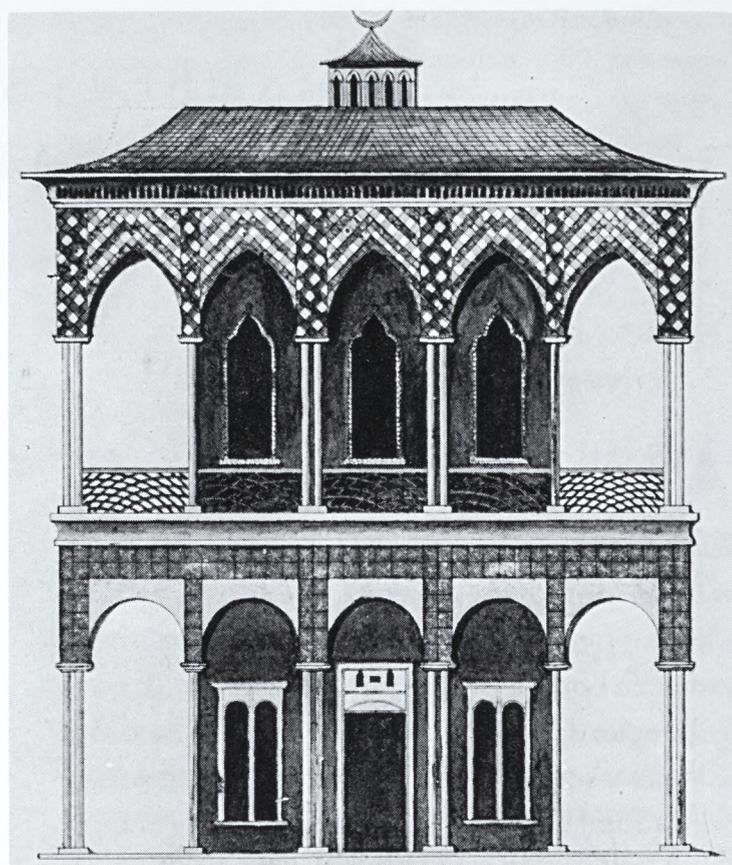


Figure 3. J. H. Muntz, (attrib). 'Plan & Elevation of building in the Moorish taste,' 1750. London, Royal Institute of British Architects, *Drawings Collection*.

1763.⁹ Muntz, a Swiss engineer, had been studying 'Moresque' fabrics in Spain in 1748. He was in Rome the following year and again between 1751 and 1753 where he is presumed to have met Chambers. He moved on to Nantes, then to Jersey, where in 1754 he met and gave painting lessons to Richard Bentley. With Bentley's encouragement he was invited by Horace Walpole to come to Strawberry Hill in June 1755. To understand Muntz's role at Kew it is necessary to evaluate Muntz's RIBA drawing J4/19 (1-2) (Fig. 3). It was intended for Frederick, Prince of Wales and must have been sent over to Kew with Chambers's blessing before 'Poor Fred's' death in March 1751. It is boldly inscribed in

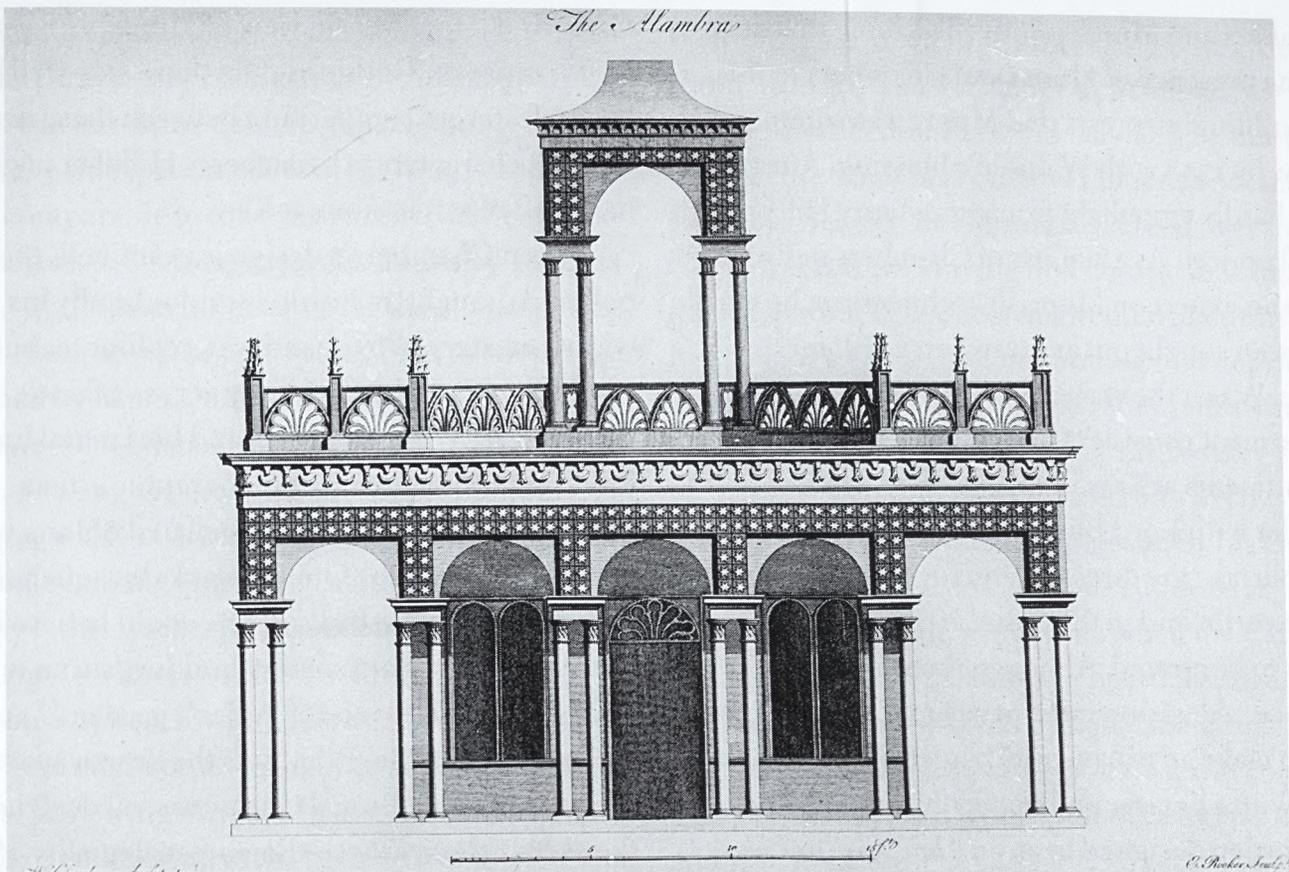


Figure 4. Sir William Chambers, Elevation of the Alhambra, Kew Gardens, from Sir William Chambers, *Plans, Elevations, Sections and Perspective Views of the Gardens and Buildings at Kew*, London, 1763.

ink in Chambers's handwriting, in a style common to his French and Italian study drawings, 'Plan & Elevation of a building in the old Moorish taste'. Below and parallel to it is scribbled in pencil in a hand identifiably Muntz's, 'this I drew in 1750 for the Prince and a model was made of it and it was built in 1758'.¹⁰ The importance of these two inscriptions needs no stressing, for clearly Muntz is, as it were, verifying his drawing made in Rome, in all probability when he was at Kew with Chambers in the drawing office. This drawing is the earliest attempt by any Christian architect to design a building in this style. Muntz's dating of the Alhambra, although not confirmed in Chambers's *Kew*, 1763, need not be doubted, by which time Chambers had transformed Muntz's design into something (Fig 4) more appropriate to Kew, completing the trilogy with the Pagoda and Mosque.

There can be no doubt that Chambers was responsible for the considerable modifications to

Muntz's design and for supervising the building of the Alhambra. He inscribed the plate in his *Kew* 'W. Chambers Architectus', just as there he acknowledged Muntz's design of the Gothic Cathedral or Smeaton's of the Water Engine, or Kent's of a garden seat.¹¹ Muntz's contribution to the Alambra lies in its generic resemblance to his 1750 design and to the incorporation of certain ornamental components, particularly the palmette motif used in the Alhambra balustrade. In Chambers' Franco-Italian album in the Victoria and Albert Museum are six drawings¹² by Muntz, probably drawn when he was at Strawberry Hill and intended for his proposed gothic treatise advertised 12 April 1760 as *Proposals For Publishing by Subscription A Course of Gothic Architecture*. These were pasted in after Chambers had returned to England in 1754. Basically Chambers borrowed from Muntz the idea of the colonnade with double thin colonnettes, but as a frontal, not encircling screen as in Muntz's design. Thus the fact of

Chambers and Muntz jointly inscribing this design, and the presence of Muntz and Chambers in this one building, suggests that Muntz was summoned to Kew by 1758 with Walpole's blessing. After all, he could hardly moonlight from Strawberry Hill on such a royal project. As a familiar of Chambers in Rome and as an expert on Moorish architecture, he must have been sought out at Strawberry Hill for his advice. Was it the same with the Gothic Cathedral?

We must consider Chambers's task after his appointments at Kew in August 1757. He had first to consider with Lord Bute, whom he described in the Kew folio as, 'the director, equally skilled in cultivating the earth, and in the polite arts',¹³ the sort of garden to be created. Although there is no supporting evidence, a decision must have been taken immediately to make an ornamental landscape garden combined with a botanic and horticultural one. Kew was not a garden designed in any *ad hoc* way, but was rigorously planned to take into account related vistas and perspectives. By late 1757 the Gallery of Antiques, Greenhouse, and re-located House of Confucius were in place. There can be little doubt that right from the first in that Autumn of 1757 Chambers had carefully chosen the site of his buildings – hence the decision must already have been taken to place Moorish, Turkish, Gothic, classical and Chinese buildings on his paper plans. As these buildings were to represent world architecture, Chambers had obviously no problem with classical and Chinese. For the Mosque he could turn to his copy of Fischer von Erlach's *Entwurff einer historischen Architectur*, 1725, or its English editions translated by Thomas Lediard of 1730 and 1737.¹⁴ It was different with Moorish and Gothic. It would surely be natural that he seek out the experts, and Muntz was the obvious choice to advise on the Alhambra. Now Muntz was at Strawberry Hill, and so was Richard Bentley, the expert on gothic. Strawberry was the catalyst for the gothic revival and the obvious place to seek advice. There was no need for Chambers to visit Strawberry. Knowledge of Bentley's expertise was widespread – and Muntz might well have recommended him for the Gothic

Cathedral. However, in view of Muntz's *Proposals* for a treatise on Gothic in 1760 there may well have been a festering competition between these two difficult characters at Strawberry Hill that might have had repercussions at Kew.

When Chambers's design is examined, the pellucid draughtsmanship is undoubtedly his, a wizard mastery of freehand watercolour technique – washing his ornamental way across a facade demarcated by a few vertical and horizontal lines. It is a technique used by scenographic artists. Basically the building is a crenellated oblong with a canted bay and two chimney stacks masquerading as gothic canopies. Indeed, one could believe it to be the fronting of an existing building surviving from Frederick, Prince of Wales's garden,¹⁵ and this is also possible. What sets the design apart from most conventional Gothic revival designs is the extraordinary three-dimensional quality of the fragile pinnacled gothic, applied elevationally as a set-off theatric screen of paired gothic pinnacled pilasters, almost as if painted in *trompe l'oeil*. The pilasters stand free of the Chambersian string course and are seemingly joined to it by a gothic two-light window set on a rather odd semi-circular open motif, repeated in quatrefoil oval windows above the string course. The lights of these ovals belong to the same family as the idiosyncratic fan-light of Chambers's Alhambra. They share the same unidentified source. The whole seems astonishingly fragile. When we associate the canopy over the window (Muntz's palmette motif here too) with the canopied niches in the Gallery at Strawberry Hill, and the pairs of free-standing colonnettes with similar finialled ones in Walpole's library, or the gothicising of a three-part front with a canted bay, with Strawberry's south front, we may pause for thought. The interaction with Strawberry is obvious. What surely determines that Chambers's design is for the Gothic Cathedral is the oblong plan with canted entrance front, which it shared with the Cathedral as built, but also the identical width of the elevation (33ft. 6ins.), if we regard the lateral towers of the

Cathedral as appendages to the plan – as they are.

The Strawberry connection with Chambers's design can hardly be denied. What is surely significant is the transparent effect of his front, its theatricality comparable to the transparency of Bentley's illustrations to his *Designs for Six Poems* by Thomas Gray, 1753,¹⁶ or to his designs for the chapel at The Vyne, Hampshire, 1754,¹⁷ rather than to anything designed by Muntz, unless one excepts a design for a chimney piece dated by McCarthy c. 1760.¹⁸ There is no confusing the draughtsmanship with Bentley's. The grey wash with blue effects are perfectly Chambersian, in contrast to Bentley's habitual yellowy-ochre washes, as demonstrated by his design for Walpole's library or for Sir Thomas Sebright's farmhouse at Beechwood, Hertfordshire.¹⁹

There might be an intriguing conclusion to all this. Following Muntz's final letter to Walpole on 12 November 1759 at the break-up of their affairs,

Walpole wrote to George Montagu on the 17th about Muntz's 'abusive' letter to Bentley.²⁰ Of course, disaffection all round may well be due to internecine Strawberry matters, but it is not impossible that Bentley and Muntz disagreed over the Cathedral at Kew. Having first co-opted Muntz for the Alhambra, Chambers might then have turned to Bentley for a Cathedral, but finding him impractical and difficult – as indeed he was, after redrawing out his own version of a gothic design in Bentley's Strawberry manner, he jettisoned him in favour of the more practical Muntz, impressed by his Gothic *Proposals* in 1760. Certainly the eruptions at Strawberry coincide with a time when the Cathedral must have been on the drawing board. In abandoning his own Bentley-laced design, Chambers received from Muntz a more practical and common sense building, even if one built of lathe and plaster and rough-casted.²¹

NOTES

- 1 The bookish interests of the Duke are well attested, not the least by his magnificent library a hundred feet long in Argyll Street, London [Ian G. Lindsay & Mary Cosh, *Inveraray and the Dukes of Argyll*, Edinburgh, 1973, 8 ff.].
- 2 The sale also included as lot 27, 13 designs or measured drawings for rooms at Bute's Highcliffe House, Hampshire, bought by Commin of Bournemouth, but now untracable; but did not include Robert Adam's designs for Luton Hoo, Bedfordshire and Hawksmoor's for Westminster Abbey, which were in the archives at Dumfries House where they were discovered in the late 1980s by Francis Russell [Francis Russell, 'Luton Hoo, Bedfordshire – 1', *Country Life*, CLXXXVI, 16 January 1992, 44–47]. The Westminster drawings are now in the library of Westminster Abbey [Giles Worsley, 'Drawn To A Find', *Country Life*, CLXXXVII, 2 May 1993, 100–101].
- 3 For a shortened version of this article see John Harris, 'One That Got Away', *Art Quarterly* (NACF), Spring 1998, 44–47.
- 4 Surprisingly the Chambers elevation of this temple, inscribed 'The Earl of Bute', and in the RIBA (J4/19 (3),

was, in fact, purchased in a miscellaneous lot at Sothebys on 30 October 1950.

- 5 London, Royal Institute of British Architects, Drawings Collection (hereafter RIBA), E3/61
- 6 RIBA, E3/62
- 7 Cf. the design for the ceilings of Lord Bessborough's library at Roehampton or for the Duke of Richmond's gallery at Whitehall, as reproduced in John Harris and Michael Snodin (eds.), *Sir William Chambers Architect to George III*, London, 1997, figs 181 and 172, both works of 1760–61 and thus concurrent with Kew.
- 8 At this point reference should be made to the RIBA drawing J4/19 (1–2) now firmly attributed to Muntz. This identification was only made in the 1960s when the two sheets of plan and elevation were erroneously identified as Bute lot 26 (1) the 'Elevation of the Alhambra'. The provenance of J4/19 (1–2) can only be hazarded as belonging to the parcels of drawings of Chambers – Thomas Hardwick provenance given to the RIBA by Philip C. Hardwick in 1885 and 1895.
- 9 Michael McCarthy in *The Origins of the Gothic Revival*,

- London, 1987, 57, dates it unequivocally 1759, quoting John Harris, *Sir William Chambers*, London, 1970, 38; but Harris only hazards 'about 1759'. Teresa S. Watts in her doctoral thesis on Muntz [*The Life and Work of Johann Heinrich Muntz 1727-1798*, University of Toronto, 1986] quotes Harris as having firmly dated it 1759, quibbling that it must be 'after April 1760'.
- 10 Harris, *Chambers*, *op. cit.*, 34. The link between Chambers in Rome with Muntz was made most recently in Harris & Snodin (eds.), *op. cit.*, 57.
 - 11 Teresa S. Watts, 'J. H. Muntz, Horace Walpole and encaustic painting,' *Apollo*, Oct. 1994, CXL, no. 392, makes unsubstantiated firm claims that 'Muntz may have been the architect 'of the Alhambra. However, if he had, Chambers would have acknowledged him.
 - 12 Michael Snodin (ed.), *Sir William Chambers, Catalogue of Architectural Drawings in the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London, 1996, nos 4-9.
 - 13 Chambers, . . . *Kew*, *cit.* 1763, unpaginated text in 'Description of the Plates'.
 - 14 Eileen Harris, *British Architectural Books and Writers 1556-1785*, Cambridge, 1990, nos 227, 228
 - 15 No ground surveys survive from Frederick's late garden works of c. 1749-50. For the latest account of his garden cf. Ray Desmond, *Kew The History of the Royal Botanic Gardens*, London, 1995, chapter 2.
 - 16 Cf. Wilmarth Sheldon Lewis, *Horace Walpole*, London, 1961, plate 20
 - 17 Cf. McCarthy, *op. cit.*, fig 215
 - 18 McCarthy, *op. cit.*, fig. 149, inscribed as 'Executed for H. Bearns Esq' who is otherwise unknown.
 - 19 McCarthy, *op. cit.*, plates VII and VIII.
 - 20 Walpole to Montagu in Walpole's *Correspondence* (ed. Lewis & Brody), 1, 1941, 259
 - 21 When Prince Ludwig Bentheim came to Kew 17 April 1783 he commented that the gardens were opened only on Thursdays from the end of June to the end of September. The Mosque had already been demolished, as also the Gallery of Antiques. He specifies the Cathedral as white rough-casted, but was annoyed that George III kept the key to it and the Pagoda. I am grateful to Dr Bernard Korzus for this information from the Bentheim journals which he is editing and to Michael Snodin for observations on the gothic drawing.