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JOHN HOBBCROFT AND JAMES ESSEX AT AUDLEY END HOUSE

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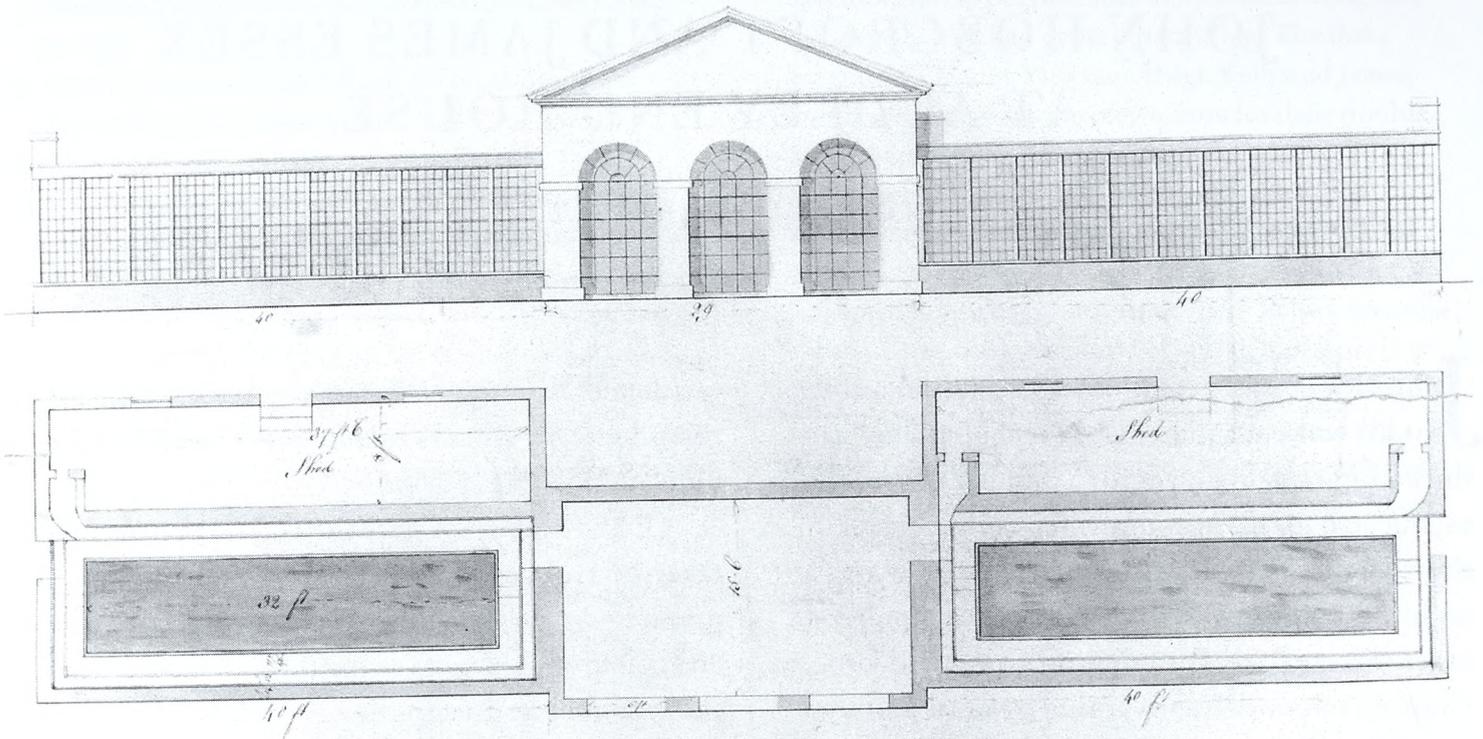
John Hobcroft (1720–1802) is known not only for his work as a joiner and carpenter who produced high quality work for a number of great houses, but also for his accomplished architectural drawings.¹ These drawings suggest that he was an architect in his own right,² though in a number of cases (Stowe Park, Donnington Grove and Croome Church) his work was overseen by more eminent men, his only known independent works being at Padworth and Wasing House, both in Berkshire. At Audley End, he provided survey drawings of the house, plans for remodelling the stables and designs for a greenhouse with flanking stoves, work he was to undertake independently. However, in the case of his most prestigious project at the house, the building of a Gothick chapel, the known involvement of James Essex (1722–1784) of Cambridge, the first practising architect to take an antiquarian interest in Gothick architecture, again overshadows Hobcroft's primacy as its designer.³

Hobcroft's association with Audley End, and its owner Sir John Griffin-Griffin, began in 1768 and was to last for nearly thirty years. During this period he, as elsewhere, provided high quality joinery work, but he also oversaw the construction of several buildings and provided a number of architectural drawings, notably '3 elevations and Ground Plans of Audley End [undertaken by his son John] . . . a plan Elevation and section of a Double-Fruiting Stove and Green House . . . Two plans of Elevations one Gothick and one modern for Altering the front of the stables'⁴ and a 'Drawing and Design for a Gothick Chapple'.⁵ Between 1778 and 1779 Hobcroft also undertook work at Sir John's London

residence, No 10 New Burlington Street, then being remodelled by Robert Adam, where again he provided architectural drawings.⁶

One of the survey drawings of the house undertaken by Hobcroft junior, and two drawings for the greenhouse, an elevation (Fig 1) and a section in ink and colourwash (Fig. 2), remain at the house. Although the greenhouse drawings were completed in 1768, the work on site did not commence until 1774, when the bricklayer Richard Ward dug the foundation, provided '68ft of Rubb and gage arches to windows' and built the flues and a chimney for the furnace.⁷ By 1776 William West had provided 'Yorkshire paving for the Greenhouse floor [and] Plain work upon Portland stone' for the window sills and coping of the fireplace.⁸ William Shennan and William Jackson provided carpenters' work, and a Mr Tyson of the 'Vineyard, Tode St London' supplied '7sq and 9ft of welch ragg slating and labour'.⁹ Hobcroft himself furnished 262ft. 6in. of sash frames and glass for the fruiting stoves in 1776 in 1776.¹⁰

Unfortunately the 'Gothick' and 'modern' designs for altering the front of the stable do not survive. The 'modern' design provided for the stables, presumably classical in form, remained unexecuted, the building appearing today as it was recorded in 1676.¹¹ However, an anonymous painting of the park c1770 shows the stable adorned with a crenellated parapet,¹² conceivably the 'Gothick' alterations proposed by Hobcroft. Certainly, in May 1771 Hobcroft surveyed and estimated the cost of repairs to the stables and oversaw improvements including the provision of modern stalling and paved white brick floors.¹³



Plan for building Hot Houses on each side of the Green House in the Kitchen Gardens at Audley End.

Figure 1. John Hobcroft, Elevation of a greenhouse, Audley End, 1768. *English Heritage*.

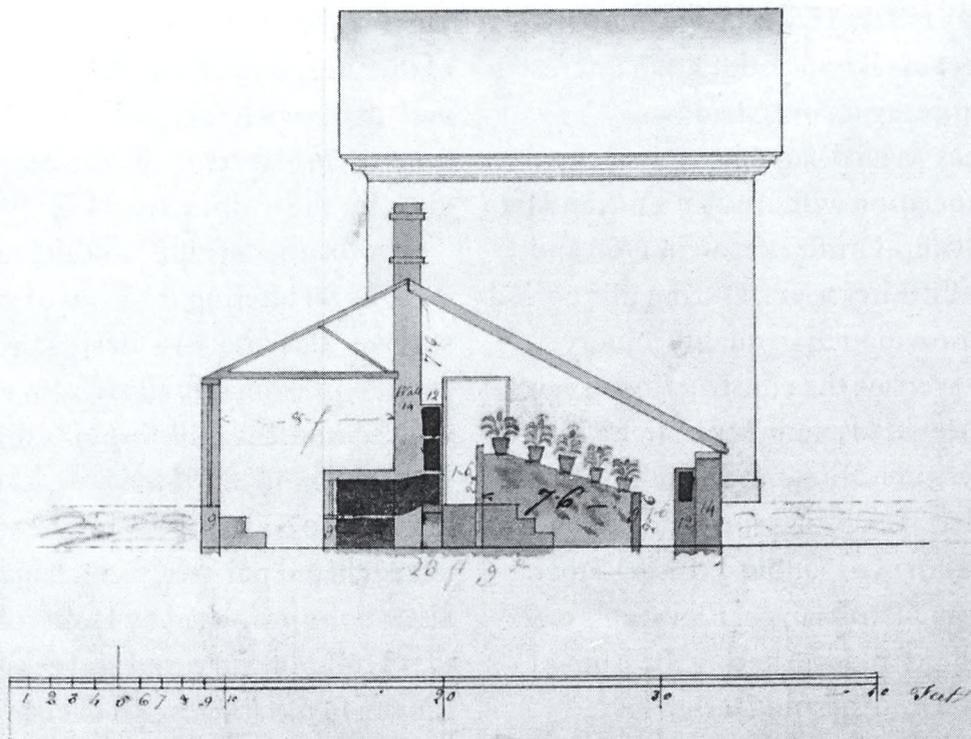


Figure 2. John Hobcroft, section of a greenhouse, Audley End, 1768. *English Heritage*.

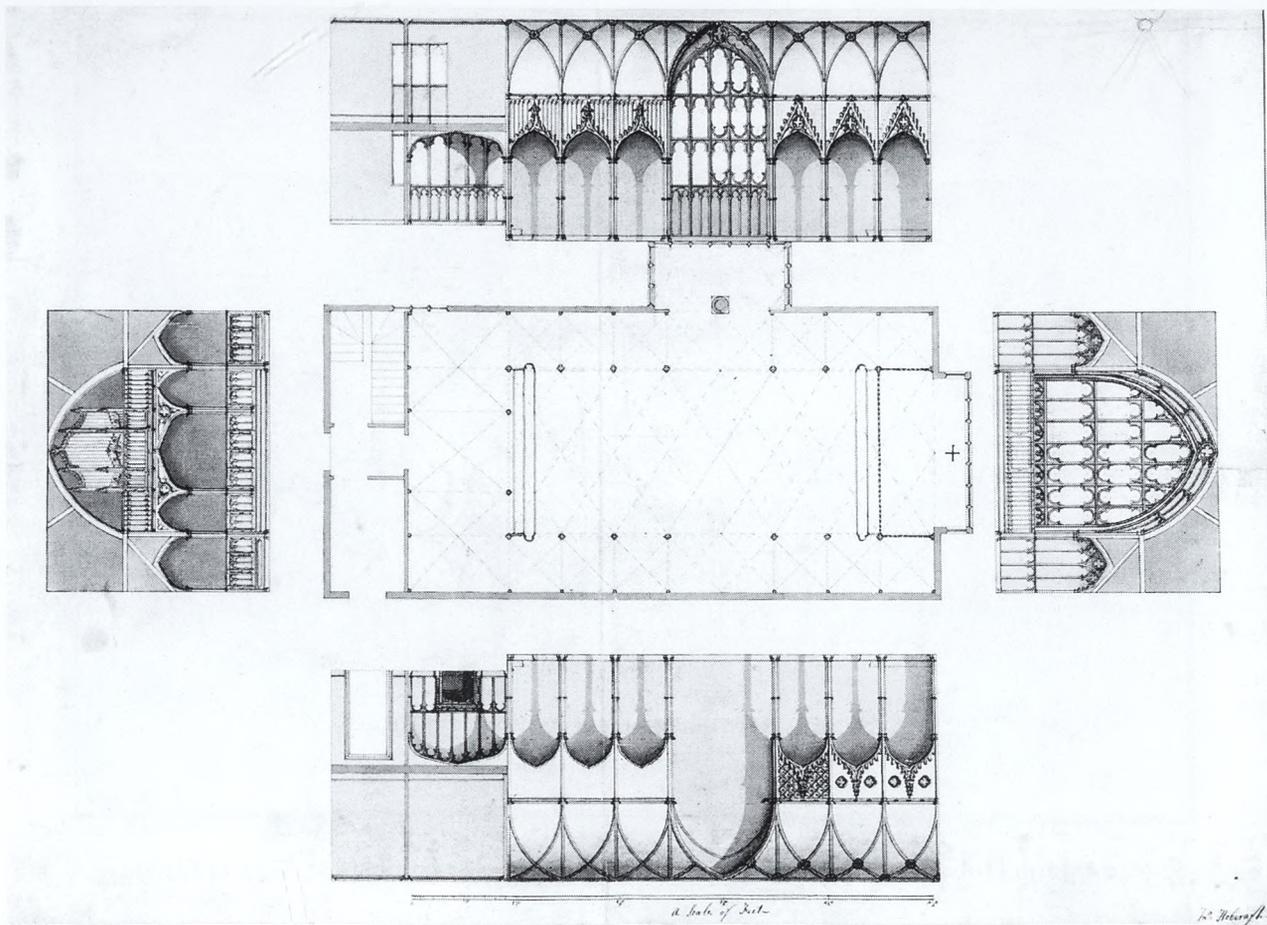


Figure 3. John Hobcroft, plan and internal elevations of proposed chapel, Audley End House.

Hobcroft's signed proposal drawings for the chapel, a plan with elevations (Fig. 3)¹⁴ and an alternative elevation of the family pew (Fig. 4),¹⁵ survive at Audley End. Both drawings, which are extremely accomplished, are executed in ink with a grey wash. Four related but unsigned drawings also survive: a ceiling plan and elevations of the family pew (Fig. 5),¹⁶ a proposal for an organ loft¹⁷ showing alternative detailing, a plan of the ceiling of the family pew as executed¹⁸ (Fig. 6), and a plan and elevation, in ink and colourwash, of the chapel as executed (Fig. 7).¹⁹ All with the exception of the colourwashed drawing appear to be, in Hobcroft's hand.²⁰

The new chapel was fitted up within the upper space of its predecessor, built c1725. Construction of the latter, which extended through two floors, had entailed the removal of the first floor of the Jacobean north great chamber, though, strangely, its ceiling with a frieze depicting elephants appears to

have been retained. The family pew, a first floor gallery, was entered from the music gallery which overlooked the north end of the Great Hall, an arrangement which Hobcroft's proposals respect. Ground and first floor plans of the earlier chapel survive, the former showing column bases fronting the altar and supporting the gallery.²¹

Demolition of the old chapel was underway in 1769, when Robert Wheeler, a joiner charged for 'Pulling Down ye celg In ye Window . . . taking up the floors in the passage to the chapel,' sawing through the first floor joists and getting ready new ash boards.²² Wheeler also made 'Modle for [the] Chpple Windo',²³ while Richard Ward, bricklayer, 'Examin[ed] the [existing] Chapil Chimny' and built a 'pully frame for the Plasterers', interestingly 'by the order of Mr Wheeler'.²⁴ A new first floor was inserted, allowing the ground floor of the earlier chapel to be remodelled to provide a still room and house keeper's room.

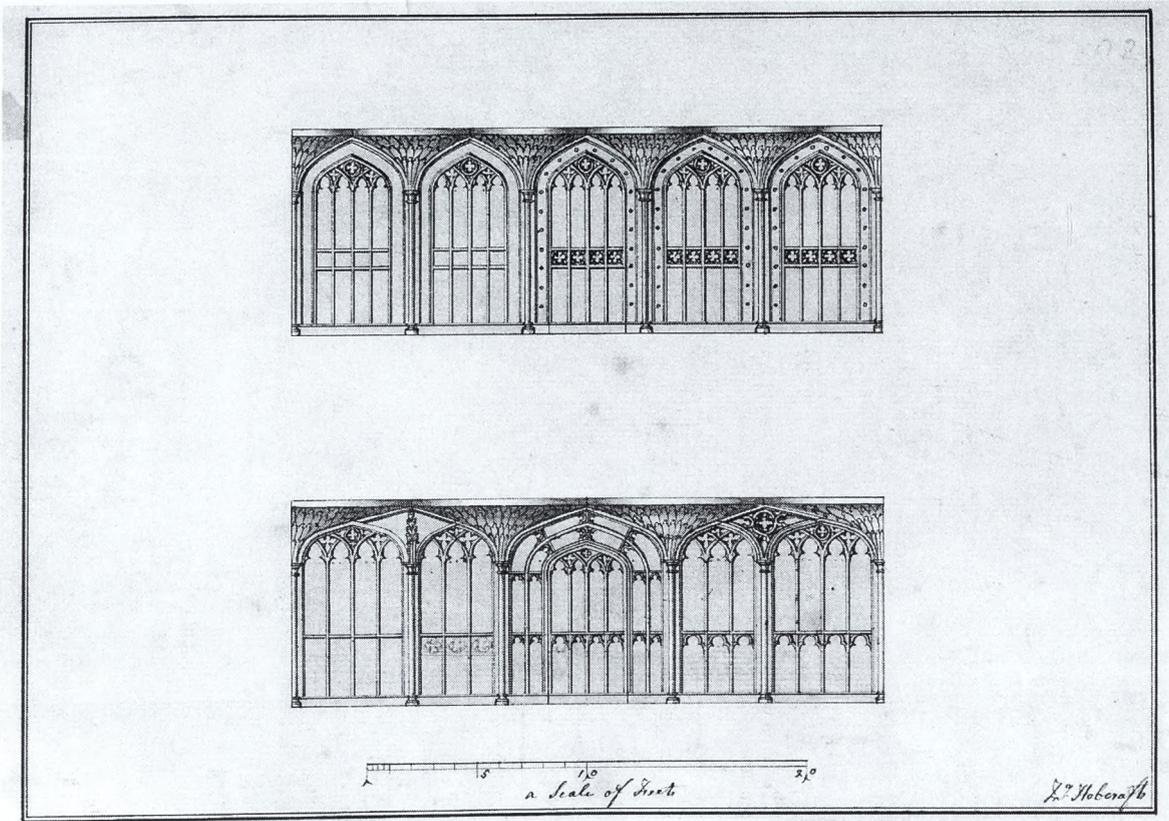


Figure 4. John Hobcroft, internal south elevation of proposed family pew. *English Heritage*.

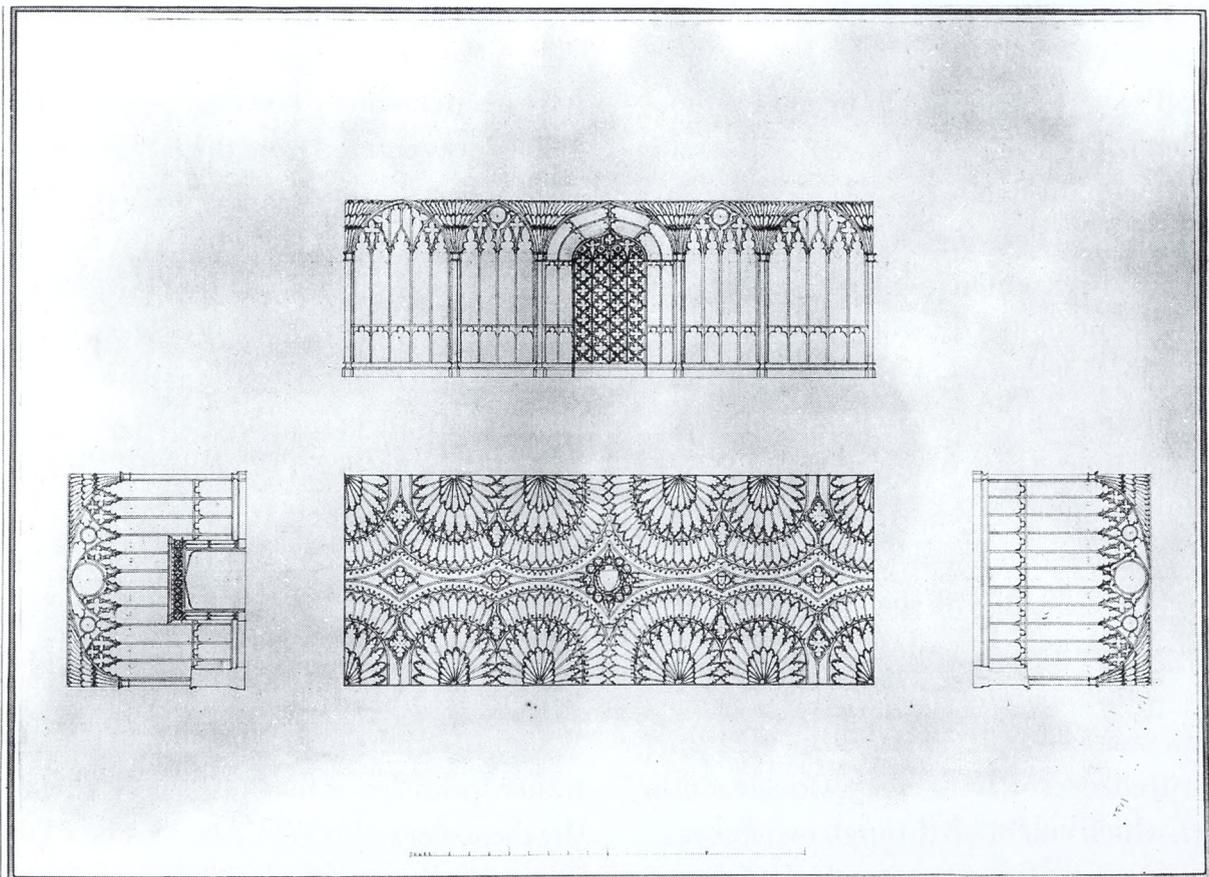


Figure 5. Alternative internal south elevation, east and west elevations and ceiling for the proposed family pew, Audley End House. *English Heritage*.

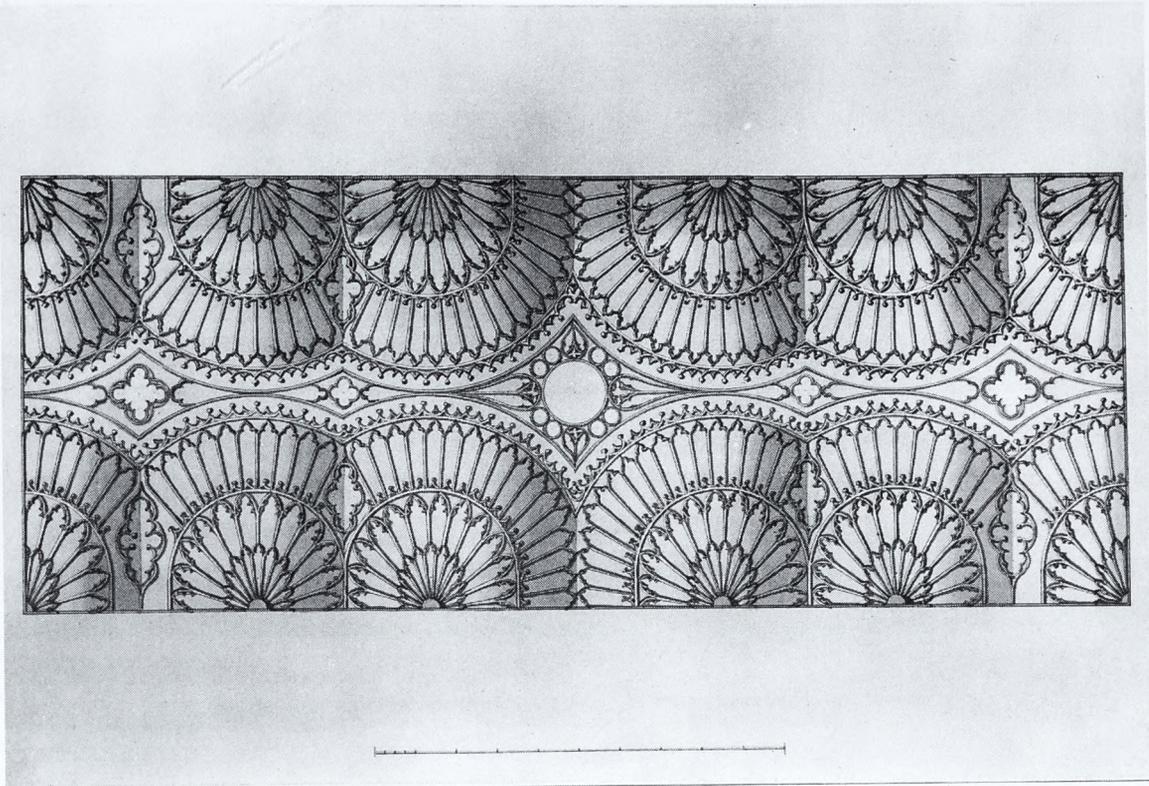


Figure 6. Ceiling plan of proposed family pew, Audley End House. *English Heritage*.

Work began in fitting up the main body of the chapel in 1770, when Richard Ward submitted a bill for ‘marking out work’ and ‘to assisting of Mr James Essex Joiner’. In February and March 1770 the joiner John Mose assisted ‘Ye Limner in Drawing Ye Chapple’²⁵ and ‘Chapple Windows’,²⁶ presumably Biagio Rebecca, who was paid in March 1770 for producing ‘four small sketches & four Great Drawings for the Chapple Windows’ at a cost of 12.12s.²⁷ The glazier William Peckitt of York then produced the finished items in stained and painted glass. *Our Saviour’s Last Supper* (1771) was placed over the altar while *The Offering of the Easter Magi* (1772) was raised in the north transept. Surprisingly both designs are overtly classical in form, the *Last Supper* being loosely based on Michelangelo’s study of the same. *The Offering of the Easter Magi* is after Van Dyck. One of the windows was fixed by Peckitt, assisted by Mose, in June and July 1771.²⁸ Carpentry work generally within the chapel was carried out by Mose, including the erection and striking of scaffolding or ‘trussels’ for the numerous trades involved.²⁹

The plastering within the chapel was undertaken by Joseph Rose, including the ceiling of the ‘tribune’, presumably the family pew.³⁰ Rose also undertook additional work, plastering the organ loft after the organ had been removed, refixed, and tuned. The fact that an organ was taken out of the loft and refixed, and the absence of bills for providing a new instrument suggest that the work involved a pre-existing instrument which served the earlier chapel. By October the chapel was painted by Thomas Oakes, the main body in buff colour to emulate stone, the mouldings and detail in white, and the ceiling of the family seat, pink.³¹ Within the vaulting and panelling of the family seat were painted the arms of Sir John and his antecedents, a design for which survives (Fig. 8).

The chapel was nearing completion in August 1772 when Mose was paid for six Gothick chairs and kneelers, dressed with red leather skins, supplied by Nathaniel Catlin³² (Fig. 9). The chairs were painted pale blue, with the arms of Griffin in the back. Nathaniel Smith, a leading London floor cloth

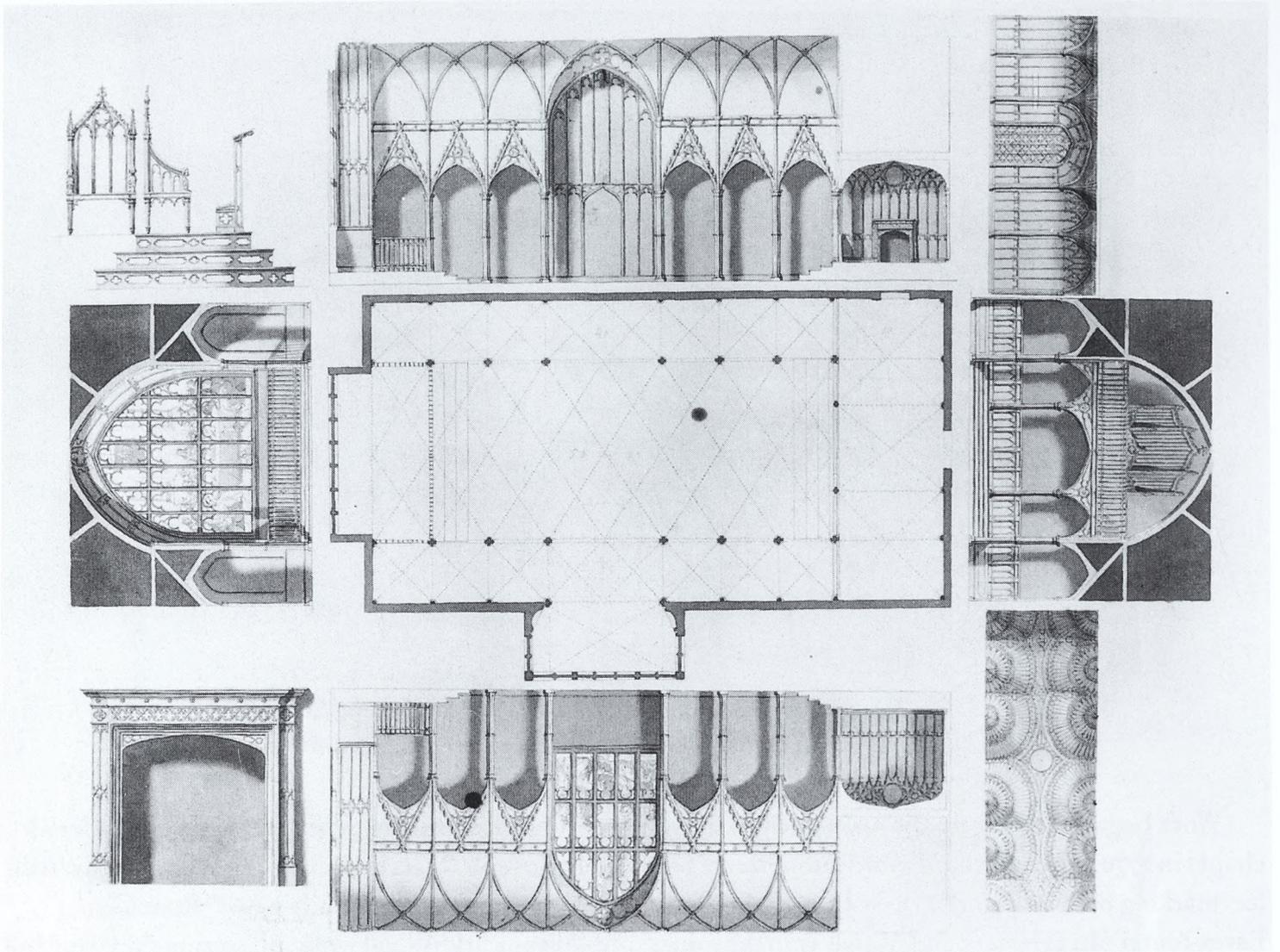


Figure 7. Plan, internal elevation of proposed chapel, elevation of proposed chair and desk, internal south elevation, ceiling plan and chimneypiece of proposed family pew, Audley End House. *English Heritage.*

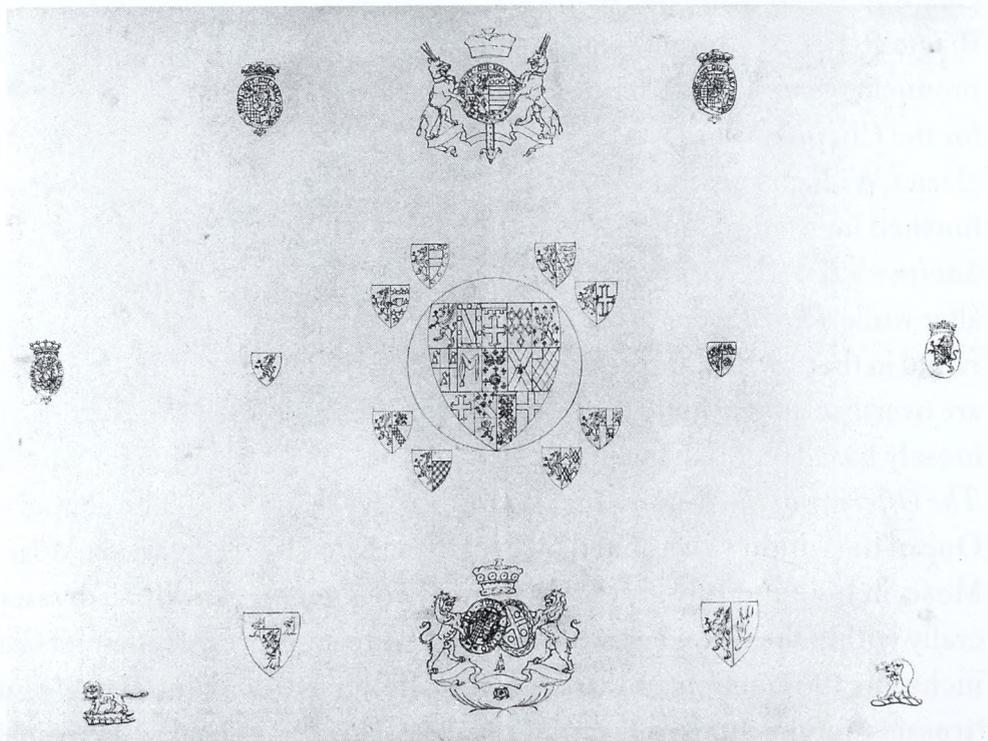


Figure 8. Proposed heraldic ornament for family pew, Audley End House.



Figure 9. Audley End House, family pew from the east, showing the contemporary chairs and kneelers, and a carpet woven in 1985, replicating the original design. *English Heritage*.



Figure 10. Audley End House, parson's chair and writing desk. *English Heritage*.

manufacturer, with an architect-designed factory and showroom in Knightsbridge,³³ supplied a painted oil cloth 'in Squares to imitate Portland and Brening Stone Pavement 22.4.0'³⁴ and Mr John Bowker provided 'Wilton . . . Carpeting'.³⁵ Hobcroft was also responsible for the design of a parson's chair (Fig. 10), submitting a bill in November 1772 for 'drawing and estimating, the parsons desk & chair and steps £1.10s' and 'to making a model . . . & drawing for ditto a second time £2.2s.'. In November 1772 Hobcroft submitted a bill for £37.2s. for 212 days work by the joiners making the parson's desk and chair.³⁶ The carving was undertaken by Sefferin Alken, whose bill for £16 described the whole: 'A Gothick chair an ornament at top with foliage & . . . 2 penicles at the corner of the back with husks . . . 2 boys heads at elbows and leaves to do. To 2 boys heads & wings . . .'.³⁷ The upholstery for the chair was of 'Superfine purple ingrain cloth' provided by John Davenport.³⁸ The final cost of the chair, which was made of olive wood, was challenged by Sir John, leaving Hobcroft to explain that extra time taken was due to the hardness of the wood; he observed that the men he had engaged 'are as Steady Good Hands as any in England'.³⁹

The chair is identical to two 'thrones' designed by Robert Adam for Alwick Castle and Croome Church.⁴⁰ Adam's design for that at Croome is dated 1761⁴¹ and may be his earliest furniture design. Hobcroft was the carpenter and joiner at Croome Church,⁴² and made the chair that Adam designed. His Audley End design must therefore have been copied from Adam's. However, here the influence of Croome ends, for the chapel at Audley End owes nothing to its Rococo Gothick interiors, of which Hobcroft had first hand knowledge. The Audley End chapel is robustly Perpendicular in style and displays an understanding of mediaeval architecture. Was Hobcroft capable of such work? Certainly he had seen ecclesiastical Gothick when working with John Chute at Donnington Grove, Berkshire and he may also have known the Chapel

designed by Chute at The Vyne nearby. Interestingly a detail there, an inverted cusped trefoil at the base of the windows was used by Hobcroft in the design drawings of the windows at Audley End (Fig. 3),⁴³ though it remained unexecuted.

However, Essex was claimed as the designer of the chapel by his friend, the antiquarian William Cole. Certainly he was capable of the task, but Hobcroft's bills for the drawings specifically refer to 'design' and reference to Essex in the bills does not occur before 1770, by which time Hobcroft had completed the design drawings. Further, when Essex is mentioned he is referred to as a joiner and his employment seems limited to setting out. However, the arcade of the nave of the chapel, is reminiscent of his design for the reredos at Ely Cathedral (1766), an interpretation of the medieval tomb of Bishop William de Luda, also at Ely, an essay he used in the design of an altar at nearby Thaxted Church (1765, since demolished), a screen at Lincoln Cathedral (1768) and a gateway at Strawberry Hill.

Clearly Hobcroft's role as the principal designer of the chapel at Audley End remains something of an enigma. However, he was responsible for the design of the Greenhouse and Stable, interesting, if not outstanding. The chapel on the other hand is an accomplished ecclesiastical composition that if completed by Hobcroft must raise him to the ranks of contemporary Gothick designers such as Chute, Miller and Keene; but the doubts remain and Cole's assertions and the similarity of the arcading to Essex's known designs must be kept in mind.

Today the chapel stands largely as executed, though the stained and painted windows were removed and replaced with plain glass. *Our Saviour's Last Supper* survived its demounting and was refixed after the war. *The Offering of The Easter Magi* fared less well and, with the exception of fragments, has been lost. However, the fact that the chapel survives at all is remarkable since the 3rd Lord Braybrooke's opinion of it was far from

flattering; in 1836 he wrote that it was 'newly fitted up according to the fashion of the day . . . in the style called after its patron, *Strawberry Hill Gothic*, a mode of decoration sufficiently objectional under any circumstances, but perhaps never adopted with less judgment or worse effect than in a building of the date and character of Audley End'.⁴⁴

The greenhouse and stoves fared less well, being demolished to make way for a vine house c1811. The interiors of the stables remain largely as fitted out by Hobcroft, though patent cast iron troughs have been added and the exterior crenellations, if they were ever fitted, have been removed.

NOTES

- 1 Howard Colvin, *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600–1840*, New Haven and London, 1995, 499.
- 2 Howard Colvin 'The Architects of Croome Church', *The Georgian Group Journal*, VIII, 1998.
- 3 Colvin, *Biographical Dictionary*, *cit.*, 350–53.
- 4 ERO, DAB/y A28/2, February 1770.
- 5 ERO, DDB/y A30/11, November 1772 (though this bill was not presented until 1772, the drawing was produced in 1768)
- 6 F.H.W. Sheppard (ed.), *Survey of London*, XXXIII, London, 1963, 494.
- 7 ERO, DDB/y A32/11, December 1774
- 8 ERO, DAB/y A34/7, July 1776.
- 9 ERO, DAB/y A34/9, October 1776.
- 10 ERO, DAB/y A35/5, May 1778.
- 11 Audley End House, Picture Store, Scrapbook, fol. 30, i.
- 12 Private Collection.
- 13 ERO, DAB/y A29/5, May 1771.
- 14 Audley End House, Picture Store, Folder 24, AEd/33.
- 15 Audley End House, Picture Store, Scrapbook, fol. 64, i.
- 16 Audley End House, Picture Store, Scrapbook, fol. 72.
- 17 Audley End House, Picture Store, Folder 24, AEd/34.
- 18 Audley End House, Picture Store, Scrapbook, fol. 73.
- 19 Audley End House, Picture Store, Scrapbook, fol. 71.
- 20 It is possible that the colourwashed drawing may be the work of Placido Columbani, a Milanese architect then engaged in the preparation of a portfolio of architectural presentation drawings of the house and gardens.
- 21 Audley End House, Picture Store, Scrapbook, fol. 47.
- 22 ERO, DAB/y A27/2, February 1769.
- 23 ERO, DDB/y A27/1, January 1769.
- 24 ERO, DDB/y A27/2, February 1769.
- 25 ERO, DDB/y A28/2, February 1770.
- 26 ERO, DDB/y A28/3, March 1770.
- 27 ERO, DDB/y A28/3, March 1770.
- 28 ERO, DDB/y A29/6, June 1771.
- 29 ERO, DDB/y A29/12, December 1771.
- 30 ERO, DAB/y A29/6, June 1771.
- 31 ERO, DAB/y A29/10, October 1771.
- 32 ERO, DAB/y A30/8, August 1772.
- 33 Anne Robey 'Floor Cloth Manufacture in Knightsbridge', *The Georgian Group Journal*, VII, 1997, 160–65.
- 34 ERO, DAB/y A30/11, November 1772.
- 35 *Idem.*
- 36 *Idem.*
- 37 ERO, DAB/y A30/11, November 1771.
- 38 ERO, DAB/y A32/12, December 1773.
- 39 ERO, DAB/y A30/11, November 1772.
- 40 Eileen Harris, *The Furniture of Robert Adam*, London, 1973, 47, 49, 63, 88–9, plate 96.
- 41 London Sir John Soane's Museum, 50 (21).
- 42 Colvin, 'The Architects of Croome Church', *cit.*.
- 43 Audley End House, Picture Store, Folder 24, AEd/33.
- 44 Lord Braybrooke, *The History of Audley End*, London, 1836, 127.