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THE MAHOGANY PULPIT, REREDOS AND ALTAR TABLE AT ST GEORGE'S CHURCH BLOOMSBURY

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Of the twelve churches built after the 1711 *Act for Building Fifty New Churches*, Nicholas Hawksmoor's church of St George Bloomsbury was unique in employing mahogany for its principal liturgical furniture. The documentation for the furniture is virtually complete, and can be found among the records of the Commissioners for the Fifty New Churches, housed in Lambeth Palace Library.¹ The surviving pieces, comprising the reredos, most of the pulpit and parts of the altar table, constitute the most completely documented group of early mahogany furniture in Britain.

The site for St George's was purchased in 1716.² It was an awkward location, formerly known as Plowyard, closely confined between Little Russell Street to the north and Hart Street (now Bloomsbury Way), to the south. Buildings crowded the plot on all sides, and some had to be pulled down to make way for the church. Because the site was longer from north to south than from east to west, there was an immediate difficulty of orientation, which Hawksmoor ingeniously solved by focussing the internal plan around the crossing of the church, thereby producing two axes, one at ninety degrees to the other. Since the entry to the west end of the church was so constricted, an imposing hexastyle portico was placed on the south side, and this became the main entrance. The ambiguity of the plan was originally mitigated by the building of high galleries along the north and south walls, and the placing of the reredos in an apse at the eastern end. Hence the primary internal axis was still east-west, as required by the church commissioners. The subsequent removal of the galleries

and the repositioning of the reredos on the north wall has changed Hawksmoor's design beyond recall, but the immediate and astonishing sight of the mahogany reredos as one enters by the south portico is perhaps some recompense (Fig. 1).³

The building of the church progressed slowly due to shortage of funds, and the interior was not ready for plastering and fitting out until 1724.⁴ The contracts for the carpentry and joinery were put out to tender, and the winning proposal was submitted by Thomas Phillips, who was awarded the contract in September 1724.⁵ Phillips (c. 1689–1736) was a carpenter and joiner of established reputation who worked on several of the twelve churches. He was also responsible for woodwork in the Treasury buildings in Whitehall and at Cambridge University Senate House.⁶ His nephew John, who succeeded to the business, worked with him at St George's and it is possible that the work was carried out largely under his supervision. Bills for the pulpit were made out to Thomas Phillips, but those for the reredos and altar table were made out to John. The receipts, however, were signed by Thomas.

The joiners worked in conjunction with two carvers, John Boson and John How. How's career is rather obscure; he was a subscriber to Gibbs's *Book of Architecture* and, as well as St George Bloomsbury, he also worked on St George Hanover Square.⁷ He might have been related to Thomas How, the London upholsterer and chairmaker active from about 1710 to 1733.⁸ John Boson is better known, particularly for his work at Kew under William Kent. He carved moveable furniture as well as fixed woodwork, and two mahogany dressing

table and mirror suites supplied by him to the Earl of Burlington in 1735 survive.⁹ His work at St George's Bloomsbury is one of his earliest known commissions.

The bulk of the woodwork at St George's was made in wainscot and deal, but the reredos, pulpit and altar table were chiefly of mahogany. The first of these to be completed was the pulpit, for which the bill was submitted before the end of December 1726 and paid in August 1727.¹⁰ The pulpit survives in a much reduced form (Fig. 2). It stood originally before the apse on a heavily carved and trussed hexangular stem, requiring fourteen steps to reach it. Twin Corinthian pilasters supported an inlaid hexagonal sounding board with an ogee roof surmounted by a vase.¹¹ This towering structure placed the preacher far above the floor of the church and on a level with listeners in the now vanished galleries. The pedestal proved inadequate to its task even before completion, and new trusses and mouldings were made before 25 March 1728. It was later reinforced with a bar of iron down the centre. Even so, a later observer noted that the pulpit swayed 'like an enormous tulip' as the preacher mounted the fourteen steps to reach it.¹² The canopy is now long gone, and the hexagonal pillar has been replaced by a lower stone pedestal. Phillips initially charged £150 for the pulpit, but was allowed only £140. Boson's carving was billed separately, and cost £36. 9s. 8d.¹³ The subsequent additions cost a further £8. 16s. 9d. for joinery and £10. 6s. 6d. for carving.¹⁴

Although billed as mahogany, the pulpit is mostly of wainscot, veneered on the exterior with mahogany, and with solid mahogany used for mouldings, trusses, 'cartoozes' and other carved work. Each of the six main panels has an inlaid cartouche employing a limited number of woods – oak, deal, mahogany and holly – to great effect. (Fig. 3) Similar inlaid work can be seen on other pulpits of the twelve churches, for example, St Mary Woolnoth.

The altar table (Fig. 4) was billed between January 1727 and March 1728,¹⁵ and survives only in

a fragmentary state. It originally had a rectangular mahogany top 4' 6" long, 3' 2" deep and 2" thick. The 8" deep frame was carved by John How, with a central cartouche flanked by palm branches and with three cherubs' heads at each corner. It was raised on 'claw' (presumably cabriole) legs with carved knees. John Phillips charged £8 for the table, and carving cost a further £6.¹⁶ The table has been dismantled and remade into two small lecterns or desks, employing the carved rails with their palm leaves and cherubs' heads for the frame. There is no sign of either the top or the legs of the original table.

The reredos or altarpiece is the most splendid of any in the twelve churches, and for many years was thought to have come from the Duke of Bedford's chapel nearby (Figs. 1 and 4).¹⁹ However, the bills in the Church Commissioners' records describes the structure in its entirety. It was billed between 1 January 1727 and 25 March 1728, and was paid for on 4 December 1728.²⁰ It is conceived as a pedimented arch supported on Corinthian columns, the back of the arch formed as a veneered niche, described in the bill as 'Circular Wall-work . . . enriched wth Mosaick work . . .'. In its coved head cherubs gambol among clouds pierced by radiant sunlight. The pediment was topped by three vases about two feet high – these have now gone.²¹ It originally stood in the apse at the east end of the church, and was flanked by two wainscot wings or 'addicions' which remain in situ. The joinery for this cost £300. Carving by John How cost a further £112. 9s. 11d..²²

The reredos is substantially of solid mahogany, with wainscot pilasters, entablature and pediment. The Corinthian columns are composed of mahogany strips, each two flutes wide. The veneering of the niche is in mahogany and other woods. In one important respect its present appearance is even more splendid than when first completed, for the gilded details were applied only in the 1970s, when both the reredos and pulpit were stripped and renovated.²³ The original finish, applied by the painter George Clayfield, was plain oil (presumably

linseed), for which he was paid 4d. per square yard.²⁴ This would have heightened the colour of the mahogany and brought out its figure, so that it contrasted with the pale biscuit-coloured wainscot, which was originally left without varnish or oil.

One of the most fascinating aspects of these bills is the way in which they illuminate the relationship between joiners and carvers on a project of this nature. In making the altar table (Fig. 4), John Phillips supplied the top, legs and the 'buskin' or blank rails for the carver to work on. The carving was done by John How, and his bill details the length and width of the carving – a total of 11 feet by 8 inches – together with the depth of cutting – 3 inches 'Emboſt'. The legs were likewise carved separately but with cutting only one inch 'Emboſt'.

The reredos was a much more complex structure, but the demarcation between carving and joinery is no less clear. All the materials were supplied by the joiner, from which he created the basic structure and fabricated the straight-run mouldings for the panelled base, the fluted pilasters, the entablature and pediment. The carver then added the capitals to the columns and pilasters, festoons down either side, modillions and flowers in the entablature, and the book, canopy, drapery and cherubs above the niche. The cherubs were especially deeply cut, being 8 inches 'Emboſt'. The carver also carved the base and cap mouldings on the plinth, as well as the mouldings around its panels. Carvings in the round were charged per item, whereas mouldings were charged by the foot length. The last item on John How's bill was for ten days' work in 'modelling ye altarpiece in Clay' – presumably so that the carvers could work from a three dimensional model rather than a two dimensional drawing.

It is unclear why, out of all the twelve churches, mahogany was used so extensively at St George's.²⁵ Hawksmoor certainly knew about mahogany; a drawing in his hand survives for the half landings of a staircase at Kings Weston, Bristol, annotated with the word 'mahogena' against sections of the parquetry.²⁶ But interior joinery was usually the

concern solely of the joiner, rather than the architect, and the design of both the reredos and pulpit were well within the capability of a joiner of Phillips's experience (the reredos, after all, is essentially an overlarge doorcase). It is probable, therefore, that the design of the liturgical furniture was supplied by Thomas or John Phillips.

What seems clear is that mahogany was not initially envisaged when the woodwork was tendered for in September 1724. Thomas Phillips's original proposals makes no mention of mahogany nor, indeed, of any of the liturgical furniture. It is confined to quoting sample prices for pews, doors, panelling or 'wall work', mouldings and cornices.²⁷ Between that time and the making of the pulpit in 1726, Phillips had clearly acquired some mahogany, and this reflects the increasing availability of the wood in London and elsewhere in the 1720s.²⁸ But the fact that all three articles were made from a mixture of mahogany and wainscot suggests a rather *ad hoc* or experimental approach. Perhaps the veneered pulpit was tried first and, the mahogany having met with approval, its use was extended to the reredos and altar table. Its brash new redness would certainly have caught the eye of the wealthy parishioners of Bloomsbury and might have resulted in further commissions for Thomas Phillips.

It is significant that whenever work was tendered for in any of the twelve churches, the Commissioners invariably chose the cheapest proposal.²⁹ This is consistent with what is known about the relative prices of mahogany and other woods in the 1720s. For instance, building accounts from the twelve churches show that London joiners routinely charged 4–5d. per foot for wainscot.³⁰ This was a 'retail' figure, and included a premium to defray the joiner's costs. The wholesale cost as paid, for instance, by the naval dockyards, was 3d. Although the original cost of Thomas Phillips's mahogany is not recorded, he charged 6d per foot for mahogany 'buskin', cut to size and prepared for the carver. Other sources suggest 3–4d. per foot was the average wholesale price for mahogany in the 1720s.³¹



Figure 1. St George's, Bloomsbury, the reredos or altarpiece. *Adam Bowett.*

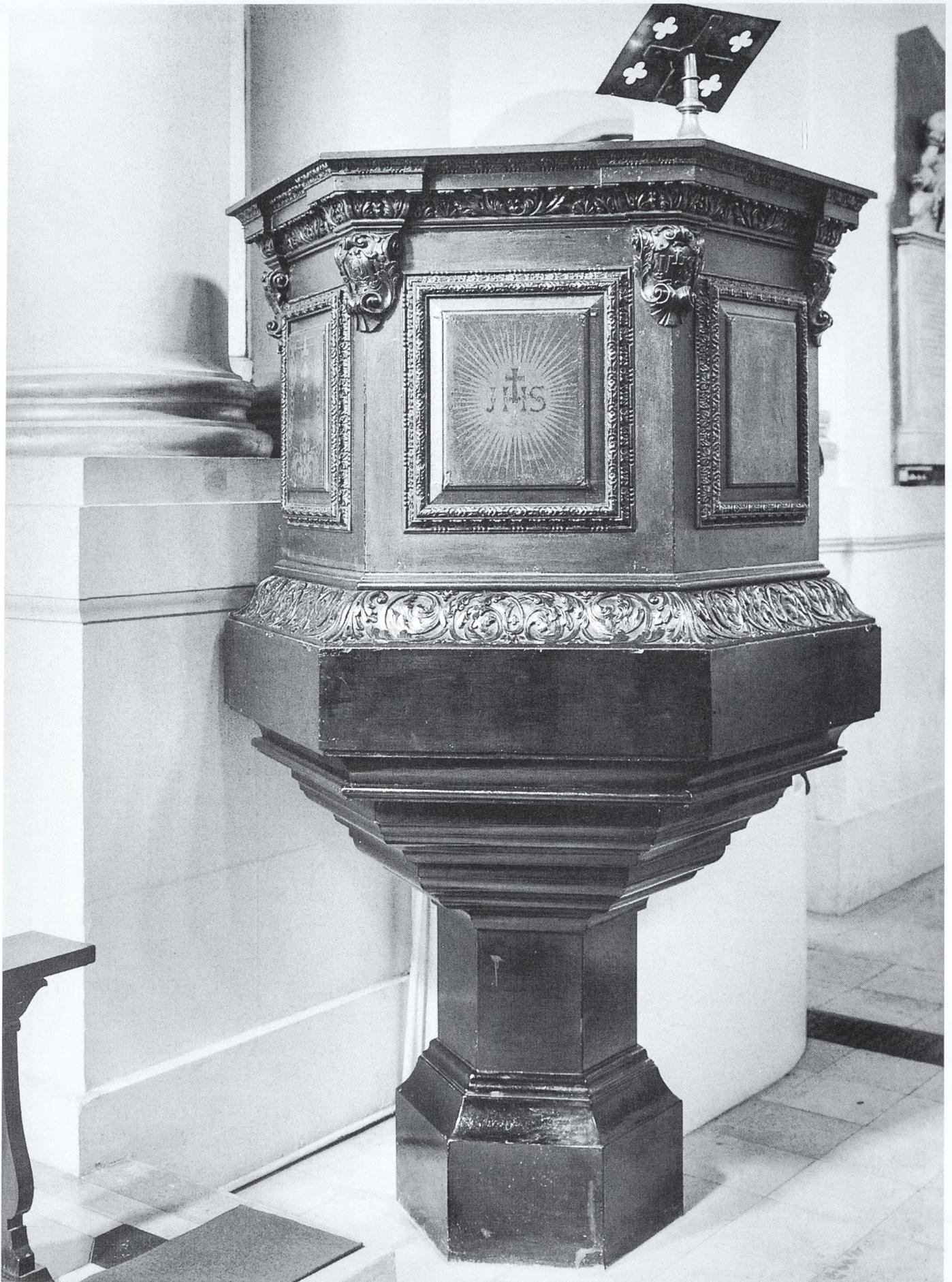


Figure 2. St George's, Bloomsbury, the pulpit. *National Monuments Record*.



Figure 3. St George's, Bloomsbury, detail of the pulpit. *Adam Bowett.*

The fact that the mahogany ensemble at St George's has not been published before is a reflection of its perceived ambiguity.³² For architectural historians it is no more than a curiosity, and for furniture historians, wedded to the notion of mahogany as a fine furniture wood, an inconvenience. But in fact these pieces do fit a general pattern, already discussed in a previous article, of mahogany finding its first employment as a joinery timber, and only subsequently as a fine furniture wood.³³

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With thanks to Ivan Hall, who first drew my attention to the Church Commissioners' records, Terry Friedman, whose assistance saved me much expense and shoe leather, and Anne Erkut.

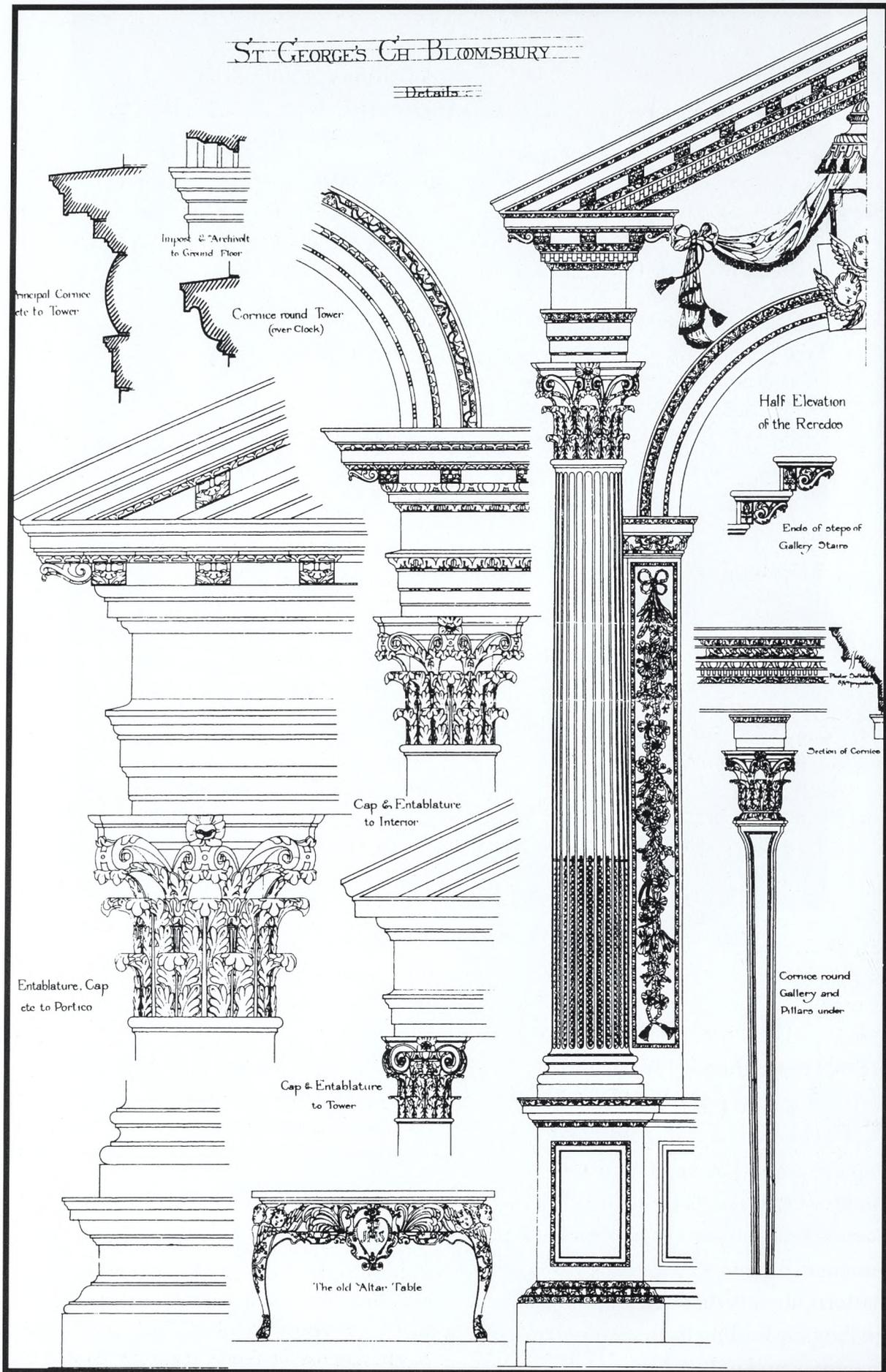


Figure 4. St George's, Bloomsbury, the reredos and altar table. *The Builder*, 18 August 1888.

APPENDIX

The pulpit

MS 2700, f. 255 To Tho^s Phillips Joiner

A pulpit of Mohogany wth six sides each having a Boloxion Pannel inlaid with Variety of Colours with a Circular sounding Board Fineard with Woods of various Colours supported with two Phluted Pilasters after the Corinthian Order & covered with an Ogee Roof fineerd with mohogany Vase on the Top the pulpit supported with an Hexangular Stem & Circular Chaptering together with a Circular Ascent of the Steps of Right Wain¹⁴ in Numb^r with Circular Brackets & mouldings under the same including a R^r Wain^t Rail & Balluster, Rampted & twisted with the Carpenters work for support the whole In toto

140. 0. 0

MS 2700, f. 256 To John Boson Carver

| <i>Ft:Ins</i> | | <i>s:d</i> | |
|---------------|--|------------|----------|
| 16:6 | Run of Carving 11½ In girt in Torus cut this p ft | 11:6 | 999 |
| 14:3 | Run of Carving 5¼ In girt a p foot | 4:0 | 2170 |
| 14:6 | Run of Carving 5 Inch Girt at p foot | 3:9 | 2144 |
| 38:4 | Run of Carving in 3 Mould ^s 3½ In: girt p ft | 2:8 | 523 |
| 34:6 | Run of Ditto 2 1/2 In Girt at p ft | 1:10½ | 339 |
| 11:6 | Run of Carving 2 In girt at p ft | 1:6 | 0173 |
| <i>No</i> | | <i>s:d</i> | |
| 8 | Faces of Composit Capitals carvd 9½ In face at | 15:0 | 600 |
| 6 | Trusses carvd 8 by 7 In each at | 7:0 | 222 |
| 9 | Brackets carvd at Ends pf Steps 6 by 5½ In: each at | 3:6 | 1116 |
| 3 | Ditto 1f: 3in by 5 1/2 In at p each | 5:0 | 0150 |
| 2 | Brackets carvd 10 by 4 In: each at | 4:0 | 080 |
| | A Vase carvd 1: 8 high & 10 ⁱⁿ Diamtr on the top of the Tipe turning included | | 150 |
| 12 | Small Pine Apples carvd for the Corners of the Dentilling in Mohoganny each at | 1:0 | 0120 |
| | | | £40 18 0 |

Additions to the pulpit

MS 2701, f. 93 To Tho: Phillips Joiner

| <i>Ft:Ins</i> | | <i>s:d</i> | |
|---------------|---|------------|--------|
| 12:0 | Run of Mahogany Cap & Bass (5 In deep) in the Addition to the pedestal under the pulpit at p Foot | 1:8 | 100 |
| 21:3 | Sup[erficial feet] revalid Mahogany pilasters at p Foot | 2:6 | 2131 |
| 11:6 | Sup[erficial feet] mahogany Buskin for Trusses under pulpit a p Foot | 6:0 | 390 |
| | | | £7 2 1 |

MS 2701, f. 98 To John Boson Carver

| <i>No</i> | | <i>s:d</i> | |
|---------------|--|------------|--------|
| 4 | Cartoozes Carv'd in Mahogany with Cherubs Heads, Wings, &c. Under y ^e pulpit 1'8" by 1'0" and 8 In Embost Each at | 2:10 | 1000 |
| 2 | Brackets Carv'd on both sides under Desk-board 8 by 3 1/2 In at Carving between y ^e Brackets 2 ft by 2 In in toto | 5:0 | 0100 |
| | | | 034 |
| <i>Ft:Ins</i> | | <i>s:d</i> | |
| 5:8 | Run of Carving in 3 members to cap of pedestal under the Pulpit 3 3/4 In girt at p Foot | 2:4 | 0132 |
| | | | £2 6 6 |

The altar table

MS 2701, f. 95 To John Phillips Joiner

A Mahogany Altar Table Ye Top 2 Inches thick 4' 6" long 3' 2" wide and 2' 8" high wth Claw Legs & Buskin for Cherubs Heads Shields & c. in toto 8 0 0

MS 2701, f. 86 To John How Carver

A Mahogany Frame to the Altar Table Carv'd with a Shield in the middle 15 [In] Diam^{tr} and palm Branches each side the same, with three Cherubs Heads over each of the Feet to y^e Table. The Frame 11 Ft by 8 In & 3 In Embost the Feet. Carved 1' 8" by 6 In and an Inch Embost in toto 6 0 0

The reredos or altarpiece

MS 2701, f. 95. To John Phillips Joiner

A large Altarpiece containing circular Wall-work, Pedestals, Fluted Columns after y^c Corinthian Order in Mahogany, A large Niche enriched wth Mosaick work and the head Fineerd with Clouds, Rays &c, in Mahogany. Likewise Fluted pilasters of R^t Wain^t behind y^c Columns & Revaild pilasters to ye Jambs of y^c Niche. The whole Crowned with a large Wainscot Entablature after the Corinthian Order and a pedament upon it – together with the Carpenters Work to carry y^c whole in toto 300 0 0

MS 2701, ff. 85–87. To John How Carver

No

2 Corinthian Capitals to Colums Carv'd in Mahogany 18 In^s Diam^r at £:s
Each 8 : 0 16 0 0

5 ½ Faces of D^o to pilasters carv'd in Wain^t at Each 1:10 8 0 0

2 Festoons Carv'd wth Fruit and Flowers 9 Ft by 8 In at Each 4:10 9 0 0

35 Modillions Carv'd after y^c Corinthian Order 6 by 4½ by 2½ In *s:d*
Each at 1: 6 2 12 6

35 Flowers Carv'd in the Coffers 4 In Diam^r and 1 Inch Embost at Each 0: 6 17 6

3 Vases, or Cups upon the top of the Altar, carv'd about 2 Ft high wth Leaves, handles & other Ornam^{ts} at each 2:15 8 5 0
Carving three Cherubs Heads with Wings, and book in y^c Key of the Nich 3 Ft by 2 Ft and 8 In Embost in toto 5 0 0

Carving a large Canopy with Drapery enriched wth Tassells and Strings 14 Ft by 8 In and 5 In Embost in a mean 5 10 0

Ft:Ins s:d

63:2 Run of Carving in Mahogany in 3 Members of the Base molding 6½ In girt at p Ft 4:4 13 13 8

60: 8 Run of Do in 2 Members of the Copping 3 In girt at p foot 2:0 6 1 4

175:2 Run of Ogee round pannels carv'd in Mahogany 1 In girt at p Ft 0:8 5 16 9

168:0 Run of Carved Husks in the Flutes of the Columns 2In girt at p Foot 1:4 11 4 0

126:0 Run of Do to pilasters in Wain^t at p foot 1:0 6 6 0

13:4 Run of Carving in three Members to y^c Impost of the Niche 6 In girt at p Foot 4:0 2 13 4

22:6 Run of D^o in 4 Members to the Archit-arch 3 In girt at p Foot 1:3 1 8 1

17:10 Run of Do in 4 Members of Archit over Columns 4½ In girt at p Foot 1:10 1 12 9

31:2 Run of Carving in 2 Members of the BedMold^s 4 In girt at p Ft 1:8 2 11 11

140:6 Run of Carv'd Ogee in Cap of Modillions 1 In girt at p Foot 4 2 6 10

58:4 Run of Carv'd ¼ round½ In girt at p Foot 2 9 9

10 Days Work of Carvers in modeling y^c Altarpiece in Clay in toto 2 2 0
£112 9 11

NOTES

- 1 London, Lambeth Palace Library, *Records of the Commissioners for Fifty New Churches* (hereafter LPL), MSS. 2691 (Minutes of the Commissioners, 1718–28), 2700 & 2701 (Books of Works, 1725–31) and 2715 (Abstract of Joiners' Proposals, 1724).
- 2 The background to the design and building of the church is fully discussed in Kerry Downes, *Hawksmoor*, London, 1959, 184–89; Hugh Meller, *St George's Bloomsbury*, London, 1975, 1–9.
- 3 According to Hugh Meller, these alterations were made in 1781, with the object of accomodating 337 new seats [Meller, *op. cit.*, 11]. Terry Friedman informs me that a drawing in Thomas Pennant's *London* [ed. 1825, IV, 412], shows the altarpiece in its original position, as does a sketch by William Newton [Royal Institute of British Architects, L9/57A]..
- 4 In 1719 the government placed a curb on the building of all the churches until Parliament had voted a new allowance of £21,000 per annum [Meller, *op. cit.*, 3].
- 5 LPL, MSS. 2691, f. 286; 2715, f. 44.
- 6 Geoffrey Beard, *Craftsmen and Interior Decoration in England, 1660–1820*, Edinburgh, 1981, 276; Howard Colvin, 'Fifty New Churches', *Architectural Review*, CVII, March 1950, 196; Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600–1840*, New Haven and London, 1978, 633 & 828.
- 7 Beard, *op. cit.*, 265; Colvin, *op. cit.*, 1950, 195–6.
- 8 Geoffrey Beard and Christopher Gilbert (eds.), *Dictionary of English Furniture Makers 1660–1840*, Leeds, 1986, 453.
- 9 Beard, *op. cit.* at note 7 above, 247; Beard and Gilbert, *op. cit.*, 453. One of Boson's dressing tables and its accompanying mirror is illustrated in Gervase Jackson Stops (ed.), *Treasure Houses of Britain*, exhibition catalogue, New Haven and London, 1985, 220–21.
- 10 LPL, MS 2700, ff. 255, 256.
- 11 LPL, MS. 2700, f. 255.
- 12 Meller, *op. cit.*, 9.
- 13 LPL, *ref. cit.* at note 10, above.
- 14 LPL, MS 2701, ff. 92 & 93.
- 15 *Ibid.*, ff. 85 & 96.
- 16 *Idem.*
- 17 *The Builder*, 18 August 1888.
- 18 *Ibid.*, f. 95.
- 19 Meller, *op. cit.*, 9.
- 20 *Ibid.*, ff. 85, 86 & 95.
- 21 *Ibid.*, f. 85.
- 22 *Ibid.*, ff. 85–7.
- 23 Meller, *op. cit.*, 19.
- 24 LPL, MS. 2701, f. 80.
- 25 The only other use of mahogany in the twelve churches was for a font cover in the new church at Deptford, supplied by the joiner John Balshaw between 1729 and 1731 [LPL, MS. 2701, f. 382].
- 26 Kerry Downes, 'The King's Weston Book of Drawings', *Architectural History*, x, 1967, 9–37.
- 27 LPL, MS. 2715, f. 44.
- 28 The stock-in-trade of the London joiner Lazarus Stiles, who died in 1724, included '338 ft of 4 inch Mahoganies, 1240 ft of inche ditto 390 ft slabs of ditto', a total of just over four tons [John Cross, 'The Changing Role of the Timber Merchant in Early Eighteenth Century London', *Furniture History*, xxx, 1994, 57–64]. Mahogany was usually measured by the superficial foot (12" x 12" x 1"), and a ton of mahogany contained 480 superficial feet [Adam Bowett, 'The Jamaica Trade: Gillow and the use of Mahogany in the Eighteenth Century', *Regional Furniture*, xii, 1998, 14–57, Appendix].
- 29 Thomas Phillips's sample proposal for St George's amounted to £670. 7s. 3d. The next lowest tender was from John Simmons (£703. 7s. 3d.), and the most expensive was John Lane (£750. 0s. 11d.) [LPL, MS. 2715, f. 44].
- 30 For example, LPL MSS. 2697 (Book of Works), f. 199 and ff. 93–4.
- 31 Adam Bowett, 'Thomas Ripley and the early use of mahogany', *The Georgian Group Journal*, vii, 1997, 140–145.
- 32 The pulpit, together with those from several other of the twelve churches, is discussed in Terry Friedman, 'Oratorical machines for Furniture Historians', *Furniture History*, xxxiii, 1997, 84–103.
- 33 Bowett, *op. cit.* at note 29 above, 143.