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# THE BUILDING OF CLARE COLLEGE CHAPEL

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The consecration of the new chapel in 1769 was the culmination of the rebuilding of the college begun in 1638. None of the earlier buildings survive to tell the visitor that Clare is the second oldest of the Cambridge colleges, founded, as Clare Hall, in 1326, more than a century before the foundation of its neighbour King's College in 1441. The original college buildings were built round a courtyard to the west side of Milne Street, the present Trinity Lane. Milne Street was no cul-de-sac then, but a back lane running parallel to the High Street to join Queen's Lane. The first buildings of King's were built opposite Clare on a cramped site between the Schools and Milne Street. Henry VI had more ambitious plans. Land was acquired directly to the south of Clare, Milne Street was closed and the foundations of King's College Chapel laid across it. With its building Clare Hall found itself literally overshadowed by the grand new royal foundation.

Some time before 1638 the Master and Fellow of Clare made the decision to rebuild the college some 70 feet further back from the original building line, clear of the huge shadows of King's College Chapel. Work began with the demolition of the front range of the college. The new front range was completed in 1641. The chapel of 1535 had formed the eastern half of the north range. Now it stood outside the new court, on the north side of the forecourt, with a new prominence which ill befitted its modest architecture. The chapel was given a new entrance in the north east corner of the projected court, but nothing more was done at this time. The rebuilding of the rest of the college proceeded one range at a time and was

finally completed in 1719.<sup>1</sup> Of the old court only the chapel survived.

Donations specifically for rebuilding the chapel were made as early as 1682 when the college received £20 from a Fellow, Mr James Goodwin. The Bishop of Ely, Dr Peter Gunning, a former Fellow, gave £300 in 1686. Money continued to trickle in until 1762 when Dr John Wilcox, Master of Clare for 26 years, died, leaving the college the residue of his estate for the purpose of providing a new chapel. After the sale of stock and other assets his will realised £5,348 1s 5¾d, which was to cover the greater part of the cost of building the new chapel.<sup>2</sup>

For the design of the new chapel the Master and Fellow turned to Sir James Burrough, Master of Gonville and Caius College and gentleman architect. Burrough had been an authority on all things architectural at Cambridge since collaborating with James Gibbs between 1722 and 1730 in the building of the new Senate House. Over the next thirty years Burrough provided designs for virtually every architectural project of the colleges and the university, including the new building for Peterhouse, the remodelling of Trinity Hall in classical style, and work at Caius, Queen's, Emmanuel and Sidney Sussex.<sup>3</sup> An important part of the work at the Senate House, the carpentry and joinery, was carried out by James Essex the Elder.<sup>4</sup> This was the beginning of a long association with the Essex's, father and son. Burrough used the Essex firm for many of his Cambridge commissions. James Essex the younger, who succeeded his father as head of the family firm on the latter's death in 1749, was born in the year the Senate

House was begun – in 1722 – and grew up to be Sir James Burrough's right hand man.<sup>5</sup> For his part Burrough helped him to obtain independent commissions. At Clare James Essex was associated with the new chapel from the beginning, both as carpenter and overseer.

The rebuilding of the chapel commenced in 1763. Demolition of the old chapel began on February 14<sup>th</sup>. At one o'clock in the afternoon on May 3<sup>rd</sup> Dr Peter Stephen Goddard, Master of Clare, laid the first stone of the new chapel with considerable ceremony. Sir James Burrough was 72 when construction began and in poor health. On August 7<sup>th</sup> of the following year he died at his college. It is recorded that on the very day of his death James Essex spent half an hour with him after dinner discussing architectural matters.<sup>6</sup> Essex now assumed sole responsibility for the new chapel. The building was covered on December 15<sup>th</sup> 1765. It was completed in 1769. The consecration of the new chapel on July 5<sup>th</sup> by the Bishop of London, former Fellow Dr Richard Terrick, was a great occasion. The sermon was preached by Dr Goddard in the presence of the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Bishop of Carlisle, the Vice Chancellor and 'most of the Noblemen, Heads, Doctors and professors in the University'. The service was followed by a great dinner in the hall. When the final account was drawn up the chapel had cost £7,319 9s 11d. Benefactions totalled £7,071 11s 5<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>d. The Bishop of London presented the chapel, in addition, with a large pair of silver gilt candlesticks and finely bound service books for the altar, valued in all at £100. The accounts for the building of the chapel were kept by the Master, Dr Goddard, who took a keen personal interest in the whole undertaking; his death in 1781 is recorded on the foundation stone which he laid in the undercroft.<sup>7</sup>

In Dr Goddard's abstract of the accounts headed 'Particular of the Expenses of building and finishing the chapel' the list is headed by James Essex who received £1,224 13s 10<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>d largely as carpenter and joiner for the project. The largest individual payment went however to the second name on the list 'Mr Jeff

(Mason)' who was paid £1,976 13s 1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>d. This was Benjamin Jeff who, with his partner Thomas Bentley, both of Cambridge, undertook the re-facing of the court of Christ's College in ashlar masonry in 1758–1775, again under the direction of James Essex and partly at the same time as the work at Clare.<sup>8</sup> The third large payment went to 'Mr Wells (Bricklayer)' who received £1,154 3s 11<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>d. William Wells built the brick carcass of the chapel with the local white brick, which he supplied.

Next on the list appear the names of two craftsmen of national standing, Mr Clark and Mr Miller. Thomas Clark of Wood Street Westminster was paid £703 11s <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>d for the plasterwork. Clark was one of the most successful plasterers of the latter half of the eighteenth century. He worked at Holkham Hall, Norfolk, Milton House near Peterborough, the House Guards in Whitehall and Somerset House, among other places.<sup>9</sup> He may also have been the Mr Clark who executed the plasterwork for the library of St Catherine's College Cambridge, remodelled and re-fitted in 1756–1763.<sup>10</sup> James Miller, referred to in the account as 'Mr Miller (Carver)', received £377 4s 6d for the fine carpentry and decorative woodwork of the interior. He too worked at Holkham Hall in 1761–1763.<sup>11</sup>

Another piece of carpentry not performed by the Essex firm, the ante-chapel lantern, was executed by John Woodward, for which he was paid £11 16s 7d. Woodward seems to have been a Cambridge man. Another local tradesman, Richard Haselum, plumber and glazier, carried out the leadwork and glazing for which he was paid £552 13s 3<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>d. This included the lead roofing of the chapel and its leaded clear-glass windows. The ironmongery was supplied by Robert Fuller and Elizabeth Fuller, a widow, who were paid £156 6s <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>d.

After the painter Mr Wiseman's bill for £143 13s 10d comes the large sum paid to Giovanni Baptista Cipriani for his altarpiece the Annunciation which cost £111 16s 9<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>d. The picture cost 100 guineas, the rest going to Joseph Perfetti for the stretcher, a carved and gilded Carlo Maratti frame, and a special case for

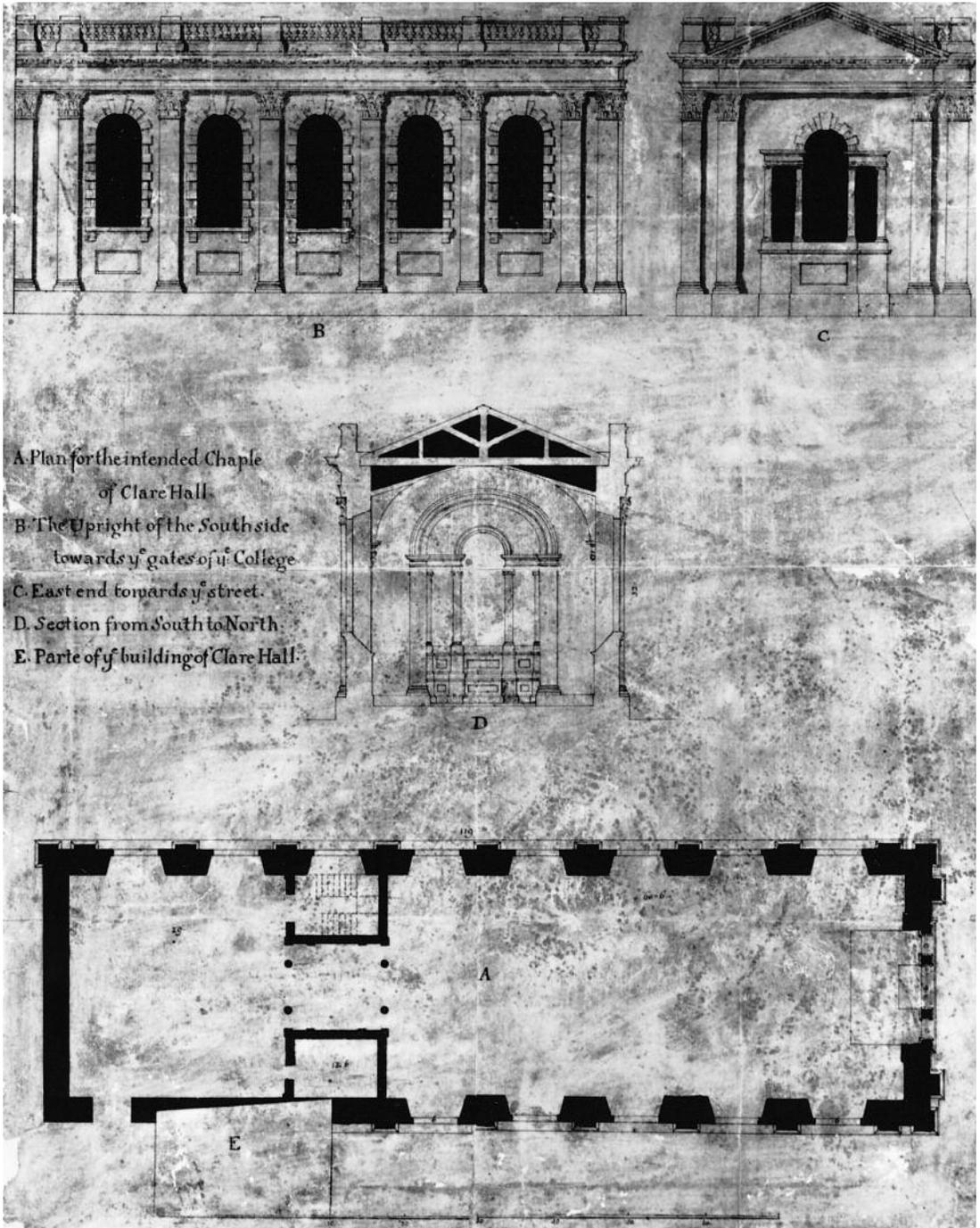


Fig. 1. Preliminary designs for Clare College Chapel, Cambridge, attributed to Sir John Burrough. *Clare College Archives*.

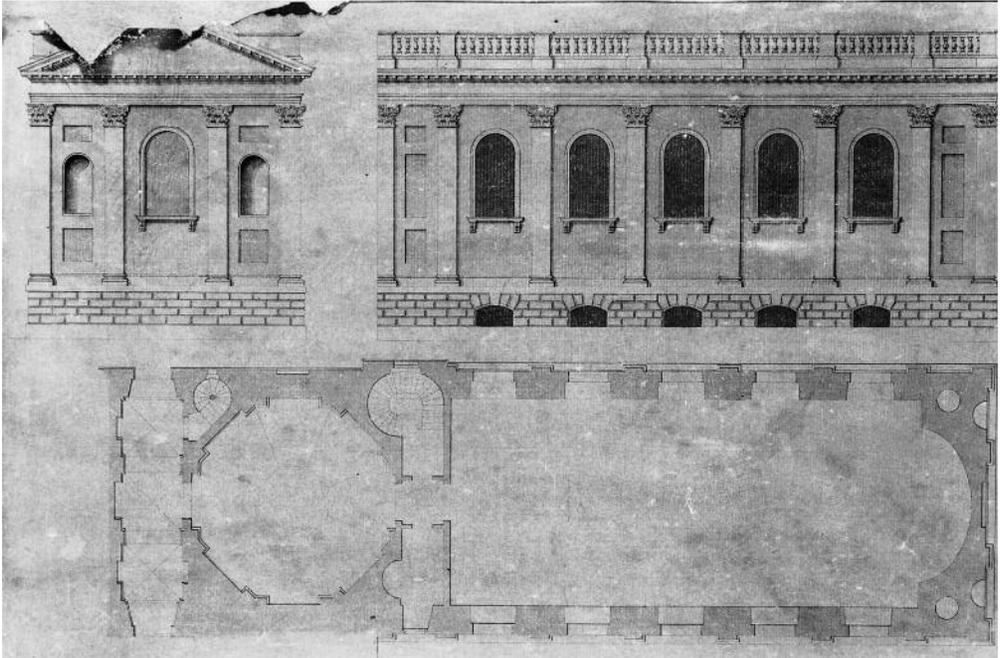


Fig. 2. James Essex, east and south elevations, and plan of Clare College Chapel, Cambridge, as executed. *British Library*.

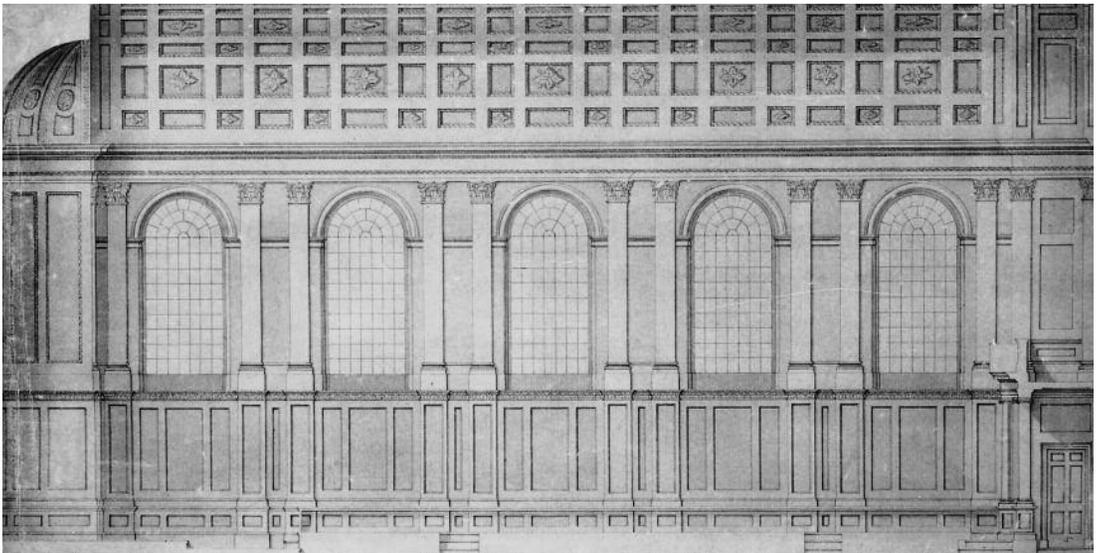


Fig. 3. James Essex, section of Clare College Chapel, Cambridge. *British Library*.

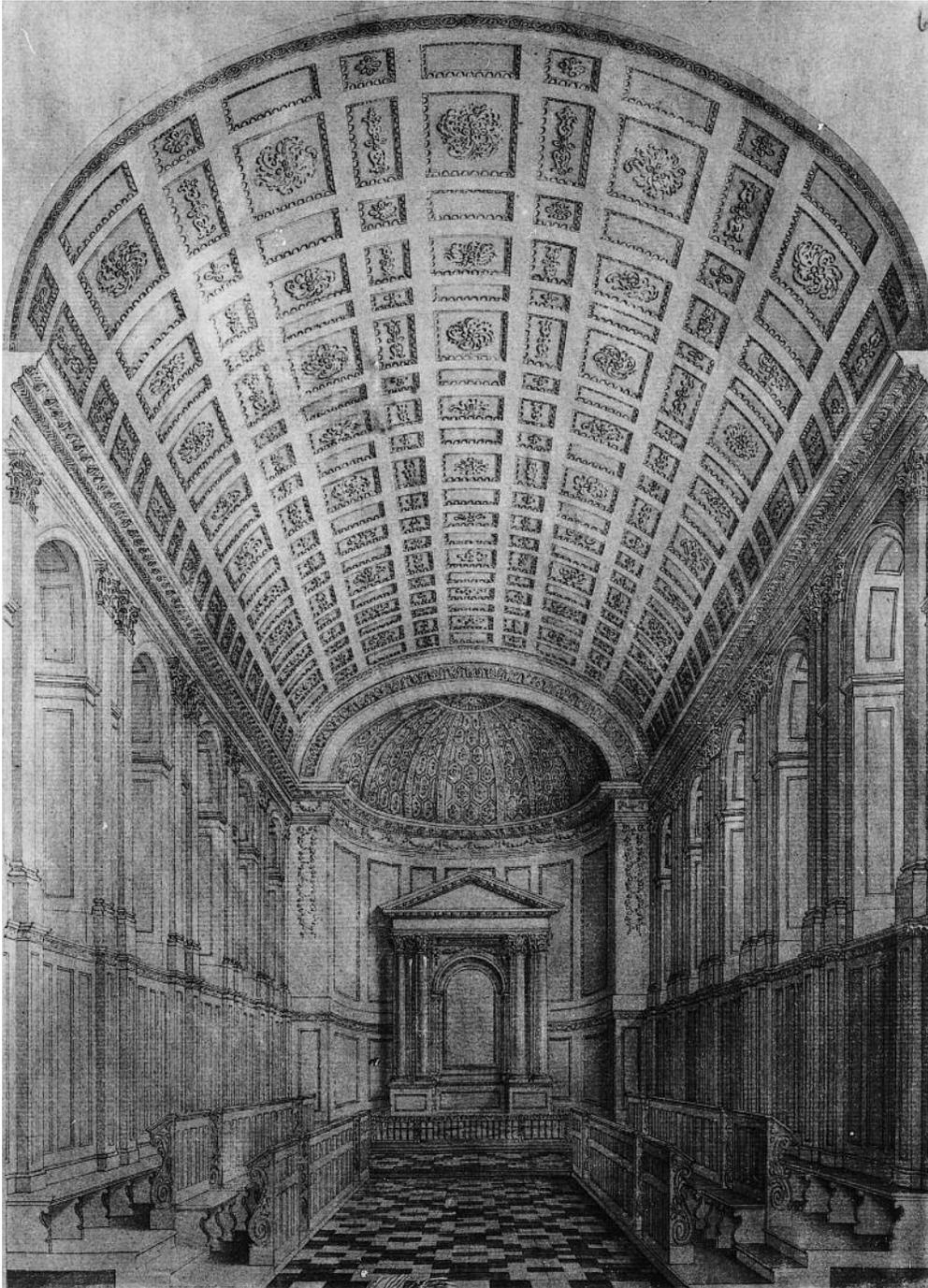


Fig. 4. James Essex, perspective of interior of Clare College Chapel, Cambridge, looking east.  
*British Library.*

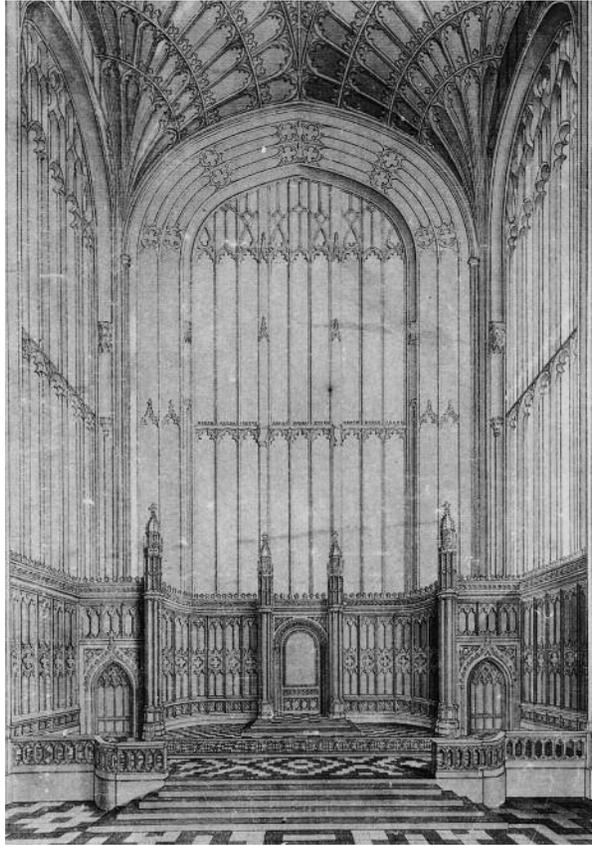


Fig. 5. James Essex, unexecuted scheme for east end of King's College Chapel, Cambridge. *British Library.*

transporting the picture to Cambridge. Perfetti made pier tables for Saltram House, Devon to designs by Robert Adam in 1771–72.<sup>12</sup> The altar rails and candle holders were supplied by another London tradesman, Thomas Shrimpton of the firm of Alexander and Shrimpton, brassfounders and ironmongers of Wood Street, Cheapside at a cost of £57 17s.<sup>13</sup> Alexander and Shrimpton supplied stoves, chandeliers and railings for the Mansion House, London, in 1758. For Corsham Court, Wiltshire, they made a grate for the gallery in 1760–62 and staircase balustrades for Mersham-le-Hatch, Kent in 1765.<sup>14</sup> There is no doubt that the building and fitting out of the chapel was carried out to the highest contemporary standards.

James Essex, who supervised the rebuilding, may have been a local man, but there was nothing provincial about the new building.

It has been assumed hitherto that James Essex merely executed Sir James Burrough's designs. A closer examination of the evidence suggests otherwise. Only one sheet of designs for the chapel survives in the college archives, signed by neither Burrough nor Essex. It is a large sheet, now in poor condition, with a plan, a section and elevations for the south and east fronts (Fig. 1). The designs are for a chapel different in many respects from the chapel as built. The plan is for a rectangular chapel with no cross passage at the entrance, and an ante-chapel which is not structural

but defined by a gallery borne on columns between the ante-chapel and the chapel proper. Pilasters are indicated on the long north and south sides and to the east end. The elevations have only a general similarity to the chapel as executed. There are many differences in detail: the pilasters have a different articulation and are not raised on a rusticated basement; the windows have Gibbs surrounds; there is a Venetian window to the east end. It is a conservative design for the 1760's and rather dull. This is almost certainly Burrough's design for the new chapel as submitted in 1762 or 1763. Sir John Summerson characterised Burrough's manner as 'not far from the manner of James Gibbs'.<sup>15</sup> The treatment of the chapel's side elevations, combined with a Venetian east window, compares closely, for instance, to Gibbs' rebuilding of the nave of All Saint's Derby of 1723–5, on a smaller scale.<sup>16</sup> Burrough employed a similar Venetian window to the east end of his new building for Peterhouse Cambridge, designed in 1736, and executed in 1738–42.<sup>17</sup>

Some of the changes may have been agreed in consultation with Burrough before his death but it seems likely that when James Essex assumed full responsibility for the project in 1764, slightly over a year after its inception, he also took the opportunity to virtually re-design the whole building. Three drawings preserved among Essex's papers at the British Library may represent his revised proposals<sup>18</sup>. The first sheet shows a plan with east and south elevations, all as executed (Fig.2). The next is a perspective drawing of the interior looking east as executed, but with no ornament to the reredos pediment (Fig. 4). The third drawing is a longitudinal section looking south (Fig.3). It shows the chapel as executed with the exception of the half-dome of the internal apse which has a different pattern of coffering. The drawing is also useful as a record of the glazing pattern of the clear glass windows, which were originally intended and executed. It is signed *Jac Essex desigt et delt* and dated April 1766. In signing the drawing this way Essex is making clear

that he is acting in the role of architect. The other drawings may also have been signed but they have been trimmed at the bottom following damage. The dated drawing was made in the spring following the completion of the shell of the building in December 1765. The fact that it shows a variant pattern for the apse coffering demonstrates that Essex was prepared to make last minute changes to produce a building distinctly different from the first approved plans.

The accounts provide further evidence of the full extent of Essex's responsibilities. Alexander and Shrimpton's bill for December 1769 specifies that the altar rail was 'made to a drawing of Mr Essex'. James Miller's bill of July 1769 is headed 'A Bill of Carving done at Clare Hall new Chapple by order of Mr Essex'. In the final breakdown of expenses in building and finishing the chapel James Essex heads the account as 'Carpenter Architect and overseer'. The heirs of Sir James Burrough were paid a 'gratification' of £21. That paid to Mr Essex was £200. He received this payment on May 8<sup>th</sup> 1770. The receipt states 'Received of Dr Goddard two hundred pounds as a Gratification from Clare Hall for my drawing of Plans, measuring of work, examining of Bills, and for all my other care and trouble about the building and finishing the Chapel'.

Many of the changes made by Essex to Burrough's plans are a response to the context of the new chapel. The rusticated basement gives the building greater dignity, but also brings its cornice level with the existing cornice of the 1638 entrance range, which it adjoins. There was little point to the Venetian window in the east end envisaged by Burrough; Trinity Lane is relatively narrow at this point and there are buildings directly opposite, formerly the front range of the old court of King's. The sun could never have shone directly through the window and the buildings across the lane would have blocked the light and view from it. The chapel is sited close to the northern boundary of the college and the buildings of Trinity Hall next door, separated from the boundary wall only by a narrow passage, so there was no good reason for repeating the pilasters on this side where they could

barely be seen. Essex omitted them and also omitted stone facings altogether to this side. Burrough's ante-chapel could only have been lit from the north and that aspect would have been significantly blocked by the buildings of Trinity Hall. Essex's top-lit ante-chapel is a logical response to the confines of the site. The change to a blind east end is also clearly related to the adoption of a full-height altarpiece in Essex's revised plans. This was at a time when cathedrals and colleges were generally beginning to revive the tradition of altarpieces.<sup>19</sup> The octagonal ante-chapel is another innovation which raises the building from local to national interest. Altogether these changes transform a pedestrian design into a building of great distinction and beauty with a fair claim to be considered England's finest classical college chapel.

James Essex is chiefly remembered as a pioneer of the Gothic Revival and it is interesting to see how his work at Clare informed his Gothic projects.

His first, unexecuted, scheme for the east end of King's College Chapel (Fig.5) shows a reredos with an altarpiece of the same shape as Clare's, set within a semi-elliptical recess.<sup>20</sup> It is a re-working in Tudor gothic terms of the east end of Clare College Chapel. He used the same pattern for the black and white marble floor that he used at Clare in both his later executed scheme for King's College Chapel and his new choir at Ely Cathedral. Clare College Chapel emerges as a central work in his career, his classical masterpiece, a work of rare poise and beauty.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Suzy Johnston, Archivist of Clare College, and to Richard Hewlings for his editorial comments on various drafts of this article. Figs 2, 3, 4 & 5 are reproduced by permission of the British Library.

#### NOTES

- 1 For the rebuilding of Clare College generally see R Willis and J W Clark, *The Architectural History of the University of Cambridge*, Cambridge, 1886, III; Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England, *City of Cambridge*, London, 1959 (hereafter RCHME).
- 2 Cambridge, Clare College Archives, Chapel Building Accounts, and list of 'Benefactors to the chapel'. These accounts, which include bills and receipts, are the source for all the otherwise undocumented information which follows.
- 3 Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects*, New Haven and London, 1995, 193.
- 4 Willis and Clark, *op. cit.*, III, 540-1.
- 5 T H Cocke, *The Ingenious Mr Essex* (exhibition catalogue), Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, 1984, 3.
- 6 Colvin, *op. cit.*, 193.
- 7 See inscribed foundation stone in undercroft of Chapel (now Junior Combination Room).
- 8 RCHME, *op. cit.*, 27.
- 9 Geoffrey Beard, *Craftsmen and Interior Decorators in England 1660-1820*, Edinburgh, 1981, 250.
- 10 RCHME, *op. cit.*, 182.
- 11 Beard, *op. cit.*, 271.
- 12 Beard, *op. cit.*, 275.
- 13 In the 'Particular of the Expenses etc' the firm appears as 'Mr Alexander (Ironmonger) for rails etc'. The bills, receipts and correspondence are signed by Thomas Shrimpton.
- 14 Beard, *op. cit.*, 241.
- 15 Sir John Summerson, *Architecture in Britain 1520-1830*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. revised, London, 1970, 316.
- 16 Colvin, *op. cit.*, 402.
- 17 Colvin, *op. cit.*, 194.
- 18 British Library, Add MS 42, 569, fols 4,5 and 6.
- 19 I owe this insight to Dr Thomas Cocke who commented on an earlier draft of this article.
- 20 British Library, Add MS 42, 569, fol 7.