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# ARTISAN ATTITUDES TO GOTHIC IN GEORGIAN HEREFORDSHIRE

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One of the many minor tributaries flowing from the Georgian Gothic Revival has been the discussion centred upon the response of artisans and craftsmen to a movement which basically interested and inspired the upper and middle classes. As with many cultural processes which had their origin in nostalgia for the past and the rejuvenating power of the primitive, the reaction of those who are expected to be the repositories of ancient wisdom has often been disappointing. An artisan cache of Gothic skill – a remote ‘colony of masons whose craft had not changed since the middle ages ... carvers who followed a tradition of ornament many centuries old’ – was not only difficult to locate; when potential candidates were identified, they were often uncooperative.<sup>1</sup> They either retreated into more remote regions or were bought off by gentlemen-architects trading in Palladianism. As Howard Colvin discovered many years ago, after detailed local research, the Woodwards and the Sumsions were still ‘living on the architectural capital of the Middle Ages’ but the Gothic espoused by the fashionable world of the 1750s had moved on.<sup>2</sup> Sadly, although these backwoodsmen were still masters of Gothic structure, they no longer employed the mouldings and ornamentation that thrilled Kent, Langley and Walpole. So Gothic revivers, it turned out, had little in common with Gothic survivors.

In the eighteenth century, as Chris Brooks has also explained, Gothic became increasingly associated with property ownership, forming a ‘cultural liquid asset’ generated by antiquarians to defend privilege, which was poured into buildings as

a ‘style’.<sup>3</sup> There was no real sense of preservation and old churches could be torn down to be rebuilt in the accepted form of Gothic, or simply pillaged for ornamental ideas. The buildings themselves were regarded as barbaric. The chancel arch of Shobdon church in Herefordshire (‘Saxon’ – i.e. Romanesque – rather than Gothic) was re-erected as a ‘freak-show’ on an adjoining hill within the park at Shobdon Court, whilst Richard Bateman, aided perhaps by Kent and Flitcroft, remodelled the church into a charming piece of Gothic confectionary.<sup>4</sup> Remarkably, it was Bateman’s neighbours Richard Payne Knight and Uvedale Price who later articulated the preservationist case through their exploration of the Picturesque. Bateman, of course, was an outsider in Herefordshire and not part of the rustic coterie of middling gentry who increasingly appreciated the special character of their ‘clownish’ shire – an outpost of Old Siluria.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps it is in Herefordshire, slightly detached from the mainstream of English culture, where that lost tribe of Gothic masons and craftsmen, unselfconsciously restoring and nurturing their ancient monuments in an age of rampant classicism, can be found. A profitable place to begin the search may be within the precincts of Hereford Cathedral. It was, after all, in that ‘part of the world’ where in 1753 Horace Walpole noticed that ‘Gothicism and the restoration of that architecture, and not of the bastard breed, spreads extremely’.<sup>6</sup>

**HEREFORD CATHEDRAL:  
MAINTAINING THE FABRIC IN THE  
EARLY EIGHTEENTH CENTURY**

The fabric of the cathedral emerged from the ‘intestine broils’ of the mid seventeenth century worn and deflowered. The building had become a mere ‘meeting house’ in the 1650s but at the Restoration George Benson, DD, master of the fabric, sent for the ‘records from London’ and ruled out a new account book. As a minor canon he had countersigned the last fabric accounts in the 1640s. He appealed to the local gentry for support and by 1666 £470 was being spent on ‘repairs’ – an annual sum not exceeded until the late eighteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately the nature of the work on the Cathedral is not specified, but the largest payments were credited to a carpenter, Rowland Andrews, who was master of the Fellowship of Joiners in the city. He appears to have had design skills, providing Viscount Scudamore, High Steward of the Cathedral, with a ‘model’ for the new vicarage at Holme Lacy in 1667 and, much later in his life, viewing the state of the Hereford Market Hall for the city magistrates.<sup>8</sup> Although the title was not used at this date, he was an informal surveyor of the fabric, acting as the eyes and ears of the master of the fabric who was a churchman and member of the Chapter.

In the 1670s Andrews was gradually superseded by John Silvester, a London carpenter/joiner who was admitted sexton of the cathedral in 1669 and could also be called upon to produce drawings.<sup>9</sup> It was this sort of literate craftsman, working in conjunction with a clerical master of the fabric who quietly maintained the cathedral buildings in the later Stuart and Georgian period. Such craftsmen supervised structural repairs – hence they were often carpenters – and ordered other craftsmen, including masons, to renew rotting timber and decaying stonework. Where necessary they carved embellishments and mouldings, but these are rarely mentioned in the accounts and there was usually no debate or discussion about routine repairs. The professional churchmen felt no need or inclination to

write this sort of detail in the accounts or act books. Traditional architecture still held sway at Oxford and elsewhere within the established church, so the masters of the fabric shared the same conservative outlook with their craftsmen – as they had done since the Middle Ages. That so much money should be spent in so short a time on Hereford Cathedral after the Restoration and yet go completely undetected, confirms the point made above.

Between 1706–36 three successive deans of Hereford were concurrently bishops of Llandaff. The second, Philip Bisse (1713–21), a member of the Royal Society, was especially energetic and played a larger part in the affairs of the cathedral than his predecessors. Significantly, in 1713, after a visitation, he redrafted the statutes of the cathedral, insisting that even the smallest repairs to the fabric should be supervised by the master of the fabric and anything that exceeded £10 in expenditure should have the consent of the Chapter.<sup>10</sup> After a period of relative inactivity the fabric accounts – perhaps orchestrated by Bisse – achieve a healthy surplus of £460 in 1720. Aided by a gift of £50 from James Brydges, first Duke of Chandos, and High Steward, Bisse refurbished the Romanesque choir, hacking into the late eleventh-century pillars and their mouldings to fix a new classical altarpiece and flanking panelling.<sup>11</sup> (Fig. 1) Although the cathedral craftsmen participated in the work their involvement was peripheral. The reredos was provided by James Paty (fl.1721–48) of Bristol, a purveyor of Baroque funeral monuments and, with less certainty, a number of fine houses in his native city with well-embellished facades.<sup>12</sup> In 1727 Browne Willis described it as ‘a most magnificent altarpiece’, and it was even praised by Britton in 1805. In 1837 the Chapter defended the choir’s cosy qualities, but then Dean Merewether, carried away with ‘effusions of [Romanesque] taste’ began ripping it all out again.<sup>13</sup>

Bisse may also have employed Paty to refurbish the Bishop’s Palace, where the present great hall, with its tall Corinthian pilasters, has all the hallmarks

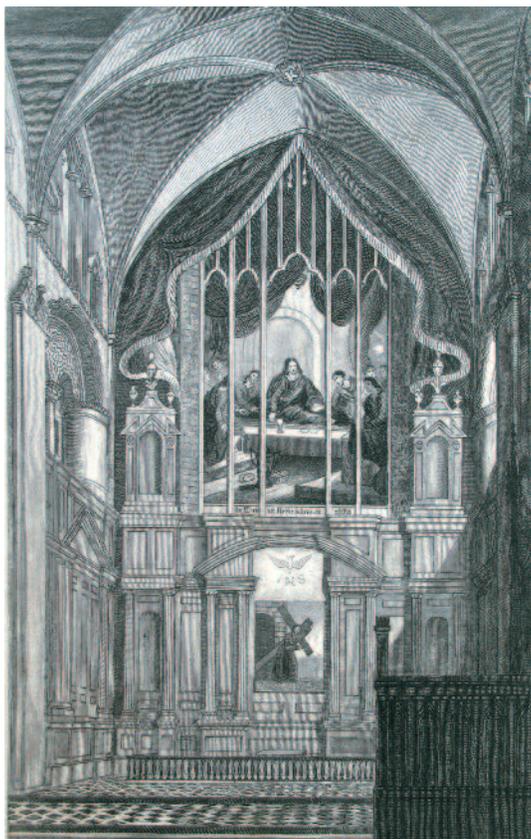


Fig. 1. Bishop Bisse's new panelling and altarpiece, erected in the choir of Hereford Cathedral, 1720. The stained glass, depicting Benjamin West's *The Last Supper*, arrived in 1823. The illustration is from Dean Merewether's *A Statement on the Condition of the Cathedral Church of Hereford* (1842) where it is used to epitomise the bad taste of the Georgians.

of the Bristol firm. Here, however, the craftsmen were instructed to preserve the Romanesque columns of the late twelfth-century hall and they were carefully boxed in behind the pilasters with neatly hidden doors to provide access. We will never know if these doors were for conscientious craftsmen to inspect the columns for worm or for curious antiquarians – the distinction is important.

Elsewhere in the cathedral the routine work of maintenance and restoration continued. The accounts become more informative as greater care is taken with expenditure. The Cantilupe tomb was repaired in 1736, between 1726–29 several windows were restored, and in 1729 the lead and timber spire – a notable landmark in Hereford's Gothic townscape – was completely renewed by the local workforce. Its lead covering made it a very heavy structure and an unknown surveyor, 'Mr Merrick' was called in to 'draw a model of the spire', presumably for consideration at a chapter meeting. Twenty-six years later Francis Grose noticed that it looked extremely crooked when viewed from the Castle Green.<sup>14</sup> To stabilise the cathedral following the collapse of the west end in 1786, James Wyatt ordered its removal in 1790.

The survival of the spire suggests that the instincts of the chapter and their workforce were preservationist. Spires were objects of affection, and when Wren and his followers rebuilt the city churches after the Great Fire they had to modify their plans to accommodate the conservative sensibilities of the citizens, whilst at Lincoln in the 1720s a proposal to remove the spires led to riots.<sup>15</sup> In contrast, a new Renaissance chancel, hidden away from the public eye, was simply a matter for the cathedral community. However, like the spire, the renewal of the great west window of the cathedral was a matter for broader discussion and expert advice.

#### FRANCIS SMITH OF WARWICK AND THE GREAT WEST WINDOW

The Romanesque west front received its Perpendicular window in 1435. It was paid for by the precentor, William Lochard, who was also a prebendary of St George's Chapel, Windsor. The glass celebrated his royal patrons and probably replaced two smaller Romanesque windows. Since the early fourteenth century the west front had carried a tower, the twin, it seems, of the great

crossing tower.<sup>16</sup> (Fig. 2) Even in the fourteenth century this considered to be dangerous, and a papal bull of 1320 transferred certain tithes from parishes in Berkshire to the fabric fund to pay for extensive work to support the twin towers.<sup>17</sup> It seems from Robert Willis's *Report* (1842) that the central tower sent dangerous lateral pressure down the nave towards the west front. This, in turn, was under pressure from its own tower, which also had inadequate support. During his survey Willis found that every pier in the cathedral was out of vertical.<sup>18</sup> Thus, in 1735 the new west window, inserted three hundred years before and under pressure from two directions, was crumbling, and serious remedial action was necessary.

On the 7th August 1735 the chapter agreed with:

‘Avery Hunt of Ross for taking down the great window at the west end of the church and setting up a new one in its place and stead thereof and did empower Mr Richard Pyle their Chapter Clerk to article with him in writing for the work, in the manner and according to the measures and propositions of several part of materials thereof, which were now agreed upon between him and the Chapter’.<sup>19</sup>

Avery Hunt was a smith and gun maker. In 1720 he was living in Worcester and was responsible for the ironwork used in the new Worcester Guildhall, built in 1721–2.<sup>20</sup> It seems likely that he was being commissioned to cast and forge the ironwork for a new west window, which is made explicit in the fabric accounts where he received £38.12s. 5d. ‘for ironwork prepared for the west window’. The same accounts record that the cathedral glazier, Mr Reece, had also prepared the crown glass for the window. Following this there is a pause in proceedings and the matter disappears from the Chapter act book. However, a separate ‘Account from Francis Smith’ survives elsewhere in the cathedral archives, dated 17 June 1736. This provides a ‘computation’ of the workmanship and materials ‘for pulling down and rebuilding of ye large window at the West End of the Collegiate Church at Hereford

if done in stone and ironwork according to a draft given by Fran. Smith’.<sup>21</sup> The appearance of Smith was explained by Gordon Hills at the British Architectural Association meeting at Hereford in 1871. Quoting the Browne Willis papers in the British Library, he explained how Willis visited the cathedral in the time of Dean Harries (1729–36) and found an iron window frame already to replace the west window, whereupon ‘he prevailed to have the ironwork laid aside, and the window repaired in stone’.<sup>22</sup>

It was entirely characteristic of Browne Willis that he should have opposed the destruction of the west window. Originally a non-juror, yet reconciled to the Reformation changes, he abhorred iconoclasm and believed that the fabric of England’s cathedrals were a tangible link with the Catholic past. As Rosemary Sweet has recently pointed out, he was ‘working in the tradition of the Laudian restoration of the beauty of holiness’.<sup>23</sup> Thus his account of Hereford Cathedral (1727) goes out of its way to praise the work of Philip Bisse ‘who caused the Choir to be beautified throughout, and a most magnificent Altar Piece to be erected, one of the stateliest and loftiest in England’.<sup>24</sup> Such effusions, no doubt, made the Chapter more sympathetic to his intervention on behalf of the west window, but there is no sense in which Willis was exclusively interested in preserving a Gothic monument. The issue was one of general neglect and ignorance, reflected here in the substitution of a utilitarian iron window for a piece of beautiful architecture, as well as the iconoclastic tendencies still visible in the established church. The apathy which resulted from such tendencies was only too obvious within the precincts of Hereford Cathedral itself, where Stukeley had recently highlighted the ruinous state of the Romanesque chapel adjoining the Bishop’s Palace, as well as the fourteenth-century chapter house.<sup>25</sup> In the neighbouring diocese of Llandaff, where Dean Harries was bishop, the cathedral lay in ruins. On the other hand, Browne Willis also had a personal



Fig. 2. An early sketch dated 1731, showing the medieval cathedral complete with west tower and spire. *Hereford City Library*.

investment in the proper restoration of the west window as it was illustrated in his *Survey* (1727). Lacking the specialist language to express his appreciation of Gothic architecture, Willis produced engravings instead. They remain some of the earliest views of British cathedrals. Moreover, he was frequently resident in Herefordshire, having an estate at Burlton in the parish of Burghill, where his orchards came to be celebrated by the Georgian poet, John Philips (1676–1709). Philips apparently knew him well and lived nearby on the chapter estate at Church Withington. His poem *Cider* (1706) was much admired and briefly put Herefordshire on the literary map. He was buried in the north aisle of the cathedral where his father had been a canon. Local

antiquarians later remembered Willis because of his connection with Philips. How much more potent this connexion must have been in 1736.<sup>26</sup>

Browne Willis's victory was somewhat pyrrhic. Francis Smith recommended that all the old stonework should be removed and, where possible, dressed and used again but that 'the perpendicular and circular mullions that are new to be wrought to the same Mold (sic) as ye old ones now are'. The mullions were to be fixed with iron pegs, set in lead, in the conventional manner. Avery Hunt's iron window was not put aside but simply modified, and Smith provided a plan of a simple tripartite window with intersecting tracery at the top: a typical piece of Georgian Gothic, elementary and unembellished,

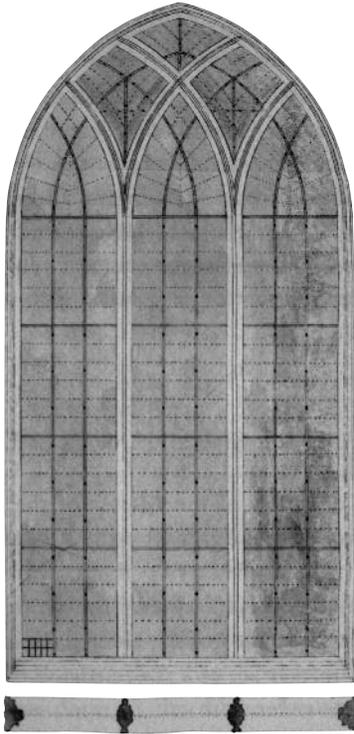


Fig. 3. Francis Smith's design of 1735 for a new west window with renewed stone mullions, superimposed upon an iron frame, cast by Avery Hunt of Ross.  
*Hereford Cathedral Library.*

but in basic form an iron replica of the fifteenth-century window. (Fig. 3) The four cross bars were to be  $\frac{3}{4}$  in. thick, the vertical bars  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. thick and there were to be 'plates, screws and nuts for all the upright bars'. His estimate for this work was £46.6s.4d. – somewhat more than Avery Hunt was paid in the fabric accounts. The ironwork was to be painted 'three times over with good oyle colour'.<sup>27</sup> And the 607 ft. of glass was to be fixed on the outside, i.e. in the stonework. Significantly, there is no mention of the stained/coloured glass, but this may have already disappeared, as the glazier, William Reese, was given an allowance for the glass taken out of the old

window which had been retained by the Chapter. Duncumb describes the window in detail in 1804 but does not mention any pictorial glass.<sup>28</sup> Smith's total estimate for the work was £96. 9s.10d. But this was left to the cathedral craftsmen and he simply received a professional fee of five guineas. Before he left Hereford, he examined the roof of the north aisle and found some signs of movement and suggested that the lead and ironwork should be examined.

The west front was illustrated by Browne Willis in 1727, drawn by James Wathen (1786) and illustrated by Duncumb (1804). The last two post-date the fall of the west front and might both be based upon Browne Willis. However, Wathen shows the cracks developing in the structure, and thus may have been working from memory. Wathen's glazing follows the earlier print but it is much more thin and uniform.<sup>29</sup> (Fig. 4) Duncumb describes the window and suggests that the medieval embellishments survived in the surrounding stonework, e.g. the angel above the window and the effigies either side of the tower above. His description of the glass is based upon a late seventeenth-century manuscript then in the possession of the local antiquarian James Walwyn<sup>30</sup> and nowhere does he suggest that the coloured glass was still present in the window when it was destroyed on Easter Monday 1786. Two panels of glass in the west window of the north transept were brought from Hampton Court, near Leominster, c.1925 and are said to have come from the great west window after its fall. Their survival would have been much more likely if they had been deliberately removed in 1735.<sup>31</sup>

The restoration of the great west window can, perhaps, be used as an example of artisan sensitivity to gothic architecture. If Browne Willis is to be believed, the Chapter was prepared to countenance the medieval window being replaced with a new cast-iron structure, designed as a prop for the west front rather than an embellishment. Yet, responding to his pressure and, perhaps, the workforce who were disconcerted by the radical solution, the

Chapter turned for advice to the pre-eminent architect/craftsman in the West Midlands, Francis Smith. Remarkably, Smith had very little experience of remedial Gothic work. His principal experience came at the beginning of his career between 1698–1705 at St Mary's, Warwick, where he worked to the wayward designs of Sir William Wilson.<sup>32</sup> He made a fleeting appearance at Worcester Cathedral in 1725 where he surveyed the cross and provided a plan and instructions 'for repairing the south end of it'. Extensive work followed, but he received no further payments from the Chapter. At Tewkesbury Abbey in 1724 he was called in to pass an opinion on the cutting of graves, which the churchwardens believed was destabilising the fabric. Very sensibly he recommended that no new graves should be cut within three feet of any wall or pillar.<sup>33</sup>

Smith was involved in the rebuilding of many parish churches, but these were generally classical in style and design. Only at Alcester in 1730, where he supervised the work of Edward and Thomas Woodward, was there a Gothic element, but the ogee windows are very much the trademark of the Woodwards. At St Botolph's, Sibson, Leicestershire, Smith inserted thick Y-tracery windows into the tower – in some respects smaller versions of the iron window at Hereford. However, it was probably two local connections that brought Smith to Hereford. He had been consulted about a new house for James Brydges, first Duke of Chandos, at Wilton, near Ross, in 1723 and was probably involved in the refurbishment of The Mynde, Much Dewchurch, when the Duke eventually settled in Herefordshire. Brydges was High Steward of the cathedral and MP for the city of Hereford. A final connection occurs at Monmouth, where in 1735 Smith was in discussions with the vestry of St Mary's church. Here he intended to retain the medieval choir as well as the tower and spire, but the Vestry disagreed and wanted a new church. Smith's involvement thereafter is unclear but his desire to preserve the medieval fabric was clearly prophetic in the context of his similar stance at Hereford.<sup>34</sup>

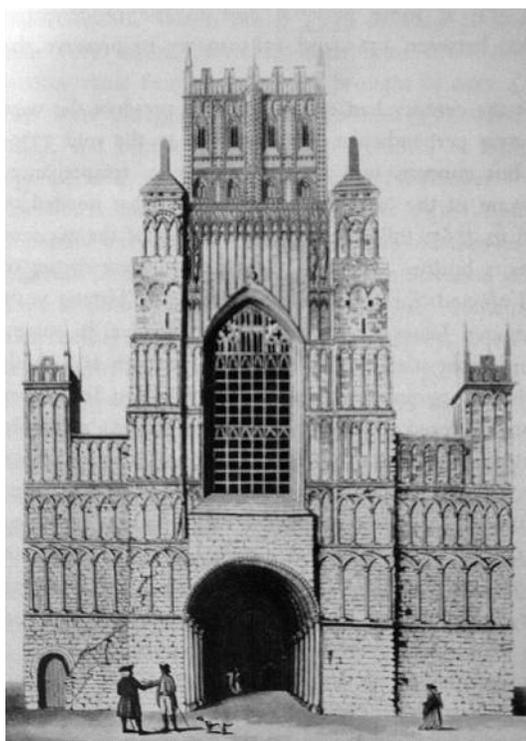


Fig. 4. James Wathen's 'View of the West Tower and Front of Hereford Cathedral taken on the morning of 17th April 1786 (on which Day the Tower fell)'. Notice the ominous crack on the left of the image and the renewed tracery of the west window supported by Smith's iron frame on the inside. *Hereford City Library*.

Unless Smith was a very prescient Gothicist – and 1735 is very early for such self-consciousness – we must assume that his motives at Hereford were entirely traditional and conservative. Like other craftsmen who gathered around any cathedral in the early 18th century the priority was first and foremost to patch and mend, unless the client was determined to have something different. Occasionally, for a large scale project, this implied producing a version of the original. Indeed, the reconstructed window at Hereford has much in common with the sub-Perpendicular west window at Tewkesbury, inserted into a Romanesque recessed arch in 1686 by Francis Reeve and James Hill but

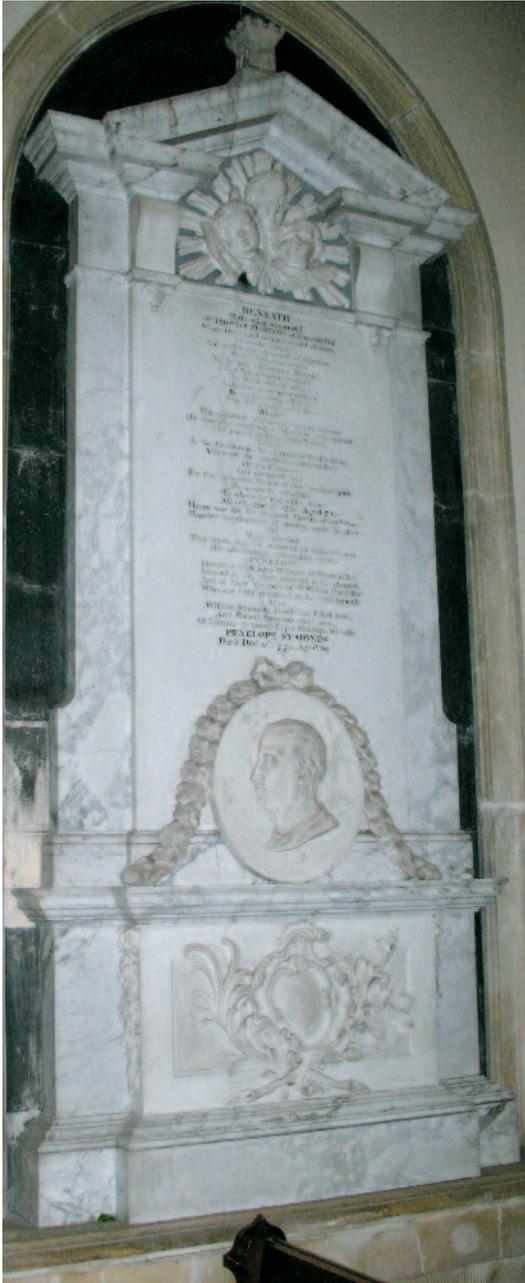


Fig. 5. A fine marble monument to Thomas Symonds of Pengethley, dated 1760, with a portrait medallion of the deceased. Erected in the parish church of St Tysilio, Sellack, near Ross-on-Wye and carved by his namesake, Thomas Symonds of Hereford. *David Whitehead*.

rather different from the self-conscious restoration work of James Essex at Ely and Lincoln in the early 1760s.<sup>35</sup> Once Smith had delivered the architectural and structural advice at Hereford the cathedral craftsmen had no difficulty in implementing it, as the fabric accounts prove. It was Smith's exploitation of Avery Hunt's iron-founding skills that is, perhaps, the most precocious part of the story.

#### THOMAS SYMONDS: THE FALL OF THE WEST END OF HEREFORD CATHEDRAL, DOWNTON CASTLE AND THE HEREFORD BRIDEWELL

Little was done to the fabric of Hereford Cathedral during the 1740s and 50s. The fabric account regularly ran into deficit and there were further regulations restricting the initiative of the craftsmen. In 1752 all instructions had to be written down and signed by the master of the fabric who, more often than not, was an absentee career churchman. Nevertheless, remedial work was still carried out in various parts of the cathedral until 1762 when attention once again began to focus upon the errant west front. A new music/schoolroom was built in the bishop's cloister on the south side of the nave, which necessitated the demolition of the west side of the cloister. Since this was clamped onto the south wall of the west front, it led to movement and cracks appeared on the north side of the west front as it slumped towards the void left by the removal of the cloister. Wathen's view of the west front shows the crack zigzagging up the wall. The church mason, Richard Hawkins, erected props and built a new buttress, but ten years later the movement was visible in the roof of the nave and Francis Thomas, Hereford's principal builder, was called into investigate. It seems that not only was the central tower *pushing* the nave westwards (the problem Smith investigated) but the unstable west tower was *pulling* the nave westwards. A certain amount of remedial work took place in



Fig. 6. Eastbatch Court, English Bicknor, Gloucestershire, designed and built by Thomas Symonds between 1763–9, for Edward Machen. *David Whitehead*.

1773, but the problem remained and two years later the chapter decided to seek ‘the opinion of a most eminent architect...respecting the state of the west tower’. James Pears, an Oxford mason, received the call and in 1776 received a fee of £21.6s.0d for ‘surveying the fabric’. He was probably invited by Dean Wetherell, Master of University College, but his report does not survive. He was by no stretch of the imagination ‘an eminent architect’ but he knew his way around ancient fabric, and a few years later was working for James Wyatt at New College, Oxford.<sup>36</sup>

Pears seems to have made an important suggestion for in 1777 the Chapter appointed Thomas Symonds as surveyor of the fabric. Hitherto, the ‘surveyor’ had occasionally been mentioned in the act books, but, almost without exception, the title was used to identify a man, often a schoolmaster, cathedral lecturer or sexton who could act as a literate go-between, carrying messages back and forward from the master of the fabric to the craftsmen on the ground. In Thomas Symonds the Chapter had the local equivalent of Francis Smith, a successful and literate statuary with

the necessary design skills and the polish to launch himself as a country house architect/surveyor. His father, another Thomas, a pitcher/paviour, had worked around the cathedral since the 1720s, but Thomas junior, whose workshop was in the north-west corner of the Close, petitioned the Dean and Chapter in 1759 to be ‘church mason in the place of Richard Reese, deceased’. Many of his marble monuments, usually signed, can be found in Herefordshire churches. The best have fine portrait medallions, presumably carved by Symonds himself.<sup>37</sup> (Fig. 5)

In 1777 Symonds was well qualified in both the classical and Gothic styles. When he died in 1791 his wife had his will transferred to the jurisdiction of Canterbury because at the time of his death he had ‘goods, chattels and credits in divers dioceses and peculiar jurisdictions’.<sup>38</sup> His work called him beyond the boundaries of the diocese, suggesting that, like Francis Smith and Thomas Farnolls Pritchard, he was a regional rather than a local craftsman. Little of this work is known, but at The Lodge, near Ludlow, he designed a house of c.1780 with ‘the air of an



Fig. 7. Allensmore Court, extended for Edmund Patershall between 1782–4 with a new principal range by Thomas Symonds of Hereford. *David Whitehead.*

Italian villa’, recently attributed to Sir Robert Taylor despite firm documentary evidence in favour of Symonds.<sup>39</sup> At Eastbach Court, English Bicknor (Gloucestershire) in the 1760s, he almost certainly built another fine five bay house with a sophisticated façade for Edward Machen, whose marble monument, of 1778, also by Symonds, can be seen in the parish church.<sup>40</sup> (Fig. 6) These two houses, along with the monuments, demonstrate the extent to which Symonds had mastery of the Neo-classical canon. But he was also familiar with earlier buildings and fabric. At Allensmore Court between 1782–4 he added a new frontage with two great semi-circular bays to a late seventeenth-century building. (Fig. 7) In the accounts he is referred to as the surveyor, but he also contracted for a good deal of the work. A collection of unsigned plans, shared between the RIBA (where they are attributed to Anthony Keck) and the Hereford Record Office, were also probably drawn by Symonds.<sup>41</sup>

More relevant for the present discussion is the involvement of Symonds at Downton Castle, where he was employed as a surveyor by Richard Payne

Knight for his precocious ‘castle’. Between 1772–6 Knight was frequently absent, either in London or on the continent; hence, although it is fairly certain that he designed the castle, he certainly needed a surveyor or clerk of works.<sup>42</sup> The earliest of Knight’s letters suggest that his uncle, Samuel Nash, controlled the initial phases of the project. Significantly, he was told to pay off ‘Mr Pritchard’ – assumed to be Thomas Farnolls Pritchard – after he had surveyed the site of the castle and given advice on materials.<sup>43</sup> Pritchard is never mentioned again, but among a small collection of tradesmen’s bills two are countersigned by Thomas Symonds. One is for brickwork carried out by Samuel Cook, the other for mason’s work provided by Richard Williams. (Fig. 8) The absence of Symond’s signature on any other bills is puzzling. It may be that he had simply contracted for the mason’s work.<sup>44</sup> However, Knight’s niece – Mrs Stackhouse Acton – remembered that Knight had appointed a person to supervise the work at Downton who was particularly fastidious, walking around with a large forge hammer, which ‘if he perceived an imperfect stone or one that

displeased him, without speaking to anyone he proceeded to batter it to pieces'.<sup>45</sup> This sounds like a superior craftsman, one used to the discipline of regulating work upon a large project – namely, the surveyor of Hereford Cathedral. And at least four of the craftsmen employed at Downton had worked with Symonds either at the cathedral or Allensmore Court, both places where detailed documentation survives.

It appears that Knight deliberately eschewed the services of a fashionable architect. He distrusted the new breed of professionals who systematised classical architecture, overriding the educated taste of the gifted amateur and undermining the individualism of craftsmen. Their plans provided a standardised approach to buildings and were like their gardening counterparts, Brown and Repton, who called themselves landscapers, but destroyed the intimacy and localism of the countryside. By promoting their own 'style' of Gothic or classical architecture, which was comprehensively applied, these fashionable architects failed to make those important connections with distinct landscapes and denied 'beauty's unbounded forms'.<sup>46</sup> Knight was not alone in rejecting the assistance of the great names in *fin de siècle* architecture. Thomas Johnes the younger, his cousin, later consulted the obscure Thomas Baldwin (c.1750 –1820), the city architect

and surveyor of Bath, to design the Hafod in Wales. Baldwin was a speculative builder, very reliable, and clearly prepared to execute Johnes' vision. Knight's neighbour and collaborator, Uvedale Price, was apparently happy with his old fashioned Baroque mansion at Foxley, but for his new marine villa at Aberystwyth, Castle House, he employed the relatively unknown and recently bankrupt John Nash. Price later prided himself upon having taught Nash his Picturesque style.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Knight appears to have employed the modest expertise of Thomas Symonds who presumably came with the skill, but not a ready-made style, and could be relied upon to faithfully execute Knight's ideas. Although Knight was no enthusiast for the Middle Ages, he admired medieval craftsmen who were free to develop their own ornament and prepared to break the rules. At Downton he particularly wanted fine ashlar stonework, as he regarded plain surfaces as a feature of primitive architecture.<sup>48</sup> Led by the future surveyor of the fabric at Hereford Cathedral, he gathered a team of craftsmen who would follow his instructions without wishing to leave their own stylistic imprint. Indeed, their insouciant approach to the job is indicated in the terminology used in their bills. The principal mason, Edward Grundy of Ludlow, regularly itemised work on the 'cornices'

Fig. 8 a & b. Two bills countersigned by Thomas Symonds, authorising payment to Samuel Cook, bricklayer and Richard Williams, mason, during the rebuilding of Downton Castle, November 1775. *Hereford Record Office*.

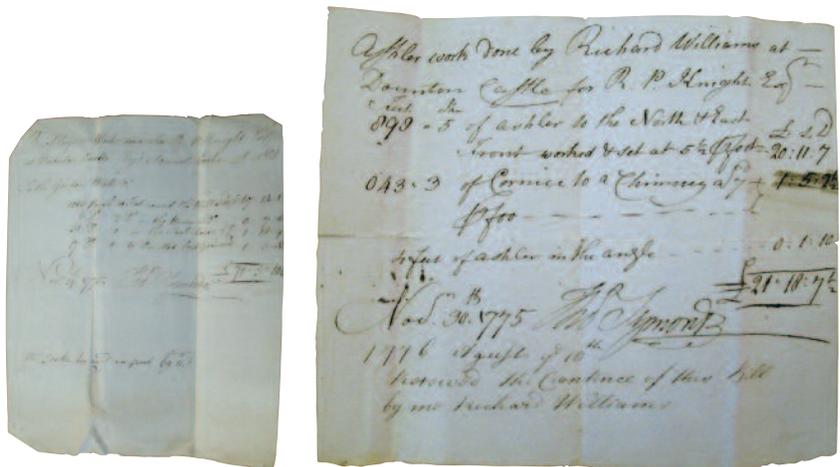




Fig. 9. Possibly the earliest view of Downton Castle, sketched by James Wathen of Hereford on 17th July 1788. *Hereford City Library*.

when it seems he was working on the battlements. Thus it appears that Richard Payne Knight had found some unsophisticated craftsmen who had no preconceived ideas of the Gothic Revival.<sup>49</sup>

Andrew Ballantyne has shown us that it was never Knight's intention to follow the example of Horace Walpole and embrace the 'archaeological' Gothic being promoted by the *Gentleman's Magazine*. He was happy to describe his towers and battlements as 'gothic' but this was not a revivalist gesture but simply a convention used in both classical and medieval architecture, as evidenced in the works of Claude, which he admired.<sup>50</sup> (Fig. 9) Here solitary houses, much like Downton, were set in wildwood, with towers and battlements. Most visitors recognised the hybrid style employed. Stebbing Shaw, one of the earliest commentators in 1788, noticed that 'Mr Knight, having seen most of the best edifices, both ancient and modern, had collected divers hints from various styles of buildings, from which he determined to raise something to resemble the habitations of the ancient Barons'.<sup>51</sup> Richard Colt Hoare (1799) makes the same point: 'it is neither an ancient castle nor a modern house but a mixture of modern and

antique'. No wonder Symonds was so assiduous in checking every piece of stone. Knight wanted the sublime essence of Gothic without any of the Langleyesque clichés; something with the spirit of a Romanesque cathedral – massive plain stonework, like the great round columns found in Hereford Cathedral or the gigantic ashlar blocks used in classical buildings, which Knight had recently admired on his tour of Sicily. The surveyor of the fabric of just such a monument was ideal as a clerk of works at Downton. As far as we know Symonds did not dabble in contemporary Gothic; his stock in trade was up-to-date classicism but he was a mason whose bread and butter derived from propping up a medieval structure. He was thus untainted by fashionable Gothic and could be trusted to interpret Knight's ideas without too many preconceptions.

Fortunately, we can assess Symonds's Gothic credentials at the Bridewell on Castle Green, Hereford. The prison reformer, John Howard, had condemned the state of the Bridewell on a visit to Hereford in 1780 but it was another seven years before a committee of magistrates – Knight was one of them – commissioned Symonds to carry out a survey and provide a plan for a new building.<sup>52</sup>



Fig. 10. A watercolour by Thomas Symonds, showing the elevation of the north front of the medieval Bridewell, on Castle Green, Hereford, dated 19th July 1789.  
*Hereford City Library.*

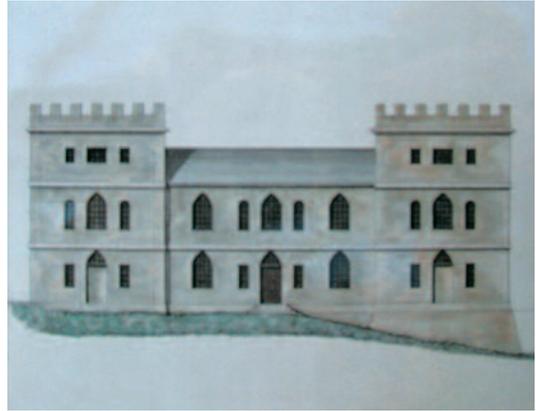


Fig. 11. Symond's watercolour of the new elevation of the north front of the proposed Bridewell, undated, but probably 1788.  
*Hereford City Library.*

The former included a charming watercolour, evoking the character of the multi-period structure, which had stated its life as the water gate of the medieval castle. (Fig. 10) It would have honoured the hand of Thomas Hearne – Knight's favourite artist – in its competent treatment of a variety of Gothic arches, mouldings, chimneys, latticework, iron grills and even the bonding of the stonework. Indeed, the building remains virtually the same today, with some modification since *c.*1800 to the fenestration. To modern eyes Symonds' draughtsmanship is replete with a patina, which was rarely achieved, even at the climax of the gothic revival in the mid nineteenth century. The building cried out for preservation but Symonds was an architect of his time and provided a new design, which exploited the old fabric without using any of the surface detail.<sup>53</sup> (Fig. 11)

In a sense it followed Downton, being designed in a mixed style – classical in proportion but Gothic in detail. The exterior with two three-storeyed castellated wings, flanking a two storey central range, reflected the interior plan with separate compartments for male and female inmates. At Downton too the plan controlled the exterior arrangements but here the result was asymmetrical.<sup>54</sup> Also like Downton the

exterior detail of the gaol was kept to a minimum with simple arches (not ogee) to the principal windows and doors, with crenellations of the wings. The façade was of smooth undecorated ashlar, or perhaps render. The design acknowledged the medieval past of the building but reflected its modern purpose. Indeed, perched upon Castle Cliffe – the gravel ridge above the Wye – it would have appeared sublime and forbidding – a precursor of Nash's gaol architecture of the 1790s. Moreover, it could also claim kinship with some of Robert Adam's Scottish castles, being a cut-down version of Mellerstain in Berwickshire.<sup>55</sup>

Symonds' Bridewell was never built, as he had more important matters on his mind. Movement in the west front of the cathedral had accelerated and disbursements from the fabric fund reach an all time high between 1784–5 with £510 spent upon repairs. From the minimal detail in the accounts it seems that Symonds and his team reverted to type, applying traditional measures to stabilise the wayward west tower. Massive amounts of stone and iron were cast into buttresses and clamps, and for a while the west end of the nave must have looked like a scene from Piranesi's *Carceri d'invenzione* (*c.*1761)



Fig. 12. James Wathen's 'North-west view of Hereford Cathedral, as it appeared on 18th April 1786'. *Hereford City Library*.

with materials piled high, temporary scaffolding, pulleys and ropes etc. It was a heroic, and yet lonely moment, for there are no recorded visits of metropolitan architects or surveyors. They knew better. The dean and chapter acknowledged Symonds' endeavours, making an *ex gratia* payment to him of £18.7s. od. but like a scene from a contemporary gothic novel, a few days before Easter 1786, the structure announced its imminent demise as crushed mortar wept out of the widening cracks. The citizens of Hereford, and a few visitors, gathered at a safe distance on Easter Monday when it all came toppling down. (Fig. 12) Within a few weeks 'architects of character and ability' were flocking to Hereford to proffer advice but Thomas Symonds had retired as surveyor of the fabric.<sup>56</sup>

Symonds was late in coming to Gothic. Although he was born in the age of Batty Langley and Kent and started his career as Horace Walpole was beginning Strawberry Hill, his early work, as we can see, was classical and conventional. Yet he was one of those 'master-workmen...who will contrive a building and draw a draught' and in Colvin's view regularly carried

out work 'in by no means contemptible gothic'.<sup>57</sup> His monuments and country house commissions suggest that he kept abreast of fashion and, no doubt, had some well thumbed pattern books in his workshop. His gentry clients, with easy access to Bristol and Worcester would have rejected sub-standard vernacular monuments, like the stone wall plaques put up for farmers and tradesmen by the Yeoman family in the villages to the north of Hereford.<sup>58</sup> Symonds' experience with large building projects and his family connections with the cathedral, gave him experience of traditional architecture. In 1775 when Knight hired Symonds as his clerk of works he may have been taking a shot in the dark but, as has been suggested above, he could also have had strong ideological reasons for taking on a relatively obscure mason apparently uninfected by the febrile enthusiasm for fashionable Gothic. The work at Downton must have provided a steep learning curve for Symonds and in terms of Gothic he stepped straight out of the Middle Ages into the new world of the Picturesque. Presumably Knight was interested in Symonds's ability to manage Gothic structures, not his knowledge

of ornament. We can assume he was satisfied with the results of his collaboration, for, as one of the ‘Gentlemen Professors’ of local taste, he could have ruined Symonds’ career subsequently.<sup>59</sup> In becoming the first professional surveyor of Hereford Cathedral in 1777, immediately following his engagement at Downton, Symonds reached the pinnacle of his career. His elevation for the new Bridewell suggests that he learnt something from Knight. Its simple lines, logical plan and uncluttered façade – without a touch of Langley – support this. It does, however, only give us a fleeting glimpse of Symonds’s Gothic taste and at a time when, as the cathedral surveyor, he was facing that most cataclysmic of Gothic experiences – the fall of a major tower.

## NOTES

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