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JAMES GIBBS AND THE CAVENDISH–HARLEY ESTATE IN MARYLEBONE

PETER GUILLERY

The church of St Peter, Vere Street, formerly the Oxford Chapel, just north of Oxford Street, is a well-known, if comparatively humble, instance of James Gibbs's architectural talents (Fig. 1). It has generally been evaluated as a kind of lesser sibling to St Martin-in-the-Fields, and there is sense in that. It has less often been placed in its topographical context, one in which Gibbs was a seminal figure. That context is the development of the Cavendish–Harley estate in the parish of St Marylebone, roughly the area between Oxford Street and the Marylebone Road, much of which has latterly become the Howard De Walden estate.

Fig. 1. The Church of St Peter, Vere Street, built 1721–4 as the Oxford Chapel, photographed in 2013. (© *Historic England Archive, DP177499*)

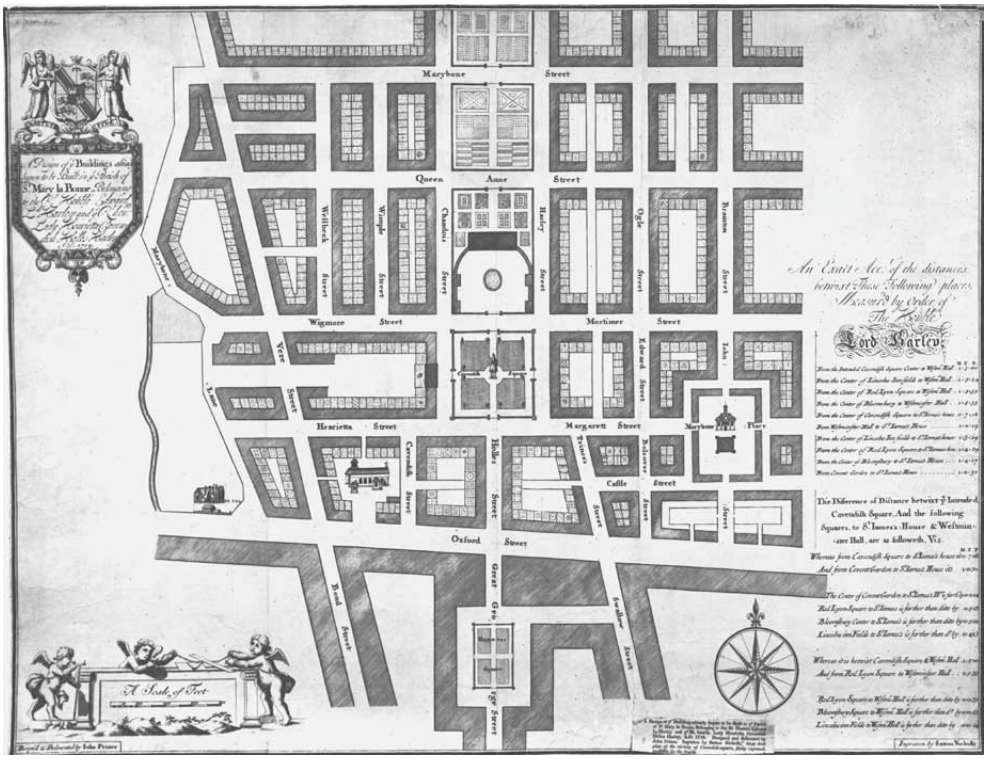

Fig. 2. John Prince's plan for Lord Harley's Marylebone estate, published 1719. (*London Metropolitan Archives, Collage 17560*)

This short account describes Gibbs's activities on this estate.[1] The church is about as glamorous as it gets. Not the least interesting aspect of Gibbs's work in Marylebone is how quotidian it was. The role or job title of estate surveyor did not exist as such in the early eighteenth century, but that in effect, if not formally, is how Gibbs frequently acted for the Cavendish–Harley estate. It is interesting to find an architect of Gibbs's stature engaged in such mundane work in this period. However, the evidence is fragmentary and elusive, not least because it looks as if Gibbs's work was sometimes unpaid, and therefore unrecorded. Professionalisation and better documentation mean that we are familiar with the surveyor side of architectural practice in the later Georgian period, as for example with Soane, Mylne or Cockerell. It is a world less characterised in the early Georgian period.

As Joseph Addison related in 1709, Marylebone was then 'The country in town; or, the town in the country'.[2] Two years later John Holles, first Duke of Newcastle, bought the Manor of Tyburn and lands then obviously ripe for development for the even then knock-down price of £17,000. Within months the extensive property passed to his only child, Lady Henrietta Cavendish Holles, for whom the Duke had arranged a marriage with Edward Harley, the only son of Robert Harley, Queen Anne's Tory chief minister, and the first Earl of Oxford and Earl Mortimer. The young Lord Harley, who became the second Earl in 1724, was no politician, but rather an aesthete, bibliophile and patron, eccentric

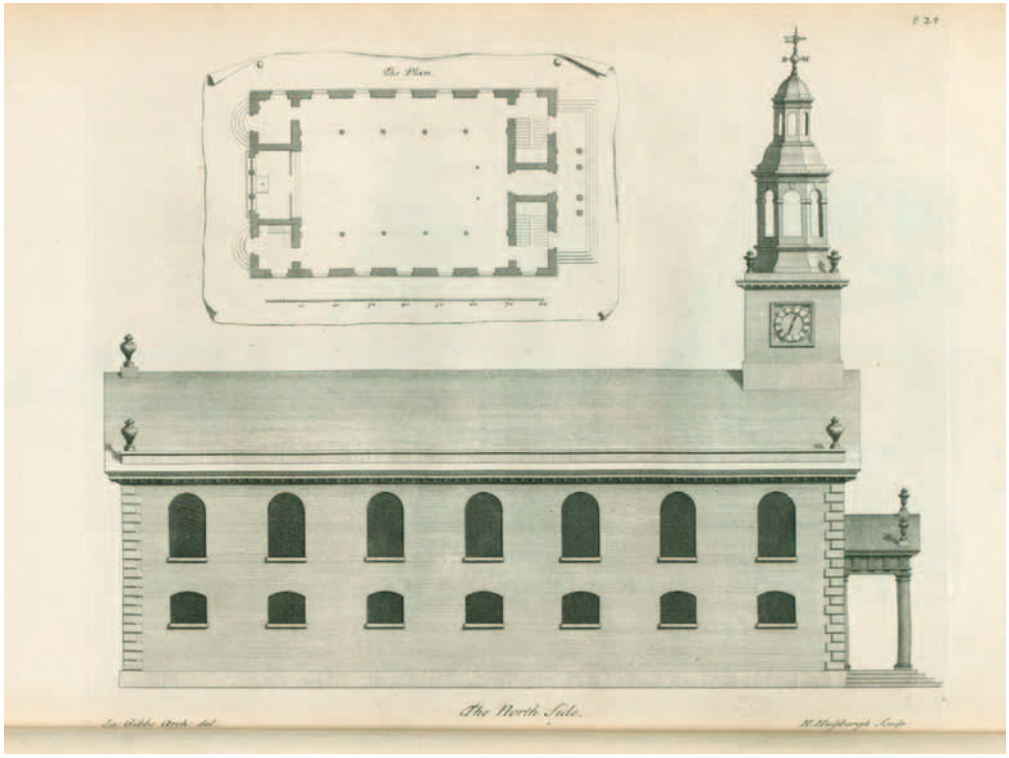

Fig. 3. The Oxford Chapel (St Peter's, Vere Street), elevation and plan from James Gibbs's *Book of Architecture*, 1728.

and unworldly. It was his uncle, also Edward, and known as 'Auditor' Harley, a Tory politician and an experienced Exchequer fixer, who from 1717 took the lead in developing what was henceforth the Cavendish–Harley estate. What was to become Cavendish Square was then enclosed and John Prince, a semi-literate Covent Garden bricklayer of overweening ambition and vanity, self-styled as a 'master builder' and the 'Prince of Surveyors', was engaged. In 1719 Prince published and claimed authorship of a plan for the estate (Fig. 2). This purported to show 'Buildings already begun to be built', significantly stretching the truth about what remained empty fields.

This 'master plan', as it might now be termed, was essentially an advertisement, designed to attract investment. In some respects it is notably sophisticated, presenting Cavendish Square as on axis with Hanover Square: extraordinarily integrated planning for early-Georgian London. There is a dense and regularly orthogonal layout for a residential grid, balanced by a chapel (the building already introduced) to the west and a market to the east, also responding to other pre-existing street lines.

Prince remained on the scene in the early 1720s, but in the background and often chivvied for dilatoriness. He returned thereafter to Covent Garden, having made little impact. Given his record, it is reasonable to suspect a hidden hand in the plan he claimed. There is an obvious candidate. James Gibbs's employment by, and friendship with, the Earl of Mar, a fellow Catholic and Scot, had brought

Fig. 4. St Peter's, Vere Street, the interior looking towards the east end, photographed in 2015. (© *Historic England Archive, DP177567*)

him to the attention of Robert Harley, and thereby to his appointment as a surveyor for the Fifty New Churches Commission in 1713. That post did not last long, but Tory patronage did. Gibbs was responsible for work for the younger Harley at Wimpole Hall (Cambridgeshire) by 1714 and up to 1721, and thereafter found a firm and lasting place in the circle of 'virtuosi' that Lord Harley formed around himself.[3]

The intended proprietary chapel was conceived as an anchor and a boost for what was meant as, what became, and what has remained the smarter west side of the estate. But on Prince's plan it is less than sophisticatedly surrounded by the backs of houses, as if in a stable yard. That changed when Gibbs was given charge of the building's design. It was important to get the chapel up with haste, to combat an impression caused by the collapse of the South Sea Bubble in 1720 that nothing was happening on the estate. But it stayed somewhat marginal or tucked away, never destined for prominence – perhaps the Harleys did not want to sacrifice profitable building plots. From 1720 progress with work on the estate

was underpinned by the involvement of Benjamin Timbrell and Thomas Phillips, leading and, crucially, financially secure carpenter–contractors and partners. They built what was initially called the Oxford Chapel in honour of Harley in 1721–4 (Fig. 3).

It is a plain brick box, with stone quoins – this much broadly typical of London churches since the Great Fire. Chunky modillions are continued at the gable ends to form the impression of pediments, there is a Doric tetrastyle portico and, as at St Martin in-the-Fields, the bell tower sits astride, and appears to emerge from, the ridged roof. The interior has a richness and beauty in marked contrast to the exterior, the similarities to St Martin-in-the-Fields being stronger here – it is what John Summerson called a 'miniature forecast' and 'preliminary model' (Fig. 4).[4] Corinthian columns on high pedestals carry the galleries and divide the elliptical central vault from cross vaults over the aisles. The dosserets are a bold and characteristically Gibbsian feature, derived from the Baths of Augustus in Rome. The delicate Italian Rococo plasterwork was by Giuseppe Artari and Giovanni Bagutti. Otherwise the interior has been heavily altered (Fig. 5). Here, in 1734, Lord and Lady Harleys' daughter, Lady Margaret, married the second Duke of Portland. The architectural influence of the church has been far reaching, both locally, as for the Grosvenor Chapel in South Audley Street (1730–1) and the Berkeley Chapel (*c.*1750), and far away, as at St Paul's, Halifax, Nova Scotia (1749–50) (see p. 195–6). In 1832 the Oxford Chapel became a chapel of ease to All Souls, Langham Place, and it was then dedicated to St Peter.[5]

Less familiar than the church is the comparably parsimonious and answering Oxford Market, on the estate's east side, where houses were smaller and artisan occupancy more general. The plan for 'Marybone Place', a grand piazza, was revised, whether by, or indirectly influenced by, Gibbs, giving much less space for the market. Like the chapel,

Fig. 5. The Oxford Chapel, interior reconstruction by Andy Crispe for the Survey of London.

Fig. 6. Nos. 3–5 Cavendish Square, houses of 1720–7 photographed in 2014.
(© *Historic England Archive, DP177196*)

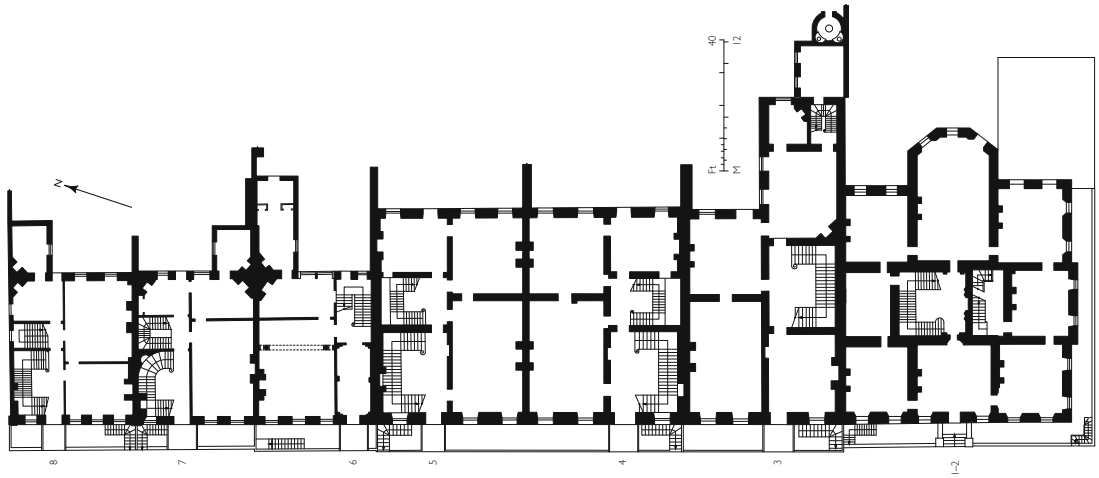

Fig. 7. Nos. 1–8 Cavendish Square, ground-floor plans, *c.*1810,
drawing by Helen Jones based on historic maps and plans

Fig. 8. Bingley (later Harcourt) House, on the west side of Cavendish Square, 1722–5, photographed in 1906 shortly before its demolition. (*London Metropolitan Archives, Collage 100614*)

the market was prosecuted with haste by 'Auditor' Harley, and was built quickly in 1721 to try to head off competition for a rival market off Carnaby Street. Direct documentation of Gibbs's role has not been found, but from early on he was, entirely plausibly, credited with having designed the market. It was a plain brick building, square in plan with entrances on all sides and an octagonal cupola, like a reduced version of the sketch on Prince's plan (Fig. 2). The market was not a success, perhaps after all on account of the Lowndes or Carnaby Market that had been formed on the other side of Oxford Street in 1725–6. Accretive additions and then reconstruction in 1816 mean that we have no good views of the original building. It was demolished in 1881.[6]

Gibbs also took on a number of tasks towards advancing the development of Cavendish Square in the early 1720s. Following the South Sea Company's collapse in 1720 and the ensuing squeeze on credit, building on the square, critical to the estate's success, was bedevilled by delays. Supervision, in so far as there was any, was by William Thomas, the Estate's steward and a fellow 'virtuoso', who assiduously chivvied a range of builders to meet completion dates. Most failed, including Prince. Gibbs stepped into the breach. He might even have been involved in the drawing up of *pro forma* building agreements. In 1721 he took a lease for a comparatively modest house on the square's south side, one of the first completed, and in 1723 he was overseeing work at the back of a house on the east side, which survives, much altered, as No. 3 (Figs 6 and 7). Its original developer,

Fig. 9. No. 20 Cavendish Square (to centre), a house of 1727–30, photographed *c.*1910. (*Royal College of Nursing Archive photograph P/1/34*)

Fig. 10. Painted staircase of 1729–30 at No. 20 Cavendish Square, photographed in 2014. (© *Historic England Archive, DP177184*)

Kendrick Grantham, identified in estate records as 'a great Projector', had fallen bankrupt by 1722, leaving only foundations. At the same time, Gibbs specified the breadth of the pavement bordering the whole square, and in 1728 he was party to discussions on the layout of the estate's sewers – to reiterate, much of his role was unglamorous.

Even so, a hint of elevational symmetry on the square's south side suggests a controlling architectural hand that can only have been that of Gibbs. There were giant order pilasters on either side of Holles Street, astride the north–south axis, on separately leased houses of the late 1720s, one of which went to William Morehead, a Scot, and much later a beneficiary of Gibbs's will. However, inequalities in plot widths and, more broadly, the fragmentary nature of speculative development, constrained any quest for uniformity. Architectural unity was generally not attempted in London's early eighteenth-century squares.[7]

The biggest of Cavendish Square's early houses, Bingley (later Harcourt) House, on the west side, was built by Robert Benson, Lord Bingley, in 1722–5 (Fig. 8). He may have acted as his own architect, as he had at his country house, Bramham Park in Yorkshire; the buildings shared an eccentricity that displeased the Earl of Oxford. Yet Bingley paid 'Gibbs' ten Guineas in 1723, presumably for some contribution to the design.[8]

It is not evident that Gibbs designed any whole house on Cavendish Square. No. 20, on the west side, south of where Bingley House stood, perhaps presents the most intriguing possibility. Despite outward appearances, much of a five-bay house of the late 1720s survives here, encased within a shell of the early 1930s (Fig. 9). The house was built for Francis Shepheard, wealthy through East India inheritance. Documents show George Greaves, a Clerkenwell carpenter, as responsible for the building work, but there is good reason to suppose the involvement of a more sophisticated hand. Within there is one of London's finest early-Georgian painted staircases and a fully pilastered ground-floor room (Figs. 10 and 11). Quality aside, the treatment of the Ionic order at the corners of this room, with the pilasters sunk, hints at involvement on the part of Gibbs. Further, entrance-hall and stair-hall panelling has unusual Gibbsian fish-tail panels above over-door pediments.[9]

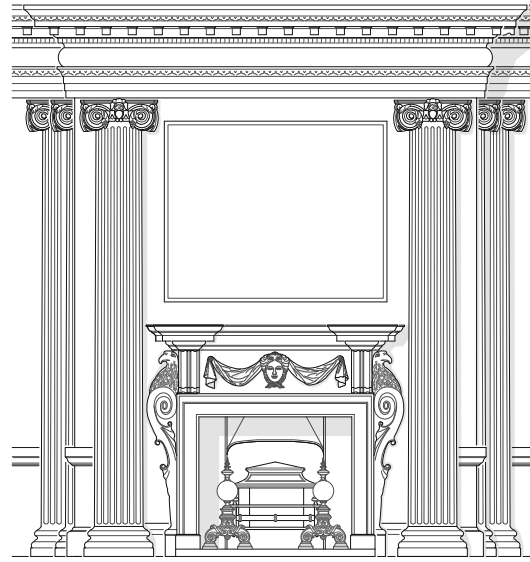

Fig. 11. Ground-floor pilastered room at No. 20 Cavendish Square, measured and drawn by Helen Jones.

Linking Cavendish Square to the Oxford Chapel is Henrietta Place (originally Henrietta Street), just round the corner from No. 20. The square apart, this street had the best-appointed houses on the Marylebone estate. They are now all gone, but they have been well documented, first by Summerson, more recently by Gordon Balderston.[10] Following a lead set by Harley's steward William Thomas, Gibbs was centrally involved. In 1723 he undertook to design and oversee the building of a house for Thomas on the street's south side. This was not

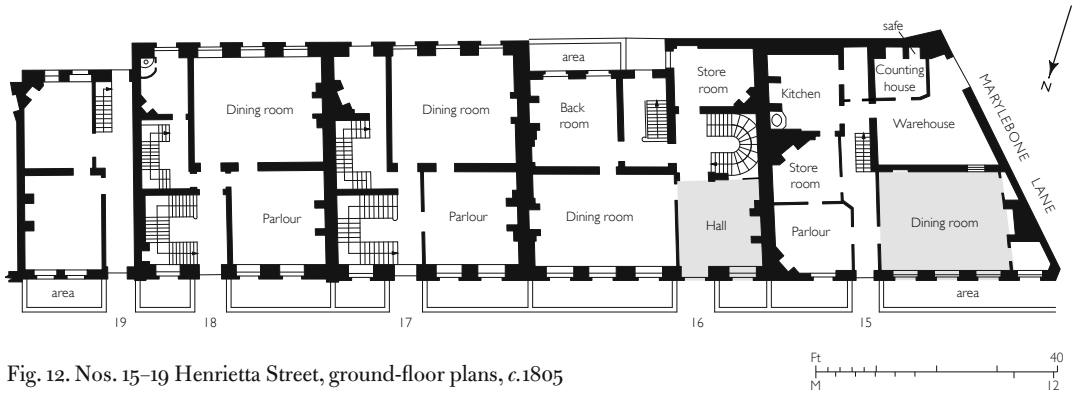

Fig. 12. Nos. 15–19 Henrietta Street, ground-floor plans, *c.*1805 (former coach-houses shaded), drawing by Helen Jones based on historic plans.

Fig. 13. Henrietta Place, showing Nos. 6–13 of *c.*1727–32 on the north side, photographed by John Summerson in 1944, subsequently demolished. (*Historic England Archive, OP31851*)

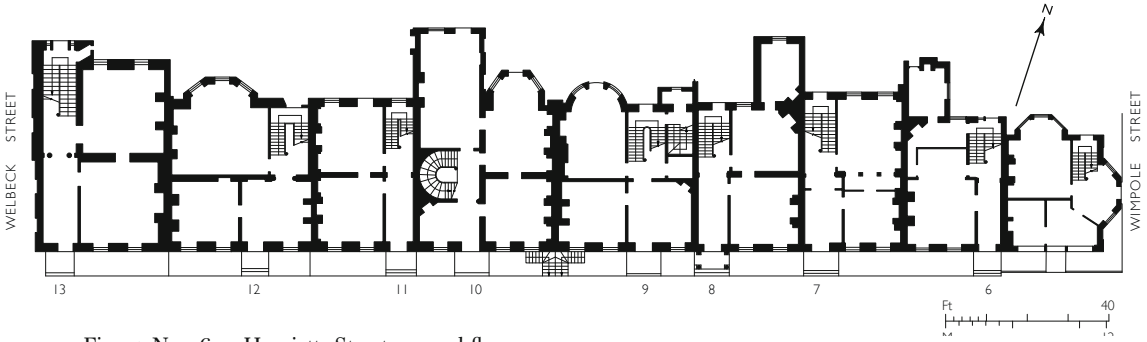

Fig. 14. Nos. 6–13 Henrietta Street, ground-floor plans, *c.*1805, drawing by Helen Jones based on historic plans.

seen through, but Gibbs might well have been involved alongside Timbrell and Phillips in what did transpire here in the early 1730s (Fig. 12). Unusually, there were originally integral coach-houses, against normal covenants. The facades incorporated strong Gibbsian keystones.

By 1725 Gibbs and Charles Bridgeman, the landscape gardener and another 'virtuoso', had agreed to put up houses for themselves on the street's north side. Gibbs built and lived in a house on the north-eastern Wimpole Street corner (the site of No. 5), from 1731 to his death in 1754. It had a large staircase-hall, the stair rising in a canted bay that projected towards Wimpole Street – mirrored by a stair-less bay on the house opposite at No. 1 Wimpole Street – but was demolished without record in 1843. He was also speculatively involved with the group at Nos. 8–11 Henrietta Street, which he designed and saw built in 1727–32 (Figs. 13 and 14). These were quite various; there were more keystones, rusticated pilasters and stone cornices. No. 8 was for Bridgeman, who intended to live there, though he never did, the house remaining incomplete or empty until the early 1740s, after his death (Fig. 15). Elsewhere in this group there were some eminent early residents: Lady Bingley, newly widowed, moved from Cavendish Square to No. 9

Fig. 15. No. 8 Henrietta Street, built *c.*1730 for Charles Bridgeman, view to the first-floor landing in 1955. (*Historic England Archive, London Region collection BM9167–5491*)

Fig. 16. 11 Henrietta Street, first-floor front-room ceiling in situ in 1954.
(*Historic England Archive, London Region collection 54–1932*)

in 1731; William Bromley MP had No. 10, with its unusual semi-round staircase, by 1735 to his death in 1737; and Baptist Noel, fourth Earl of Gainsborough, was first into No. 11, the smallest house in the row, from around 1732. Prior to demolition of the whole row in 1956, the first-floor front room of this house was taken down for installation in the Victoria and Albert Museum's period rooms (Figs. 16 and 17). Its features tally well with those presented in Gibbs's *Book of Architecture* of 1728. Edward Harley, the second Earl of Oxford's cousin, had No. 12, the street's widest house, from *c.*1735 to 1741 when he became the third Earl and moved across the road to No. 16 in Thomas's group of bigger houses, which, along with Timbrell and Phillip's No. 18, was not finally demolished until the 1970s.[11]

There were other, rather miscellaneous, engagements. In 1729–30 the Earl of Oxford erected a manorial courthouse, watch-house and gaol at the south end of Marylebone Lane, on its west side. Gibbs designed this, seemingly without payment, to include an over-door sculpture of the Earl of Oxford's arms and supporters, carved by Michael Rysbrack, who lived a stone's throw away, on the east side of Vere Street. The building was conveyed to the parish in 1733, and replaced in 1803–4.[12]

Fig. 17. First-floor front room from 11 Henrietta Street as re-erected at the Victoria and Albert Museum. (*Victoria & Albert Museum*)

Gibbs returned his attention to Cavendish Square in 1735, the Duke of Chandos having asked him to design an extension to his house on the north side of the square's Harley Street corner. Deemed too expensive, this, like much of what Chandos initiated, remained unexecuted. In 1741 Gibbs valued a different Cavendish Square house for the Harleys. There is also a plan surviving among Gibbs's drawings for 'Mr Hanbury's house',[13] referring to William Hanbury, for whom Gibbs had worked at Kelmarsh Hall, Northamptonshire. Hanbury's town house was built in 1744 on the south-east corner of what is now Cavendish Place, where it met Edward Street, now obliterated by Upper Regent Street. This was part of a speculation by William Wilton, an entrepreneurial plasterer and a veteran Marylebone developer who had been involved with house-building on Henrietta Street.[14]

Gibbs's work in and on the Cavendish–Harley estate was extensive, but it was highly varied, irregular, and probably informal. He ducked in and out to help, especially with Cavendish Square, but he was not in any strong sense supervising the estate's layout or architecture. He took on similarly informal tasks for the parish of St Marylebone, as a leading inhabitant. In the early 1730s he supervised the erection of a seven foot-high perimeter wall around what is now Paddington Street Gardens South, granted to the parish by the Earl of Oxford and intended as a burial ground, and for almshouses and a workhouse that were not seen through. The modest fifteenth-century parish church on Marylebone High Street was closed as unsafe in 1741, and Gibbs was consulted about repair. He advised rebuilding and presented plans for a new church. But by this time the Earl of Oxford, now bankrupt, was in no position to help, and Gibbs's scheme was ignored in favour of a makeshift rebuild by John Lane. Whether despite, because of, or without reference to this snub, Gibbs left £100 in his will for enlargement of the church with a burial vault, but ten years later in 1764 his scheme was again bypassed as too expensive. Finally, in a rather sad sequence of might-have-beens relating to Marylebone's church, William Chambers's mid-1770s designs for a new church (intended for the High Street, then for what became Manchester Square) are said to have derived from Gibbs's round-church scheme for St Martin-in-the Fields.

Despite all this, there is a memorial to James Gibbs in St Marylebone's nineteenth-century parish church.[15]

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

1 This article brings together material related to James Gibbs that is already published, scattered on a topographical basis in Philip Temple and Colin Thom (eds), *Survey of London*, volumes 51 and 52: *South-East Marylebone* (London, 2017). Other and primary sources are therefore generally not cited here. They can be found through the page references to the Survey volumes (hereafter *SoL*).

2 *SoL*, p. 7, quoting *The Tatler.*

3 *SoL*, pp. 7–9; H.M. Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600–1840* (London, 2008 ed.), pp. 416–17, 424; Gawen Hamilton, *A Conversation of Virtuosis at the King's Arms,* 1734–5.

4 J. Summerson, *Georgian London* (London, 2003 ed.), p. 99; J. Summerson, *Architecture in Britain 1530 to 1830* (London, 1970 ed.), p. 350.

5 *SoL*, pp. 233–8.

6 *SoL*, p. 762.

7 *SoL*, pp. 185, 193, 229–30.

8 *SoL*, pp. 217–18.

9 *SoL*, pp. 220–4. I am grateful to Richard Hewlings for pointing out the Gibbsian nature of these features.

10 J. Summerson, 'Henrietta Place, Marylebone, and its associations with James Gibbs', *London Topographical Record*, 21 (1958), pp. 26–36; G. Balderston, 'Rysbrack's busts of James Gibbs and Alexander Pope from Henrietta Street', *Georgian Group Journal*, 11 (2001), pp. 1–28; G. Balderston, 'William Thomas, Steward of the "Marybone" Estate', *Georgian Group Journal*, 14 (2004), pp. 287–307.

11 *SoL*, pp. 238–41.

12 *SoL*, pp. 147–8. Gordon Balderston has drawn my attention to evidence in the City of Westminster Archives Centre (M: Acc 449/1) that Vere Street takes its name from a connection between the manor of Tyburn and Robert de Vere, fifth Earl of Oxford, in the thirteenth century, and not from the Harleys' own lineage.

13 RIBA Drawings Collection, SB68/2.

14 *SoL*, pp. 210, 555.

15 *SoL*, pp. 69, 70, 108.