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GIBBS AND THE UNIVERSITIES

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Gibbs grew up on the edge of a university town, Aberdeen¹, but he did not make his first foray into university architecture until after he had established his reputation in London with the building of the church of St Mary-le-Strand (1714–17). His Catholic upbringing and his early Jacobite connections made him *persona non grata* in government circles after the Hanoverian succession, and in 1717 he was dismissed from his official position as one of the two surveyors under the Fifty New Churches Act of 1711. But he built up a private practice that included substantial alterations to Wimpole Hall (Cambridgeshire) for Edward Harley, later second Earl of Oxford, the son of Queen Anne's Lord Treasurer. And in 1719 Harley recommended him to the Fellows of St John's College, Cambridge, who wanted to build a new chapel there. That project came to nothing, but later in the same year Gibbs prepared designs for a proposed new ceremonial hall (*aula*) or Senate House for the University of Cambridge, and in 1724 he was commissioned by King's College to prepare designs for the completion of its long-delayed residential buildings. By then he had already been mentioned as one of the 'ablest architects' to be consulted by the trustees of the will of the wealthy physician John Radcliffe (1652–1714) in connection with plans to build a new library in the heart of Oxford; this eventually resulted in the building of what has been known since the nineteenth century as the Radcliffe Camera.

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge is smaller than Oxford, and its townscape is still dominated by the buildings of the constituent colleges rather than those of the University without which they would never have existed. The University's buildings, comprising lecture rooms (Schools), a Library and a meeting room (Regent House) for the governing Senate, were grouped around a courtyard built piecemeal in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries; it remains substantially intact, ignored by, and virtually inaccessible to, the crowds of visitors who throng the main streets. Until the second half of the eighteenth century the buildings were hidden away behind houses to the west of Trumpington Street, one of the city's two main thoroughfares, and were entered from a narrow street running along their eastern side (Fig. 1).² The degree ceremonies that marked the culmination of the academic year were transferred from the Regent House to the University church of Great St Mary, east of the Market Place, in the sixteenth century, and in 1574 a narrow passageway was cut through from the entrance gateway of the Schools complex to the west door of the church.³ Meanwhile the colleges embarked on large building schemes of their own, gradually appropriating the land on the east bank of the River Cam, formerly used for wharves and warehouses. Despite a drop in the number of student admissions (matriculations) in the years following the Restoration of 1660,⁴ their building schemes continued well into the eighteenth century.

Cambridge's Schools form part of one of the oldest collections of purpose-built university buildings in Europe, but they were, and still are, dwarfed by the mighty chapel of King's College immediately to the south. Begun in 1448 but not finished until 1515, this magnificent building exhausted the college's funds, and the large plot of land designated in 1449 by the founder, King Henry VI, for a quadrangle of residential buildings and a hall to the south of the chapel was still 'covered with weeds and rubbish' at the beginning of the 18th century.⁵ The college's members lived in a small

court or quadrangle begun in 1441 to the north of the Chapel, abutting onto the University Schools and originally intended, in the words of a memorandum compiled in 1719, 'to make shift withall till the College was finisht'. The buildings were dilapidated, overcrowded and 'extremely unhealthfull', and the hall and some of the chambers had recently been severely damaged by fire.⁶

In about 1712 the newly-appointed Provost, John Adams, a Chaplain to Queen Anne, asked the elderly Sir Christopher Wren to supply a design for completing the empty quadrangle to the south of the

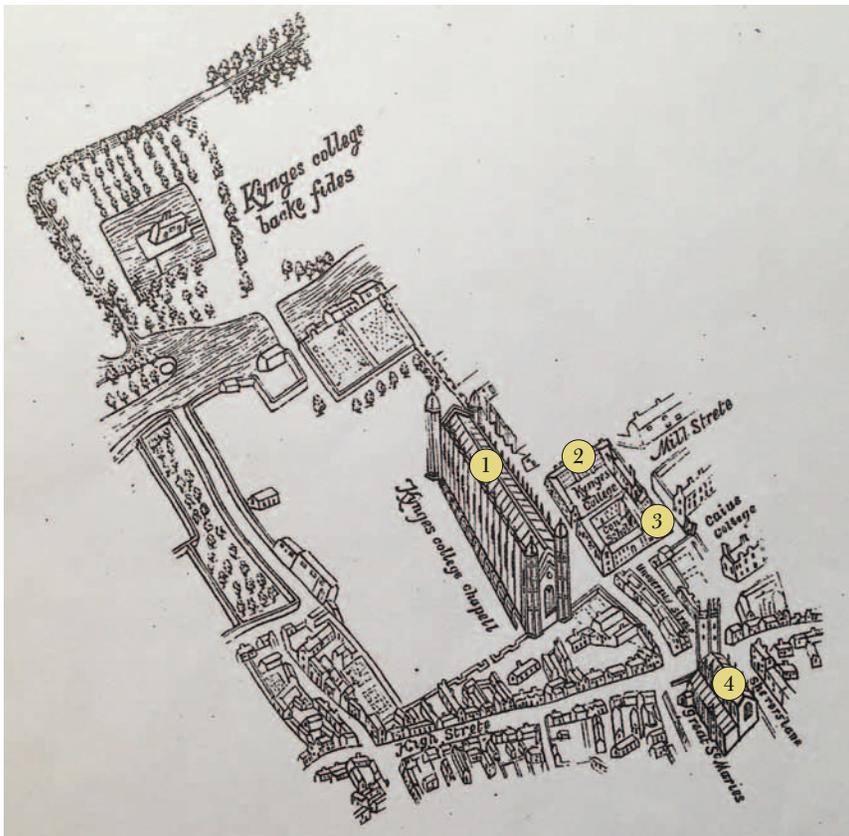


Fig. 1. Hammond map of Cambridge (from Willis & Clark, i, p. 553).

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|-----------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. King's College Chapel | 3. University Schools |
| 2. King's College old court | 4. Great St Mary's Church |

Chapel. He passed the commission on to Nicholas Hawksmoor, who made a wooden model of the residential block for the college's Fellows, designed to close the courtyard to the west.⁷ This was shown to Adams, who commented that the building should be placed further to the west so as 'to give a full view of the Chappel' and that a plainer design, with pilasters substituted for the columns framing the central archway would be 'more answerable to the Chappel'; he went on to suggest that 'all Ornaments might be avoided; this too the Rather because something of that Nature is in the Founders Will.'⁸ Hawksmoor then produced a second model with pilasters substituted for the columns to which the Provost had objected.⁹ But the project languished after the Hanoverian Succession in 1714, and when it was revived Hawksmoor was dropped in favour of Gibbs.

In 1712 Hawksmoor also prepared the first of two designs for reshaping the centre of the medieval city. If implemented they would have turned a country market town into a Baroque showpiece, Hawksmoor pointing out in his marginal notes to one of his maps that 'Cavalier [Domenico] Fontana and others has done the same in cases of Like Nature' in Rome.¹⁰ A new east-west route would be opened through the south side of the market place with a vista closed at its far end by the east front of King's College chapel. A 'forum' containing a new University church and 'commencement hall' – an *aula* for degree ceremonies – would face the still-unbuilt entrance front of the quadrangle at King's; another quadrangle, for the University's lecture rooms and library, would go up on a site in front of the Schools, already earmarked for that purpose in 1669.¹¹ Wren had made ingenious plans to build a permanent new Senate House and library here in about 1675,¹² but nothing had happened, and when David Loggan made his map of Cambridge in 1690 the site contained an inn, together with numerous small houses that had gone up piecemeal over the previous centuries.

Then in 1719 King George I presented the University with over 30,000 books and manuscripts

given by the late Bishop of Ely, John Moore, occasioning the following lines from Joseph Trappe, Professor of Poetry at Oxford:

'The King, observing with judicious eyes
The state of both his Universities
To one [Oxford] he sent a regiment. For why?
That learned body wanted loyalty.
To t'other he sent books, as well discerning
How much that loyal body wanted learning.'

To which this rejoinder was made:

'The King to Oxford sent his troops of horse,
For Tories own no argument but force.
With equal care to Cambridge books he sent,
For Whigs allow no force but argument'¹³

The existing library, with its 16,000 books, was housed in 'two mean rooms of moderate size' on the first floor of the Schools.¹⁴ The King's bequest of books made it essential to take over more of this building and to give it a more impressive architectural presence; it also paved the way to providing the University with the impressive ceremonial *aula* or Senate House that it had long lacked, and which Oxford had acquired with the building of Sir Christopher Wren's Sheldonian Theatre in 1664–9. A committee (syndicate) of University notables was formed in 1719, and the passing of an Act of Parliament in 1720 enabled the purchase of the site to go ahead. By then Gibbs had already prepared an abortive scheme to build the new chapel at St John's College,¹⁵ for which funds had been sought from Edward Harley. Gibbs had been employed by Harley to enlarge Wimpole Hall, only a few miles from Cambridge; he went on to design the chapel there, finished in 1724, and a splendid library for Harley's books.¹⁶ And in 1721 the Senate House syndics thanked Harley for forwarding 'Mr Gibbs's design for our building'.¹⁷

Three undated drawings by Gibbs of c.1719–21 show a free-standing, rectangular building, clearly influenced by Wren's abandoned scheme of c.1675, with the ceremonial hall at first-floor level, reached

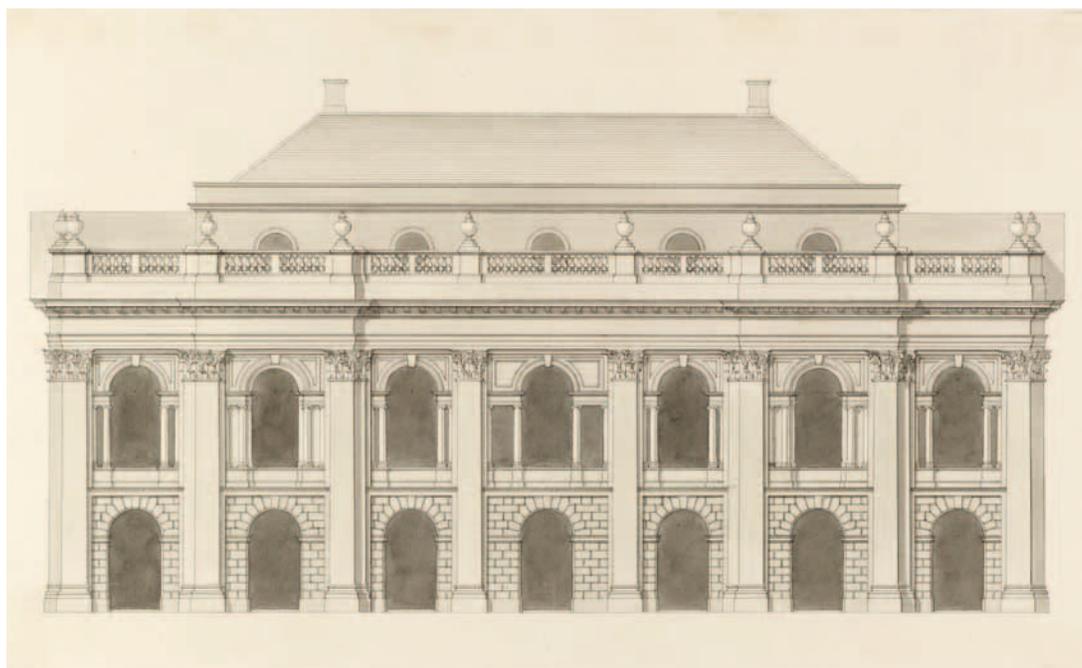


Fig. 2. Cambridge, Senate House early design c.1719–21. (© Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, WA 1925.341.76)

by staircases from a ground-floor *cryptoporticus*: a feature that was to resurface in the Radcliffe Library in Oxford. The hall would have been lit by attic windows and enfolded within a two-storeyed loggia articulated by giant Corinthian columns, with rusticated arches at ground level and *serliana* openings above (Fig. 2), echoing the external treatment of Palladio's Basilica in Vicenza.¹⁸ This scheme may relate to one supplied by James Burrough, a Fellow of the adjacent Gonville and Caius College and one of the syndics, who later went on to become an unofficial architectural advisor to the University. It envisaged a hall raised up on 'Rustick Pillars, not unlike those that support Lincoln's Inn Chapel' in London (1619–23). It has been convincingly suggested that the author of this lost design may not have been the twenty-year-old Burrough, a competent amateur architect but no

youthful prodigy, but John James, who had stepped into Gibbs's shoes after his dismissal as one of the Commissioners for the Fifty New Churches in London, and who is known to have been consulted about the project;¹⁹ the University paid him twenty guineas in January 1723 for his 'Pains taken ... in coming to Camb. measuring ye ground & drawing plans for a new Commencement [Senate] House, tho' we proceeded on another Scheme'.²⁰ This, more ambitious, scheme, first prepared by Gibbs in 1721, was for a group of buildings disposed around a three-sided courtyard, with a five-bay central block containing a first-floor Library and two long wings projecting forward towards the University Church: a layout which has a loose resemblance to that of the Capitol in Rome as rebuilt by Michelangelo, which Gibbs had seen. The south range was to be devoted to a printing house for the University Press,

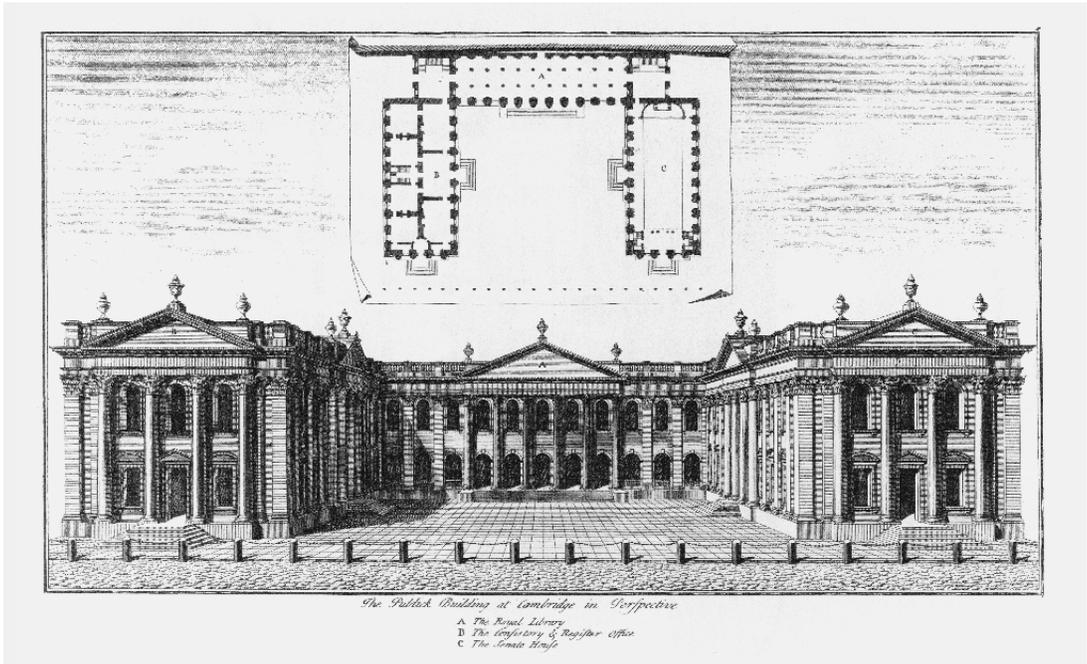


Fig. 3. 'The Publick Building at Cambridge', from Gibbs, *Book of Architecture*, p. 36.

a Registry and a consistory court for the Vice-Chancellor, the north range to the Senate House.²¹ Early in 1722 Gibbs, despite his covert Catholicism, was 'retain'd to supervise and conduct' the work, taking with him to London 'Mr Burrough's Plan of intended public buildings' and making 'what improvements he shall think necessary upon it'.²²

Gibbs continued to make amendments to the plans for the 'Publick Building'. A revised scheme of 1723 shows the 'Royal Library' widened to seven bays;²³ by 1728, when he published a plan and elevation in his *Book of Architecture*, it had been further widened to eleven bays (Fig. 3).²⁴ Meanwhile work on the Senate House had begun in 1722, and it was completed in 1730, enabling the books donated by King George I to be moved into the premises vacated in the old Schools courtyard. The plan could not be more simple: a rectangle lit,

like Inigo Jones's Banqueting House at Whitehall Palace, by two layers of windows, with the staircases squeezed into the corners. The walls are faced with white Portland ashlar supplied by the master-mason Christopher Cass, contractor for St Martin-in-the-Fields, to whom a first payment of £1583 was made in 1732; the joints – as in John Webb's King Charles Building at Greenwich – are heavily emphasised, the walls articulated by giant Corinthian columns and pilasters modelled on those of the Temple of Castor and Pollux in the Roman Forum, also a feature of St Martin-in-the-Fields, begun in the same year. The central bays are framed by engaged temple fronts – another feature of the King Charles Building – and the roofs are hidden by a balustrade, as in Louis XIV's long-demolished chateau at Marly in France (1679–83), which Gibbs had indicated in 1716 that he would like to visit.²⁵ The architectural

language, rich and dignified, owes a great deal to that of Wren and his Office of Works team, but without any Mannerist eccentricities or grandiose straining after effect. The galleried interior (Fig. 4) is mainly notable for its woodwork, by James Essex, a local man; he received several payments for wainscoting and ‘Joiners & Carvers Work’, starting in 1726, and there were also payments to Isaac Mansfield for plasterwork and to the Swiss-Italian stuccoists Giuseppe Artari and Giovanni Bagutti, both of whom also worked at St Martin-in-the-Fields, for the ‘ornaments of the ceiling.’²⁶

Had Gibbs’s plans been completed as intended, Cambridge would have acquired a complex of university buildings as grand as any of the time in Europe. But he was balked, initially by changes of mind of a kind not unknown among academics then and now. Trenches for the foundations of the south range were dug in 1727, but work was brought to an abrupt halt after opposition from the Fellows of the neighbouring Gonville and Caius College. Gibbs’s proposed ‘Royal Library’ would have interrupted the view along the ‘little street’ running alongside the entrance range of the Schools from the college’s Gate of Honour (1573–5): a crucial part of the ceremonial route devised by Dr Caius, the college’s founder.²⁷ Though he had originally backed Gibbs’s plans, the Master, Dr Gooch, now argued that each of the new buildings should be free-standing, leaving the route between the central block and the two wings open. Gibbs insisted that his final, ‘attached’, scheme was ‘more convenient, more Beautifull, and less chargeable than the other impracticable wild Scheme’ of separating the buildings.²⁸ But his plans for the library and south range, whether attached or detached, were finally shelved because, as he laconically remarked in his manuscript autobiography, ‘the University had no money to finish them’.²⁹ The trenches were filled in and the east range of the Schools, containing the expanded University Library, was not rebuilt until 1754–8, after Gibbs’s death, to a handsome Neo-Palladian design

by Stephen Wright, protégé of the University’s Chancellor the Duke of Newcastle. The buildings between it and the University Church were removed at about the same time, giving a clear view of the south front of the Senate House across what became known as Senate House Yard (Fig. 5).³⁰ Finally in 1824–9 the old Provost’s Lodge in front of King’s College was demolished,³¹ since when the Senate House has closed the northward vista along what is now King’s Parade.

In 1724, soon after work had begun on the Senate House, Gibbs was brought in by the new Provost of King’s College, Andrew Snape, to design a residential block on the west side of the still-empty courtyard there. Gibbs followed Hawksmoor by proposing a detached building faced in Portland stone, seventeen bays long and three storeys high, in what he called his ‘handsome plain manner’, similar to that which he later employed at St Bartholomew’s Hospital in London (see pp. 91–111) and conforming to Henry VI’s own wish for a ‘substantial setting apart of superfluity’.³² The building was structurally complete by 1729, though it was not fitted out until well into the 1730s, after Gibbs had promised in 1731 to have it done ‘as chepe as the nature of the work will allow’; the total cost of the building to 1732 was £19,939.³³ Gibbs admired King’s College Chapel as ‘a beautiful building of the Gothick Tast, but the finest I ever saw’, and his new building complemented it without attempting to imitate its style. The central archway leading into the garden is framed by a huge Doric aedicule, which Gibbs intended to be surmounted by two reclining figures on the sides of the pediment.³⁴ Above it is a lunette or ‘Diocletian’ window; another, larger, pediment crowns the whole composition (Fig. 6). But only half of the rooms had been occupied by 1750, one of the occupants complaining that they were ‘so sumptuous and grand that it requires more than the narrow Appointment of a Fellow of the College to fit up in a manner as would become them’.³⁵

Gibbs also prepared plans for buildings on the



Fig. 4. Senate House interior. (*Historic England, CC76_00628*)



Fig. 5. Senate House from the south. (*Author*)



Fig. 6. King's College, Gibbs Building. (*Wikimedia Commons*)

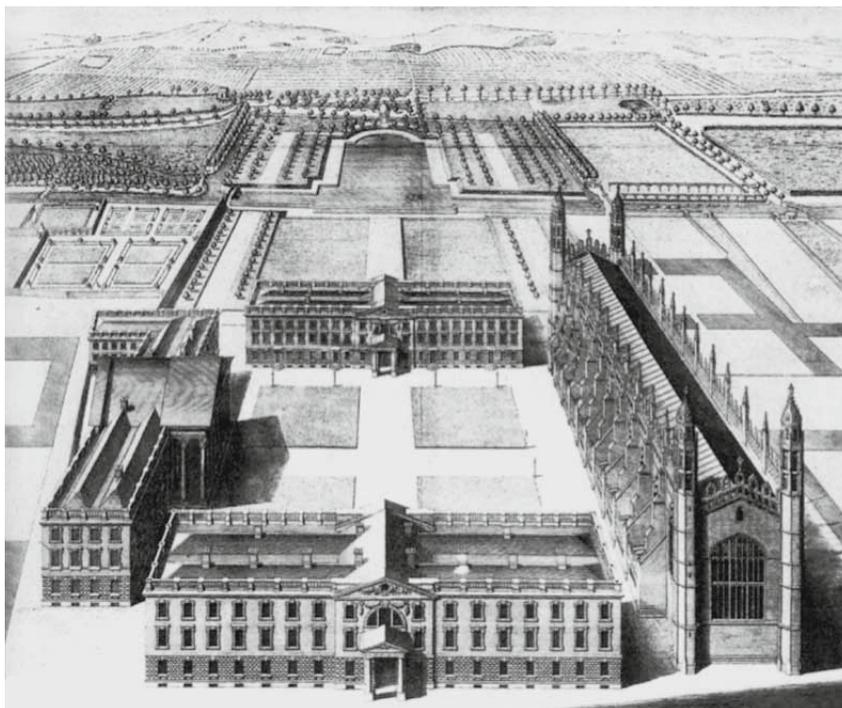


Fig. 7. King's College, prospect 'as intended to be finish'd' (engraving by James Essex, 1741).

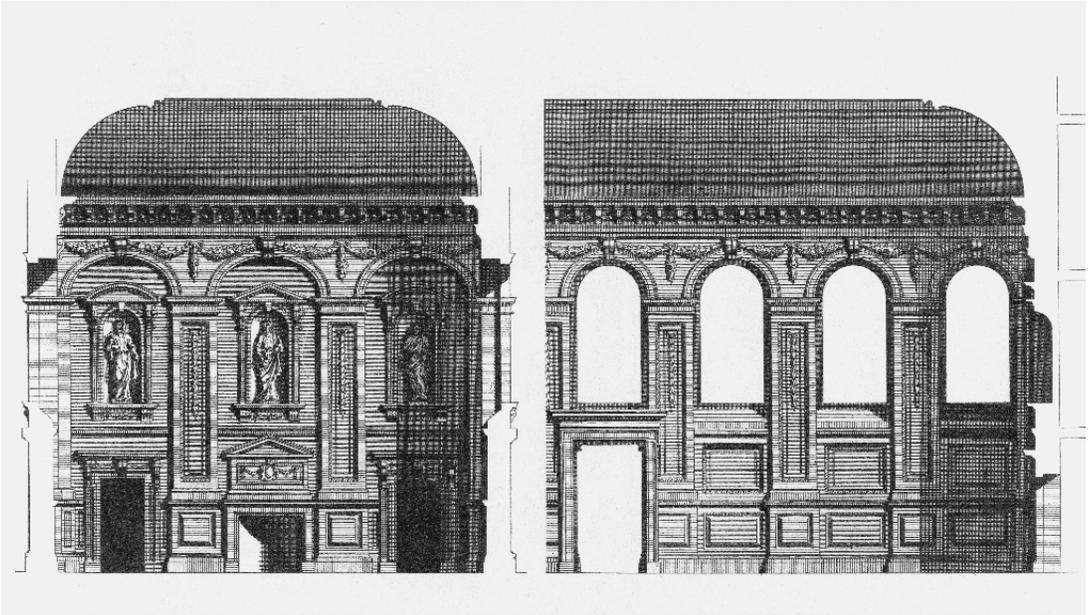


Fig. 8. King's College, hall interior, from Gibbs, *Book of Architecture*, p. 35.

other two sides of the courtyard, and they were illustrated in an engraving of 1741 by James Essex, showing the college 'as intended to be finish'd' (Fig. 7). A second residential block, almost identical to the one on the west side, would have faced the street to the east, and the south range, opposite the Chapel, would have contained the Hall, Buttery and Provost's Lodge, with a massive Corinthian portico at the centre.³⁶ Two engravings in the *Book of Architecture* show the intended internal treatment of the Hall which, had it been built, would surely have been one of the most impressive rooms of its date in England, eighty feet long, forty wide and forty high (Fig. 8). But, as Gibbs noted in his manuscript autobiography, the college 'could not finish the whole as was intended, for they had put their money into the South Sea [Company] ... and wer [sic] left in debt, and could with great difficulty pay for that West line which was finished.'³⁷ The debt on the Gibbs Building was not paid off until

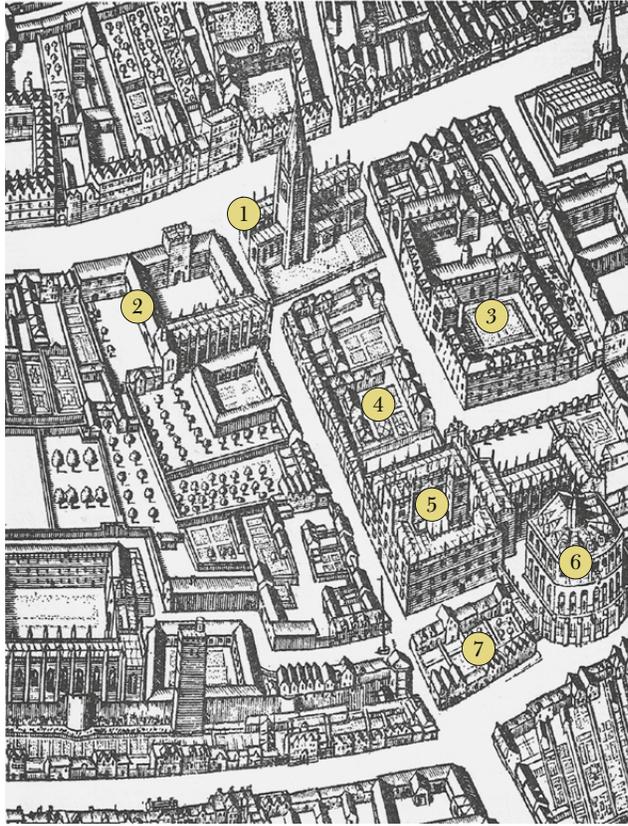
1768, and, despite the preparation of a grandiose scheme for completing the quadrangle by Robert Adam, and another by James Wyatt, the building of the remaining ranges had to wait until the early nineteenth century. By that time taste had shifted from Gibbs's classicism to the Tudor-Gothic of William Wilkins, and it was his cleverly contrived south range and screen to King's Parade that went up in 1824-9, its turrets, echoing those of the Chapel, flanking the view north to the Senate House: an effective visual prologue to Gibbs's building, though not the one he intended.

OXFORD

Gibbs's most ambitious plans for Cambridge were frustrated by the lack of resources; at Oxford the availability of copious funds allowed him to put up what is arguably his finest building. The funds came

Fig. 9. The site of Radcliffe Square, Oxford, (Detail, Loggan, Map of Oxford, 1675). North is at the bottom

- 1 University Church
- 2 All Souls College
- 3 Brasenose College
- 4 Site of Radcliffe Square
- 5 Schools Quadrangle
- 6 Sheldonian Theatre
- 7 Site of Clarendon Building



from the legacy of John Radcliffe, one of the most successful physicians of the time, who had numbered several members of the royal family, including William III and Queen Anne, among his patients.³⁸ Though ‘far from being a Bookish Man’, in the opinion of the antiquary Thomas Hearne, Radcliffe was ‘very ambitious of glory’, and, as early as 1712, Francis Atterbury, Dean of Christ Church, mentioned his ‘noble design of enlarging the Bodley library’.³⁹ And on his death in 1714 the unmarried Radcliffe left £40,000 for the purpose to be spent within ten years of the death of his last surviving sister.⁴⁰

Even before Radcliffe’s death, Nicholas Hawksmoor, Oxford University’s favoured architect, had made a design for a domed library to be attached to the west of the Bodleian Library’s Selden End, with a new library for Exeter College underneath

it to compensate the Fellows for losing part of their garden. But Radcliffe changed his mind about the site, stipulating in his will that the new library should be built in a more prominent position between the Schools Quadrangle (1614–19: now part of the Bodleian) and the largely fifteenth-century University church. The site, which eventually became Radcliffe Square, was bounded on either side by streets of small houses and by the buildings of two colleges, All Souls and Brasenose (Fig. 9).⁴¹ Already in 1629 it had been proposed as a fitting location for a ‘fair and capacious Room, advanced on Pillars’ which would serve as an *aula* for university ceremonies: part of Archbishop William Laud’s plan to remove these sometimes rowdy activities from the University church.⁴² That idea was abandoned after the Sheldonian Theatre was built in the 1660s to the

north of the University's fifteenth-century Divinity School.⁴³ But in about 1712–3, following consultations with George Clarke, Fellow of All Souls College and amateur architect, and William Lancaster, the Vice-Chancellor of the University, Hawksmoor made a series of ambitious plans for reshaping the townscape of central Oxford, analogous to those which he prepared for Cambridge. They involved the creation of a square or 'Forum Universitatis' between the Schools and the University church, with a monument in the middle,⁴⁴ and a new printing house (the Clarendon Building) to the north of the Schools, built to Hawksmoor's designs in 1712–15.⁴⁵ Here we see the germ of the idea that eventually resulted in the creation of Radcliffe Square with the Radcliffe Library in its midst.

Hawksmoor prepared a series of designs for the library after Radcliffe's death, most of them taking the form of a classical rotunda on a square base. This was an unusual plan for a library, but not quite a unique one; in 1705–10 the Duke of Brunswick had commissioned Hermann Korb, head of the office of works for the Duchy, to build a circular library at Wolfenbüttel in Germany to house 35,000 books bequeathed by one of his predecessors.⁴⁶ Hawksmoor may or may not have known about this building, but he would certainly have known about Wren's unexecuted design of about 1675 for a circular library at Trinity College, Cambridge, and he must also have been familiar with Wren's abortive plan for a mausoleum to Charles I.⁴⁷ This would have stood at the eastern end of St George's Chapel in Windsor Castle, and its external treatment, with a ring of engaged columns around the rotunda, anticipates both Hawksmoor's and Gibbs's schemes for Radcliffe's library. Hawksmoor was obsessed with classical antiquity and with the architecture of the Italian Renaissance that sought to revive it; his 1715 design for the library draws much of its inspiration from commemorative buildings in and around Rome, which he knew through illustrations. They included the mausoleum of Caecilia Metella

on the Appian Way, with its square base supporting a rotunda, and Bramante's Tempietto of c.1502–10 at S. Pietro in Montorio, the site of St Peter's martyrdom: another rotunda, but with a peristyle of Doric columns and a hemispherical dome.

In 1720, following a rise in the value of South Sea Company's stock, the Radcliffe Trustees, who included Gibbs's Cambridge patron Edward Harley, asked seven of the 'ablest architects', including Wren, Hawksmoor and Gibbs, to prepare designs for the new library. But the bubble burst, and in any case Radcliffe's legacy did not become available until the death of his last sister in 1736. With that in mind, the Trustees did not finish assembling the land until 1734, when they asked for designs from Hawksmoor and Gibbs, the only survivors of the architects approached in 1720. Their designs were strikingly different. Three sets of drawings by Gibbs (undated, but probably dating from c.1734–5) show a rectangular building which would have taken up most of the ground between the Schools Quadrangle and the University church (Fig. 10). Each set features a rusticated ground floor with a reading room upstairs, lit either by semicircular-headed windows or, in one case, by rows of lunette ('Diocletian') windows placed high on the wall to allow the maximum space for the bookcases.⁴⁸ The building was intended to house 'all Sorts of Books belonging to the Science of Physic, as Anatomy, Botany, Surgery, and Philosophy'.⁴⁹ Any of these schemes would have provided ample accommodation for the volumes (which had yet to be purchased); one of them would also have supplied heated ground-floor rooms which could have been used for lectures, or as accommodation for University professors. But Gibbs's building would have taken up most of what we now call Radcliffe Square, and in 1734–5 John Smallwell, Master of the Joiners' Company in London, made a wooden model (recently restored) which embodies Hawksmoor's final thoughts about the design: a domed rotunda on a square base with concave corners, joined to

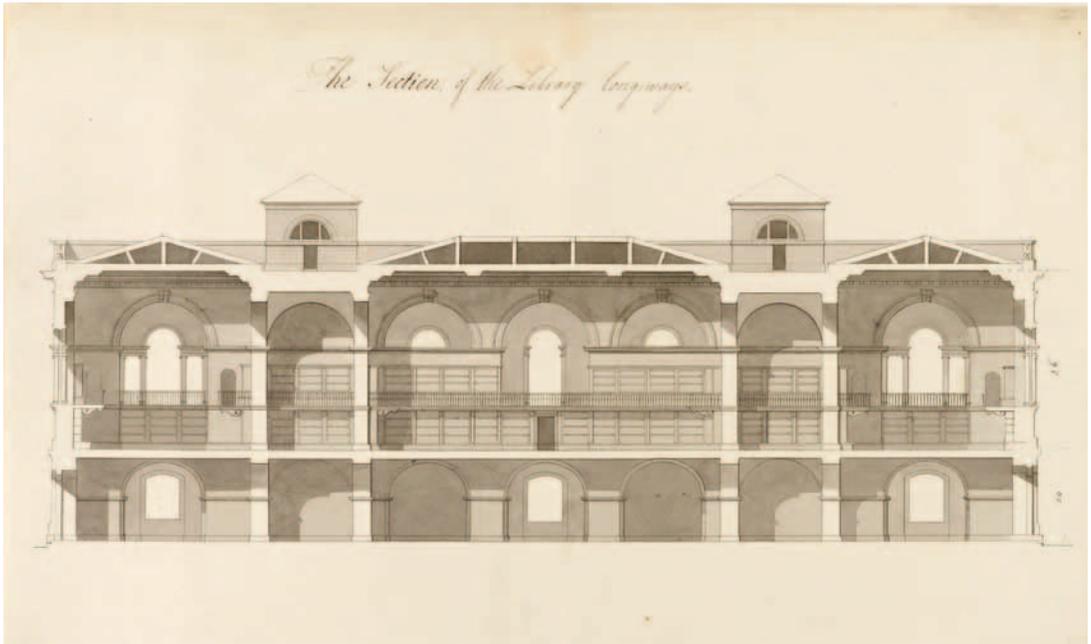


Fig. 10. James Gibbs, early rectangular design for the Radcliffe Library, cross-section.
 (© Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, WA 1925.340.245)

the Schools Quadrangle by a narrow link, and with massive internal walls radiating from the rotunda to support a stone dome (Fig. 11).⁵⁰ This would have preserved the open space of the intended square, but Hawksmoor died in 1736 before work could start. The commission then devolved to Gibbs, who had recently been consulted about building projects at Magdalen College, Oxford.⁵¹ His presumed Tory sympathies may have helped commend him to the Radcliffe Trustees, and in February 1735 he was paid £42 for supplying plans.⁵² The Trustees must have persuaded him to produce a modified version of Hawksmoor's model design, and it was this which he presented to them early in 1737, when the foundation stone was laid.

John Radcliffe may have wanted the new library to serve as his memorial; according to Thomas Salmon, writing in 1744, he aimed 'to perpetuate

his memory by the Library and therefore to give it the name of *Radcliff's Mausoleum*'.⁵³ He had been buried with great pomp in the University church, and he left instructions for a more conventional monument in his will, but none was made. Gibbs's Italian training had given him the opportunity, denied to Hawksmoor, of studying the monuments of ancient Rome at first hand, and his manuscript autobiography, written in the 1750s, included six drawings of the Pantheon, together with references to domed Renaissance and Baroque buildings that he had seen in Italy, including the church of S. Maria della Salute in Venice.⁵⁴ Some fifteen years before, he had prepared an (unexecuted) circular design for St Martin-in-the-Fields which he included, together with designs for assorted circular garden buildings, in his *Book of Architecture*, and in 1740 he designed an octagonal mausoleum to Marwood

William Turner in the churchyard at Kirkleatham in Yorkshire. In his hands the domed rotunda envisaged by Hawksmoor for the Oxford library was transformed into one of the most satisfying, and sophisticated, examples of eighteenth-century classical architecture in Europe

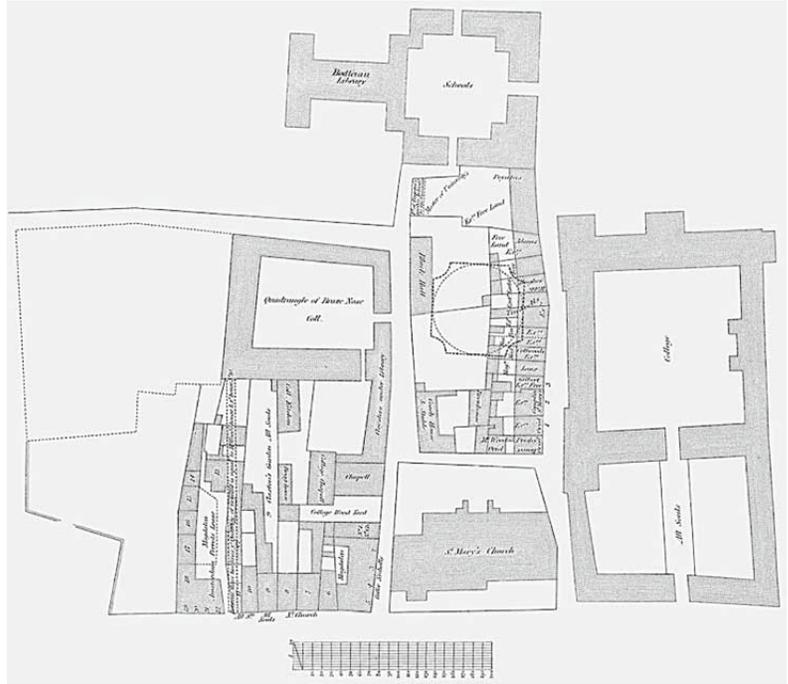
Before work began, Gibbs made some crucial changes to the design proposed in Hawksmoor's 1734–5 model. First, the site was moved south to a position between Brasenose and All Souls Colleges, doing away with the proposed link to the Schools Quadrangle and freeing up space around

the building (Fig. 12). So, rather than being seen as an appendage to the Bodleian Library, it became the focal point of one of the most impressive urban spaces of its date in Britain: for many people then and now the symbolic heart of Oxford University. Gibbs also introduced a sense of Baroque *sprezzatura* to the exterior, substituting what he called a 'regular Polygon of sixteen sides' for the heavy square base that Hawksmoor had intended, and replacing the single Corinthian columns on the upper floor with paired columns.⁵⁵ And in his hands the dome became substantially broader, its weight necessitating

Fig. 11. Radcliffe Camera model by John Smallwell, 1734–5, based on design by Hawksmoor, perhaps with amendments by Gibbs. (*Bodleian Library objects 11*)



Fig. 12. Plan of Radcliffe Square and its surroundings, redrawn from a 1718 original and showing the site of the Radcliffe Camera (Skelton, *Oxonia Antiqua Restaurata*, 1817).



substantial strengthening of the side walls and ground floor. Work started later in 1737 under the supervision of the Oxford master mason William Townsend and Francis Smith of Warwick, with whom Gibbs had collaborated at Ditchley Park (Oxfordshire); both men died within the next couple of years, and the work was then entrusted to their sons.⁵⁶ In a letter to Lord Noel Somerset (later fourth Duke of Beaufort), one of the Radcliffe Trustees, written in March 1738, when work on the basement was already well advanced, Gibbs expressed his concern that the masons should follow his design to the letter:

‘My Lord, all building should have three Essential qualities, use, strength, and beauty. Ther [sic] is none fitter to consider these better than your Architect, yet this he cannot do, unless he sees the building as it advances. This is not like a Counting house, that any workman will undertake to build by a plan given ... This fabrick is quite different, great care is to be had here. This is a Regular Ornamental pile of Building, formed according to the just rules of Architecture, and of due Symmetry and Proportion, and if finished it

should be one of the finest buildings in England. This is a publick Building seen by all sorts of people who come to Oxford from different parts of the World, and is to be applauded or condemned by the best Judges according as it is executed: and therefor [sic] requires the greater care and judgment in the performance for being all of stone.’⁵⁷

This letter can be read as an *apologia* not only for his Radcliffe Library design, but for his approach to public architecture in general.

Gibbs conceived the lower part of the building as a Renaissance-inspired *palazzo* façade wrapped around a cylindrical core, the ground floor faced with heavily emphasised blocks of the local Headington stone, the upper level with ashlar from the quarries at Taynton, near Burford in Oxfordshire.⁵⁸ His original intention was build a stone dome, and arches were built at intervals over the aisle surrounding the upstairs library in order to counteract its weight. This helps explain the ‘syncopated’ rhythm of wider and narrower bays

on the *piano nobile*, the former with two levels of windows lighting the interior, the latter with blind niches.⁵⁹ Arched doorways surmounted by pediments are placed at ground level underneath the wider bays, and blind niches under the narrower bays, contributing further to the syncopated effect. Lighting for the rotunda at the heart of the library comes from windows in the drum of the dome; they are separated by buttresses, visible from outside,

designed to take some of the outward thrust of the intended stone-built dome.

The first drawings, made at the beginning of 1737 and engraved soon afterwards (Fig. 13), show paired Corinthian pilasters on the upper level.⁶⁰ But in a variant design, perhaps dating from early in 1738, Gibbs achieved a more sculptural, dynamic effect by substituting three-quarter columns for the pilasters and by raising the height of the dome in



Fig. 13. James Gibbs, 1737 design for a circular library on a polygonal base, with flaps raised to show pilasters. (© Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, WA 1925,342.104)



Fig. 14. The Radcliffe Camera from the tower of St Mary's Church, Oxford. (*Wikimedia Commons*)

order to give it a more pointed profile with more pronounced ribs like those on the dome of St Peter's Basilica in Rome.⁶¹ This design was engraved in 1740, but in 1741, after the building had reached roof height, Gibbs, perhaps uncertain of the masons' ability to construct a stone dome which would have been wider than any other of its type in England, persuaded the Trustees to let him build it instead of wood framing with a lead covering. (Fig. 14). The final design, showing the timber framing of the outer dome, was engraved and published by Gibbs in *Bibliotheca Radcliviana*, a celebratory volume brought out in 1749 to mark the completion of the building (Fig. 15). By way of consolation for the failure to build a stone dome, John Townesend made a model, a twelfth of the size of the intended original. It was later placed on top of a pavilion in the garden of St Giles House (Fig. 16), home of Thomas

Rowney, one of Oxford's MPs, a little to the north of St John's College, where in 1742–3 Gibbs had designed the Ionic-columned stone screen within the hall.⁶²

The Radcliffe Library's tenebrous ground floor was conceived as a vestibule or *cryptoporticus*, open to visitors during the day but protected by iron grilles, made by Robert Bakewell, so as 'to preserve [it] from being a lurking Place for Rogues in the Night-time, or any other ill Use' (Fig. 17).⁶³ It is roofed by saucer domes of stone, like those over the nave and aisles of St Paul's Cathedral;⁶⁴ they rest on massive piers and are adorned with linear detailing reminiscent of that on the ceiling of Borromini's San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane in Rome (1634–43). From here a cantilevered oval staircase, deftly inserted into the northernmost bay, leads up to the light-filled rotunda; the staircase ironwork is by Thomas

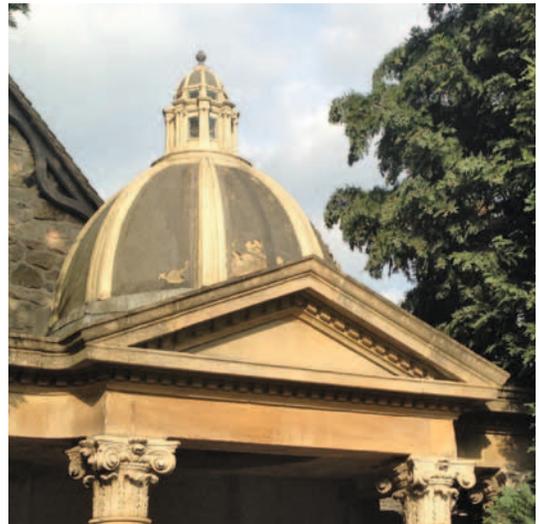
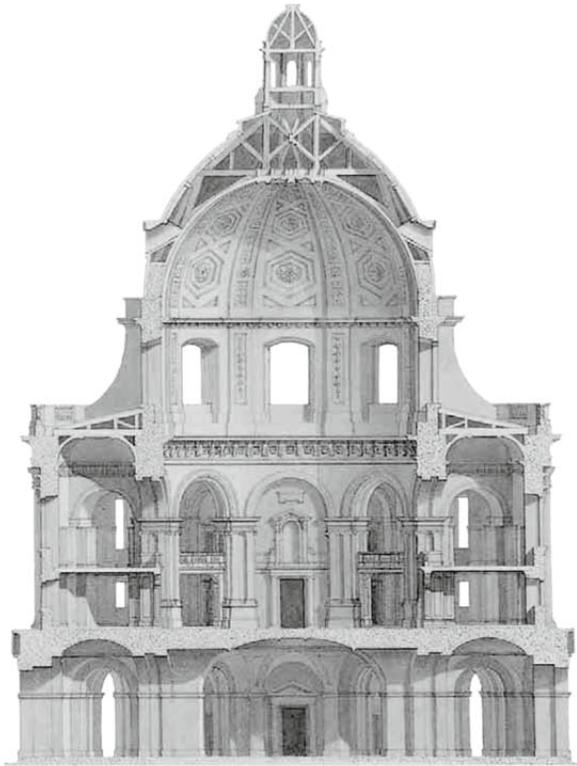


Fig. 16. Model of Gibbs's intended stone dome in the garden of St Giles House, Oxford. (Author)

Fig. 15. Cross-section of the Radcliffe Camera as completed in 1748 (Gibbs, *Bibliotheca Radcliviana*, pl. 9).



Fig. 17. Radcliffe Camera, rotunda interior
(Ackermann, *History of the University of Oxford*, 1814).

Wagg, and Charles Stanley and Thomas Roberts were responsible for the Rococo plasterwork on the ceiling.⁶⁵ Little used by readers for the first hundred years of the library's existence, the bookcases – by John Phillips and William Linnell – were arranged on two levels around the outer wall,⁶⁶ the lower level with ornamental Rococo-inspired plasterwork on the ceiling. A life-size statue of Radcliffe by Michael Rysbrack presides over the interior from within a niche over the entrance, and there is a bust of Gibbs, also by Rysbrack, dated 1726, over a doorway in the upper level leading to a spiral staircase:⁶⁷ an

unusual, though not unprecedented, example of self-memorialisation by an eighteenth-century British architect in one of his own buildings.⁶⁸

The centre of the rotunda was left open, unencumbered by furnishings and encircled by arches resting on piers articulated by Ionic pilasters (Fig. 18). The Rococo cartouches in the spandrels, seemingly designed by Gibbs himself, were executed by Giuseppe Artari,⁶⁹ and the frieze above is enriched with volutes; there is more plasterwork by Artari and Stanley on the ribbed ceiling, which is heavily influenced by Bernini's at Sant' Andrea al

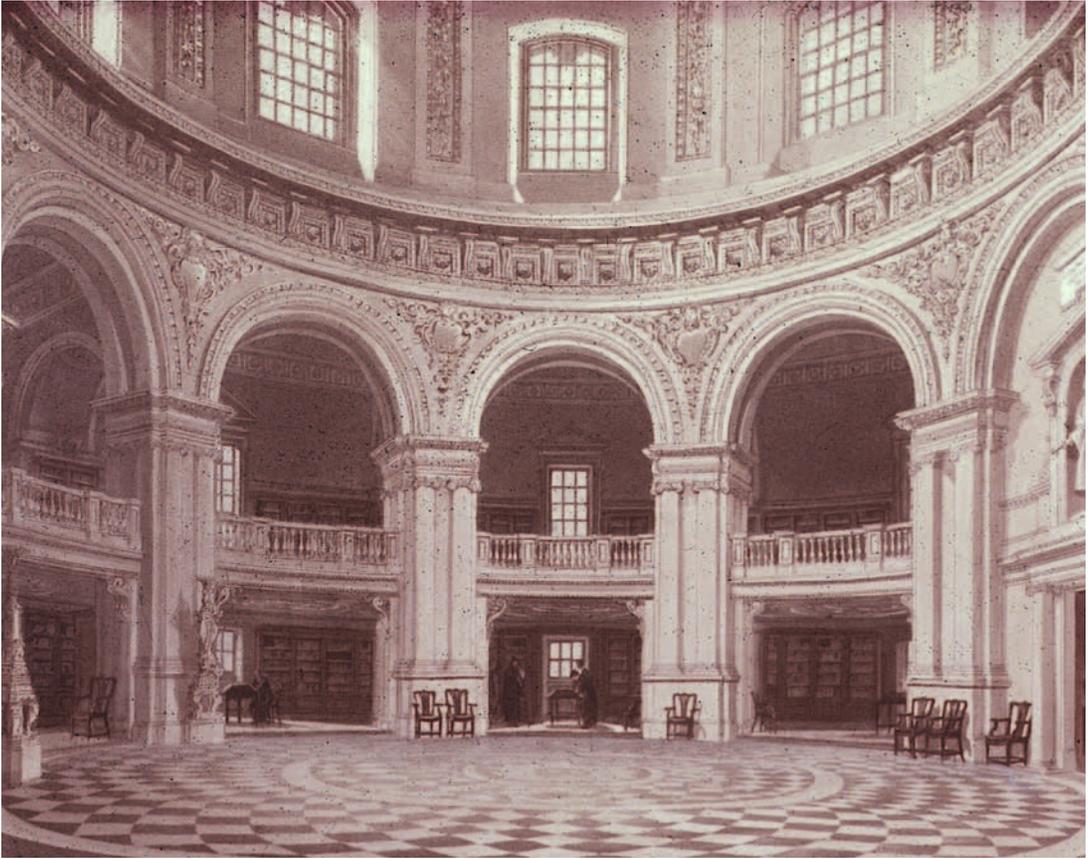


Fig. 18. Radcliffe Camera ground floor
(Ackermann, *History of the University of Oxford*, 1814).

Quirinale in Rome (1658–70) (Fig. 19). As in many of Gibbs's later buildings, such as the magnificent entrance hall at Ragley Hall, Warwickshire (1749–56), the Rococo exuberance of the detailing is tempered by the classical dignity of its architectural setting. Work on the interior was finished in 1748, by which time £43,226, 6s, 3d had been spent on the whole project:⁷⁰ more than twice the expenditure on Gibbs's two Cambridge buildings.

There are interesting parallels between Gibbs's buildings at Oxford and Cambridge, but there

are also some contrasts. Both universities had to respond to a growing demand for library space resulting from gifts of books, or of funds to purchase books. In Cambridge there was also a need for a suitably impressive setting for university ceremonial, something that had already been satisfied in Oxford with the building of Wren's Sheldonian Theatre. The Fellows of King's College wanted to complete the long-postponed quadrangle of residential buildings first envisaged by their royal founder in the fifteenth century, but the project was left incomplete for lack of funds. Financial difficulties also explain

Fig. 19. The interior of the Radcliffe Camera dome. (Author)



the failure to build the whole of Gibbs's complex of University buildings, of which the Senate House was intended as a constituent part. John Radcliffe's generosity ensured that money was not a problem at Oxford, and the library that bears his name demonstrates, like the Cambridge Senate House and the Fellows' (Gibbs) Building at King's, why he was such a successful architect. His buildings helped redefine the architectural character of England's two oldest universities, and they still give pleasure to anyone who appreciates the poetry of architecture.

ENDNOTES

- 1 He studied at Marischal College but did not take a degree: A. Roberts, 'James Smith and James Gibbs: seminarians and architects', *Architectural Heritage* 2 (Edinburgh, 1991), p. 50.
- 2 R. Willis and J.W. Clark, *The Architectural History of the University of Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1886), iii, pp. 4, 9–34.
- 3 Willis and Clark, iii, p. 39. There is a plan of the layout in T.P. Hudson, 'James Gibbs's designs for university buildings in Cambridge', *Burlington Magazine*, 114 (Dec, 1972), p. 843.
- 4 E. Leedham-Green, *A Concise History of the University of Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 90–91. Cambridge was admitting some 400 students a year in the early seventeenth century, but the number had fallen to a hundred by 1763: P. Searsby, *History of Cambridge University*, iii (Cambridge, 1997) p. 11.
- 5 Sir John Soane's Museum, Gibbs MS, f. 48.
- 6 King's College, Cambridge archives, GIB/3; Willis and Clark, i, pp. 322–3, 367–70.
- 7 A. Doig, *The architectural drawings collection of King's College, Cambridge* (1979), p. 23.
- 8 King's College, Cambridge archives, GIB 1/4; Willis and Clark, i. pp. 557–8.

- 9 K. Downes, *Hawksmoor* (1959), pp. 110–7. Hawksmoor’s two models are preserved in the College Library.
- 10 British Library (BL), King’s Maps 8/58b; Downes, *Hawksmoor*, pp. 117–121. No designs for the individual buildings appear to have survived, and it is not clear whether or not Hawksmoor prepared the plans on his own initiative.
- 11 *An inventory of the Historical Monuments in the City of Cambridge*, i (Royal Commission on Historical Monuments [RCHM], 1959), p. 9.
- 12 Willis and Clark, iii, pp. 39–42; A. Geraghty, *The Architectural Drawings of Sir Christopher Wren at All Souls College, Oxford* (2007), pp. 27–29.
- 13 Willis and Clark, iii, p. 29, note 2.
- 14 Zacharias von Uffenbach (1710), quoted Willis and Clark, iii, p. 29.
- 15 Friedman, *Gibbs*, p. 225.
- 16 J. Lees-Milne, *Earls of Creation* (1962), pp. 212–6. The books were sold after Harley’s death and constitute the nucleus of the Harleian Collection in the British Library.
- 17 Hist MSS Comm, *Portland*, v, p. 730.
- 18 Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, Gibbs Collection, WA 1925.340, ff. 40–42; WA 1925.341, f. 63.
- 19 Hudson, *loc. cit.*, p. 844.
- 20 Cambridge University archives, Registry (*sic*) book 46/10, f. 44. A similar sum was paid to William Dickinson, Surveyor to Westminster Abbey, who submitted the plans jointly with James. I am grateful to Richard Hewlings for this reference.
- 21 Ashmolean, Gibbs Collection, WA 1925.341, f. 113.
- 22 Willis and Clark, iii, pp. 44–7.
- 23 Ashmolean, Gibbs Collection, WA 1925.341, f. 44. A variant version, engraved by H. Hulsbergh, shows a modified plan for the south wing: BL, King’s Maps, VIII, 68a.
- 24 Gibbs, *Book of Architecture* (1728), pl. 36.
- 25 Letter to the Earl of Mar, 22 August 1716, Hist. MSS Comm., *Stuart*, ii, p. 404, quoted in B. Little, *Life and Work of James Gibbs* (1955), p. 43. There is no indication that Gibbs ever saw the chateau, but he may have been familiar with Perelle’s engraving of it.
- 26 Cambridge University archives, ‘Expences about the publick University Buildings’. I am grateful to Richard Hewlings for sending me a photocopy of this document. The total cost, including the purchase of leases, was £14,910, 13s, 9d.
- 27 Hudson, *loc. cit.*, p. 843; V. Morgan and C. Brooke, *History of Cambridge University*, ii, (2004), p. 58.
- 28 Willis and Clark, iii, pp. 50–3.
- 29 Sir John Soane’s Museum, Gibbs MS, f. 48.
- 30 The cleared space is shown in an engraving of 1769: Cambridge University Library, Views x.2 (26).
- 31 Willis and Clark, i., pp. 544, 54.
- 32 Gibbs, *Book of Architecture*, p. ix; Friedman, *Gibbs*, pp. 233–4; RCHM, pp. 134–5. The main master mason was Christopher Cass; the carpenters were James Essex – who, like Cass, had worked at the Senate House – Thomas Phillips and Benjamin Timbrell, who had worked for Gibbs on St. Martin-in-the-Fields.
- 33 Gibbs to the senior bursar, 22 April 1731, quoted in Willis and Clark, i., p. 563; King’s College, Cambridge archives, GIB/6 (Building Accounts, 1723–35).
- 34 They are shown in Gibbs, *Book of Architecture*, pl. 34, but were omitted for lack of money.
- 35 Friedman, *Gibbs*, p. 234. See p. 131, Fig. 10.
- 36 The proposed internal treatment of the Hall is shown in Gibbs, *Book of Architecture*, pl. 35.
- 37 Sir John Soane’s Museum, Gibbs MS, f. 48v.
- 38 Friedman, *Gibbs*; H.M. Colvin, *Unbuilt Oxford* (New Haven and London, 1983), pp. 64–73. For Radcliffe’s life and career, see A. Quinton, ‘Dr John Radcliffe, the benefactor and his benefactions’, *Jnl. of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 79 (1986), pp. 310–7, and *ODNB*.
- 39 S. Hebron, *Dr Radcliffe’s Library* (Oxford, 2014), pp. 19, 24.
- 40 S.G. Gillam, *The Building Accounts of the Radcliffe Camera* (Oxford Historical Society, new series 13, 1958), p. vii; I. Guest, *Dr John Radcliffe and his Trust* (1991), p. 52. Radcliffe never married.
- 41 Guest, *op. cit.*, p. 130. There were fourteen houses along Catte Street, facing All Souls College, soon to be extended by Hawksmoor, and more in School Street, owned by the adjacent Brasenose College and used as student lodgings.
- 42 P. Heylin, *Cyprianus anglicus* (1668); A. Geraghty, *The Sheldonian Theatre* (New Haven and London, 2013), pp. 21–4.
- 43 Now part of the Bodleian Library complex.
- 44 Downes, *Hawksmoor*; R. White, *Nicholas Hawksmoor and the replanning of Oxford* (1997), pp. 84–9; Hebron, *op. cit.*, pp. 25–34. Hawksmoor

- also proposed a 'Forum Civitatis' at Carfax, the city's central crossroads.
- 45 Geoffrey Tyack, 'The Clarendon Building: printing house and propylaeum', *Bodleian Library Record*, 23/1 (2010), pp. 41–63.
- 46 It was demolished in 1886.
- 47 A. Geraghty, *The Architectural Drawings of Sir Christopher Wren at All Souls College* (2007), pp. 27–7.
- 48 Gillam (ed.), *Building Accounts*, pp. 162–6 and pls. 18–27. The drawings are in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, Gibbs Collection, WA 1925.341, 117–132).
- 49 J. Pointer, *Oxoniensis Academia* (1749), p. 145.
- 50 Gillam (ed.), *Building Accounts*, p. 159 and pls. 8–13; Hebron, *op. cit.*, pp. 39–41 and pls II–III. It has been suggested (Guest, *op. cit.*, p. 137) that Gibbs may have collaborated with Hawksmoor on the design of the model, which is kept in the Bodleian Library.
- 51 R. White, *The Architectural Drawings of Magdalen College, Oxford* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 2, 6.
- 52 Gillam (ed.), *Building Accounts*, p. 180.
- 53 *The Present State of the Universities* (1744).
- 54 Sir John Soane's Museum, Gibbs MS, ff. 3–10, 28v; W. Aslet, 'James Gibbs's autobiography revisited', *Georgian Group Journal* 25 (2017), pp. 113–127.
- 55 It has been known as the Radcliffe Camera since 1862, when it was taken over as a reading room by the Bodleian Library.
- 56 Townesend's son John took his place after he died, as did William Smith after the death of his father Francis: Colvin, *Dictionary*, pp. 960, 1048.
- 57 Badminton archives 508.12.1, quoted in Guest, *op. cit.*, p. 142.
- 58 Gillam (ed.), *Building Accounts*, pp. 10–11. The exterior was restored in 1965–8: W.F. Oakeshott (ed.), *Oxford Stone Restored* (Oxford, 1975), pp. 36–40.
- 59 The word 'syncopated' was used by Summerson in his *Architecture in Britain 1530–1830* (9th ed., New Haven and London, 1993), p. 333. For the proportions of the columns, and the intercolumniation, see Nick Mols below, pp. 79–90.
- 60 Gillam (ed.), *Building Accounts*, pp. 170–1 and pl. 28 (Ashmolean Museum, Gibbs Collection WA 1925.342, f. 75). There is a variant version in the Bodleian Library (MS Don. A.7, f. 12), reproduced in Hebron, *Dr Radcliffe's Library*, pp. 44–5.
- 61 Gillam (ed.), *Building Accounts*, pl. 29. There is an almost identical elevation and cross-section in BL, Add MS 31323.
- 62 Colvin, *Unbuilt Oxford*, p. 73; Friedman, *Gibbs*, pp. 319–20. For the Hall screen, for which Gibbs was paid five guineas, W.C. Costin, *The History of St John's College 1598–1860* (Oxford, 1958), p. 192. Gibbs was also engaged by All Souls College in 1740–50 to modify the design of the bookcases and ceiling of Hawksmoor's unfinished Codrington Library, omitting the top level of shelving originally proposed and substituting the present upper cornice surmounted by busts: H.M. Colvin and J.S.B. Simmons, *All Souls: an Oxford college and its buildings* (Oxford, 1989), p. 33.
- 63 *Bibliotheca Radcliviana*, description of Plate VIII.
- 64 Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, Gibbs Collection, WA 1925.341, f. 71.
- 65 There is a full list of craftsmen and their payment in Gillam (ed.), *Building Accounts*, p. 181.
- 66 John Phillips was a nephew of Thomas Phillips, one of the carpenters for the Gibbs Building at King's College, Cambridge.
- 67 G. Balderston, 'Rysbrack's busts of James Gibbs and Alexander Pope from Henrietta Street', *Georgian Group Journal* 11 (2001), pp. 1, 5–6. The bust was originally displayed in Gibbs's house at No. 5 Henrietta Street, Marylebone, into which he moved in 1732. Gibbs stipulated in his will that his own books should be placed 'in the presses ... next to my busto.' I am grateful to Gordon Balderston for drawing this to my attention.
- 68 There is a bust of Nicholas Hawksmoor in the Buttery at All Souls College.
- 69 Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, Gibbs Collection, WA 1925.341, f. 38v. For the plasterwork see also Christine Casey above, pp. 37, 40.
- 70 Gillam (ed.), *Building Accounts*, Appendix II, p. 181.