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CENTRALISED PLANS FOR ANGLICAN CHURCHES IN GEORGIAN ENGLAND

Donald Findlay

Claims are often made for the extreme rarity of churches built to centralised plans in Georgian England, and it is time that such proud pronouncements were put to the test. Certainly, following Wren's commendation of his own basilican design for St James' Piccadilly, which he generally used for his larger churches, the standard form for Georgian churches was a rectangle, with or without galleries, to which a west tower or portico (or both) and an eastern chancel might be added. This article is not concerned with churches of quasi-cruciform plan, such as Shobdon, Great Witley or Stanford upon Teme, which have transepts used for family pews or to house monuments, but rather with those in which the liturgical demands for a space focused on a pulpit and an eastern altar have been met within the terms of 'the perennial fascination which the perfection of a central plan held for architects'.

There are seven categories of centralised plan, namely rectangles with projections from the middle of each side, Greek cross plans, squares, octagons, circles, ellipses and those which fall readily into none of these types. Some forerunners may be found amongst the ingenious plans for the smaller of Wren's City churches, rebuilt after the Great Fire of 1666 on the cramped sites of mediaeval predecessors which elicited from Wren's lively mind a number of solutions remarkable for their inventiveness. Many made little impact on their surroundings because of neighbouring buildings, and the interest is internal, not external: the shapes included three squares enclosing crosses, one octagonal dome over a square body, and three circular domes, one over a square body and two over rectangles. There were also an elongated octagon and an elongated decagon. Above all there was the great cathedral of St Paul, where Wren, though he was not allowed to build his equal-armed or Great Model designs, placed at the crux of the building an enormous dome which had no liturgical function but was a classical evocation of the dominant steeple of Old St Paul's as well as of St Peter's in Rome. There was also a group of seventeenth-century churches, mostly in east and south London, where (as with Wren's St James, Garlickhythe) a rectangular body included a transeptal axis; these include Christ Church, Broadway, Westminster (c.1636), St Matthias Poplar (1642), St Paul Shadwell (c.1656), St Mary Matfelon (c.1673), St Mary Magdalene Bermondsey (1676-7), and St Nicholas Deptford (1696-7).

The early years of the new century immediately show, in the work of the Commission for Building New Churches established in 1711, a fascination with centralised plans. Thomas Archer built two truly Baroque churches on almost square plans at Deptford (1713-30) and at Smith Square, Westminster (1713-28), the latter overcoming the difficulty of a single steeple by having one at each corner and giving each front a pediment of equal weight. Nicholas Hawksmoor, who designed six churches for the Commissioners, experimented with an elliptical chapel for Queen's College Oxford (1708, not built), and a rectangle with semi-circular ends for St George Bloomsbury (c.1716, not built). His three churches in the parish of Stepney are longitudinal, but all have a square expressed within the outer shell. At Greenwich (1712-18) the transepts are only grandiloquent porches, but at St George Bloomsbury (1716-31) as built he struggled with the problem of a site longer from north to south than from east to west without satisfactory resolution.

Amongst the wooden models made for the Commissioners, but lost in the nineteenth century, was one for a circular design, apparently with six entrances. This was not built; nor was James Gibbs' circular design for St Martin in the Fields (1720) which proposed a round

nave with an inner ring of pillars and projections at each end, that towards the west crowned by a spire. (Another unachieved scheme for a centralised church was Colen Campbell's tremendous square church with a central dome for Lincoln's Inn Fields, published tellingly immediately after plates of St Paul's Cathedral and St Peter's Rome in his *Vitruvius Britannicus* (1715), just as Gibbs published both alternatives of his round design for St Martin's beside the built design in his *Book of Architecture* (1728).)

Other architects were less ambitious but more successful in getting their churches built. In his rebuilding of Twickenham parish church (London) (1713) John James gave the side elevations imposing pilasters and pediments which affect the rectangular interior little, and the same is true of the pilastered and pedimented south wall of Gayhurst, Bucks (1723) with its central doorway, of Edward Wing's Aynho, Northants (1723–5) with pedimented sides and, much later, of the south pedimented wall at Thomas Johnson's Holy Trinity, Halifax, Yorks (1795–8).

In their rebuilding of Blandford, Dorset (1735–9) the Bastard brothers included narrow centrally-placed transepts which turn out only to be porches and contribute nothing to the interior beyond a slight pause in the rhythm of the colonnades. At St George Reforne, also in Dorset (1754–66), Thomas Gilbert provided a long church of nine bays with a swelling at the middle which combines a saucer dome internally with broad shallow pedimented transepts externally, more successful inside than out. The derivation of the steeple from the western cupolas at St Paul's Cathedral suggests that the apsidal-ended transepts may also derive from the similarly-shaped western chapels of that building.

Later in the century some churches were built to centralised plans which cannot be easily classified. These include James Paine's chapel at Gibside, Durham (1760), basically a square enclosing a square covered by a dome, with a portico on the principal front and semi-circular recesses within rectangular projections on the other three sides. When the church was fitted up much later, in about 1810, the pulpit and communion table were unusually placed free-standing in the central space, presumably because as a private chapel the building was not ordered for parochial worship. Another church intended to enhance a landscape was James Stuart's realisation of Earl Harcourt's designs at Nuneham Courtenay, Oxon (1764), which is a square covered by a dome with lower chambers to east, south and west, and a portico attached to the blank north wall for decorative rather than functional reasons.

At Mistley in Essex (1766, mostly dem. 1870) Robert Adam took an extremely plain existing box and added towers with cupolas to each end and a portico to the middle of each side, with the result that this is one of the few oblong churches which is symmetrical about the short axis as well as the long one. Characteristically Adam's emphases are placed at each end of his building, but double symmetry was also achieved in the next year at Brandsby, Yorkshire (1767) (Fig. 1). Here Thomas Atkinson provided for Francis Cholmeley a small church deriving great dignity from its hipped roof crowned by a single large cupola placed centrally, which is supported on two arcades forming internally a square vaulted space between an equal nave and chancel.

The church erected by Nicholas Revett for Sir Lionel Lyde at Ayot St Lawrence, Herts (1778) stands behind a temple front and flanking screens in the park; internally the centralised plan is emphasised by the circular arrangement of the ceiling plasterwork and by the shallow but definite arched transeptal recesses to left and right. Finally, at Horbury in Yorkshire (1791–3) John Carr encountered a problem somewhat similar to Hawksmoor's at Bloomsbury in providing a western steeple even though the principal front faced south. This difficulty, which could have been easily solved by reference to Brandsby or Mistley, caused Carr to produce a handsome building with awkwardly differing transepts, that on the south being fronted by a portico, and an interior which, because of colonnades across the openings of the transepts, is little more than a plain rectangle with shallow apses at each end.



Fig. 1. Brandsby, North Yorkshire, by Thomas Atkinson, 1767. Monumental dignity achieved in a small building by the simple devices of a centrally placed cupola of large scale and enrichment of the middle window with a Gibbs surround (the porch and chimney are later additions). (photo: author)

It has already been noted that Wren provided three square plans, and there was also the Dutch precedent of the *Nieuwe Kerk* in Haarlem (1645–9). This scheme was taken up just after Wren by Henry Bell at All Saints, Northampton (1677–80) and again on a smaller scale at North Runcton, Norfolk (1703–13), where the sweeping pitched roof of the nave gives no indication that inside four free-standing pillars carry an octagonal dome. Hawksmoor's St Mary Woolnoth (1716–24) is again a square within a square, the central flat ceiling raised high on triplets of columns to admit light through semi-circular windows. The general effect is of an ante-chamber, similar to the halls at Castle Howard or Blenheim (the latter compared to a church by Lord Berkeley of Stratton in 1713), and not unsuitable for a house of God on earth which is but a gateway to something greater beyond.

At Berkley in Somerset (1749) the North Runcton scheme was repeated with the addition of elegant plasterwork on the dome. St John's Chapel, County Durham (1752) also has four freestanding pillars, with a coved square recess in the ceiling above them. Thomas Lightoler's St Paul, Liverpool (1763–9, dem. 1932) (Fig. 2) was a building made monumental by the use of a square plan surmounted by a large dome carrying a cupola. Three sides had porticos, those on the flanks being attached, and the fourth side had a recess for the altar. Inside, an octagon of pillars carried the galleries and the dome.

There are also two rather late churches built to a square plan. For the first, at Paddington Green, London (1788), John Plaw (architect of the circular house Belle Isle on Lake Windermere) provided externally a neat structure with projections of differing appearance in the middle of each side, and a pyramid roof culminating in a cupola. Inside, the church becomes more complex, with a many-sided gallery between four pillars which creates

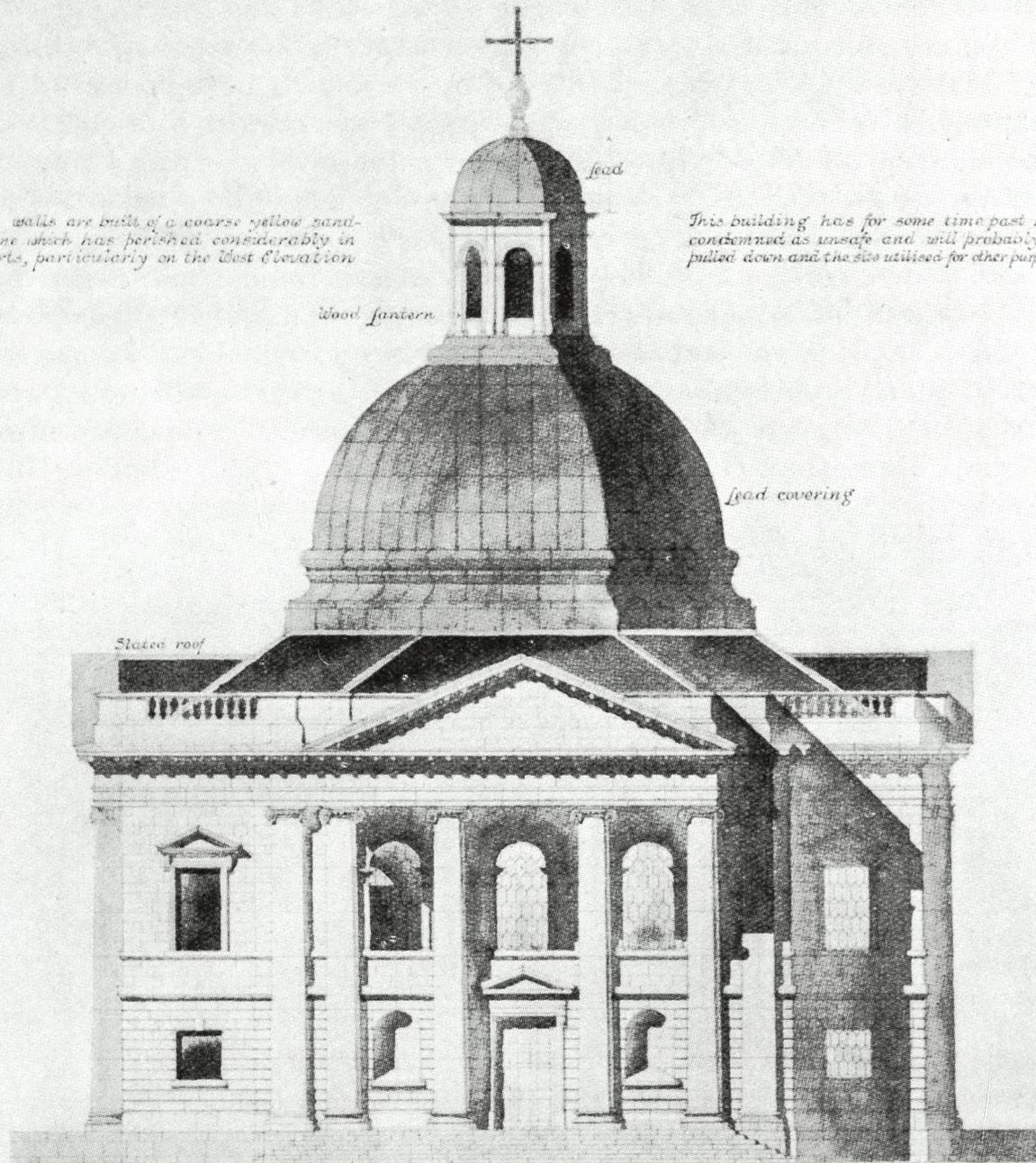
ST. PAUL'S CHURCH
ST. PAUL'S SQUARE LIVERPOOL

Built 1765-1769

Thomas Lightoller Architect

The walls are built of a coarse yellow sandstone which has perished considerably in parts, particularly on the West Elevation

This building has for some time past been condemned as unsafe and will probably be pulled down and the site utilised for other purposes



WEST ELEVATION:

Scale of 70 feet

Measured & Drawn by
J. Ernest Crutchley
1912 AD

Fig. 2. Liverpool, St Paul, Merseyside, by Timothy Lightoller, 1763-9, dem 1932. A square building entered through a portico and covered by a large dome with a lantern, depicted in a measured drawing by J. Ernest Crutchley, 1912. (*Architect's Journal* 11 February 1925, in Council for the Care of Churches collection)

an almost circular central space. At Banbury, Oxon (1792–7) Samuel Pepys Cockerell produced, as almost his first building, an externally forbidding but internally spacious church with a semi-circular colonnaded porch. Inside, twelve columns arranged in a square support the galleries which originally ran equally round all four sides, obscuring the chancel, and a vaulted plaster roof which introduces a flat circular centre within the expected square.

It seems that no churches were built to a Greek cross design before the middle of the century, when one was built at Stratfield Saye, Hants (1754) (Fig. 3). It terminates a vista from the front door of the house and was designed by John Pitt for his nephew Lord Rivers. Over the crossing is a low octagonal dome, not visible inside, and the cross plan is taken up in the alleys between the box pews. Sir Robert Taylor's design for Long Ditton, Surrey (1778, dem. 1880) was also cruciform. Of a very different character is the sepulchral red brick church erected at Great Packington, Warks (1789–90) by the fourth Lord Aylesford to designs by Joseph Bonomi. This church, which externally appears square, with four equal domed turrets at the corners, just precedes the church at Banbury, not so very far away. Inside, the corners of the central space are marked by short Greek Doric pillars of huge scale carrying blocks of entablature, from which springs the great central groin vault. Round this space are four short transepts with semi-circular vaults housing the chancel, family pew, organ and principal entrance. A church of similar plan was erected at Dodington, Glos (c.1800–05) by James Wyatt for Christopher Codrington, with less ponderous proportions and Roman Doric pillars. Finally, in 1792 James Spiller built the largest of the cruciform churches to serve the parish of Hackney London. There are also humbler cruciform churches at Hale, Hampshire (1717), Farleigh Wallop, Hampshire (1750), Culgaith, Cumberland (1756), Shotley, Durham (1769) and Buckland Tous Saints, Devon (1779).



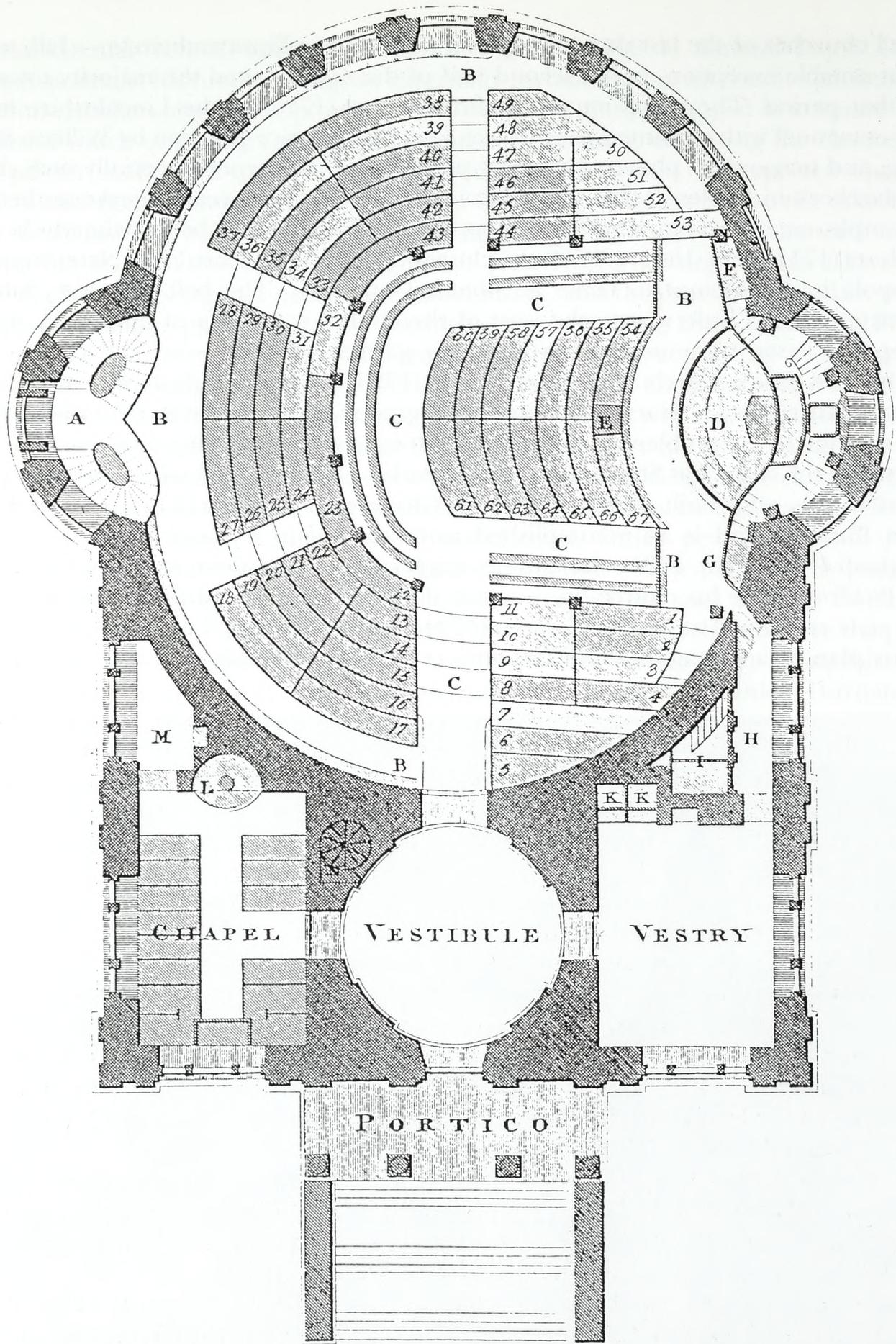
Fig. 3. Stratfield Saye, Hampshire, by John Pitt, 1754. A Greek cross plan rising to a dome to form a feature in the park although there is only a (possibly later) flat ceiling inside (photo: author).

All churches of the last three categories — octagon, ellipse and circle — fall, with one small but notable exception, in the second half of the century, and the majority towards the end of that period. The exception is Moulton Chapel (1722) in the Lincolnshire marshes, which is octagonal with a pointed roof. It was built for Maurice Johnson by William Sands of Spalding, and may owe its plan to the locally potent Dutch influence, especially such churches as the Marekerk in Leiden (1639–49). Although a gap of thirty years intervenes before the next example, octagonal churches are by no means as rare as has been claimed. At Ayot St Peter, Herts (1751, dem. 1862) (Fig. 4) the church again had a pointed roof, later topped by a frilly cupola in an attempt to make an honest Goth of it. The bell, however, hung in a wondrous erection a little way to the west of the church consisting of an obelisk upon two superimposed bases, reminiscent of an eccentric garden building.

Henry Keene's church at Hartwell, Oxon (1753–5) for Sir William Lee introduces the Gothic style. Its refined character also suggests a garden building and its twin towers form an obvious solution to the problem of unbalancing an octagon by attaching only one tower. Much more remote, the church at Stoney Middleton, Derbys (1759) was rebuilt to an octagonal plan by James Booth, who built Paine's stables at Chatsworth and Carr's stables for the Royal Crescent, Buxton, and is an accomplished work to find in a Dales village. At St Mary's Birmingham (1773, dem. 1925), the trustees suggested the octagonal form, and the designer, Joseph Pickford, gave his church an unusual, if not unique, round tower with a spire. The classical style continued at Madeley, Salop (1794), where Thomas Telford used a simple but ingenious plan of an octagon which becomes cruciform internally, the spaces in the angles



Fig. 4. Ayot St Peter, Hertfordshire, 1751, dem 1862. A plain octagonal building, all the interest being concentrated in the extraordinary detached bell-tower which also formed the entrance to the churchyard. (Drawing by Buckler 1832, photograph in Council for the Care of Churches collection)



PLAN of the GROUND FLOOR of ALL SAINTS CHURCH

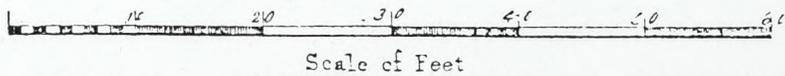


Fig. 5. Newcastle-upon Tyne, All Saints, Tyne & Wear, by David Stephenson, 1786–9. The innovative elliptical plan with curved pews facing a pulpit set behind and above the communion table in a small apse, an arrangement which soon had to be altered for acoustic reasons. Stairs to the gallery occupy the opposite apse and beside the circular vestibule in the base of the tower is a separate chapel for the font (L). (Undated plan in author's collection)

being used to house vestries and gallery stairs. It was repeated by the anonymous architect of nearby Malinslee in 1805. St John's Chichester (1812) is also an elongated octagon and has galleries on all sides leaving a central rectangle, at the east end of which stands the pulpit with the table in a recess behind it.

The Gothic style was revived by George Dance II for the naves which he inserted into the existing churches at St Bartholomew the Less, London (1789) and Micheldever, Hants (1808). Both are lit by pointed windows in a central octagon as well as by side windows, and both are more successful within than without. An octagon was also skilfully fitted into an existing church at Debden, Essex (1792–3) for Robert Chiswell by John Carter, a protagonist for accurate Gothic who presumably had the octagon of Ely Cathedral in mind.

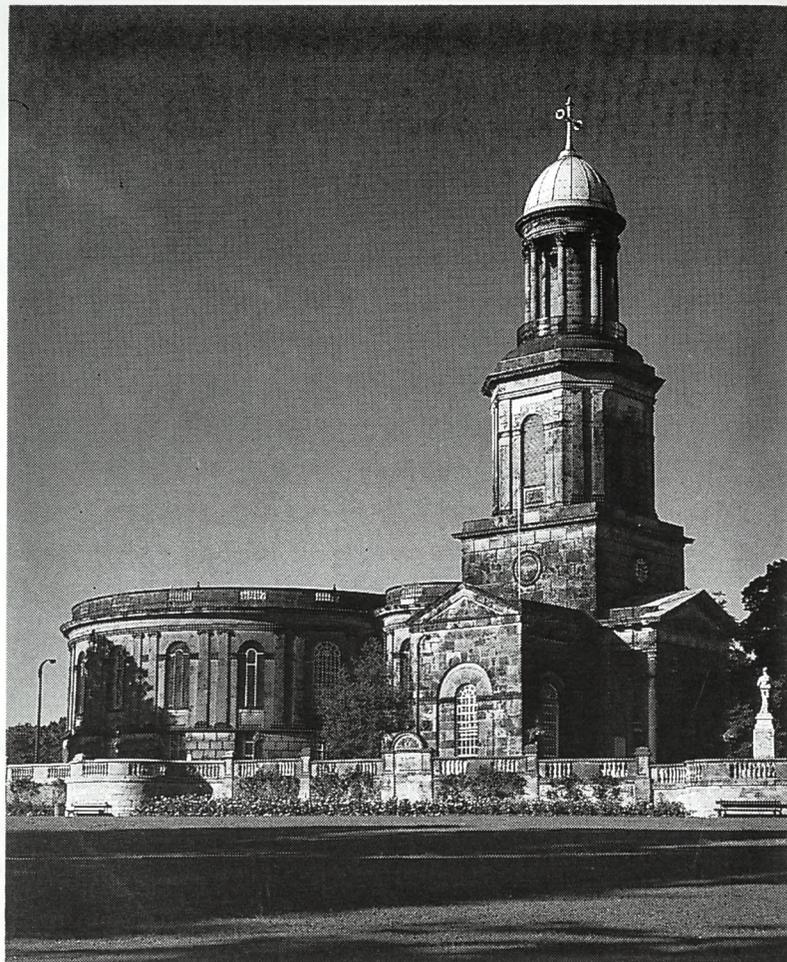
Towards the end of the period the octagon becomes more generally acceptable, and Gothic churches of this plan were built at Teignmouth, Devon (1817–21) by W. E. Rolfe, a pupil of Soane, which has a lantern; at Coleford, Glos (1820–1, dem. 1882) by the incumbent, the Revd Henry Poole, and its sister at Parkend, Glos (1822) with transepts; at Blackford, Somerset (1823) by Robert Carver; at St Dunstan in the West, London (1831–3) by John Shaw, with a lantern and recesses attached to each face of the octagon; and at East Donyland, Essex (1837) with a pointed roof. It was in connection with St Dunstan's that the *Gentleman's Magazine* makes what seems to us the obvious link between the shape of these churches and the precedent of mediaeval chapter houses, but it is East Donyland with its lancet windows and steep roof which most closely resembles these prototypes.

The final two categories each contain two churches, all four built in the 1780s and 1790s. The first was the large elliptical church of All Saints, Newcastle upon Tyne (1786–9) (Fig. 5) by the local architect David Stephenson, a tour de force in more ways than one, not least in its plan (which is actually a circle with the two halves drawn apart and smaller semi-circles inserted between rather than a true ellipse) but also because of the sheer constructional skill of roofing a space 86 feet by 72 feet without intermediate walls or columns. The gallery sweeps round and the pews are curved on the centre of the pulpit, so that there is hardly a straight horizontal line in the building. The other elliptical church was St Martin Outwich in the City of London (1796–8, dem. 1874), designed by S. P. Cockerell, but on so reticent a site that its channelled walls gave little hint of the oval interior.

Both the circular churches were built, astonishingly, at the same moment, and one of them was a stone's throw from the Cockerell church just mentioned. St Peter le Poer, Old Broad Street, London (1788–92, dem. 1908) was designed by Jesse Gibson, the district surveyor, and was also contemporary with such remarkable churches as Hackney, Paddington, Banbury and Great Packington. Although its orientation was reversed so that the tower could stand over the entrance from the street, surrounding buildings blocked it from sight and it was only inside that its shape became clear.

If St Peter le Poer occupied a self-effacing position, the opposite is emphatically true of our last church. When St Chad's Shrewsbury collapsed in 1788 the vestry decided to build afresh on a new site, and fixed on one suggested by their architect, George Steuart, who placed his fine new church (Fig. 6) majestically on a ridge at the edge of the town overlooking green fields. The various circular plans which he provided were initially rejected by the trustees, but by persistence the architect got his way and erected what Whiffen described as 'one of the most boldly conceived buildings of the whole Georgian epoch'. It is an enormous drum 100 feet in diameter with a massive tower rising through square and octagonal stages to a cupola, and separated from the body of the church (rather too distinctly, Pevsner thought) by an ante-chamber with rounded ends containing elegant stairs to the gallery. Within the nave the circular plan is emphasised by a ring of extremely slender iron pillars which carry the galleries, and by the flat ceiling which gives the impression, as Christopher Hobhouse remarked of another church, of 'a hat box from the moth's point of view'. No chancel appears

Fig. 6. Shrewsbury, St Chad, Shropshire, by George Steuart, 1790–2. A majestically severe drum attached by an oval chamber containing gallery stairs to a grand tower combining square, octagonal and circular stages surmounted by a cupola (photo: author).



externally, and the only real fault of the plan is the way in which one is contrived within the eastern part of the drum.

There is no room here to search for precedents for the plan of the churches mentioned, but doubtless those who had been on the Grand Tour had visited the circular temples of Vesta at Tivoli and of Mater Matuta in Rome, and had seen the Pantheon (then used as a church), the Basilica of St Peter, and the Tempietto of Bramante, to say nothing of the seventeenth-century churches of circular, elliptical, trefoil and even more elaborate shapes designed by such architects as Bernini, Borromini, da Cortona or Rainaldi. It is therefore surprising that apparently no triangular or hexagonal churches were erected for the Church of England, nor even any of a semi-circular design, which might have been suggested by the ancient theatres — although Thomas Harrison did prepare such a design for All Saints, Newcastle, which was rejected, and St Mary in the Castle, Hastings, Sussex (1825–8) is rather more than a semi-circle with the communion table against the centre of the straight side.

Much could be said of centralised plans employed by other denominations here and in Scotland (the octagon, for example, was favoured by John Wesley), but that more centrally planned churches were not built in England suggests that the Anglican parish authorities respected the high seriousness of public worship and, limited on the one hand by a horror of anything Papist and on the other by a diffidence about anything smacking of non-conformist enthusiasm, were mistrustful of the more fanciful ideas of bright young architects (possibly with good reason, for All Saints Newcastle and St Paul's Liverpool both had great problems with acoustics). Thus the parochial attitude which prevented Gibbs' circular design for St Martin in the Fields being built near the beginning of the century still obtained near its end amongst the members of the Shrewsbury vestry who came so close to ensuring that George Steuart did not build his masterpiece. The more innovatory plans were therefore left to such buildings as garden temples and mausolea, but even so the number of Georgian churches built to centralised plans was very much larger than is commonly assumed.