



THE
GEORGIAN
GROUP

John Harris, 'William Kent's Gothick',
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Symposium, 1983

William Kent's Gothick by John Harris

On the whole William Kent has had what might be described as a bad press. Christopher Hussey in *The Picturesque* in 1927 and Kenneth Clark in *The gothic Revival* in 1928 were both dismissive of his achievement in Gothick. Margaret Jourdain's biography in 1948 was only redeemed by a distinguished introduction by Christopher Hussey. Even Rudolf Wittkower in his *Archaeological Journal* article in 1945 saw Kent as subordinate to Lord Burlington. No-one of stature has yet come forward to do Kent justice, but in 1954¹ Howard Colvin judged Kent more fairly as the 'creator of an English rococo Gothick happily free from antiquarian preoccupations', and in 1970 Dr. J. Mordaunt Crook placed Kent's Gothick in its proper perspective of the Gothic Revival.² If one had to defend Kent, the defence would maintain that in choosing between Kent and his mentor Lord Burlington, the genius is Kent's. In the 1730s he was perhaps one of the most versatile artists in Europe.

Kent's Gothick, and I prefer it spelt with a 'k', was an associational style, not a revivalistic one. In studies of the English Gothic Revival this associational character has been judged entirely in the context of what could be called the Wren — Tom Tower syndrome, seen to culminate in Hawksmoor's completion of the west towers of Westminster Abbey. Renaissance architects, however, were fully capable of designing in an associational style when the situation demanded it, although there is as yet no study of the extensions made to European gothic cathedrals and greater churches by renaissance and later architects using an associational style. I need only refer to one case study: the celebrated problem of completing the facade of S. Petronio in Bologna.³ Baldassare Peruzzi produced a sequence of designs in 1522, so did Vignola in 1545 and Giulio Romano in 1546. All these great renaissance architects practising in a classical style could produce on this occasion distinguished designs in associational Gothic. This is the context in which the work of Wren and Hawksmoor should be judged, and it was certainly a context not unknown in the early 18th century particularly to the likes of such antiquarians as John Talman who travelled many of the cathedrals of Italy and very likely knew of the *archivio* at S. Petronio. In England, however, we need not be ashamed to begin our story with the completion of Tom Tower, Christ Church, Oxford, in 1681.

Tom Tower is something of a catalyst for English gothick. It stands at the head of a family tree of associational designs, and we need only refer to two works that draw inspiration and precedent from Wren's seminal work: All Soul's College, Oxford, where Hawksmoor was active from 1716, and Westminster Abbey where he had succeeded Wren as Surveyor in 1723. In the context of All Souls, however, an isolated design needs to be considered: John Talman's proposed remodelling of the Hall and Chapel range in a style, to quote his own description appended to the drawing, 'unlike any other in Oxon & pretty much after ye Italian Gothick'.⁴ John dates his drawings March 1708 and his extraordinary project can only be explained in the light of his travels through Italy and his profound study of Italian gothic buildings during the years 1709 to 1716. Horace Walpole could hardly have done better. It is not necessary that Kent should have known this design, but more to the point was his companionship with Talman in Italy and their sharing experiences of antiquity and Italian Gothic, including the matter of the west front of Milan cathedral. In so many ways Talman acted as a catalyst upon the emergent Kent.

If Talman's All Souls was not to be, Hawksmoor's is familiar to us all. His gothick combines predominantly rectilinear forms mixed with ogee. He understands, better than Kent, gothic's linear energy and captures something of its movement and soaring verticality. I contrast with the All Souls screen of 1716, one of his designs for the front to The High, and here, I suspect, he is as much aware of Hugh May's Windsor as of Tom

Tower. His success at recognising the volumetrics of Gothic design is demonstrated not only by the Westminster towers of 1734, but by his convincing design for adding canopied stalls to the early 16th century ones in Henry VII's Chapel in 1725.

We could move conveniently from Hawksmoor's doings at Westminster Abbey to Kent's at Hampton Court, but in matters of chronology there is the curiosity of a small house in Bull Lane, High Wycombe, now alas demolished. As far as we know it is the first example of a building not added to in associational gothick. The tablet above the gothick aedicule was clearly dated 1729 and an examination of the front revealed that the aedicule and the windows were of one building. A suggestion was made that it might have been a masonic lodge, but it must remain a mystery which, to quote Walpole, 'time which establishes truth, but most oftener falsehood, must settle'.

Kent entered the gothick stakes with the commission to rebuild the east range of the Clock Court at Hampton Court and to renovate the parts adjacent as well as providing apartments behind. It was a surprising commission, for Kent held no official post at Hampton Court although he was in the Works as Master Carpenter. Others might have been expected to have done what was after all a minor task. According to Walpole via Dallaway,⁵ Kent had first provided a classical design, but was prevailed upon by Sir Robert Walpole as First Lord of the Treasury to rebuild in gothick. It does not quite ring true, and there are clearly facts that are not yet known. In the matter of the Gothic Revival Hampton Court also figures with the design, improbably attributed to Vanbrugh, for re-facing the north front of the Tudor Great Hall in an ogee-windowed gothick made before July 1716.⁶

The problem was not a new one and had already been tackled by or under the supervision of Vanbrugh before 1720, as is made clear by plans and elevations now at All Souls.⁷ Then the bulk of the whole cross wing between Clock Court and Fountain Court was to have been retained. Vanbrugh's (?) designs thus enable us to assess more accurately what Kent replaced: a tall crenellated facade with many-windowed bays. This Kent cut down to the height of the existing three-storey projecting tower with cuppolaed pinnacles and set in place his existing gatehouse modelled upon the Tudor Hampton Court — St. James's Palace type, and from elsewhere incorporating the renaissance terracotta roundels with busts. The true Kentian details occur only in the middle bay of the tower: the pointed window above. Perhaps it doesn't matter that the precise source for this window is not yet known; what is more relevant is that Hampton Court acted as a catalyst for Kent's subsequent essays in gothick: at Esher, Laughton, the abortive Honingham, Rousham, and almost certainly the mysterious Holton.

At Hampton Court Kent was a little hesitant in the handling of rococo gothick. At Esher by 1733, the year designs for Henry Pelham are dated, he has pulled himself together and Esher may be described as the first major country house of the gothic revival. As at Hampton Court he was extending and modifying existing Tudor work, in Esher's case a gatehouse remaining from the house built circa 1475 for Bishop Waynflete of Winchester. By extending it three bays and three storeys to each side Kent at once established the arch-model for so many subsequent neo-gothick country houses. I refer, of course, to John Vardy's initial designs for Milton Abbey, Dorset, made about 1755 and almost certainly utilised by Sir William Chambers when actually building the house from 1771. The south front of the Abbey could be described as being by Chambers out of Vardy and Kent, so indebted is it to Esher; and then there is also the case of Tong Castle, Shropshire, built about 1765 and perhaps involving the county architect T.F. Pritchard. There is one elemental difference between Tong and Milton and Esher: Esher reveals Kent's vocabulary as simple and selective. Windows always have ogee heads, and, when of two lights, with a quatrefoil under an ogee relieving arch. The quatrefoil Kent uses elsewhere either as a window or as a blank. Rarely does Kent depart from the details and elements found at Esher, although there is some evidence that late in his career his vocabulary was affected by

the publication of Batty Langley's *Ancient Architecture* in 1741, notably with the proposed gothick tower for Conyers D'Arcy at Aske in Yorkshire, if, indeed, the design is in Kent's hand.⁸ There is nothing like Esher, and this applies especially to its wonderfully felicitous plan, so loosely knitted together, and a demonstration of that quality of movement found in Kentian and Burlingtonian planning that has been called concatenated. Kent first expressed it fully in his many designs for the Royal Mews in 1731, and it has been incorrectly laid under tribute to the Chiswick Link Building of 1733. At Esher movement was also obtained by the use of protruding canted bays, reflecting octagons on plan, and in this Kent is possibly a pioneer.

Esher must have been a wonderfully evocative house both inside and out. Kent's fusion of gothick and classical details in decoration can be seen in what survives of the interior: a gothick arch may be given a Greek key pattern frieze, and this same combination is revealed with a chimneypiece engraved by John Vardy, for it was Vardy who really revealed to the world Kent's achievement in gothick when he published *Some Designs of Mr. Inigo Jones and Mr. William Kent* in 1744 and separately the two rare engravings of Esher. Esher cannot be dismissed without reference to one other house built by Kent for Henry Pelham: I mean Laughton Place, Sussex, recently rehabilitated for us by Mr. Roger White.⁹ Laughton existed as a Tudor hunting tower and sometime, perhaps in the late 1730s, Kent enlarged it using more or less the same vocabulary of details as at Esher.

If we can accept Esher as an essay in concatenated gothick invented at just the time that Kent was applying these principles of staccato composition to his classical architecture, Honingham in Norfolk and Rousham in Oxfordshire confirm the hypothesis. The Honingham album of designs¹⁰ is dated 1737 and was made for the Hon. William Townshend. Here was a brick house of circa 1605 and of typical East Anglian type, and Kent proposed to enlarge it by enclosing it in a typical Kentian gothick cosmetic and adding wings fully in the concatenated manner: a miniature Holkham executed in gothick. The project was abandoned because Townshend died in 1738. Happily Kent was able to offer an almost identical fare to Genral Dormer at Rousham in circumstances identical to those at Honingham. Indeed the concatenated theory is even more confirmed at Rousham with the filling-in of the recesses between main block and wings by pieces of screen wall topped by balls, a solution that may be described as by Kent and Lord Burlington at the Chiswick Link Building of 1733 out of Palladio at S. Giorgio Maggiore. Honingham was to have had a large Gothick hall with a part canopied vault, but at Rousham the 'General' obviously preferred a mainly classical decor for the display of his pictures and bronzes, except in the library where Kent provided a most felicitously designed quasi-gothick ceiling with a chimneypiece of Esher sort. Adjacent to Rousham there is one other house that deserves examination, for it must surely be by Kent, although it is mysterious by virtue of its disappearance so long ago and its lack of documentation. I mean Holton House, where an addition in associational gothick style is so Kentian as to be by no other.

Even if we do accept that the composition of Kent's gothick may have changed a little following Batty Langley's *Ancient Architecture* in 1741, there is not much deviation from what was laid down at Esher in 1733. The Gothick screen in Westminster Hall of 1739, the York pulpit and the Gloucester screen of 1741, are composed of manifestly the same details, just a few key elements, and always a little whimsical and never less than witty as we can observe with his design for a candlestick, or the table-stand meant for Queen Caroline's Merlin's Cave in Richmond Gardens in 1735. All this must be seen in the context of Kent's astonishing versatility as a designer of genius. Esher was his triumph, one in its own way as significant as the classical achievement of Holkham.

Notes

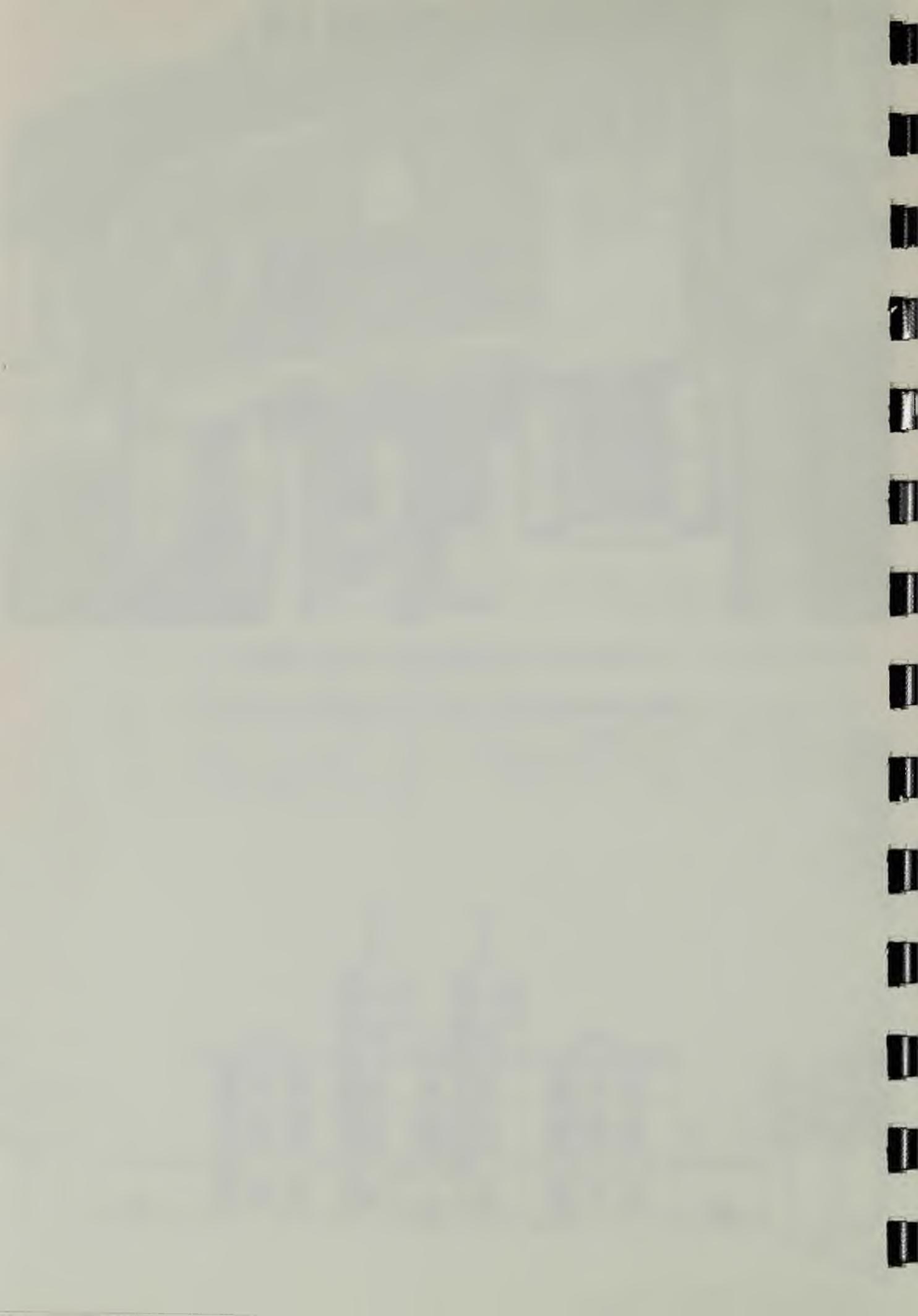
- 1 H.M. Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of English Architects... 1954*.
- 2 Charles E. Eastlake, *A History of the Gothic Revival*, ed. J. Mordaut Crook, 1970.
- 3 Guido Zucchini, *Disegni Antiche E Moderni per La Facciata Di S. Petronio Di Bologna*, 1933.
- 4 H.M. Colvin, *Catalogue of Architectural Drawings of the 18th and 19th Centuries in the Library of Worcester College, Oxford*, 1964, nos. 40-41, plates 57-58
- 5 Horace Walpole, *Anecdotes of Painting*, ed. Dallaway, 11, 1862, 564.
- 6 H.M. Colvin, ed., *The History of the King's Works*, V, 1976, 178, fig. 6. If this is by Vanbrugh it is unique in his known designs, for he never used gothic. The design lacks the sort of cohesion that might be expected of Vanbrugh. In a domestic building the pointed windows with what appears to be cusped hoods above them are curious, but early.
- 7 The Wren Society, VII, 1930, plates XXIV-XXV. All Souls I, 31, 35, 36, and 57. Miss Juliet Allan is preparing an article about these, and Kent's work at Hampton Court.
- 8 In RIBA Drawings Collection. A circular gothick tower with buttresses and castellations and containing no details of Kentian type. it must, however, belong to the 1740s and is thus a late Kent project. As far as we know Kent never designed a purely gothick free-standing garden feature.
- 9 Roger White, 'Saved by the Landmark Trust: Laughton Place, East Sussex', in *Country Life*, May 5, 1983, pp. 1184-1190, and cf. correspondence June 9, 1983, 1561.
- 10 RIBA Drawings Collection, cf. J.J. Sambrook, 'Honingham Hall, Norfolk', *Norfolk Archaeology*, XXXIV, Part III, 1968, 303-313.
- 11 On an engraving of the house, Holton is mistakenly called Horden. it is adjacent to Shotover, where Kent worked from circa 1729. The only known illustration is in Harrison & Co., *Picturesque Seats*, an engraving dated July 2, 1787. This house occupied the moated site in the present park, and in Kent's time was in the possession of the Wherwood family.

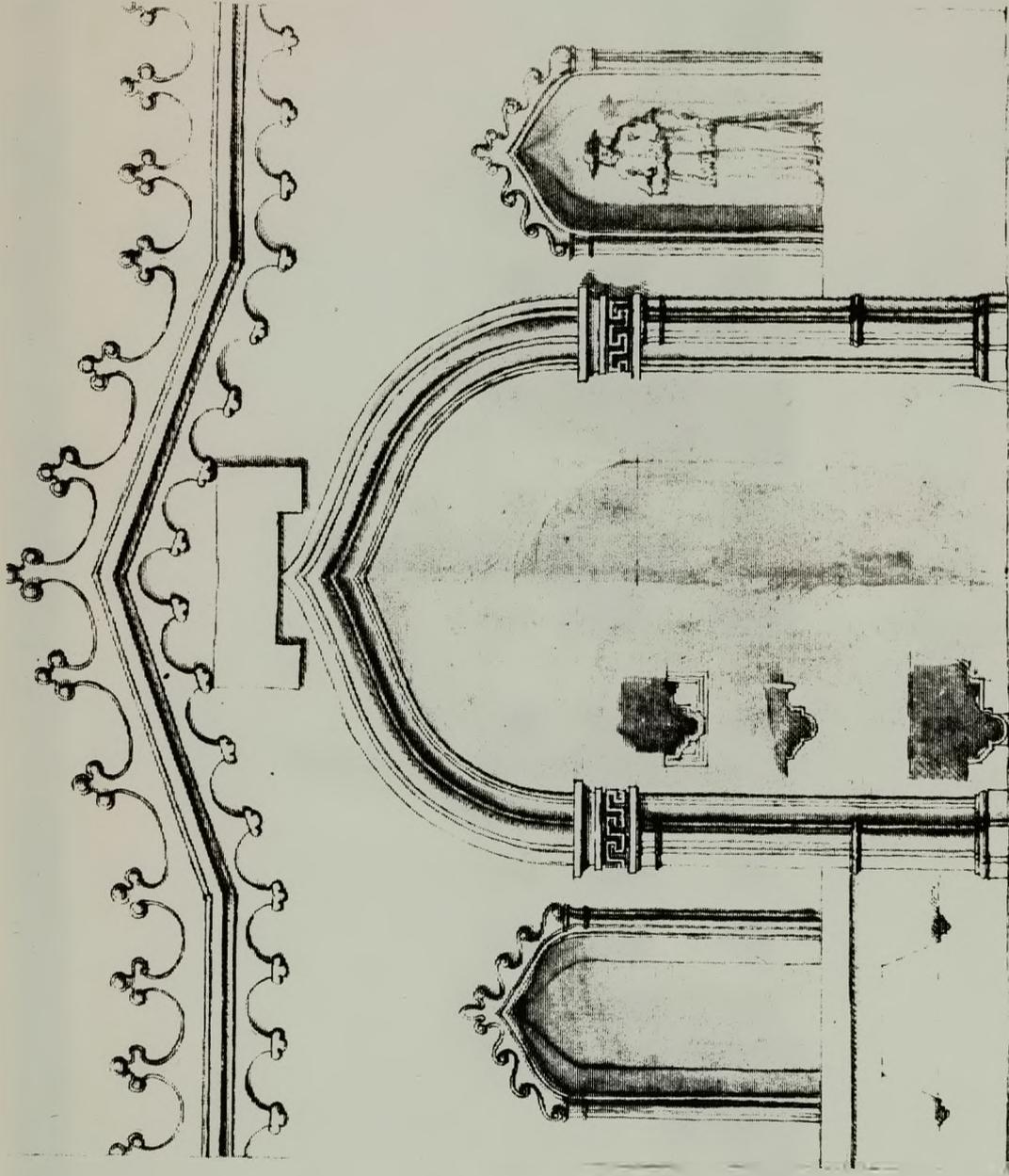


1. (top) A house in Bull Lane, High Wycombe, Bucks, since demolished

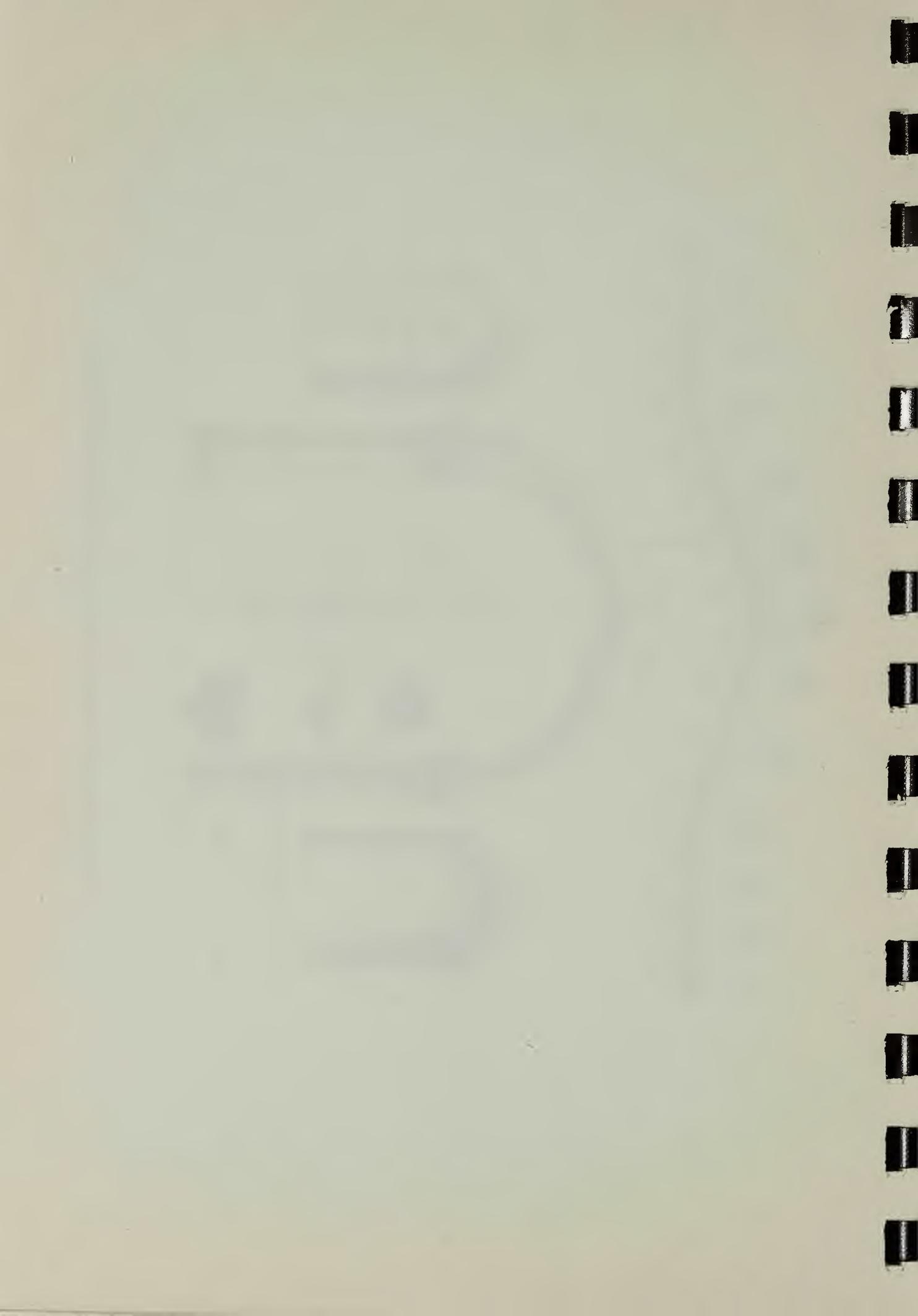
2. (bottom) William Kent's design for Esher Place, Surrey. (Wimbledon Public Library)

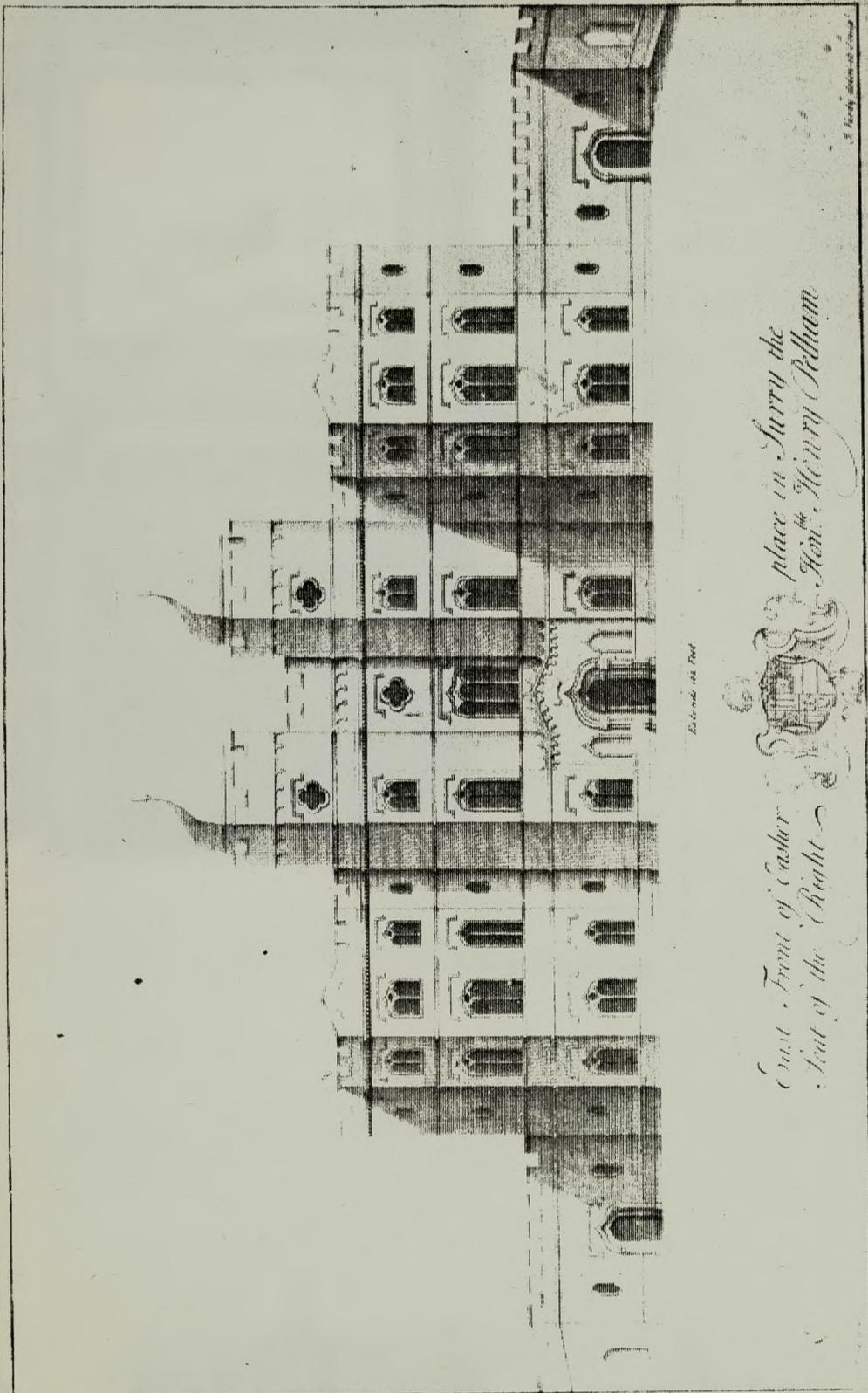






3. William Kent's design for the porch at Esher Place, dated 1733. (Wimbledon Public Library)





Front of Escher Place in Surrey the
Seat of the Right Hon. Henry Pelham

Engraved and Published

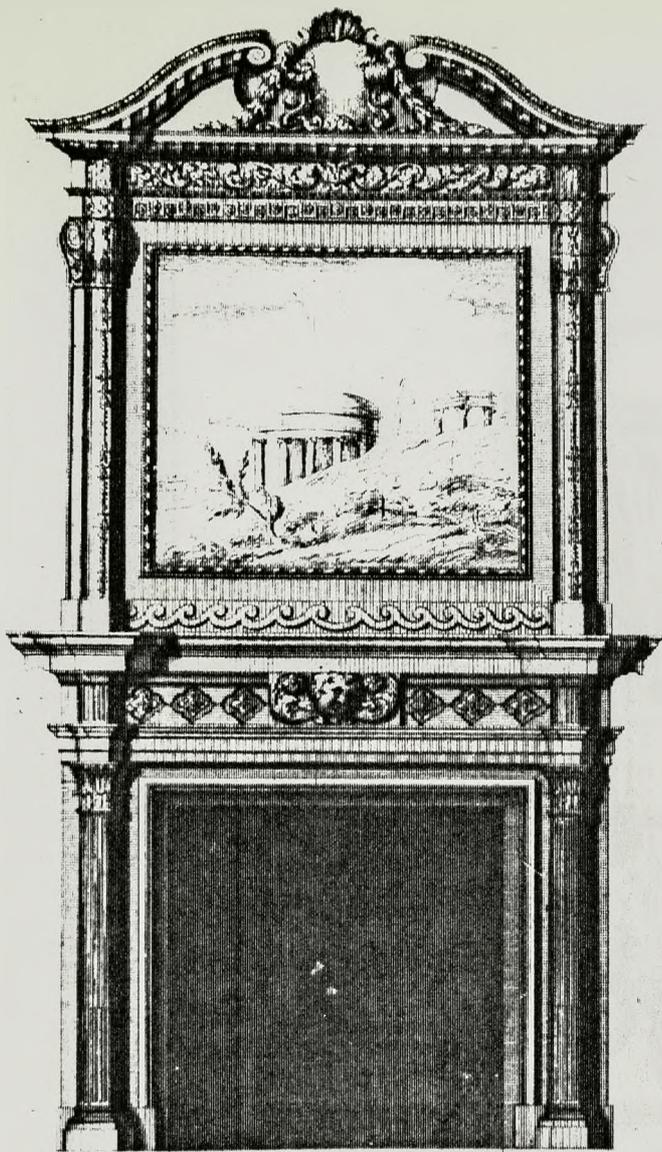
J. Vardy delin. & sculp.

4. John Vardy's engraved elevation of Escher Place

[The text in this section is extremely faint and illegible. It appears to be a list or a series of entries, possibly a table of contents or a list of items, but the specific details cannot be discerned.]



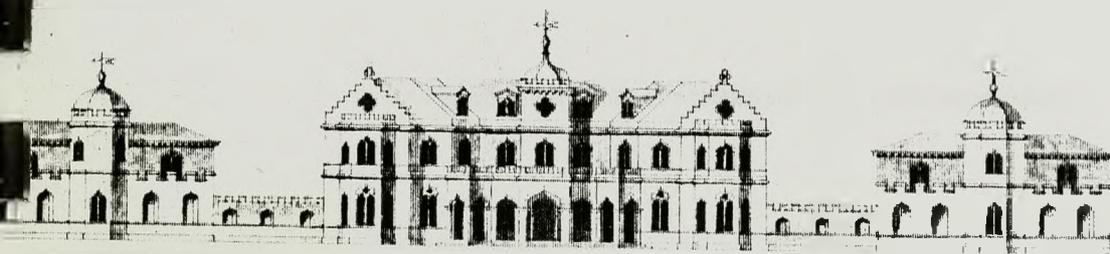
5. (top) John Vardy's engraving of a chimneypiece at Esher Place, from *Some Designs of Mr. Inigo Jones and Mr. William Kent, 1744*



Kent Inv^t

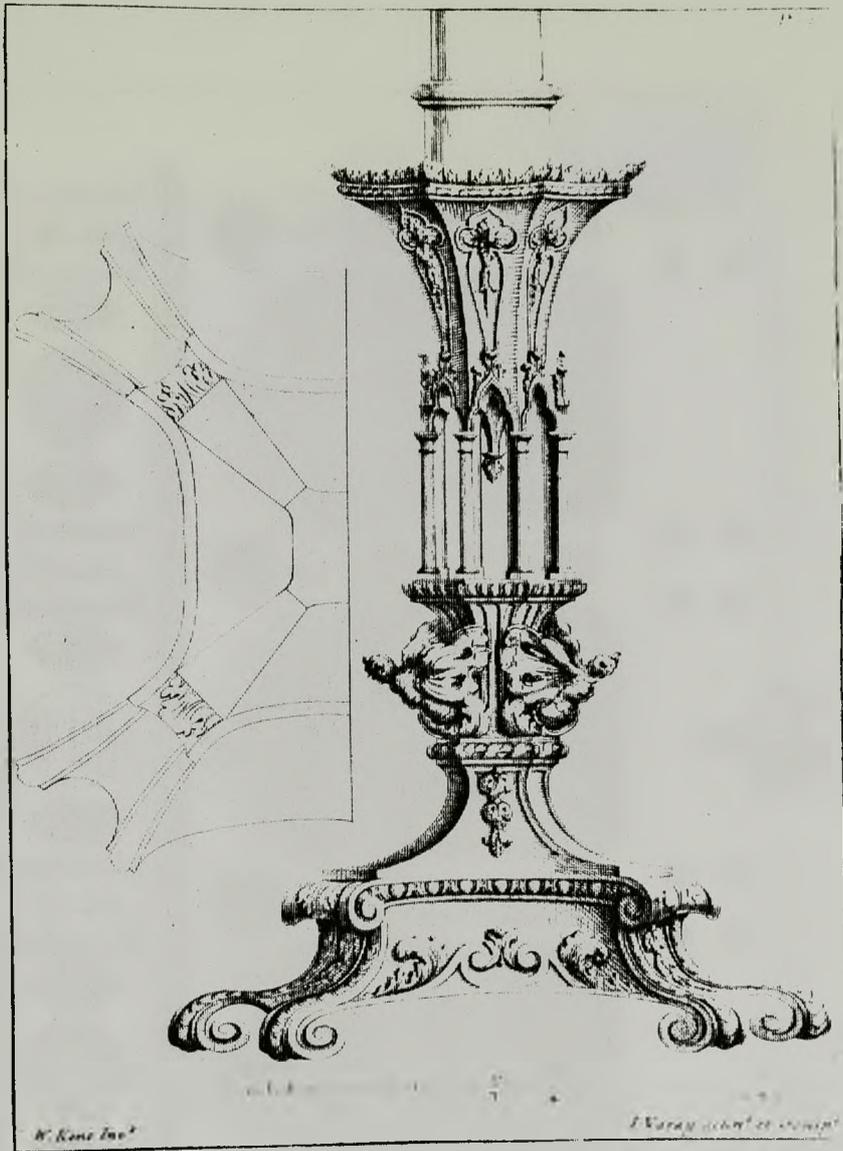
J. Vardy delin et sculp^t

6. (bottom) William Kent's design for rebuilding Honingham Hall, Norfolk, signed and dated 1738. (RIBA Drawings Collection)



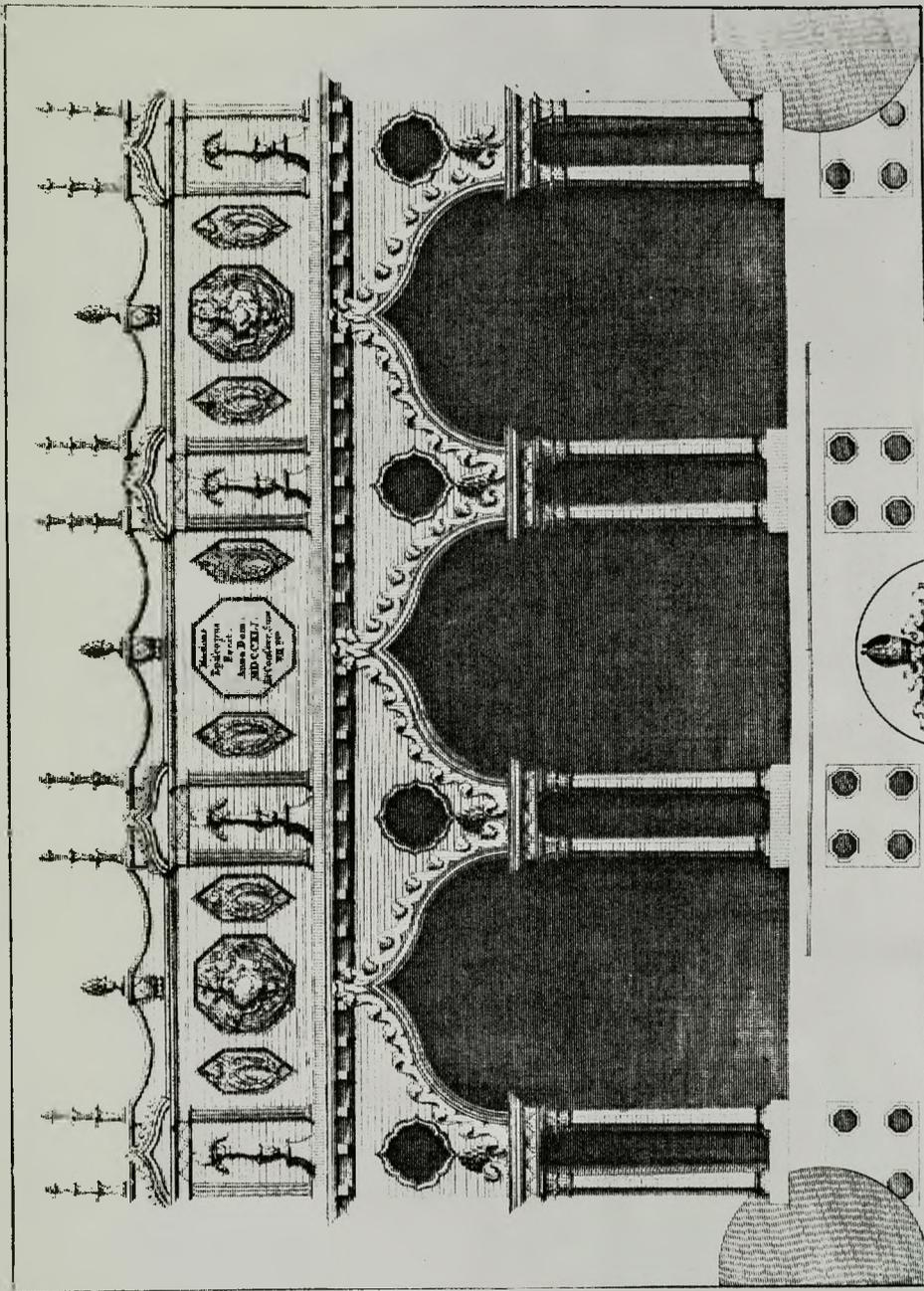
Scale in Feet





7. John Vardy's engraving of a gothick candlestick, from *Some Designs...*

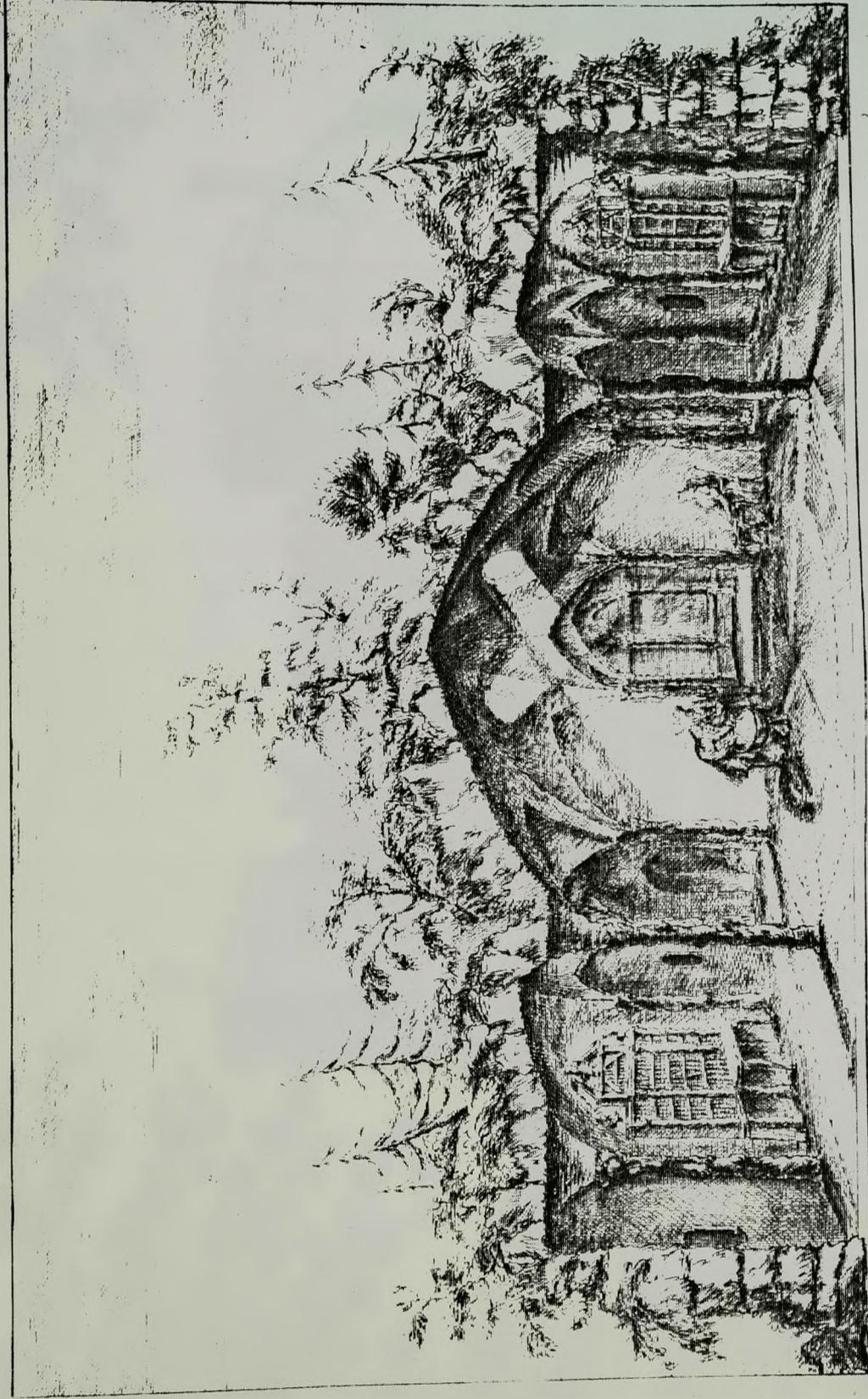




A Screen Erected before the Choir in the Cathedral
 by the Rev. Bishop of Gloucester, 1741. Designed by M^r Kent.
 — by his Bishop's most Obedient
 Servant, John Vardy.

8. John Vardy's engraving of the Gloucester Cathedral choir screen (loc. cit.)

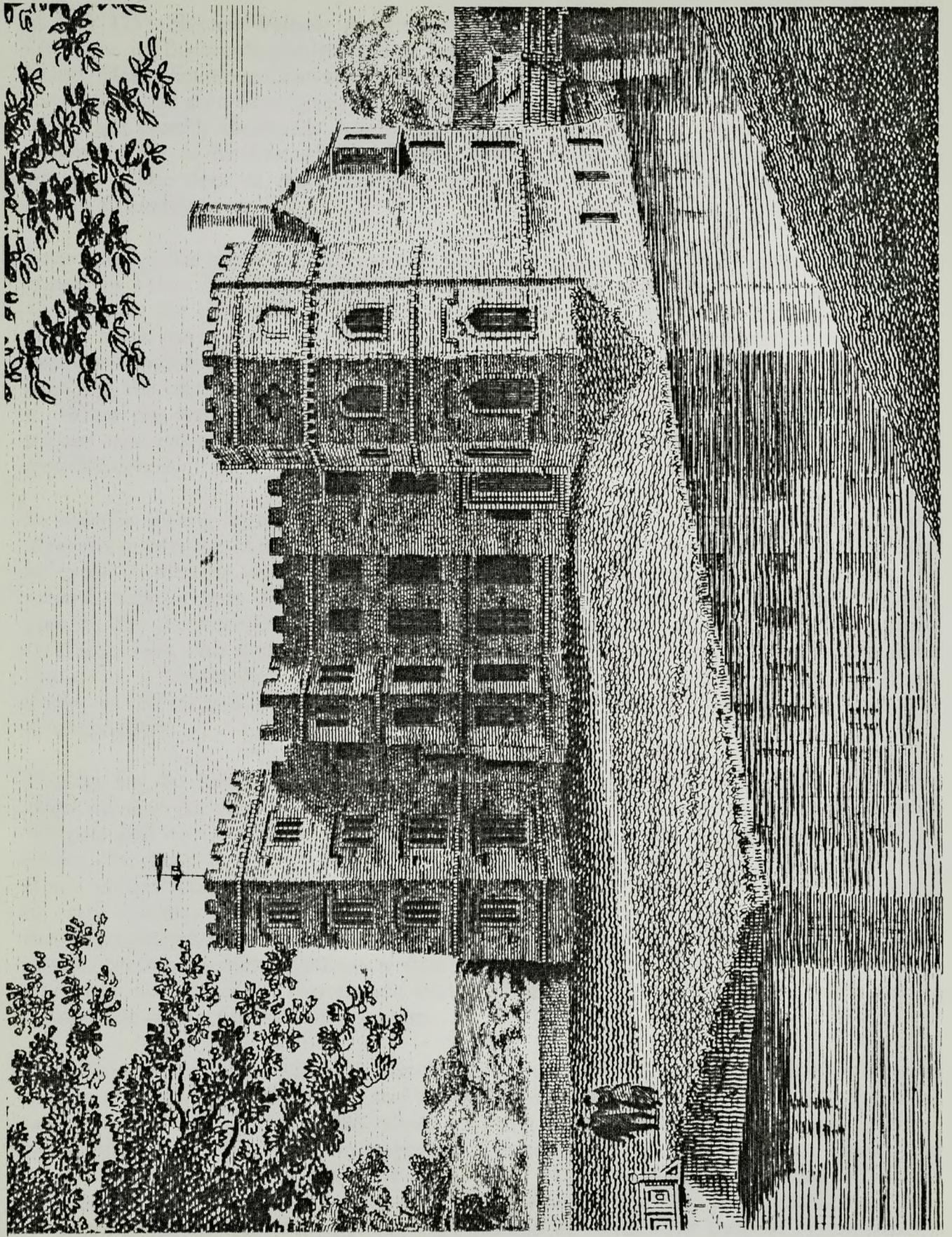




The section of MERLIN'S CAVE in the Royal Gardens at Richmond.
 as designed by M. Kent. J. Vardy delin. et sculp.

9. John Vardy's engraving of the section of Merlin's Cave, Richmond, Surrey (loc. cit.)

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10. Holton House, Oxfordshire