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ARCHITECT AND CLIENT

Howard Colvin

The relationship between architect and client has never been an easy one. On the one hand the client is entrusting the expenditure of a large sum of money to another person who may or may not produce the building he wants at a cost he can afford and within a time-scale he can tolerate: on the other the architect is offering a functional and aesthetic concept which perhaps embodies cherished principles of design as well as much hard-won practical experience to someone who may mutilate it by ignorant meddling or ruin it by parsimony.

In Georgian England there were, as there are today, both satisfied and dissatisfied clients, and architects who enjoyed enlightened patronage as well as those who retired hurt from commissions that caused them nothing but frustration. The epic struggle between Vanbrugh and Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough, over the design of Blenheim Palace is well known¹ and at a distance of nearly 300 years we can sympathise with both parties, for if Sarah undoubtedly showed no understanding of Vanbrugh's genius, it is apparent from a reading of the original documents that her high-handed architect was quite capable of altering designs and ordering works at Blenheim without proper consultation.

In the reign of George III Lord Pembroke was only one of many aristocratic clients whose patience was exhausted by the dilatory habits and unbusinesslike methods of James Wyatt.² "When a [new] commission is proposed to him by a Nobleman or Gentleman by whom he has never before been employed", his nephew Jeffrey told the diarist Joseph Farington, "he will eagerly attend to it till he has got all the instructions necessary for the commencement of the work, but then he becomes indifferent to it, and has lost many great commissions by such neglect."³ The letter which Wyatt received from another exasperated client, William Windham of Felbrigg, must be one of the most devastating ever written by a long-suffering client to a delinquent architect.

"It is near two years since you undertook a business for me neither requiring, nor admitting of, delay; and which you have not done yet. I have written to you no less than five letters desiring to know, whether you meant to do this, or not: and you have returned no answer. You may perhaps think that this is a mark of genius, and the privilege of a man eminent in his profession: but you must give me leave to say, that it must be a profession higher than that of an Architect, and eminence greater than that of Mr. Wyatt, that can make one see in this proceeding anything but great impertinence, and a degree of neglect, that may well be called dishonest."⁴

On the other hand, both Samuel Whitbread, the builder of Southill in Bedfordshire, and Sir George Beaumont, the owner of Coleorton in Leicestershire, were so pleased with the services of their architects, Henry Holland and George Dance the younger, respectively, that they were moved to commemorate their satisfaction by inscriptions which in Holland's case pay poetic tribute "to the labours of thy polished mind", and in Dance's record that he "has manifested as much friendship, by his attention to the Execution of the work, as he has shown good sense, taste and genius in the Design".⁵

My purpose in this paper is not, however, to illustrate from 18th-century examples those clashes of personality on the one hand, or those harmonious relations on the other, that have always affected the relations between architect and client, but rather to see that relationship in terms of the social and professional conventions of its time. In what ways did the relations

between Georgian architect and Georgian client differ from those of the 19th and 20th centuries?

First of all we must remember the physical and geographical constraints that affected architectural practice. In a country without motor-cars, railways, telephones or faxes, the scope for misunderstanding and muddle was enormous. The case of Sir Marmaduke Wyvill, the Yorkshire gentleman who went away for five months, leaving his house to be altered by John Carr of York, and returned to find that “there had been a mistake” and Carr’s workmen had inadvertently pulled down the whole house, was no doubt exceptional,⁶ but frantic letters to say that “the workmen are all at a stand, as not knowing how to proceed one jott farther” for lack of drawings, or that the mason has inexplicably “lost three feet in one of the fronts”⁷ remind us of the difficulty of communication that bedevilled all architectural supervision from a distance and that could so easily embitter relations between an anxious client and an absentee architect.

Often there was a tacit or even an explicit understanding that the architect would visit the site at least once a year, and the diary of the London architect Robert Mylne shows that periodically he set out on a long journey in the course of which he would inspect the slow-moving works at his various commissions in the country.⁸ Alternatively, the principal workman, or the clerk of works, if one was employed, might go to London from time to time for instructions. But most communication was necessarily by post, and much depended on the good sense and judgement of the master workmen. As many of these men were quite capable of designing a building themselves, it is easy to see why provincial builder-architects of ability like Smith of Warwick, or Carr of York, or Pickford of Derby, were so successful. For they could offer a package, as we should call it — design, supervision and execution — and unlike the architect from London they were only 10 or 20 miles away in case of need. For some clients, indeed, it was enough to employ the fashionable London architect just to decorate the interiors of a house designed and executed by an architect-builder. This is one of the reasons why Robert Adam so rarely designed a complete country house, many of his commissions being, as at Hatchlands, Harewood or Croome, for the principal interiors only.

The master-builder who designed what he built gained his remuneration mainly from the building contract. The design was an incidental matter for which payment might be expected only if it was not proceeded with. Then, as now, private clients often obtained designs from more than one architect, and in this form the closed competition goes back at least to the early years of the 18th century. It was, however, a competition with no rules, and the client would feel himself free to combine features from different designs or even to employ one competitor to carry out another’s plans — something that was particularly common in Scotland, where it was not unknown for one architect to provide a design, for a second to be responsible for its execution and for a third to be employed to measure up the completed work.⁹ In this way a Scottish client avoided any danger of being exploited by a single builder-architect, but ran the risk of divided responsibility if anything went wrong. Public competition as a way of obtaining designs dates from the latter part of the 18th century, but it has never been a method employed by the private client, and it forms a chapter — a fairly scandalous one — in the history of the architectural profession that I cannot attempt to deal with within the limits of this short paper.

Assuming that the client employed what we should call a professional architect to design and supervise the erection of a building either by a contracting master-builder or by separate agreements with the various tradesmen, how was that architect remunerated? Remuneration in accordance with a recognised scale of charges is one of the touchstones of professionalism whether in architecture or medicine or law, and in the 1830s the remuneration of architects was one of the first questions to which the newly-founded Institute of British Architects addressed itself in pursuance of its policy of establishing “an uniformity and respectability in the

profession". In 1845 its Professional Practice Committee recommended that a commission of 5% should be the only recognised remuneration of an architect, "be the character of the work what it may". They found that payment on this basis could be traced back as far as 1777, when Sir William Chambers received 5% in connection with the building of Somerset House.¹⁰

There is in fact abundant evidence that architects had received a 5% commission for their services throughout the 18th century. Indeed the practice goes back to the 17th century. An abstract of Sir Christopher Wren's account for rebuilding the London City Churches after the Great Fire of 1666 shows that Wren and his colleagues Hooke and Woodroffe were paid "for the management of the whole at 12d per pound for all moneys received and paid".¹¹ In 1737, when George Dance was asked by the Mansion House Committee to state what he expected "for his Trouble and care in Surveying, and ordering the intended building . . . he said that the usual allowance was five pounds per cent on the money laid out."¹² John Wood of Bath received 5% as architect of Liverpool Town Hall in 1754,¹³ James Wyatt charged the same for his work as Shardeloes in the 1770s,¹⁴ and in 1793, when James Lewis modestly asked the Governors of Christ's Hospital for only 2½% they gave him a gratuity of 100gns, observing that 5% "was the usual charge of gentlemen of his profession upon new buildings".¹⁵

But if 5% was the usual charge, it was by no means the only one, and an examination of 18th-century building records reveals considerable diversity in the remuneration of architects. Some were content to receive a lump sum which bore no direct relationship to the total cost of the building,¹⁶ others accepted an annual salary in the case of works extending over a long period. In 1730 it was stated in evidence that the architect's fee at Blenheim Palace was "300 a year besides travelling charges", but that "others [charge] 200 a year, others 5 per cent".¹⁷ Even if remuneration was on a percentage basis, it might be fixed at anything between 2 and 6% of the total cost. In the same year James Gibbs wrote to the Vice-Chancellor of Cambridge University to say that he was usually paid at the rate of 5% on the total outlay, but that "out of that respect I have for the University, I only charge the halfe I have from any other person, which is two and a halfe per cent of the whole charge of this building", that is the Senate House.¹⁸ In 1720, when he competed for St Martin's-in-the-Fields, he was compelled to sign a declaration that he would "accept of such Reward for his Care pains and Trouble . . . as the Commissioners . . . shall think fit". What they thought fit was no more than £550, which represented less than 1½% of the total outlay.¹⁹ In 1737 Henry Flitcroft told the committee for rebuilding the church of St Olave Southwark that "he would perform his business as a surveyor for 4£ per cent", while his rival Mr Porter "offered to perform the same at 2£ per cent". In view of the "proved ability" of Mr Flitcroft, the vestry decided to employ him, but then blandly informed him that, "as they chose him as their surveyor, they hoped he would abate somewhat of his proposall". He replied that he would contract for no less than 4£ per cent; but "in regard to the parish" he would make a deduction of half per cent, an offer which the parish accepted.²⁰ On the other hand Nicholas Dubois received a 6% commission for acting as the architect of Stanmer Park, Sussex, between 1721 and 1728, in addition to travelling expenses at the rate of £1 13s for each journey to and from London. His total remuneration on this basis amounted to £738.²¹

Travelling charges formed a regular part of an architect's remuneration in the case of buildings erected outside London. In 1773 Sir William Chambers informed a client that travelling charges "are I believe allowed to every Architect of reputation here. I know Mr. Wright, Mr. Taylor, Mr. Adam always charge their Expenses. They have assured me that the article has never been disputed and that excepting some beginners or persons who have not the fortune to be known and are glad on these Accounts to be employ'd on any Conditions, they think travelling expenses are charged by every body unless in cases of Contract where the profits of the undertaking are supposed to be sufficient to pay all outgoings of this sort".²² Some architects charged by the mile, others by the visit or in proportion to the time spent in travelling

on behalf of a individual client.⁸

Some architects charged for measuring over and above their commission. In 1795 it was proposed by a committee of the Architect's Club to make a regular charge for measuring in addition to the customary 5%, Soane being the only dissentient.²³ A few years later Henry Holland deposed that "he was in the habit of charging one, two and two and a half per cent [for measuring] in addition to the usual allowance of five per cent",²⁴ but Soane asserted that "the old-established allowance of five per cent to the Architect or Surveyor" was "even in these times, an adequate compensation for his best services through all the stages of the work, from the design . . . to the ultimate examination and audit of the accounts of the tradesmen".²⁵ He was not alone, for in 1826 the Secretary of the Treasury ascertained that "upon inquiry of Messrs Soane, Smirke, Cockerell, Seward, Pilkington and Hardwick, they have not in their practice made any charge for measuring the works they have been employed upon, considering their expense to be included in their commission of five per cent".²⁶

However, as the 19th century advanced, it became less and less usual for the architect to accept responsibility for the measurement of works carried out under his supervision, for, as the Committee of Professional Practice appointed by the R.I.B.A. reported in 1867, "within the last half century, in consequence of the improvements in many practical points of professional duties originating with the late Sir Robert Smirke, the measuring and bill department has been transferred . . . to the class of measuring surveyors, and is distinctly carried on by them".²⁷ Thus the function of the surveyor was at last clearly distinguished from that of the architect, with which it had so long been identified, and architects, though relieved of the onerous if largely mechanical duties of measurement, continued to claim their 5% until the increasingly technical nature of architectural design and supervision was held to justify its increase in 1919.

The general acceptance of 5% as the normal remuneration of an architect in the 18th century was only one step towards professional status. The concept of Georgian architects as professional men was still only precariously established in the minds of their clients, for whom most of them scarcely ranked even as gentlemen. Architecture had never been recognised as an academic subject in the English universities, and the fact that so many of its practitioners were involved in the building trades meant that the medieval classification of architecture as a mechanical rather than a liberal art was difficult to shake off. So at Stanmer the Huguenot architect Dubois could be called "the French son of a bitch" by Henry Pelham's servants,²⁸ and even Sir William Chambers, a Royal Academician and the Comptroller of His Majesty's Works, complained after a visit to Blenheim Palace that "I am like the Egiptian Bird who picks the teeth of the Crocodile, admitted and cherished whilst there is any work to be done, but when that is over the doors are shut and the farce is at an end".²⁹ The fact that in England so many gentlemen were amateur architects tended no doubt to give architecture a certain degree of respectability, and those gentlemen by birth who became regular architects, like Vanbrugh and Archer, did not lose caste as a result. Robert Adam, whose forbears were minor gentry in Fife, so far succeeded in gaining acceptance in the higher ranks of society that when he died in 1792 his body was buried in Westminster Abbey and the pall-bearers were the Duke of Buccleuch, the Earl of Coventry, the Earl of Lauderdale, Viscount Stormont, Lord Frederick Campbell and William Pulteney of Westerhall.³⁰

But for most 18th-century architects their relationship to their aristocratic employers was more that of servant to patron than of professional man to client. The idea of patronage, with its implications of subservience on the one side, and of condescension on the other, it not one that appeals to the egalitarian society of the 20th century. But it operated at every level of 18th-century society, and in architecture the search for a wealthy and influential patron was high on every young architect's agenda. It often began in Rome, where clever and ambitious young architects such as Robert Adam, Robert Mylne or John Soane could hope to form the

acquaintance of rich young aristocrats on the Grand Tour who were likely to build on their return to Britain. A well-disposed patron might be the making of an architect's career. Writing to Lord Findlater in 1785, James Playfair reminds him of the many architects "who have accumulated large fortunes in a few years by means of one Patron of Rank. Crunden, Leverton, Holland, and Johnson are all opulent within these ten years by this means, although all of them [he says sourly] possess very slender merits".³¹ Who Crunden's patron was I do not know. Leverton's may have been the Indian nabob, Sir Thomas Rumbold, for whom he designed Woodhall in Hertfordshire. Holland's success stemmed from his employment to design Brooks's Club, a commission that introduced him to a circle of Whig aristocrats which included the Prince of Wales. In John Johnson's case it may have been his work for the Marquess of Northampton at Castle Ashby that led to his extensive employment by the Northamptonshire gentry.

Patronage of this sort sometimes had a political bias. Vanbrugh's patrons were nearly all Whigs, Gibbs's largely, but by no means exclusively, Tories. Robert Adam's talents were such as generally to transcend political boundaries, but as a Whig he was never employed in Tory Oxford. Later Sir Robert Smirke had an extensive Tory clientèle that included the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel.

Benevolent patronage could not only lead to further employment by private recommendation: it could bring the security of salaried office. What Vanbrugh was paid by Lord Carlisle for designing Castle Howard we do not know, but Carlisle was Lord Treasurer, and the office of Comptroller of the Royal Works was Vanbrugh's real reward.³² In the course of the 1720s Lord Burlington used his influence at Court to infiltrate the Office of Works with his protégés — notably Kent, Flitcroft and Garrett — thus at once providing them with remunerative posts and ensuring that future royal buildings would be designed by Palladian architects.³³ It was to Sir Robert Walpole's patronage that Ripley, the executant architect of his country mansion at Houghton, owed his appointment to the Comptrollership of the Works on Vanbrugh's death in 1726, and when Ripley died in 1758 and Flitcroft took his place, it was by "the immediate appointment" of the Duke of Newcastle (then Prime Minister) that his architect Stephen Wright took Flitcroft's place as Master Mason and Deputy Surveyor.³⁴ Wright was Newcastle's architect at Clumber and Clarendon, and when, in 1754, the duke gave £500 towards building a new front to the University Library at Cambridge, it was Wright's design that he forced on the unwilling university.³⁵

The Office of the King's Works, under the direct patronage of the government of the day, offered the most prestigious posts that Georgian England had to offer to architects. The financial rewards were not enormous, but the senior offices carried with them an official residence in Whitehall or elsewhere, and as daily attendance was not expected, there was time to conduct a lucrative private practice. In London there were other surveyorships — of the Bank of England, the City of London, the East India Company, Greenwich Hospital — that were equally sought after and to which patronage was often the key.

So long as patronage was paramount, there could be no architectural profession as we know it today — no codes of practice nor corporate solidarity, still less any recognised qualifications or system of architectural education. What gradually brought the Georgian system of patronage in architecture to an end was the expanding economy of a country undergoing an industrial and commercial transformation, and the transfer of much hitherto aristocratic patronage to corporations, charities, commissioners (eg for new churches), and so forth. Instead of being tied to a party, a family or a region, it was now possible for an architect to specialise, like Mylne, in bridges, or, like Blackburn, in prisons. As J. C. Loudon observed in 1835, "the time for building palaces, castles and cathedrals is gone by, or nearly so, and that for town halls, schools, museums, libraries, theatres . . . is approaching".³⁶ These new types of

buildings brought with them a new middle-class clientèle of business and professional men and introduced a new era in the relations between architect and client that was to last well into the early years of this century.

NOTES

1. David Green, *Blenheim Palace*, 1951, tells the story, but Vanbrugh's letters should be read at first-hand in Geoffrey Webb's excellent Nonesuch Press edition of 1928.
2. *The Farington Diary*, ed. J. Greig, V, 1925, 168.
3. *Op. cit.*, IV, 1924, 32.
4. *The Windham Papers*, 1913, I, 182-83, Letter dated November 23, 1793.
5. *Southill. A Regency House*, ed. Whitbread, 1951, 59; inscription over porch at Coleorton.
6. *The Farington Diary* V, 1925, 168.
7. "Letters and Papers relating to the Rebuilding of Combe Abbey, Warwickshire 1681-1688", ed. H.M. Colvin, *Walpole Society* L, 1984, 264; British Library, Add. MS. 41133, ff. 45^v-46^v.
8. A. E. Richardson, *Robert Mylne*, 1955, *passim*.
9. See H. M. Colvin, "The Beginnings of the Architectural Profession in Scotland", *Architectural History* 29, 1986.
10. C. Woodward, "Professional Practice", in *The Growth and Work of the R.I.B.A.*, ed. J. A. Gotch, 1934, 118.
11. British Library, Harleian MS. 4941, f. 168.
12. S. Perks, *History of the Mansion House*, 1922, 175, 290.
13. J. A. Picton, *Liverpool Municipal Records 1700-1835*, 1886, 158-59.
14. *Shardeloes Papers*, ed. G. Eland, 1947, 135.
15. Architectural Publication Society's *Dictionary*, s.v. "Lewis".
16. Thus in 1692 Wren accepted £1000 "for his great Care and paines in Directing and Overseeing the Building of [Chelsea] Hospital and in Stating and Settling the Workmen's Bills relating thereto for ten years past", although the total expenditure was in the neighbourhood of £145,000 (*Wren Society* XIX, 69, 81), and in 1715 the Delegates of the Clarendon Press at Oxford agreed "to gratifie Mr. Hawksmore for his care in drawing and supervising the whole worke of the New Printing house", which had cost £6,185, by a gift of £100 (*The First Minute-Book of the Delegates of the Oxford University Press*, ed. S. Gibson & J. Johnson for the Oxford Bibliographical Society, 1943, 45).
17. *Virtue Notebooks* (Walpole Society) III, 46.
18. R. Willis & J. W. Clark, *Architectural History of the University of Cambridge*, III, 1886, 55n.
19. Westminster Public Library, MS. Minutes of the Commissioners for Rebuilding St. Martin's Church, f. 27.
20. *The Builder* II, 1844, 252-53.
21. Information from the late Arthur Oswald, who had examined the original accounts.
22. British Library, Add. MS. 41133, f. 99^v.
23. A. T. Bolton, *The Portrait of Sir John Soane*, 1927, 76-77.
24. J. Soane, *A Letter to the Earl Spencer*, 1795, 5-6. James Paine did the same: see his letter to Sir William Chambers stating his professional charges in British Library, Add. MS. 41134, ff. 35^v-36.
25. Soane, *op. cit.* Soane gave evidence in 1803 in a case in which R. F. Brettingham was endeavouring to obtain "5 per cent for surveying &c. and 2½ for measuring". Brettingham lost (*The Farington Diary* II, 19).
26. J. Noble, *The Professional Practice of Architects*, 1836, 32-33.
27. Report of the Committee of Professional Practice, cited in Architectural Publication Society's *Dictionary*, s.v. "Measuring".
28. British Library, Add. MS. 33085, ff. 351-52.
29. Heather Martienssen, "Chambers as a Professional Man", *Architectural Review*, April 1964, 281.
30. *Gentleman's Magazine* 1792 (2), 283. All these aristocrats had employed Adam with the exception of Viscount Stormont, who was representing his aged uncle the Earl of Mansfield, his client at Kenwood House.
31. Scottish Record Office, Edinburgh, GD 151/11/32.
32. K. Downes, *Sir John Vanbrugh*, 1987, 235.
33. H. M. Colvin, "Lord Burlington and the Office of Works", in *Lord Burlington and his Circle* (Georgian Group Symposium, 1982).
34. J. Mordaunt Crook, "The Office of Works 1719-1782", in *History of the King's Works* ed. Colvin, V, 1976, 88-91.
35. R. Willis & J. W. Clark, *op. cit.* III, 63-66.
36. Quoted by J. Mordaunt Crook, "The pre-Victorian architect: professionalisation and patronage", *Architectural History* 12, 1969, 72.