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THE STEPPED VOUSOIR AND AFTER: PROVINCIAL INDECISION IN BRISTOL — THE PATY FAMILY

Timothy Mowl

If the Paragon and the Assembly Rooms on The Mall are your images of 18th-century Bristol then abandon them. They are 19th-century Clifton — a stone-built suburb of refuge for a nervous bourgeoisie. They sit high and limestone-solid on their healthy hilltop. Below them in the valley was the real brick-built 18th-century Bristol of the Paty family. Down there, collieries, ironworks, glassworks and brass foundaries poured their fumes out around a stinking river, and a degraded working class, laced with the wild Irish, was always on the edge of riot and plunder. Bristol was both the Black Country and the Toxteth of its age; to Alexander Pope: “very unpleasant and no civilized company in it”.¹ To Horace Walpole, “the dirtiest great shop I ever saw”.² Here the Patys inherited a ruined and undirected tradition of civic design that had been deliberately shattered in 1699 by John Romsey, the long serving Town Clerk.

To be brief, the City Corporation had a drink problem. They consumed not by the bottle but by the barrel-full. Wine, brandy, port and sherry came out of their ears and by 1699 they were unable even to service their £16,000 debt. So, to ensure uninterrupted intoxication for the next 140 years, Romsey persuaded them to lease out the city’s favourite park for prime residential development. Being familiar with London speculative building, Romsey laid it down that all the houses on the new Queen Square had to be of brick. Bristol had no tradition of brick building and little even of brick making. Set between a forest and a hill of second-rate Pennant building stone, the 17th-century city was a carpenter’s creation, a homely mix of wood and rubble. The brick houses that resulted from Romsey’s decree were timid boxes, a dim Quaker Classicism, as if Pratt and Wren had never happened. A few hankered naively after the lost decorative tradition that Romsey had ruthlessly terminated. But those new ground rents did the trick. In 1714 the Corporation celebrated the accession of George I with 53 gallons of port and 15 gallons each of sherry and claret; all in one night.

Over the next 20 years this imposed brick vernacular was absorbed without flair or imagination by men like the Quaker carpenter, George Tully, who preceded the Patys as a City surveyor. The result was squares like St James, streets like Orchard. This was the Bristol the Patys inherited.

Significantly they surfaced in this brick banality as a family, or more accurately a clan, of Somerset stonemasons and carvers with yards in the Horsefair and Limekiln Lane.³ There were five James Patys and the James who really founded their fortunes altered the spelling of his surname in drafting his own will.⁴ That particular James, a Limekiln Lane Paty, was the carver, freestone mason and designer of a prestige civic building, the City Library, raised between 1738 and 1740. Plainly he had at least heard of Palladio and when his 21 year old son, Thomas, helped to install a second-hand Grinling Gibbons-style overmantel in the upper room, it introduced the young carver to virtuoso three-dimensional quality. Up until then, Thomas had been a funerary mason. Over the next 50 years, while he sometimes described himself as “architect”, he consistently added “and statuary” or “stone and marble cutter”. A large portfolio of his monumental designs survives but only one conventional and unrealised Palladian elevation.⁵ The monuments incline to a Rococo delicacy of husks and garlands.

Before his father died in 1747 and Thomas took over the firm, he had already established a brilliant reputation in the city with the internal woodwork and external stonework of John Strahan's last building: the Redland Chapel (1740-47).⁶ (Fig. 1) Technically the cherub heads set like a permanent angel congregation around the walls are so delicately detailed that they were long attributed to Rysbrack. But they are conventional and Thomas's dove of the Holy Spirit on the reredos is close cousin to the dead duck on the Gibbons-style City Library overmantel. A less derivative and more personal talent emerges outside the chapel's east end and even more so on the great frieze of the Corn Exchange and in the populist images of the four continents that Paty designed and carved for John Wood's new market court, with blackamoors, turbaned Turks, camels, wild beasts and savages in loose Rococo scrolls.

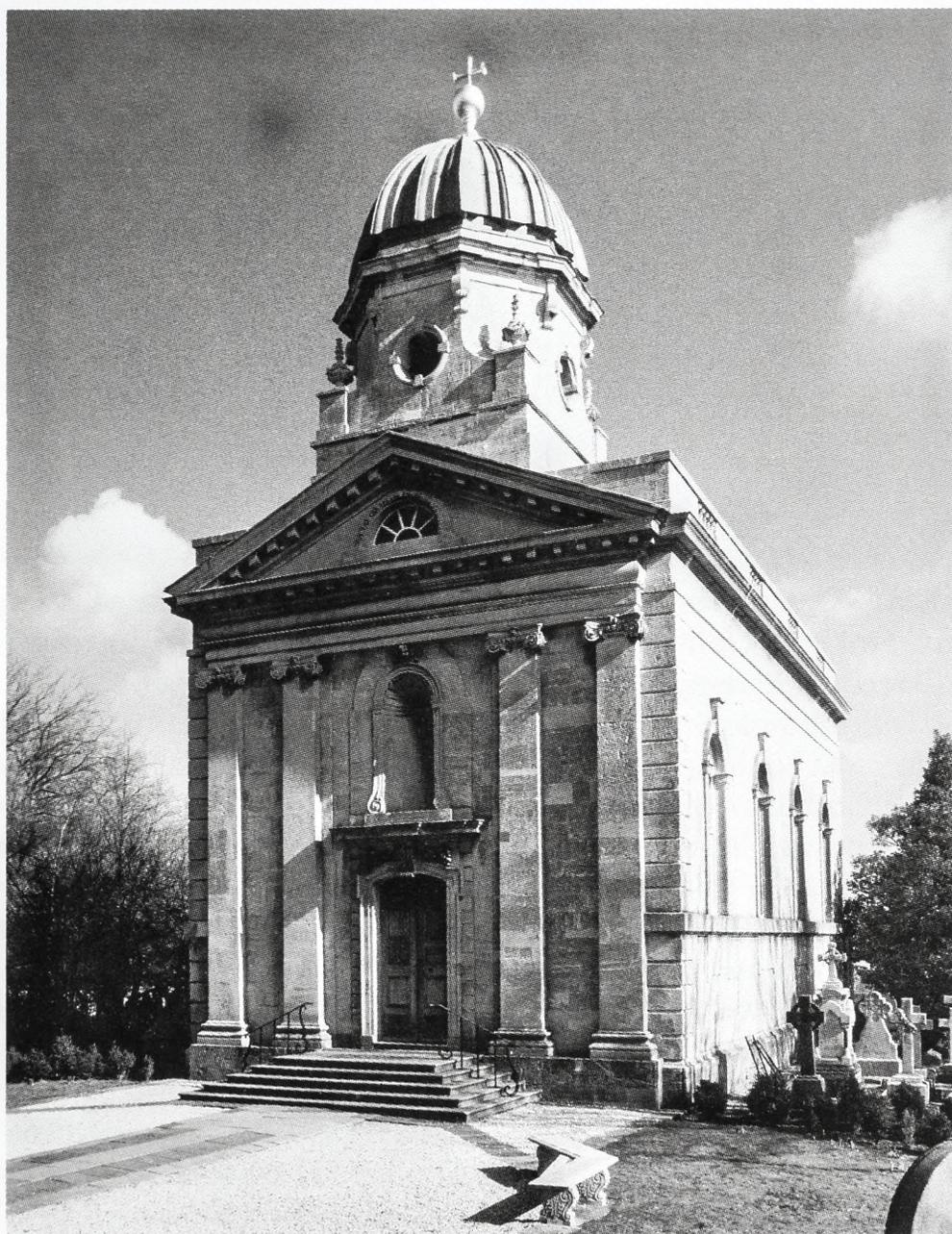


Fig. 1. Thomas Paty was responsible for the external stonework and internal woodwork of John Strahan's Redland Chapel (1740-47).

John Wood's Exchange (1741-43) was Bristol's first introduction to major Palladian design, but Paty's experience as its "ornamental carver" effected no conversion to Palladian orthodoxy, indeed his frieze can be seen as an impertinent Rococo addition to the already feminine design. Paty's own bid for the major masonry contract had been undercut by two Bath bids and there was traditionally bad blood between Bath and Bristol.⁷ The standard unit which

Thomas Paty evolved some years later to front Bristol's fast expanding streets owes nothing to the unit which John Wood devised for the same purpose in Bath.

What did have lasting influence on Thomas Paty was the contract drawn up in 1746 to act as mason and carver for £2,000, building Clifton Hill House to a daringly advanced design by Isaac Ware for Paul Fisher, a rich city merchant.⁸ Ware carried the prestige of the capital, not the stain of Bath, and by working there with his team of masons Paty absorbed the idea of an austere proto-neo-Classical exterior with riotous proto-Rococo plasterwork within. Ware makes it clear in his *Complete Body of Architecture* that his client had made him design the Rococo ceilings against his own sturdily Palladian judgement. Fisher was the proprietor who "has corrupted his taste in France so far as to dislike the Grecian science".⁹ Ware remarks, disdainfully, that his own design "may be decorated with eagles, griffons, Pegasuses or other fantastical or real forms of animals, and with masks, faces and baskets of flowers".¹⁰ Joseph Thomas, the plasterer who created this moderately lively though still contained composition at Clifton Hill House, went on to devise and execute a full-blooded Rococo ceiling for his own house in Guinea Street, a riotous staircase hall in Orchard Street and further Chinese-Rococo work for Bristol's lost Prince Street Assembly Rooms of 1756.

Thomas Paty was not the only convert to what Ware suspiciously labelled as "French Ornaments", "Wild Leaves" and "French Crooked Figures". His Clifton Hill House experience launched the Paty firm into a 17-year period when they built, always to the exterior designs of other men, six buildings with rich Rococo interiors decorated with a cheerful mix of figurative life — squirrels perched on boughs, rabbits, peach trees, Chinamen in conical hats, frustrated foxes — all easily contained within the abstract curlicues and feathery scrolls of the style.

There was The Cedars which Thomas Paty built in Wells for Charles Tudway to a design by Thomas Prowse.¹¹ Plain to the point of tedium outside, its ceilings are inventive worlds of domesticated fantasy. Then came the Royal Fort, a small masterpiece of European stature to which I shall return. Stoke Park followed where James Paty headed the Paty team for the first time to realise Thomas Wright's strange King James's Gothic-style Castle of 1760-64 and redeem its lumbering outline with Thomas Stocking's relatively formal Rococo ceilings.¹² Thomas Paty let loose Stocking again on St Nicholas's Church in the city where he was completing a dull James Bridges design with a Gothic tower and a vast Rococo ceiling, the latter lost through bombing. Fonmon Castle in Glamorgan is aggressively plain outside but again the plasterwork of the Paty-Stocking interior combines a wonderful bucolic gusto within the airy dance of its Rococo confines.¹³ Last in this remarkable series is William Reeves's Arno's Court and his extraordinary Black Castle — a major commission with which I shall deal later.

This is too consistent a record to be chance and it is not unreasonable to describe the Patys as provincial apostles of the Rococo, a relatively rare style on this side of the Channel. It flourished in Bristol because Bristol was not Bath. Bristol never accepted formal Palladian plasterwork of acanthus, bay leaves and paterae. Thomas Paty's own natural flair for three-dimensional design led him to recruit workmen who could respond to the latest in the pattern books. The Patys were essentially a pliant firm. They gave rich clients what they asked for and the nouveau riche commissioned what was modish in the drawing rooms.

But do six sets of interior designs make an architect? For that matter, can a firm constitute an architect? The Adam bothers suggest that it can. Consider the complex case of the Royal Fort (Fig. 2) built by the Patys for Thomas Tyndall and his young wife Alicia on Kingsdown high above the city.

The house has three sharply contrasted elevations, each with a different set of architraves, while the plat and sill bands that tie them roughly together confine the Venetian windows on the south side. James Bridges prepared the wooded model for the house, but a contemporary



Fig. 2. Royal Fort was built by the Patys for Thomas Tyndall, but it is not clear who was the designer.

rhyme suggests the involvement of three architects, one of them Paty:

For Aid, — he, Jones — Paladio, — Vanbrough viewed;
 Or Wallis, — Bridges, — Patty's Plans pursued;
 No Matter which, — the Fabric soon uprose,
 And all its various Beauties did disclose.¹⁴

So it seems highly probable that Tyndall commissioned three designs, liked them all, got Bridges to mould them together in wood and the Patys to build the house in stone. Internally the same inspired magpie eclecticism continues and here one senses a feminine choice. The fantastic staircase wall with its twining vine and delicious willow pattern miniatures is surely Chinese wallpaper realised in plaster. The ceiling of the Eating Room which cost 30 gns is closely modelled on Timothy Lightoler's design in *The Modern Builder's Assistant* which came out in 1757, a year before work began. Thomas Paty himself carved the doorcase and the trophies above the chimneypiece for £24 and £17 10s 0d respectively.¹⁵ But these decorations to the Eating Room with their exotic Chinese angularity were clearly inspired by Thomas Johnson's *One Hundred and Fifty New Designs* published in 1758. It is as if a modern house were to be fitted up from illustrations in *House and Garden* and some Laura Ashley wallpapers. Not an improbable scenario and very feminine. A sense of fun and domestic happiness is still palpable in the main rooms; but the upstairs rooms were never fitted out. Alicia died in 1764, an idyll broken, and all funded on profits of the slave trade. I suggest, however, that the sum total of its parts is great architecture, exhilarating teamwork from a man able to transmute directions, carve wood and stone himself like an angel and harness two first-rate plasterers, one a masterly formalist, one an erratic poet of the realised image. There is, incidentally, no proof as yet uncovered that Thomas Stocking

worked at the Fort, only assumptions.

Stocking was responsible for the grand, more formal, less figurative ceilings in Stoke Park, where James Paty realised Thomas Wright's castle-style house between 1760 and 1764. James is usually described as Thomas's brother but on no firm evidence. As he was 17 years younger I subscribe to the view that they were cousins. James designed the Gothic loggia now sadly dilapidated on Stoke Park's entrance front. Gothic was not the Patys' strongest point. Thomas's tower and spire for St Nicholas Church of 1765 are livelier than Bridges's dull box of a nave, but his St Michael on the Hill Without of 1775-77 is frankly pedestrian. The Gothic detail which Patys added to Bridges's canted bays at Arno's Court is adequate, but I would never blame them for the nightmarish Black Castle which acted as stables to Arno's Court. That is almost certainly a working up of an old William Halfpenny design in 1764, years after Halfpenny himself was dead.

What is certainly a very rare and original building by the Patys, James I suspect from its likeness to the Stoke Park loggia, is the Bath House set mid-way between Arno's Court and the Black Castle. It was an immensely civilised compromise between the two houses, a Gothic exterior to a Rococo interior. This points neatly to the fact that the natural external dress of the Rococo was not an austere Taylorian canted bay, but these light-hearted arcades with a lively fret



Fig. 3. The houses in Great George Street were built by the Patys for individual owners.



Fig. 4. Berkeley Crescent, built by Thomas Paty just before 1789, is astonishingly old-fashioned for its date.

of Batty Langley Perpendicular detail. The interior, which is lost, had many stylistic links with the great vine on the stairs at the Royal Fort. The exterior has found a happy haven at Portmeirion.

From all this imaginative excess it is sobering to turn to the Patys' street elevations, but the hard fact remains that in the prosperous years after 1762 they laid out and offered standard elevations for as many as 14 streets, enlarging the city by a third again of its entire area. It was an operation designed to profit the trade of their builder's yard in Limekiln Lane, the fame of which, incidentally, had reached across the Atlantic to Thomas Jefferson who enquired into Paty prices for mouldings and entablatures when he was building Monticello.¹⁶ Basically they made three rather obvious ideas suffice for several hundred houses. One was the blocked surround taken from Gibbs's *Book of Architecture* of 1728 but not absorbed by the Patys until 1763 when they produced a version of this spotted-dick Classicism at Albermarle Row in the Hotwells. The second device was the stepped voussoir. For some inexplicable reason Bristol loved this irresolute eyelash flicker and set it, bought ready cut from Limekiln Lane, over a thousand windows. It had first appeared around 1730 on a house in Prince Street by Strahan and is more a logical extension to a Gibbsian keystone than a device Gibbs ever used himself.

These two motifs sufficed for brick houses with stone dressings, streets as barely passable as Bath Street or as dully dignified as Albermarle. But when the Patys began to design up the hill towards Clifton for individual owners, as in Great George Street (Fig. 3), or for speculative developers, as in Park Street, Charlotte Street and Berkeley Square, there was a change. Thomas's son, William Paty, the only Paty ever to be trained as an architect in the schools of the Royal Academy, had returned from London. William seems to have forced his reluctant old father to brush up the design that he had built for Ware at Clifton Hill — rusticated base, windows cut clean without architrave — all those years ago. Back in 1748 it had been innovative, now, as the building boom of 1785 began, it was commonplace, but it satisfied Bristol. Thomas never liked it. He had intended a grand brick crescent at the top of Park Street. William insisted on a stone-built, three-sided square. But a strange compromise was achieved. Thomas was allowed, just before he died in 1789, to have a little brick-built crescent, Berkeley (Fig. 4), alongside the big stone ranges of Berkeley Square and, oddest of all, the north range of the square is stone on its 13-house elevation to the square, but formally brick with stone dressings on its rear face to Park Street. To get one's own way at the age of 77 over something as stylistically clapped out as stepped voussoirs says much about Thomas's will power.

One last splendid Paty compromise remained, planned by the father together with the son, realised by William in 1790 after his father's death, influenced and largely funded by Thomas Tyndall of the Royal Fort who had been now for many years a widower. This was Christ Church in the city centre. Gibbsian without, but internally an astonishingly successful essay more in the manner of Sir Robert Taylor's Transfer Offices at the Bank of England.¹⁷ Though far too late to qualify, it has the delicate airy spirit of the Rococo and that rare quality in a Classical church of upward flight. Infinitely light-footed, its Corinthian columns seem to tether the vaults down as if against a strong wind. There are Paty roses on the entablature blocks, delicate palm fronds crossed on the altar table and the pulpit and on the re-set reredos is the motif of the Royal Fort Eating Room: columns wreathed spirally with garlands, a last memory of the Paty Rococo edging with feminine twirls into the new age of the neo-Classical.

NOTES

1. Quoted in John Latimer, *Annals of Bristol: Volume 2, Eighteenth Century*, Bristol, 1970, 223.
2. *Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. by W.S. Lewis, 10, 232.
3. The most authoritative published genealogical account of the Paty family is that given in *Bristol: an architectural history*, eds. Andor Gomme, Michael Jenner & Bryan Little, 1979, 439-40. For further information on the Patys see Timothy Mowl, *To Build The Second City: Architects and Craftsmen of Georgian Bristol*, Bristol, 1991, Chapters 2, 3 and 4.
4. Bristol Record Office, Wills: James Paty, November 21, 1747.
5. The portfolio consists of 106 drawings by Thomas, his son William and a statuary mason, Henry Wood, who bought William Paty's practice in 1801. It is the property of the University of Bristol, but is currently in the possession of E. Gordon Priest. A further portfolio of Paty designs is in the collection of the City Art Gallery in Leeds (*ex. inf.* Terry Friedman).
6. Thomas Paty's accounts for this work are given in J. Charlton & D. Milton, *Redland 791 to 1800*, Bristol, 1951, appendix ii, 61-62.
7. For a full analysis of the building of the Exchange see Tim Mowl & Brian Earnshaw, *John Wood: Architect of Obsession*, Bath, 1988, Chapter 10.
8. Contractual agreement quoted in Walter Ison, *The Georgian Buildings of Bristol*, Bath, 1978, 177-78.
9. Isaac Ware, *A Complete Body of Architecture*, 1756, 522.
10. *Ibid.*, 498.
11. For Paty's Cedars contract of December 23, 1758 see David Tudway Quilter, "The Cedars and the Tudways" in *A History of Wells Cathedral School*, Wells, 1985, 67-68.
12. The first building campaign at Stoke Park dates from 1749 to 1753 when Norborne Berkeley was reshaping

the south front to designs by Thomas Wright of Durham; Thomas Paty is mentioned as wood and marble carver for this work in the Badminton papers deposited in the Gloucester Record Office. The second, 1760-64, phase was supervised by James Paty acting as clerk of works.

13. Both Paty and Stocking are recorded in the Fonmon Archives in the Glamorgan Record Office: Stewards Accounts with Robert Jones (1766-67), 11/50/5; I owe this information to Sir Brooke Boothby.
14. Written pseudonymously by J.W. Shirehampton (Ison give John Wallis) and quoted in Ison, *Georgian Buildings*, 190.
15. A letter from a later Tyndall to his uncle, preserved in the Scottish Record Office, states that the Patys were responsible for the exterior stonework and the interior wood carving and plasterwork (S.R.O. GD 152/53/6/9/7). Cited with the approval of the Keeper of the Records of Scotland.
16. The Jefferson-Paty connection was no doubt effected by Lord Botetourt (Norborne Berkeley) in October 1769 when Jefferson enquired about Thomas Paty's prices; see William L. Beiswanger, "The Temple in the Garden: Thomas Jefferson's Vision of the Monticello Landscape" in *British and American Gardens in the Eighteenth Century*, 1984.
17. For Taylor's Transfer Offices see Marcus Binney, *Sir Robert Taylor: From Rococo to Neo-classicism*, 1984, pl.11.

Photographs: Gordon Kelsey.