

Chapel Exhibition Lent Term 2013 – FINAL DRAFT

The First Design for the Chapel of St John's College, Cambridge, by George Gilbert Scott

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George Gilbert Scott (1811-1878) was the most famous and successful architect of mid-Victorian Britain, responsible for many landmark structures such as the Albert Memorial (1863) and the Midland Grand Hotel, St Pancras Station (1865) in London, and churches and universities all over the former British Empire, including in Newfoundland, Shanghai, Christchurch and Mumbai. One of the leading Scott experts, Professor Gavin Stamp, has written that 'the sheer scale of Scott's achievement continues to daunt historians of architecture'. It is easy to see why: his name has been attached to over one thousand projects, including many partial restorations of medieval cathedrals. He maintained an office of at least twenty draughtsmen, easily the largest in the world at that time. The 1860s were the apogee of his popularity and his creative output, and it was in this decade that St John's College approached Scott to design a new Chapel and Master's Lodge, as well as other buildings for the College. Scott was a 'super-star' of his time, akin to Richard Rogers or Norman Foster today; one of his pupils (the Oxford architect T.G. Jackson) recalled working in his office around this time:

I have seen three or four men with drawings awaiting correction or approval grouped around his door. The door flew open and out he came: "No time today!"; the cab was at the door and he was whirled away to some cathedral...now and then the only chance of getting instructions was to go with him in the cab to the station.'

In May 1861, on the feast day of St John at the Latin Gate, William Selwyn (1806-75), a former Fellow of St John's, gave a sermon in the College's thirteenth-century Chapel. With a characteristic flurry of Old Testament rhetoric, he called for the construction of a 'more worthy' place for worship, and partially on account of his efforts, the College decided to embark on one of its most important architectural projects. Scott was, in many ways, the obvious choice for the commission: in the mid-1850s he had built the wonderful Chapel at Exeter College, Oxford, and had a reputation for meeting deadlines and budgets. To the Oxbridge world of the 1850s and 60s he was a reliable, safe choice. He arrived in St John's in February 1862 to carry out his initial survey, and presented two options to the College: either the medieval Chapel could be enlarged, which would have retained much of the character and fabric of First Court, or an entirely new structure could be put up. These two alternatives were only evolved to a very basic degree, and we have no clear indication what the extension to the original Chapel would have entailed (Scott only made plans, not elevations, at this stage). The College Council decided on 2 May 1862 to push ahead with the ambitious plan to build an entirely new Chapel, immediately to the north of the existing structure; the old Chapel would in time be razed. Throughout the summer of 1862 Scott worked on his design, and regularly communicated with the College. By December the College Council was able to approve his designs, as they noted, 'now before us'.

The seven drawings in this exhibition are an important record of Scott's first worked-through design for the Chapel of St John's College. The attentive eye will immediately notice that there are several significant differences between these drawings and the Chapel as-built. This is because after the contracts had been signed in June 1863, and construction started, an Old Johnian, Henry Hoare of the famous banking family, put forward £5,000 to have the planned flèche (that is, a slender tower over the crossing) replaced with a much more substantial square tower, modelled on that at Pershore Abbey, Worcestershire. After the site had been prepared in late 1863, the foundation stone was laid by Hoare in May 1864. The story, often recalled, of the tower's expense is that Hoare was killed in a railway accident only a few years into the construction, and the College never saw the majority of the money promised for its construction. The design for the tower was changed by Scott probably around late 1864 or early 1865, but before this had been done the original design was well-publicised, appearing in

a full-page engraving in *The Builder* magazine in March 1863 alongside a small editorial, which noted the ‘unusually important scale, both as regards dimensions and proportions’ of the new Chapel. The seven drawings shown here, dating then from *c.* 1863, offer a detailed guide to what Scott had originally planned. The Chapel, with its square tower, was eventually consecrated in May 1869.

Drawing 1: Ground Plan

This shows the plan for the Chapel much as it was eventually built, with only very minor differences. The change in design of the tower had little impact on the foundations (though we suppose Scott may have slightly thickened the walls to carry the extra weight). It will be noticed that the plan of the Hall to the bottom of the drawing is not as was eventually carried out, where there are in fact two bay windows instead of one. The pencil markings nearby suggest the eventual changes. Of particular interest are the parish boundaries which are marked in dark ink – St Sepulchre, All Saints, and St Clement – the Chapel is built on the intersection of these parishes.

Drawing 2: South Elevation

Here it is immediately apparent how different the first design would have been from the Chapel as-built. This drawing shows the slender flèche, probably of wooden construction with lead sheeting, emerging from the Chapel’s roof over the crossing in the Ante-Chapel, somewhat similar to his work at Exeter College, Oxford. The view is from First Court. Scott shows how the flèche was to have been supported: the section through the transept roof shows the large truss structure. It will also be apparent that the tracery in the south nave windows is not exactly how we find them as-built: they have been arranged differently (though to Scott this seemingly random variety was a key ingredient to the overall beauty of the Chapel).

Drawing 3: North Elevation

This is the view of the Chapel gained from standing in the Forecourt, surrounded now by later College buildings designed by Edward Maufe in the nineteen thirties. The Vestry, with the Chapel’s organ above it, can be seen in the elevation, left of centre. Only the window tracery is slightly different to the Chapel as-built, and of course the flèche is visible as before.

Drawing 4: Transverse Section and East Elevation

The left drawing shows a section through the Ante-Chapel, looking towards the altar. The flèche is only shown in outline as this section cuts right through its form. Here we gain an even better understanding of how the flèche would have been supported on the walls and piers beneath. In particular, it will be noted that Scott had originally planned on vaulting (in stone) the centre Ante-Chapel ceiling, as well as the transepts. The square tower as-built allowed the architect much more space, and he instead chose to put in a flat wooden ceiling, around roof-level in this sketch. Only the transepts are stone-vaulted in the Chapel as-built. The keen observer will also note Scott makes no reference to the metal tie-bars which now spans the crossing arches: perhaps it was not needed in this first design, as the flèche would have been much lighter (and perhaps less durable) than the stone tower. The right drawing shows the view from St John’s Street of the exterior of the apse: it is as-built.

Drawing 5: West Elevation and Transverse Section, looking West

The left drawing shows the view from Chapel Court, now much obscured by Maufe’s arcade. We can see how the flèche would have emerged from the roof, with an open-work section, statues on pedestals, gables and spandrels with quatrefoil decorations, pinnacles and a crocketed, rather severe spire. It will also be noticed how Scott has marked in pencil some minor alterations to the south gable wall, seemingly truncating it somewhat. The right drawing, a section from inside the Ante-Chapel looking towards the great west window, is similar to that in Drawing 4, only facing the other direction.

Drawing 6: Longitudinal Section, looking North

Perhaps the most impressive of the seven drawings, this shows a section through the long axis of the Chapel, and shows many fascinating interior details. The flèche and the vaulting of the crossing have already been noted. The main oak ceiling is shown decorated with large square-headed quatrefoils. As-built, there are instead images of saints and other worthies within large cusped Gothic canopies. Also, it will be noticed how Scott shows the dividing point between the 'new' and the 'old' stalls, as seen in the Chapel today, but the drawing does not show any appreciable difference between their design.

Drawing 7: Transverse Sections

The left drawing is a section through the Chapel immediately to the east of the crossing tower, looking away from the altar. It shows the flèche in great detail, shooting off the top of the sheet, as well as the carpentry of the stalls and the screen. Some minor changes will be noticed in the design for the gable over the main door from First Court. The right drawing is a section through the Chapel nearer the altar, and looking towards it. The Vestry and organ loft are shown, and so are the decorations of the interior oak ceiling, which are, as previously noted, different to the Chapel as-built.