

A 'Bastard' Building; a Child of Strawberry [Hill] uglier than its Parent: St John's Church, Deansgate

Precious little of Georgian Manchester remains intact, or even documented in any substantive detail. The Victorians swept away much of Manchester's earlier built heritage, and they re-fashioned the city with swathes of new structures responding to its new-found mercantile and industrial identity. As my previous posts for Visit Manchester have demonstrated, Manchester has a rich patina of Gothic buildings spread throughout the city and its boroughs; there are plenty more interesting buildings to discuss throughout this series running the course of 2020.

This post explores is a building pulled down in 1931: the Church of St John, Deansgate. St John's occupied the space that is now the site of St John's Gardens sitting between Byrom, Lower Byrom, and Quay Streets, and it is memorialised by an unornamented industrial version of a Celtic Cross at the centre of the St John's Gardens. Gothic gate posts, seen in photographs of the church from 1930, also survive on the entrance to the Gardens (**Fig.1**). It can be seen in the top left-hand-corner of [this](#) photograph by A.W. Hobart from 1930.

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A section of stained glass by William Peckitt from the church is now preserved in the north aisle of St Ann's Church, St Ann Square, Manchester, depicting Saints Peter, John, and James (**Fig.2**).

Why write about a building that no longer exists and that wasn't considered worth preserving in 1931? Buildings are pulled down for various reasons, but this does not mean they are insignificant. The building has an interesting history; it was partially rebuilt because the roof collapsed into the body of the church in 1924 (as recorded in a number of photographs, see [here](#) and [here](#)), and St John's was ultimately rendered unnecessary due to population changes in the city and consequently the need for fewer churches.

The church is tremendously significant as the first notable and substantive example of Gothic architecture erected in the city in the Georgian period. It also stands as a crucially important, but sadly entirely neglected, example of Gothic architecture erected in eighteenth-century Britain. As such, it is a superb example of what is commonly referred to as the Gothic Revival style.

Sir Howard Colvin observed in a pioneering essay 'Gothic Survival and Gothick Revival', reprinted in *Essays in English Architectural History* (1999), that differences existed between 'Gothic Survival' architecture and 'Gothick Revival' architecture. 'Gothic Survival' architecture was undertaken by local builders generally after the sixteenth century (such as

Low Ham Church, Somerset, (**Fig.3**)), and they reproduced the style and techniques of the medieval masons that built Europe's peerless medieval cathedrals. 'Gothick Revival' architecture, on the other hand, was designed and made by people untrained in the traditions of medieval architecture: it was a new and distinct reinterpretation of Gothic design (such as the 1710s addition to All Soul's College, Oxford, by Nicholas Hawksmoor (**Fig.4**)). The whimsicality of the latter version of Gothic is emphasized by the addition of the 'k'; this distinction between 'Gothic' and 'Gothick' holds true, but the reality is that Georgian Gothic architecture—notice that I am not spelling it with a 'k'—is simply an extension of the medieval architectural tradition; it blends the aesthetic traditions of centuries' old buildings with the formalities of eighteenth-century taste.

The result of this fusion between old and new styles created a profoundly different type of Gothic that possessed the appearance of medieval architecture, but which was effectively only superficially Gothic in terms that medieval masons would understand. In part this happened because the designers of Georgian Gothic buildings were not brought up in the traditions of medieval design—unlike the builders of 'Gothic Survival' architecture. Also, unlike for Classical architecture, there was no standard text explaining what Gothic was, how to work in the mode, and what, if any, rules there were governing its construction, proportions, and design. Classical architecture was systematized by, amongst other publications, Vitruvius' *Ten Books of Architecture* (see [here](#)) that delineated the Orders of architecture, the style's proportions, and many other aspects.

Various British architects trained in the then fashionable Classical mode in eighteenth-century Britain also designed and executed Gothic buildings, including William Kent (c.1685–1748). Kent's Gothic style—a derivative of major, easily identifiable forms used in medieval architecture—can be seen in his design for an illustration (**Fig.5**), 'The Redcross Knight Introduced by Duessa to the House of Pride', c.1730, to accompany Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* as an inset plate. The structure of the building is Classical, including even a Classical colonnade, but the forms applied to these structures are clearly Gothic—namely the pointed arch and the quatrefoil.

This type of Gothic was systematized by Batty Langley (1696–1751) in a pattern-book that he issued in two parts between 1741 and 1742: *Ancient Architecture: Restored and Improved* (available [here](#)). Horace Walpole (1717–97), the great supporter of Medieval architecture, and who designed and erected 'the castle [...] of my ancestors', Strawberry Hill, Twickenham, on the banks of the River Thames from around 1750, subscribed to Langley's pattern-book (**Fig.6**). Indeed, the early phases of Strawberry Hill are indebted to the style and ethos of Langley's 'improved' Gothic that is characterized by Classical underpinnings, and the use of the ogee arch. See, for example, the form of the windows on the house's Southern and Eastern façades. Walpole's understanding of Gothic shifted from Langley's and Kent's overly Georgian, 'designed' Gothic, to a far more archaeologically inspired style that at least superficially attempted to recreate the form, structure, and decoration of architecture, especially as exhibited in funerary monuments, such as Archbishop Wareham's at Canterbury Cathedral, Kent.

Walpole initially approved of both Kent's Gothic, but his opinion shifted over time. Initially writing about the villa Kent designed for Henry Pelham, Esher Place, Kent, he writes in 1748

that: 'Esher I have seen again twice and I prefer it to all villas, even Southcote's [Woburn Farm, Chertsey, Surrey]; Kent is Kentissime there'. The building is recorded in numbers plates, but perhaps best in this (**fig.7**). By 1771, in his *Anecdotes of Painting*, Walpole was critical of Kent's style. He wrote that:

As Kent's genius was not universal, he has succeeded as ill [sic.] in Gothic. The [screen of the Court of the] King's Bench at Westminster [Hall], and Mr. Pelham's house at Esher [Place, Surrey], are proofs how little he conceived either the principles or graces of that architecture.

Concerning Langley, Walpole was certain that his style of Gothic was simply and uncompromisingly bad. He wrote that:

all that his [Langley's] books [on Gothic] achieved, has been to teach carpenters to massacre that venerable species [Gothic architecture, and] has given occasion to those who know nothing of the matter, and who mistake his clumsy efforts for real imitations, to censure the productions of our ancestors, whose bold and beautiful fabrics Sir Christopher Wren viewed and reviewed with astonishment, and never mentioned without esteem.

And in a letter to one of the designers of Strawberry Hill, Richard Bentley, Walpole described Latimer House, Buckinghamshire, and damned Langley's Gothic as a 'bastard' style;

Latimers belongs to Mrs Cavendish. I have lived there formerly with Mr Conway, but it is much improved since; yet [...] the house has undergone Batty Langley-discipline: half of the ornaments are of his bastard Gothic, and half of Hallet[t]'s mongrel Chinese. I want to write over the doors of most modern edifices, *Repaired and beautified, Langley and Hallet[t] churchwardens*. The great dining-room is hung with the paper of my staircase, but not shaded properly like mine.

Charles Locke Eastlake (1836–1906), in his 1872 *History of the Gothic Revival*, also slammed Langley's Gothic, stating that

Gothic architecture has had its vicissitudes in this country. There was a time when its principles were universally recognised [twelfth to sixteenth centuries]; there was a time when they were neglected or forgotten [seventeenth century]. But in the days of its lowest degradation [mid-eighteenth century], it may be questioned whether it would not have been better that the cause should have remained unexposed than have been sustained by such a champion as Batty Langley.

These repeated criticisms of a particular style of Georgian Gothic that does not live up to the rigorous antiquarian understanding of the style that Walpole gained over time, or which Eastlake possessed, should not be seen to devalue buildings made in the mode.

Shobdon Church in Herefordshire (**Fig.8**), made according to William Kent's style, is today celebrated as a wonderful survival from the mid eighteenth century (**Fig.9**); St John's, Deansgate, was an equally important example of mid-Georgian Gothic design.

St John's Church was built from 1769 according to the order of Edward Byrom (1724–73), notable as the founder of Manchester's first bank. The architect of Byrom's project, however, has not been identified. From the various photographs taken of the church, it is obvious that its window designs, and general appearance, match the Batty Langley/William Kent variety of 'bastard' Gothic that Walpole objected to so much.

The Church had a tall, five story tower to the west of a two-story, six bay box-like 'nave' (see [here](#)). Of the windows in the body of the church, the ground floor examples are of a typical pointed-arch 'lancet' type, whereas the upper windows have the far more ornate ogee arch head made from a pair of S-shaped arches meeting at the apex (see [here](#)). This style was typical of the Langley/Kent style. Similar Ogee-windows can be seen on the tower (third register), and above and below the clock face. This overly decorative patterning contrasts the otherwise plain surface of the façade, and the crenulated roofline interrupted by the tall pyramid (pinnacles) decorated with organic knobs (crockets), and each finished with a finial.

The variety and overtly decorative nature of these windows is illustrated particularly well in an 1845 illustration of the church by C.W. Clennell ([here](#)). Another leitmotif of this early Georgian style of Gothic applied to the church is the quatrefoil (see [here](#)); in this instance the windows 'punch' through the fabric of the building, and they can also be found on the early parts of Walpole's Strawberry Hill (**Fig.10**). These quatrefoils dominate the eastern façade of the church (see [here](#)), and one sits above each doorway featuring a double-ogee-arch doorway that is modelled heavily upon Plate XXIV of Langley's *Ancient Architecture* (1741–42) (**Fig.11**); these doorways also repeated on the Western elevation (see [here](#)), with the central East window (this is the one now preserved in St Ann's Church, St Ann's Square, Manchester, and depicted in **fig.2** in this post) between them responding to the form of window included in Langley's Plate LVI, *Gothick Temple* (**Fig.12**), from the same pattern-book.

As such, the St John's Church was a miraculous example of 1730s and 1740s Gothic architecture erected in late 1760s Manchester. Although its style was not cherished in the late Georgian and Victorian periods, it, nevertheless, is highly relevant to the development of Georgian Gothic design. Elements of its design relate not only to the most significant designers of early Georgian Gothic design, but also the building often—but incorrectly—considered to be the first example of Gothic Revival architecture: Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill.

Walpole, wrote about Lee, Kent, and described it as a 'Child of Strawberry [Hill], prettier than its parent' (**fig.13**). He helped design Lee, guided its owner and his friend, Thomas Barrett (1744–1803), and the architect, James Wyatt (1746–1813), and the style was firmly of the antiquarian-informed manner. If Walpole knew of St John's Church, Deansgate, its reliance upon the designs of Langley and Kent, and its relation with the early and unsatisfactory parts of Strawberry Hill, it does not seem unreasonable to me that he would have considered the church 'a child of Strawberry Hill uglier than its parent'.

Image Captions.

Fig.1: Gateposts to the St John's Churchyard—now St John's Gardens. © Peter N. Lindfield

Fig.2: William Peckitt, stained glass depicting Saints John, Peter, and Matthew, north aisle, St Ann's Church, Manchester. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.3: Low Ham Church, Somerset. Nick MacNeill (CC BY-SA 2.0).

Fig.4: Nicholas Hawksmoor's additions to All Soul's College, Oxford. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.5: William Kent, *The Redcross Knight Introduced by Duessa to the House of Pride*, c.1730. E.876-1928. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Fig.6: South and East elevations of Strawberry Hill. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.7: Luke Sullivan, *A View of Esher in Surrey the Seat of the Rt. Hon. Henry Pelham Esq.* 1759. B1978.43.1075. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

Fig.8: Exterior elevation of Shobdon Church, Herefordshire. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.9: Interior of Shobdon Church, Herefordshire. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.10: Detail of the exterior façade of Strawberry Hill showing the quatrefoil windows. © Peter N. Lindfield.

Fig.11: Plate XXIV from Langley's *Ancient Architecture* (1741–42). Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

Fig.12: Plate LVI from Langley's *Ancient Architecture* (1741–42). Courtesy of the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University.

Fig.13: John Dixon, *Lee, Kent*. 1785. B1975.1.8. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.