

Gothic's 'Constitution': The Great Hall at Manchester University

Gothic architecture is synonymous with England's great medieval cathedrals and parish churches. Canterbury Cathedral, Kent (**Fig.1**), preserves multiple different phases of Gothic architecture built and re-built over the course of the Middle Ages. The current Choir (1175–84, **Fig.2**) replaced one from 1098–1130, the Nave (**Fig.3**) added under the direction of Archbishop Lanfranc in the 1070s was demolished and replaced by the example we see today in the English Perpendicular style between 1377 and 1405 by Henry Yevele, the King's Master Mason, and the pulpitum (**Fig.4**), also in Perpendicular Gothic, was inserted into the fabric around 1450.

The educational offshoots of the Church that, today, comprise some of the Colleges at Oxford and Cambridge, were also executed in the Gothic style (**Figs 5 and 6**). Besides having a chapel, such as those found at New College (**Fig.7**), or Christ Church (**Fig.8**)—the latter also serves as Oxford's cathedral—a crucial part of each college was and remains the Hall; a communal space for dining and other functions. The largest medieval example in either Oxford or Cambridge is that at Christ Church, Oxford (**Fig.9**), begun by Cardinal Wolsey who suppressed the Priory of St Frideswide in 1525 and begun the construction of Cardinal College on a grand scale on its site. Halls were also prominent and central to the plan and function of medieval houses and palaces, such as, for example, Hampton Court Palace, Richmond-upon-Thames, begun in 1515 also by Cardinal Wolsey, and, like Cardinal College, it came into the possession of Henry VIII. Akin to the scale and ostentation of the Hall at Wolsey's college, Henry VIII added a grand hall to Hampton Court Palace with a distinctive hammer-beam roof between 1532 and 1535 (**Fig.10**). This hammer-beam roof, made from trusses projecting from the wall supported by arches, replete often with carved figures, heraldry, and Gothic tracery, is a distinctive and celebrated achievement of medieval carpenters who constructed such wooden structures to support roofs.

The earliest example of a hammer-beam roof dates to c.1290 and can be found in the Pilgrims' Hall (**Fig.11**) at Winchester Cathedral, but the most well-known is also the largest, and can be found at the heart of the Palace of Westminster (also known as the Houses of Parliament): Westminster Hall (**Fig.12**). Westminster Hall, built from 1097 for William II (Rufus), son of William the Conqueror, is the oldest building in the Palace of Westminster, with it having survived the devastating fire of 16 October 1834 (**Fig.13**) that destroyed large swathes of the complex, and it survived as a historic relic in the palace's rebuilding by Charles Barry and A.W.N. Pugin (**Fig.14**).

The choice to rebuild the Palace of Westminster in the Gothic style was conditioned by the heritage and constitutional importance of Westminster Hall and St Stephen's Chapel (reconstructed [here](#)), both of which were notable for their notable Gothic character, and hacking escaped the ravages of the 1834 fire. After it was realised that the majority of the Parliamentary estate couldn't be saved from the fire, attention turned to the Hall: firemen and volunteers attempted, and succeeded, in saving it and its peerless fourteenth-century hammer-beam roof. The Chancellor of the Exchequer cried "Save, O save the Hall!"; "Damn the House of Commons, let it blaze away!"

The hammer-beam structure was commissioned by Richard II in 1393 to roof the Hall, and it was undertaken by Henry Yevele, the King's Master Mason, and the carpenter Hugh Herland. Unsurprisingly, the Palace of Westminster as a whole is not only Grade I listed (List Entry number 1000095, see [here](#)), but also a World Heritage Site. Historic England's listing makes particular reference to Westminster Hall in the listing's general observations, noting that it 'is a key monument of the Perpendicular style and its admirable oak roof is one of the greatest achievements of medieval construction in wood'.

Unknown to the majority of visitors to Manchester, an exceptional nineteenth-century version of the hammer-beam roofed Gothic hall seen in Westminster, Christ Church, Oxford, and elsewhere, was released in the city. It lies at the heart of what is now the University of Manchester, although originally built for Owen's College. Whitworth Hall (**Fig.15**) was named after Joseph Whitworth (1803–1887), a Manchester engineer who made his money through manufacturing innovative and highly profitable firearms. Whitworth Hall was designed by the Manchester architect Alfred Waterhouse—he is responsible for, amongst other Gothic buildings, Manchester's Town Hall (**Fig.16**)—and it was built by Waterhouse's son, Paul, c.1895–1902. Grade II* (Historic England List Entry Number 1271428, see [here](#)), the hall, located on the tall first story of the south range of the Owen's College buildings, is reached by a very modest and unimpressive early Gothic staircase; the Hall itself, upon entry is anything but modest: it is large (breadth, depth, and height), bright (**Fig.17**), and dominated by the stage, organ (**Fig.18**), and glorious hammer-beam roof (**Fig.19**).

The Hall does more than just re-create the hammer-beam roof that is found in medieval halls, but also the style of large Perpendicular Gothic windows, which can be seen, for example, in **Fig.14** depicting the New Palace of Westminster and Westminster Hall. Waterhouse, consequently, re-created the form, structure, and ornament of the medieval Gothic Hall, and inserted it into the fabric of Owen's College. As similar great halls at Oxford and Cambridge demonstrate, this architectural feature is both appropriate and well-used in the educational context. As a new institution, the choice of Gothic not only afforded Owen's College a sense of importance, Englishness, tradition, and heritage, but the Whitworth Hall also recreated the architectural environment found at many medieval religious sites and educational institutions.

Image Captions

- Fig.1: Crossing Tower, North-West Transept, Chapter House, Nave, and Cloisters of Canterbury Cathedral, Kent. © Peter N. Lindfield.
- Fig.2: Internal view of the Choir of Canterbury Cathedral, Kent, looking East. © Peter N. Lindfield.
- Fig.3: Internal view of the Nave of Canterbury Cathedral, Kent, looking West. © Peter N. Lindfield.
- Fig.4: View of the Pulpitum at Canterbury Cathedral, Kent, looking East. © Peter N. Lindfield.
- Fig.5: View of the North (Chapel) and Southern Ranges of the 'Front' or South Quad, All Souls College, Oxford. © Peter N. Lindfield.
- Fig.6: View of the Great Quad looking towards the Cathedral (centre) and Hall (right). © Peter N. Lindfield.
- Fig.7: View towards the altar of New College Chapel, Oxford. © Peter N. Lindfield.

- Fig.8: View towards the High Altar, Christ Church, Oxford. © Peter N. Lindfield.
- Fig.9: View towards High Table, the Hall, Christ Church, Oxford. © Peter N. Lindfield.
- Fig.10: View of the hammer-beam roof and towards the High Table, the Hall, Hampton Court Palace, Richmond-upon-Thames. Pavel Medziun (CC BY-2.0).
- Fig.11: View of the hammer-beam roof of the Pilgrims' Hall, Winchester. Courtesy of Winchester Cathedral.
- Fig.12: View of the interior of Westminster Hall, London. From Ackermann's *Microcosm of London* (1808–11).
- Fig.13: J.M.W. Turner, *The Burning of the Houses of Parliament*, c1834–35. D36235, Turner Bequest CCCLXIV 373. Tate (CC-BY-NC-ND (3.0 Unported)).
- Fig.14: Exterior of the New Palace of Westminster. Westminster Hall can be seen to the left of the photograph. © Peter N. Lindfield.
- Fig.15: Exterior elevation of Whitworth Hall with Oxford Road in the foreground. Stephen Richards (CC BY-SA 2.0).
- Fig.16: Exterior façade of Manchester Town Hall, from St George's Square. Mark Andrew (CC BY-2.0).
- Fig.17: Interior of Whitworth Hall, University of Manchester. © Peter N. Lindfield.
- Fig.18: Interior of Whitworth Hall, detail of the organ, University of Manchester. © Peter N. Lindfield.
- Fig.19: Interior of Whitworth Hall, with a view to the Perpendicular Gothic window, University of Manchester. © Peter N. Lindfield.