Laughton Church chancel and other major church alterations in and around Lewes, East Sussex, c. 1740–1810

THE ROLES OF ARCHITECTS AND LOCAL CRAFTSMEN

by Sue Berry

Architectural history is preoccupied with the work of architects who are thought to be eminent and influential. This case study is of the influence of local craftsmen upon Georgian churches. It asks whether we over-estimate the influence of architects in the Georgian period and under-estimate the skills and impact of craftsmen. Similar work in other counties suggests that craftsmen certainly played a major role in the design of the churches. This small study suggests that they exerted a similar influence in Sussex. Due to the influence of Victorian and other later restoration work, much Georgian work has been lost. In this study, archival evidence is often the best source of evidence.

There are two aims for this short study. The first is to set the previously undated rebuilding of the chancel of Laughton church near Lewes in the 1760s into the broader context of other major work on churches that was undertaken nearby during this period. The second is to encourage further examination of the work of local craftsmen, in particular that of John Morris.1 He appears to have played a major role in the design, siting and construction of a considerable number of Georgian buildings that still survive, especially around country house estates.

In and around Lewes some substantial alterations to churches were undertaken between about 1740 and 1810. All needed major repair work and one church was entirely rebuilt. The artisans who were involved in the designs for the new work used styles that were fashionable during this part of the Georgian period and much of the work still survives.

In all of the examples local craftsmen completed the building work even if, as in the instances of Glynde and Laughton Churches, an architect of national standing produced the original design. Alterations in the Gothick style carried out by local artisans can still be seen at Laughton Church and, in Lewes, at St Michael’s and St Thomas in Cliffe. Glynde Church and the nave of All Saints in Lewes were rebuilt to classical designs. Glynde was the only church in this group for which the designs of an architect were implemented.

The local artisans were able to refer to books on how to design in the latest style, such as William Pain’s compendious Practical House Carpenter, which included schemes for churches, bridges, shops-fronts and gentlemen’s houses in classical styles.2 Batty Langley and John Vardy were amongst those who, from the 1740s, published Gothick designs that local artisans or their clients wishing to use the style could have consulted.3 Serious study of medieval Gothic architecture did not begin until the late 18th century.4

THE WIDER CONTEXT

Only a detailed survey of all the evidence for work on Sussex churches would enable us to judge how typical is the pattern of repairs, minor alterations, partial and wholesale rebuilding described here.5 The dominance of local expertise throughout most of the period that is identified in this short study reflects findings elsewhere. Detailed work on every parish in Berkshire indicates that between 1700 and 1820, most churchwardens did their best to keep their churches in a reasonable state of repair.6 There, most of the work on churches was entrusted to master masons and bricklayers who would then interpret the latest designs when major alterations or new churches were needed.
The same pattern broadly applies to Shropshire, but most of the extensions, repairs and rebuilding undertaken between about 1700 and 1780 reflected a classical vocabulary drawn from outdated pattern-books used by the artisans. Between about 1780 and 1800, however, the few designs for new churches that were built in the county were fashionable ones, because architects who had been trained or were practising in London successfully sought work there. Friedman views the Georgian period as the golden age of the church in Shropshire because of the care that was lavished on them.

In Dorset some 15 parish churches were rebuilt between 1700 and 1820 and seven others were significantly altered, but again most of the work was done using local expertise until towards the end of the period. In Caernavonshire, Clarke notes that the majority of churches were in good repair, but does not find any major works undertaken in this period.

Many of the major changes to churches during this period are now thought to have been the direct result not of serious disrepair, but responses to the way in which the Georgians used their churches. The fashion for ‘auditory worship’ during the Georgian period required the congregation to be able to see the pulpit and for this the nave needed to be more open than would have been expected in a medieval church service, when the emphasis in worship was on ritual at the altar obscured by screens from the congregation. The major alterations to St Michael’s in Lewes in 1748 and the rebuilding of Glynde church appear to have been largely driven by the aspirations to ensure that the pulpit and the reading desk were visible and that enough pews were provided for the congregation to sit during the sermon. Much of the work on the interiors and some of the exterior work undertaken between 1700 and 1820 by artisans was lost when the Ecclesiological movement, now increasingly regarded as a Victorian version of political correctness, advocated the removal of these Georgian embellishments. The claim that the Georgian church was neglected emerged during the 19th century as one of the arguments in support of the...
changes that were made to many churches later that century by architects who were enthused and supported by the Ecclesiological movement. Only now is the work of the Georgian volunteer churchwarden and his artisan-designer on parish churches receiving the recognition that it deserves.

**THE GEORGIAN ARTISAN IN LEWES, GLYNDE AND LAUGHTON**

In Lewes, Joseph Daw, a local bricklayer and mapmaker, designed the south aisle of St Michael’s on the High Street when it was rebuilt in 1748, and submitted a plan for the consideration of the vestry (Fig. 1). The superb flint work of the street frontage of this Gothick aisle, inserted as an afterthought ‘as the bricks on examination proved so very indifferent’, can still be admired today. Daw probably designed the Gothick-style south aisle and porch of St Thomas’s in Cliffe, subsequently built by members of his family just after he died in 1752 (Fig. 2). In 1806–7, Amon Wilds, a local builder, both designed and rebuilt the nave and chancel of All Saints in Friars Walk in a late Georgian classical style for just over £2000 (Figs. 3 & 4). The enlarged church could accommodate 650 people seated in pews.

Local expertise may also have strongly influenced the final appearance of the churches at Glynde and Laughton. Sir Thomas Robinson (c. 1702–1777), a gentleman architect of national repute, designed Glynde Church in a classical style that was fashionable during the 1750s and 1760s (Fig. 5), although he does not appear to have played any part in the supervision of the building process. Sir Thomas knew Richard Trevor, Bishop of Durham and the owner of Glynde Place, since he had designed a Gothick gateway at Bishop Auckland Castle for him in 1760. Trevor’s rebuilding of Glynde church can be explained both by its condition and its prominent location, right beside the entrance to Glynde Place that he was modernizing.

The building accounts for Glynde Church reveal that John Morris of Lewes (1716–1792), surveyor and stonemason, acted as the master of works from 1763–65. Morris worked for other local landowners, he interpreted their own designs when required, as at Coombe Place, and designed the stable block at Glynde Place. Morris supervised the construction of Glynde Church and gave it the very prominent location for which it is now well known by using the same site but not the precise footprint of the old...
Morris played a very major role at Laughton church, where he simplified a design by ‘Mr Robinson’, which had been commissioned by the Duke of Newcastle, Thomas Pelham-Holles. The new chancel was to replace the existing one over the Pelham family vault. The first design was by the designated ‘Mr Robinson’, who was either Sir Thomas Robinson (c. 1702–1777) the designer of Glynde Church, or William Robinson (c. 1720–1775) who worked at Coombe Place. Both Thomas and William Robinson used the Gothick and Classical styles, which makes distinguishing between them difficult.

That Sir Thomas Robinson was employed at Glynde rather suggests that it was Sir Thomas rather than William Robinson who provided the first design for the chancel at Laughton. Both churches were being worked on at the same time (in the mid-1760s) and the only evidence of William Robinson working locally is at Coombe Place, where he worked during the early 1770s for John Bridger. The appointment of John Bridger of Coombe Place as a Commissioner for Excise Appeals may explain his use of William at Coombe Place, as William was the Surveyor of Buildings to the Board of Customs and had already designed the Excise Office in a conservative classical style.

The rebuilding of the chancel of Laughton church, in 1764–65 was a very modest affair when compared with the rebuilding of Glynde Church. This project was the only significant building work commissioned in Sussex by Thomas Pelham-Holles, the owner of large estates in the neighbourhood of Laughton: Halland House, a huge late Tudor building, and a well-known hunting lodge at Bishophstone. The Duke’s main home outside London was his beloved Claremont in Surrey, where he employed famous designers of the period such as Vanbrugh and Kent. His use of such people at Claremont might indicate a preference for well-known designers and so favour Sir Thomas Robinson as the original architect for Laughton rather than the lesser-known William.

Having agreed to the design for Laughton chancel by ‘Mr Robinson’, the Duke of Newcastle left the supervision of the work to Abraham Baley, his very able local agent. Baley ran not only the Duke’s estates in Sussex, but also those of the Earl of Clinton and Thomas Pelham of Stanmer. Baley then employed John Morris to rebuild the chancel.

By mid-May 1765 the old chancel at Laughton had been demolished and the foundations for the new one laid (Figs 6 & 7). It was then that Baley informed the Duke’s London agent that the Bishop of Chichester would require an application for his approval to rebuild the chancel. Baley also suggested that the design for the new chancel could be improved, claiming that he had sought advice from ‘an acquaintance’. He recognized that Mr Robinson might be offended, but considered the design as rather ‘barn like’ in scale and the mixture of Gothick, Chinese and Rustic details inappropriate for Laughton church. Baley thought that the design offended the eye and that a man of taste such as his Lordship would not wish it to be built without amendment. He claimed that the alternative that he had submitted ‘in the Gothick taste’ was from a gentleman that he knew in the north ‘who is very curious in the Gothick taste’ and that it would cost only an extra £40 on top of the estimate of £560 for the reconstruction of the chancel by Mr Robinson. Baley proposed to save costs with the new design by...
omitting three windows on the north side (which is not visible from the road or from the path to the church porch). No matter who the nominal architect was or what Baley claims that he did, it is clear from the papers of the Duke’s executors that it was Morris who improved the design, the mason displacing the absent architect.

Two sets of designs for Laughton chancel by Morris have survived; one is attributed to him by an endorsement. That annotation is supported by the correspondence between Baley and Morris and by the handwriting on it and on the notes that accompany these designs. This proposal is very similar in style to the existing medieval nave and would have complemented it. This set of designs includes three small drawings: the proposed chancel as seen from the east end and detailed sketches of the east end and of the south side. There are two ground plans of the chancel, the first of the ground floor and the second of the vault below showing the main supports for the chancel floor. The second set of drawings is of a Gothick chancel, which is almost identical to the one that now stands. This set of designs consists of three small drawings: the proposed chancel as seen from the south side (Fig. 6) and detailed sketches of the east end and of the south side. Morris simplified Robinson’s design by confining the details solely to Gothick. Combined with a letter from Morris to Baley in which he says that he is costing this design, Baley’s advocacy of the Gothick design also confirms that the design was by Morris.

Morris finally submitted a bill for £760, some
40% more than the estimate for the design by ‘Mr Robinson’ and in 1767 he was asked by the Duke’s senior estate manager to explain the greatly increased costs. 37 Morris defended his bill by pointing out that ‘Mr Robinson’ had not included all of the costs of the work. He had to provide drainage for the vault and adequate foundations for which piles were used, and double walls to ensure that the chancel was adequately supported. Nor were the costs of the floating ceiling, the use of Westmorland slates on the roof and the finish of the walls in flint rather than brick in the estimate from ‘Mr Robinson’. 38 To defend himself, Morris mounted his design for the south side of the chancel on a piece of stiff paper and annotated beside the sketch most of the additional costs. The other extras included Norway Oak for the door to the Pelham vault and the communion rails. To save costs, he reduced and simplified the size of the design of the Pelham vault and the communion rails. To save costs, he reduced and simplified the size of the design of the east window to match the windows on the south side. 39 Although the church has been repaired and additions have been made to the north side of the chancel, the east and south sides have changed little since the mid-1760s (Figs 6 & 7).

Given the ability of the local craftsmen of Lewes to interpret the latest fashions, as reflected in the churches in Lewes, and our knowledge that John Morris in particular designed and amended designs for clients — as for example at Coombe Place, it would be surprising if the ideas of any architect of national standing remained unscathed, especially if they did not supervise the work. In the instance of Laughton chancel, we know now that Morris supplanted an absentee architect even if we cannot be absolutely assured as to which Robinson it was from whom the original design was commissioned. The impact of local expertise in the latest fashions upon the designs of architects of national standing as well as on the majority of local buildings erected or altered during the Georgian period seems to need more attention than we currently give it.

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NOTES

1 H. M. Colvin, A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600–1840 (London: Yale, 1995), 664, gives a brief summary of current knowledge of his work to which this article adds Laughton chancel. His father Arthur was also a mason and worked at Stanmer House for the Pelhams. This aspect could reward study.

2 W. Pain, The Practical House Carpenter or Youth’s Instructor (London: J. Taylor, 1815). This eighth edition includes in plates 133–6 designs for a church and a pulpit from 1792. ‘Pain’ was published from the 1780s.


5 D. Beevers, R. Marks & J. Roles, Sussex Churches and Chapels (Brighton: The Royal Pavilion, Art Gallery and Museum, 1989), 55–9, offers a very brief overview of church building between 1600 and 1800. Only major projects are noted and it demonstrates the need to follow up with detailed work.


10 C. Webster, ‘“Absolutely wretched”: Cambodian attitudes to the late Georgian Church’, in J. Elliott & C. Webster (eds), ‘A Church as it Should Be’, 1–8, sets the issues as perceived by this group.


12 T. Horsfield, The History and Antiquities of Lewes and its vicinity 2 (Lewes: Baxter, 1827), 279; the St Michael’s churchwardens’ accounts include a detailed specification of Daw’s work on 20 June 1748 and a subsequent agreement to replace the indifferent bricks ‘with headed flints, gaged and squared’, on 15 August 1748; the vestry also agreed to borrow £200 at up to 4½% to be paid for from the church rates. Thomas Pelham-Holles, Duke of Newcastle (who paid for the work at Laughton), met some of the costs, giving £52 10s.0d. and Mr Pelham (possibly of Stanmer) gave £3110 0d. (ESRO PAR 414/9/1). There is an early memorial to Pelham ancestors in St Michael’s.

14 T. Horsfield, Lewes (1827), 284; in 1805, the Vestry obtained a private Act of Parliament to raise the funds for the work.
15 G. Worsley, ‘New light on Long Sir Thomas’, The Georgian Group Journal 9 (1999), 13; ESRO, PAR 347/4/2/5 (plan and elevation of new church by Thomas Robinson Bt); PAR 347/4/1/6 (alternative plan incorporating a tower, c. 1763); PAR 347/4/1/13 (bill to Lord Trevor for plasterwork by William Perritt, 1765); PAR 347/4/1/14 newspaper cutting about the opening of the church, 8 July 1765.
16 Colvin, A Biographical Dictionary, 831.
17 Colvin, A Biographical Dictionary, 664; W. de St. Croix, ‘The parochial history of Glynde’, Sussex Archaeological Collections 20 (1868), 77; he also refers to the building accounts and other resources some of which are now in ESRO, GLY 922–951 (accounts and correspondence relating to the church, mainly of John Morris); N. Pevsner, The Buildings of England: Yorkshire, North Riding (London: Yale, 2002), 309–10, notes that Robinson designed Rokeby Hall and nearby, St Mary’s Rokeby for his brother-in-law, the Earl of Carlisle and that the church is similar to Glynde but was not consecrated until 1778, so was probably later.
18 Colvin, A Biographical Dictionary, 664, notes that Morris described himself in his will as a surveyor and stonemason and cites ESRO, WA66 f. 423; ESRO, GLY 922–53.
20 ESRO, GLY 922–951 reveals how Morris set out the imprint of the new church at a different angle from that of the older church. A copy of ground plans is also in ESRO, PAR 347/4/1/4, dated July 1763.
21 ESRO, GLY 922–953; ESRO, PAR 347/4/1/5 (plan and elevation by Robinson) and PAR 347/4/1/6 (alternative plan by Robinson with tower).
22 The design by Robinson has not been found, only his very simple sketch of the east end, in ESRO, ACC 6077/22/8.
23 Colvin, A Biographical Dictionary, 829–831 on Thomas, and 832 on William.
24 Brock, ‘The improvement’, 80, for payment to W. Robinson’s brother in 1775 for work that William had done before he died. Thomas Pelham-Holles, Duke of Newcastle, appointed Bridger to the Commissioners for Excise.
25 Colvin, A Biographical Dictionary, 832.
28 British Library (hereafter BL), Add Ms 33048 and 33338 contain letters from Abraham Baley to the Duke of Newcastle on this and on estate matters.
29 An example of his superb management accounts is to be found in BL, Add Ms 33169.
30 ESRO, ACC 6077/22/8, Laughton Chancel accounts 1764–65 by John Morris, includes the plans for both designs for the chancel and a simple sketch of the east end labelled ‘Mr. Robinson’.
31 ESRO, SAS/HA 310 (Abraham Baley’s letterbook) 4 May 1765 (the fiat would cost £4 or £5); improvements were suggested on 6 May 1765; F. W. Steer & I. M. Kirby, A Catalogue of the Records of the Bishop, Archdeacon and Former Exempt Jurisdictions (Chichester: WSCC, 1966), 57, explains that a faculty had to be obtained from the Chancellor of the Diocese before the fabric of a church, churchyard or parsonage house could be altered, although one was not needed for ordinary repairs. Alterations include the demolition and removal of the fabric of the church, including pews.
32 ESRO, SAS/HA 310 (Abraham Baley’s letterbook), 6 May 1765.
33 ESRO, SAS/HA 310 (Abraham Baley’s letterbook), 4 and 6 May 1765; his correspondent was John Morris, the Duke’s manager, see the letter of 15 May 1765 where he says that stone will be recycled and save money and claims £40 as the extra cost.
34 ESRO, SAS/HA 310, 16 May 1765; ESRO, ACC 6077/22/8, Laughton Chancel accounts of John Morris, 1764–65.
35 ESRO, ACC 6077/22/8, Laughton Chancel accounts of John Morris. The use of another architect or a mason to finish off or modify designs does not appear to have been unusual: Henry Keene completed designs for Sanderson Miller see T. Mowl, ‘Henry Keene 1726–1776’, in R. Brown (ed.), The Architectural Outsiders (London: Waterstone, 1985), 86–8, where he describes Keene as completing Miller’s Gothick designs.
36 ESRO, ACC 6077/22/8 (16) (Morris to Baley, 14 June 1764).
37 ESRO, ACC 6077/22/8 (4).
38 ESRO, ACC 6077/22/8 (14).
39 ESRO, ACC 6077/22/8 (20). In contrast with Glynde, no evidence associated with this rebuilding of the chancel survives in the parish archives at ESRO PAR 409.