THE DATING OF THE BUILDINGS OF THE ROYAL HOSPITAL AT GREENWICH

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There is still some confusion about the dating of the buildings of Greenwich Hospital, in spite of the fact that the Public Record Office preserves an almost complete set of the Account Books[1] as well as the Minute Books of the Grand Committee and the Board of Directors.[2] The publication of the extracts from the Minute Books by the Wren Society[3] rather adds to the uncertainty, since they were chosen in so arbitrary a fashion that they are at times positively misleading. No part of the Account Books has been published.

The broad dating here proposed has already been adopted by Mr. Summerson in the second edition of his *Architecture in Britain 1530–1830*.

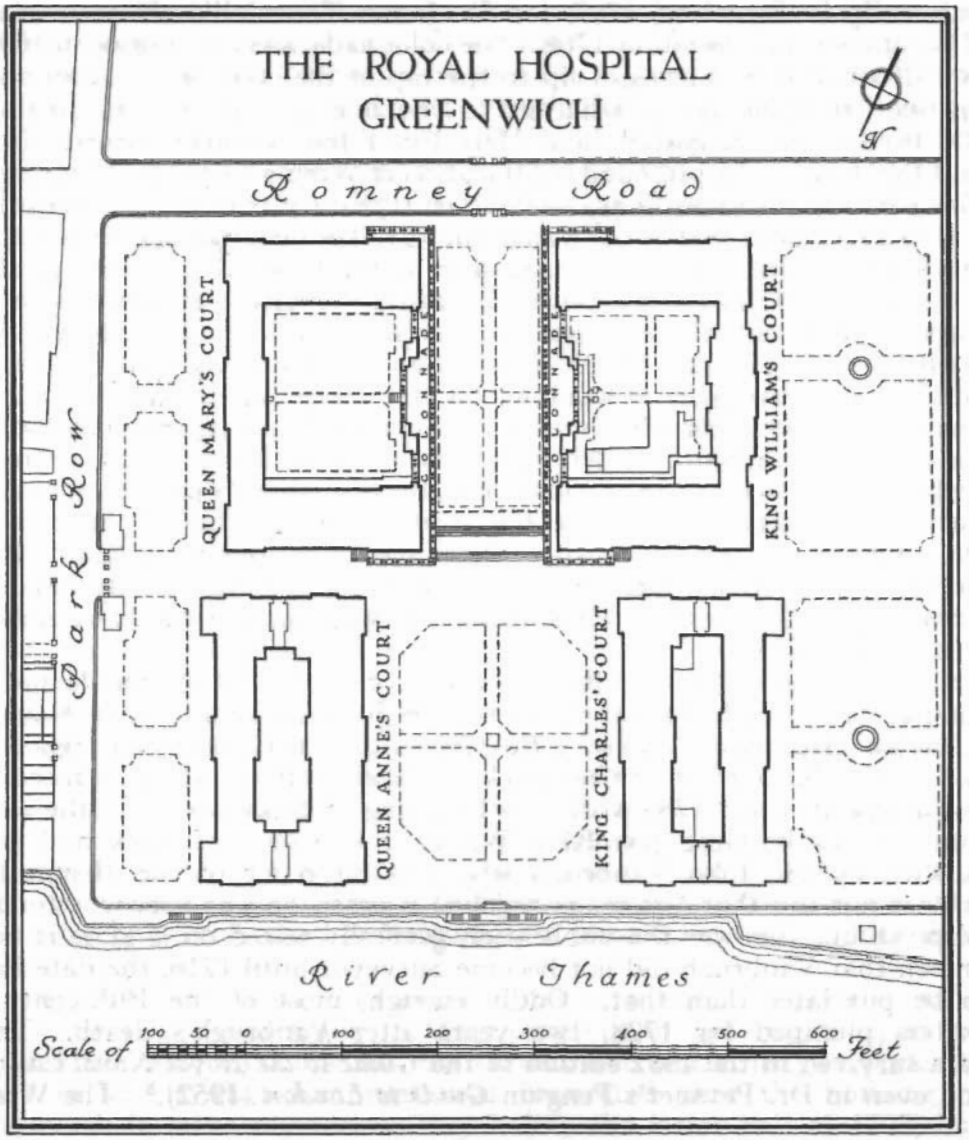
Before the hospital was founded the east wing of King Charles' Court was already in existence. This was the one wing erected of Charles II's proposed new palace at Greenwich and had been built between 1664 and 1669. The Charter of the Hospital was granted on 25th October, 1694, and work began on the base wing of King Charles' Court and its two pavilions.

In discussing the hospital buildings it must be remembered that it is seldom possible to make a simple statement about a building being 'finished' on a given date. Building went on by fits and starts, parts were left for considerable periods not quite complete, and those in control were constantly changing their minds about what they wanted inside the various buildings. The Base Court is comparatively uncomplicated, since it was the first thing attempted when enthusiasm was high and here were no money difficulties (it was put up in two years and completely finished in four), but even here the doorway was left uncompleted and was not dealt with until October, 1700, four months after everything else had been finished. Another difficulty springs from the accounts which sometimes, particularly later on, cover not monthly but six-monthly periods. It is thus only occasionally possible to be certain in which month an event took place; any starting date given in this paper may thus be three or four months too early and any finishing date three or four months too late. None the less, the difficulty is by no means as formidable as Mr. Bolton suggests.[4] Though it is true, as he says, that payment was often made long after the work was carried out, yet it was nevertheless entered into the accounts under the month or six months when it was actually done.

The exterior of King Charles' Court was completed in July, 1698, and the interior by June, 1700. In the early days, everyone seems to

[1] Adm. 67/1–10.
[2] Adm. 68/670 ff.
[3] Wren Society. Volume VI.
[4] Wren Society. Volume VI. Mr. Bolton does not appear to have consulted the Account Books.

have been hopeful that the whole complex of buildings would be finished in a reasonably short time. Between 1696 and 1699 all the foundations were dug. Work on King William's and Queen Anne's Courts went rapidly forward, and even in Queen Mary's Court a two-foot course of



masonry was laid in the South Dormitory and the brickwork was raised somewhat higher. But the enthusiasm for building outran the funds available, the enterprise got more and more into debt and in 1708 the works were stopped.

The main buildings of this first period were as follows : in King William's Court there was the main feature, Wren's Great Hall and the vestibule and cupola. These were begun in August, 1698, the exterior of the hall was completed in October, 1700, the vestibule and cupola were completely finished in November, 1704, and the interior of the hall was ready in February, 1707, for Sir James Thornhill's nineteen years of painting which began in 1708. The colonnade was also begun in 1698, but although it was brought up to the top of the columns in 1706, only the section immediately adjacent to the hall was taken any further. Mr. Bolton has suggested (and Herr Furst has recently echoed him[1]) that the dome was a profound modification of Wren's design by Vanbrugh. This seems to me exceedingly unlikely on stylistic grounds, and there is no reason to suppose that Wren would not have kept control of the design of so vital a feature whatever he may have done elsewhere in the hospital.

The South Dormitory proceeded fairly steadily. It was begun in August, 1699, and the exterior was completed by February, 1704, and the interior by January, 1708. It is not an overwhelmingly distinguished building, but the pairs of windows on the south façade have a certain singularity ; the upper windows with the cornice breaking very vigorously back and interrupted by a large keystone, and the lower with a strongly projecting cornice squashed down on another large keystone and with surrounds reminiscent of Webb's work in King Charles' Court. It all suggests a common author with the even more singular West Dormitory. This was begun in May, 1701, and was practically finished externally by September, 1704, though it was not absolutely complete until April, 1708.

The dating of this building has always caused a lot of trouble and it has not had the attention it deserves. In John Cooke and John Maule's *Historical Account of Greenwich Hospital* of 1789 it is completely ignored, but in the *Description of Greenwich Hospital* of 1811, which is more or less a reprint of the 1789 work, the following sentence occurs : ' the west front of this building (i.e. King William's Court) is of brick and was finished by Sir John Vanbrugh who was Surveyor to the Hospital '. It does not say that Vanbrugh finished it when he was surveyor to the hospital, but this was the implication generally seized on, and as it was known that Vanbrugh did not become Surveyor until 1716, the date had to be put later than that. Oddly enough, most of the 19th-century writers plumped for 1728, two years after Vanbrugh's death. This date survived in the 1952 edition of the *Guide to the Royal Naval College* and even in Dr. Pevsner's Penguin *Guide to London* (1952).[2] The Wren

[1] Viktor Furst, *The Architecture of Sir Christopher Wren*, (1956), 95.

[2] This is not the only building of the period which has suffered from serious mis-dating. Another celebrated example is Christ Church, Spitalfields. In 1732, when Hawksmoor was still alive, a Guide produced by the Corporation of Parish Clerks said it was begun in 1723 and this date has persisted as far as Mr. Colvin's *Dictionary* of 1954. But the Declared Accounts and also inscriptions within the church make it clear that preliminary work began in 1714, the foundation stone was laid in 1715, and thereafter building went steadily forward.

Society publications, however, definitely exploded this view. Mr. Bolton, the Editor, had strong convictions and was absolutely certain that Vanbrugh was somehow the controlling genius at Greenwich from as early as 1699. He admitted that there was no actual evidence that Vanbrugh came near Greenwich until 1703, but he thought that the complete initiative must have passed to him at least immediately after the accession of Queen Anne. So he dates the West Dormitory 1702 with a query and most recent authors have followed him. Herr Sekler generally repeats the Wren Society conclusions; he gives the building to Vanbrugh, but he dates it 'after 1703'.[1] Mr. Colvin gives the whole of King William's Court except the Painted Hall to Vanbrugh and dates it 'circa 1703' onwards.[2] Mr. Summerson has the date right and gives it to Vanbrugh with a question-mark.[3] Mr. Whistler goes into the question in some detail, 'On the west side of the west quadrangle a brick and stone building known as King William's block displays a vastness of ornament and a strange conflict of scales that are patently not of Sir Christopher Wren's devising. Begun in 1700 or soon after it seems to have made slow progress; for the 'shell' was unfinished in 1704 and lacking a cornice, and as late as 1706 the Board was inquiring "why the two frontispieces in the west dormitory of King William's Court were not proceeded on". Now it was in these two frontispieces, clapped on each side, that the Vanbrugh-Hawksmoor manner first reverberated through the Hospital, and as the Board's query rather suggests, they may be overweening afterthoughts, like the great Kimbolton portico which they recall. Without them we should not have associated the building with Vanbrugh, for much of the detail is quite unacceptable as his, and in the manner of Wren. The explanation is surely that Wren left this block to Hawksmoor, though he had to be consulted over the various proposals. It is of course possible that Vanbrugh suggested its final treatment; but . . . Vanbrugh had no authority to 'direct' at Greenwich until he succeeded Wren as surveyor in 1716 when nothing imaginative remained to be done'.[4] The Board's enquiry in 1706, however, was merely about completing the very top of the two entablatures, and there is no doubt that far from being 'overweening afterthoughts' the frontispieces were part of a design which must have been produced at least as early as 1701.

Mr. Whistler seems to be alone in having a tentative preference for Hawksmoor as the designer of the Dormitory in spite of its apparent amateurishness. Of course Mr. Bolton and Herr Sekler may be perfectly right in saying that Vanbrugh was connected with the building of Greenwich in some mysterious way before the latter half of 1703, but they are quite wrong in implying he had any official connection before

[1] Eduard Sekler, *Wren and his place in European Architecture*, (1956), 173.
[2] H. M. Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of English Architects, 1660–1840*, (1954), 639.
[3] John Summerson, *Architecture in Britain, 1530–1830*, Pelican History of Art, 2nd Edition.
[4] Laurence Whistler. *The Imagination of Vanbrugh and his Fellow Artists*, (1954), 13.

then, or that the West Dormitory dates from as late as 1703. The Letters Patent which appointed Vanbrugh a Director are dated 31st July, 1703, the Directors met for the first time on 25th August and Vanbrugh attended his first meeting on 14th October. By this time it was clearly far too late to influence the design. As has been said, work began in May, 1701 ; masons were then working on the great pillars and pilasters of the west front of King William's Court. In January, 1702, the masons were paid for the following work : ' In the West Dormitory in perifery round the whole building, the West Grand Portico excepted, and in higth as follows viz : at the North and South ends from ye upper bed of the grand fascia to ye upper of the Attick Cornice : in ye West Front from the same levell to ye top of the great Dorick Capitalls; in the East Front from ye same levell to ye upper bed of the great Capitalls ; the Pediment, Entablature of the little tabernacle ; and the Ketton ashler there no higher than the nose of ye grand impost ; but the Ketton Coines as high as the underbed of the Attick Cornice '.[1] And in July, 1703 : ' In the West Dormitory of King William's Court in the West Front the whole length of the Frontispiece in height from the upper bed of the Grand Fascia to the upper bed of the Astragall of the Pillars and Pilasters ; but in the intercolumnation from the upper bed of the 14 ins fascia to a levell of 12 ft. 7 ins. above the same ; and in the East Front the whole length of the Great Elliptical Arch from nose to nose, in height from the levell of the upper bed of the impost to the under bed of the great Cornice '.[2]

I think these extracts are sufficient evidence to assert that the design dates from 1701 at the latest. What then is the explanation ? Why should Wren, who was only sixty-nine in 1701 (which is no great age for an architect), fail to complete a final design for the whole hospital even if his earlier ones had been rejected ? It was what everyone must have expected and would clearly have welcomed. It is true that Vanbrugh's cousin was the Secretary, and that Vanbrugh had already begun at Castle Howard his happy partnership with Hawksmoor and was soon to obtain the Comptrollership of the Works, but there seems no reason why Wren and Hawksmoor should step aside for him.[3]

It is surprising that more notice has not been taken of this very singular building which seems to have little in the way of obvious derivations from the works of this or any other country. It certainly looks as if it had not been fully thought out as an architectural composition, and this might point to the work of an amateur architect ; it is hard to believe it could be by such an out-and-out professional as Hawksmoor.

[1] Adm. 68/676.
[2] Adm. 68/677.
[3] A possible, though highly speculative, explanation has been suggested, I think by Mr. Summerson. This is that when Vanbrugh was arrested in France and confined to the Bastille, he had really been a spy and a successful one. As a reward which would not be shown in the books, he was allowed a site in Whitehall and a building to design at Greenwich. It is notable that Wren insisted on specific Treasury authority before letting Vanbrugh have the Whitehall site.

The central feature on the west side seems to have little connection with the building behind it. The cornice and the parapet merely butt into the frieze and cornice of the frontispiece, and the doorway is not expressed at all but just crammed between the pillars. On the east side the central feature is mixed up with the windows in a particularly clumsy fashion. The pilasters go up to support very little ; the very flat arch makes their position even more equivocal,—it seems to intervene because they would be unable alone to keep the building up. The central aedicule is extraordinary and, as far as I am aware, unique. It does not in the usual manner of a feature of this sort emphasise some central and significant part of the design, such as a main doorway or window. Here the windows inside the aedicule are exactly the same as those on either side and the doorway is stuck between the bases of the columns. It is a purely decorative feature expressing nothing but itself and taking little or no part in any general design. The aedicule has perhaps a faintly Italian air, but no Italian would have tolerated so wide a disproportion between base and column. Gigantic bases occur often enough in the Hawksmoor–Vanbrugh style, but are never, elsewhere, so large in relation to the supporting columns.

The detail of the building has some tenuous parallels. The portico on the west side might be a first draft for the South Portico at Blenheim or the Kimbolton portico, as Mr. Whistler says. The pediments over the linking windows recall those on the sides of the tower at St. Anne's, Limehouse, and perhaps derive from some French example such as the Palais de Condé. The window arrangement on the east side recalls Easton Neston very faintly, and the eye of faith might see some connection between the central feature on the east side and that of the north side of Easton Neston, but it amounts to nothing more than that they both have pilasters with an arch between. None the less, there is clearly something of Hawksmoor here. Did he, as Mr. Whistler rather suggests, produce a modest design which he then let Vanbrugh elaborate? Or was he given a free hand by Wren, and did he take the opportunity to try out some ideas which did not make up an architectural whole and hadn't much relevance to this particular building but which might be useful for the greater things to come? Or again, did he let Vanbrugh do as he liked here so that the deplorable result would stop him being too much of a nuisance when it came to designing Castle Howard and Blenheim?

Doubt is thrown on such speculations by the fact that, when the Board of Directors decided in 1706 that the work of finishing the entablatures was going too slowly and new contracts were drawn up with the masons, the Board refused to pass them in Sir Christopher Wren's absence though Vanbrugh was present, and they were not passed until Wren had considered them and had personally corrected and marked them. This does not appear to support Mr. Bolton's view that Wren had been bowed out in 1699, or in 1703, at the very latest. In fact, we cannot

arrive at a firm conclusion on the proper attribution of the building ; we have no real evidence as to what part each of the three architects had in the design.

To discuss Queen Anne's Court it is necessary to turn back to the beginning of the first period of building. It was clearly inevitable from the start that the west front would have to resemble the east front of King Charles' Court. None the less, for some reason the building was completed externally in brick between 1698 and 1704, roofed over and then apparently left empty and boarded up. It seems that the Board of Directors felt that, with money rapidly running out, they ought to get the west side of the hospital finished before they went too far with the east. This was the only place at Greenwich where a building was completely finished in brick and left to wait for its façade until more prosperous times, unless, as has been sometimes said, the west Dormitory of King William's Court was meant to be finished in stone. There is no evidence that this was the intention, and it seems improbable that the elaborate stone frontispieces would have been put on a building that was later to be faced in stone. The practice followed for the Queen Anne's Court façade is an extremely common one in Italy, but I do not know of any other examples in England. The building had to wait for over twenty years for its façade, and this has played havoc with attempts to date it. It was always known as Queen Anne's Greater Building, and the east range of Queen Anne's Court as Queen Anne's Lesser Building. The latter had a more straightforward history ; it was begun in 1701 and completely finished externally by March, 1705. Some work was done on the interior in 1707, before it fell under the general ban on work on the east side until the west side was finished.

This is a building which is now almost always given unequivocally to Hawksmoor. Mr. Goodhart-Rendel's attribution has been enough to silence all doubts, though the only evidence he has produced is that the little columns flanking the uppermost central window are reminiscent of columns somewhat similarly placed in the belfry of St. Anne's, Limehouse. Although this may not seem very much, he goes on : ' The design is not among the works of Hawksmoor's full maturity, but never has his skill been more striking than in the way in which the whole composition of the façade is made to lead up to and to culminate in the columned window. The cornice also shows an ingenious conversion of Webb's great cornice, with which it mitres, into something suitable for an astylar façade '.[1] But at the time that this building was erected it was still the intention to repeat on this side the then riverward face of King Charles' Court,—Webb's large pavilion and the small pavilion of the base court. If this had been done, there would have been no Webb cornice with which to mitre or to serve as the exemplar for the cornice-window

[1] H. S. Goodhart-Rendel, *Nicholas Hawksmoor*, (1924), 27.

arrangement here. The base pavilion would not have projected at all; in fact it would have been set back, and any mitreing would have had to be done on the river front with a very different type of cornice.

There is, as far as I am aware, no documentary evidence that Hawksmoor designed this building; on the other hand, he was the Clerk of the Works and it is reasonably probable that he would have dealt with a comparatively minor work of this sort. But the stylistic indications cannot possibly allow us to go beyond 'probably by Hawksmoor'.

When the work stopped in 1708 these two buildings were more or less up, and were roofed, but without any of their end pavilions. In 1707 a temporary chapel was built in between them, as it was quite clear that there was no chance of a permanent chapel being built for some time to come and the Pensioners had begun to come into residence in January, 1705.

To recapitulate briefly the state of the hospital in 1708: King Charles' Court was complete; in King William's Court the Great Hall, Vestibule and Cupola and the colonnade round the hall were complete; the rest of the colonnade was merely a line of unroofed columns. The dome of King William's Court in fact stood for over thirty years without its sister dome across the main avenue. The South Dormitory was complete and the West Dormitory was finished outside and only a little needed doing within, mainly joiners' work, though the paving of the stone staircase and the upper dormitories, which would seem to be fairly essential, was not done until 1714. In Queen Anne's Court the two buildings were little more than shells; in Queen Mary's Court there was a little masonry above ground. In the place where the Court was to be built a number of houses surviving from the old Tudor palace still stood and provided residences for the officers of the works.

On 15th November, 1711, the General Court passed a resolution saying 'When the work is to be proceeded with, the first building shall be the taking down the Pavilion of brick at the N.W. angle and building it up with stone as the adjacent pavilion built by King Charles and as expressed in the perspective before-mentioned'. This perspective was by Hawksmoor. The taking down of the old pavilion began at the end of July, 1712, when the work was restarted, and the new Pavilion was begun in May, 1713. It was finished outside by December, 1715, and inside by June, 1718. In May, 1715, Hawksmoor was ordered to draw up plans for the north pavilion of Queen Anne's Court which were to correspond with those of King Charles'. They were begun a year later and the exteriors finished by about June, 1720. However, when the works were stopped again in 1721 the two pavilions were nothing more than shells.

The three new pavilions all followed Webb's design, but, of course, as he built only a single pavilion he did not have to provide a link in the rear. This link, which is of no great architectural importance, is the one thing at Greenwich that can definitely, on documentary evidence, be ascribed to Hawksmoor.

Some little work was done in the nine-year period from 1712–21 to make the two Queen Anne's buildings habitable. One ward was constructed in Queen Anne's Greater Building in 1713 and some flooring was done in Queen Anne's Lesser Building in the next year. In June, 1713, the large trophy was carved to stand on the east frontispiece of Queen Anne's Lesser Building, though it did not in fact get hoisted into position until 1731. Queen Anne's Court remained a shell, generally speaking, without a western façade and without its southern pavilions. This period saw the completion of King William's Court; the colonnade was taken up again in June, 1714, most of the work was done between December, 1714, and March, 1715, but it was not finally finished until June, 1717.

By March, 1721, the debts had got so large that the works were stopped again. The Directors wanted to apply to Parliament for a lottery but the General Court would not agree. At last, in June, 1725, with the usual wild underestimating of the cost and after prolonged haggling with the masons over contracts, the façade of Queen Anne's Greater Building was begun. It was finished in September, 1728, and the interior was pressed ahead fairly steadily and completed in September, 1731. The interior of Queen Anne's Lesser Building was taken up again in January, 1729, and also completed in September, 1731. The insides of the North Pavilions were begun in October, 1725, but in June, 1727, the windows were boarded up and the interiors were left half-finished until May, 1729, when the work was taken in hand again and finally completed by September, 1730. The South Pavilions were also started in about June, 1725, and the outsides were complete by September, 1731. Work was immediately started on the interiors, but in March, 1732, the works came to a stop once more. There had incidentally been an almost but not quite complete stoppage of the works from June, 1727, to May, 1729.

This was not a very creative period in the hospital's history. The last really significant decision was taken in 1711; to pull down the North Pavilion of the base wing of King Charles' Court and to repeat Webb's Pavilion three times along the river front. But the third period was notable for the death of Sir John Vanbrugh and of his successor Colen Campbell, and for the appointment as Surveyor of Thomas Ripley, a client of Sir Robert Walpole,—a man quite unable to produce an adequate design himself and not really to be trusted to leave alone the designs of better men. At the time of the stopping of the works the General Court was looking round desperately for economies and proposed that, as no building was going forward, the allowances of Hawksmoor and James, the two Clerks of the Works, should be stopped. Eventually, Ripley offered to forego £50 of his salary so that Hawksmoor could be paid £50 as against his previous salary of £100. This on the face of it looks like a generous gesture on Ripley's part, but it did not assuage Hawksmoor's furious rage at losing his salary and having such a man set over him.

He was convinced that Ripley was behind the moves against him, and that after 40 years of carrying on the building of the hospital and bringing it almost to completion he was being done down by an influential incompetent ; it might be the City Directors who were taking away his salary, but Ripley was behind the curtain. When the work was resumed in July, 1735, Ripley took back his £50 and Hawksmoor ceased to be Clerk of the Works ; his long connection with Greenwich was over.

The restarting of the works in 1735 was due to Parliament at last facing up to the fact that a fresh source of income for the hospital would have to be found if it was ever to be finished. An Act was therefore passed applying to the hospital the rents and profits of the estates of the Earl of Derwentwater which had been forfeited to the Crown on the Earl's condemnation for treason after the '15. A provision in the Act was that an annual report on the progress of the work should be presented to Parliament, so it is comparatively easy to follow the last period of the building. The interiors of the South Pavilions of Queen Anne's Court were begun again in October, 1735, and finished during 1742. The work on Queen Mary's Court was begun with the Chapel in May, 1735 ; this was finished externally by September, 1739, and was architecturally complete inside, but it was undecorated and unfurnished. The Vestibule and Cupola were begun in April, 1736, and finished in September, 1742. The colonnade was begun in October, 1738, and finished in March, 1741. The South Dormitory was begun in October, 1735, finished externally in March, 1739, and internally in September, 1743 ; the East Dormitory kept exact pace at all points with the South Dormitory. There were a number of changes in the arrangements of the interiors after this and minor work went on as late as 1751. There was another very quiet period from 1743–1746 ; in mid-1746 work began on the interior of the Chapel and it was finally completed in September, 1750. It was consecrated earlier in that year, though there was some dispute about the effectiveness of the consecration ; the opinion of the Attorney and Solicitor-General was taken and services were not held until November. Painting and glazing went on in the chapel in 1751 and cabins were still being erected in the dormitories, but from here onwards construction shades more and more into maintenance and the 55-year labour may be said to be over. In April and May, 1751, the temporary chapel within Queen Anne's Court was taken down.

Architecturally, Queen Mary's Court has very few excitements. The dome and colonnade follow King William's Court as closely as possible, the South Dormitory is a somewhat duller version of the South Dormitory of King William's Court with both façades stone instead of only one. But the East Dormitory could not possibly repeat the West Dormitory of King William's Court, so here Ripley was all on his own. He produced a design solemnly and tediously null, made up of quotations from all over the Hospital, but lifeless and quite unworthy of the

excellences of the rest of Greenwich.[1] It is very sad that when the money was really flowing the last design was in the hands of such a distressing architect.

His chapel was not quite so bad but it was burned down in 1779 and replaced by the present Neo-Greek design by 'Athenian' Stuart and William Newton. It was reopened in 1789.

Further alterations were the pulling down of the S.W. Pavilion of King Charles' Court and its rebuilding by Stuart to match the S.E. Pavilion, and the pulling down of Wren's base wing of the same Court in 1811 and its rebuilding by Chambers' pupil John Yenn, who was then Surveyor. The building was completed in 1814 and is very clearly dated.

A summary discussion of the history of these buildings is bound to leave a rather confusing impression of a very great number of dates. But in fact the work falls very easily into four periods. The first, from 1696 to 1708, was the really creative period; in it were built the base wing of King Charles' Court, the whole of King William's Court, except the roof of the Colonnades and the interior of the West Dormitory, and the shells of the two buildings of Queen Anne's Court, the greater unfaçaded. In the second period, from 1712 to 1721, King William's Court was completely finished, the northern base pavilion of King Charles' Court was taken down and rebuilt, and the North Pavilions of Queen Anne's Court were finished externally. In the third period, from 1725 to 1732, the façade of Queen Anne's Greater Building was constructed, the Queen Anne buildings were finished inside and the South Pavilions were built though not proceeded with internally. The final period from 1735 to 1751 saw the completion of the South Pavilions of Queen Anne's Court and the complete construction of Queen Mary's Court.

This paper has been written in an attempt to throw light on some doubtful chapters in the history of one of the finest complexes of buildings that we possess.

[1] The East Dormitory of Queen Mary's Court originally had a triangular pediment, which was familiarly known as 'Ripley's Saddle'. I am indebted to Mr. H. M. Colvin for this information.