

# THOMAS HARRISON AND THE REBUILDING OF CHESTER CASTLE: A HISTORY AND REASSESSMENT

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*Developed from a paper read on 14 April 1983 at the Chester Heritage Centre and on 2 November 1983 at the Grosvenor Museum; it forms part of the author's research for a doctoral thesis on Thomas Harrison 'of Chester', 1744-1829*

Chester Castle was a crucial scheme in Harrison's career as an architect, and one which ultimately earned him the title Thomas Harrison 'of Chester'. The purpose of this article is to demonstrate the nature of the commission: it was both large and prestigious, though it grew piecemeal with many alterations and delays during the building. It is a building which is important in many respects: not least for the way in which it took up the advanced doctrines of the prison reformer, John Howard and was influenced by the ideas of the renowned prison architect, William Blackburn.

The completed scheme consisted of three main blocks: the central range containing the Shire Hall, flanked by subsidiary wings (Plate 1); on the left, the Barracks ('A' Block, now the Headquarters of the Cheshire Regiment) with its prevost or deserters' prison behind; and on the right, the Armoury ('B' Block, now the Officers' Mess). These are linked to the central building by Doric colonnades and the complex is united by its crowning feature, the Propylaea (Plate 2), and the sweeping wall which joins this grand gateway to the wings.

The central E shaped building encloses three courtyards (Plate 5): to the left of the Shire Hall, the one once occupied by the male debtors; to the right, that of the females; and immediately behind, the Gaoler's court. The Gaoler's House was on the same level, with the Chapel immediately below, and direct access from debtors' and felons' yards. Behind the Shire Hall, the land falls steeply (a drop of twenty six feet)<sup>1</sup> to the river. The felons' wards, demolished between the wars to make way for County Hall, occupied the lowest level. Felons were housed in five separate blocks, each raised on arcades, below which were day rooms, and situated at the end of trapezium shaped yards, which the Gaoler could see quite clearly from his house. The Gaoler's House and Chapel both exist today: the interior of

<sup>1</sup> F. Simpson, *Chester Castle 907-1925 A.D.*, 1925, p. 37.

the Gaoler's House has been altered, though that of the Chapel is substantially intact, except for its galleries.

Harrison may have worked out the form of the building as eventually executed early in the proceedings, though it is clear from the summary below that the first drawings were to be of the Gaol only. Parts of the medieval structure were to remain standing during improvements, and were pressed into service to save the need for building temporary structures: only when these became redundant were they demolished. As sections of the new building were completed, they were brought into use. Delays were occasioned by a number of factors, including the passing of two Acts of Parliament: the first in 1788, empowering the Magistrates executing the works to borrow money and to demolish and rebuild;<sup>2</sup> and the second in 1807, to enlarge the castle precincts and improve the approaches,<sup>3</sup> since the area occupied by Harrison's new castle was considerably larger than that of the medieval one.

The story of the rebuilding begins on 30 August 1784 when it was decided that the present gaol was 'insufficient, inconvenient and in want of repair',<sup>4</sup> Howard having compared it with the 'Black Hole of Calcutta'.<sup>5</sup> A competition was announced in April 1785, to 'rebuild, finish, repair, enlarge the gaol'<sup>6</sup> on the site of the old gaol and ground to the East and West. It was to accommodate 100 prisoners, though usually only eighty two people were confined. Plans were to be received before 20 July 1785.<sup>7</sup>

At the General Quarter Session of 28 February 1786, Thomas Harrison was awarded the first premium, with the second going to William Cole, builder, who was subsequently heavily involved in the building works, and the third to John Hiram Haycock of Shrewsbury.<sup>8</sup> At this stage, Harrison had no connection with Chester, though he had achieved some fame with his work in Lancaster, at the Castle and the Skerton Bridge. Harrison was concerned initially with the Gaol only, although he was also asked to prepare plans in the event of the Shire Hall and adjacent buildings being demolished.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, proceedings were suspended quickly, because under the terms of the Gaol Act, the Magistrates were empowered to repair, rather than to rebuild: it was not until July 1787 that they decided to apply to Parliament for an Act to sanction this.<sup>10</sup> Nun's Gardens and

<sup>2</sup> A. Blomfield, in *The Builder*, vol. 21, 1863, p. 204.

<sup>3</sup> Simpson, *Chester Castle*, p. 38.

<sup>4</sup> Cheshire Record Office, Proceedings relating to the rebuilding or enlarging the Gaol of the Castle of Chester and other Buildings adjoining thereto previous to the obtaining the Gaol Bill of the 28th Geo. 3rd, 1784-88, Ref. QAB 1/1, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in J. Hemingway, *History of the City of Chester*, 1831, vol. 2, pp. 176-77.

<sup>6</sup> Cheshire R.O., QAB 1/1, pp. 8-9 (12 April 1785).

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 8-11.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 22 (21 Sep. 1786).

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 39 (9 July 1787).

any part of Gloverstone, the area outside the moat of the medieval castle, or land to the South West or South of the existing buildings, was designated a suitable site<sup>11</sup> and Harrison was asked to alter his plans accordingly.

At a meeting in August 1788, the Commissioners present were unanimously agreed on the rebuilding.<sup>12</sup> By this time, they had decided on the elevation of the felons' blocks (Plate 3): 'the cells or apartments [*sic*] for the confinement of prisoners shall be elevated and placed at a distance from the Gaoler's House',<sup>13</sup> and they had also resolved to approach William Bell of Acton, Denbighshire, architect, to act as their surveyor,<sup>14</sup> a decision they were later to regret. Two months later, Manley stone had been chosen for the exterior, and Bell duly appointed at a salary of £200 per annum to commence on 1 November.<sup>15</sup>

Initially, work progressed quite rapidly. The foundations were being laid out during August 1788, in accordance with a plan and model by Harrison,<sup>16</sup> and the old Exchequer Court, Record Rooms and Constable's House were to be demolished so that work could proceed. The following April, Harrison was ready to inspect the different levels of the foundations,<sup>17</sup> which were found to be satisfactory.<sup>18</sup> The Commissioners aimed to complete the boundaries of the South East and South West sides before September 1790.<sup>19</sup>

Whilst this was going on, the building of the felons' wards was being put in hand. The foundations of the arcades and walls for half of these were being built some time after September 1789, Cole and Spencer being responsible for the masonry and brickwork,<sup>20</sup> with James Varley and Sons doing that of the elevations.<sup>21</sup> In August 1790, Thomas Harrison was asked for plans and sections of the wards and arcades.<sup>22</sup> These must have been supplied on time, as just over a year later, Bell was directed to get slates from Lord Penrhyn's quarry for the roofs of the wards, 'and any of the other buildings which may be finished this year'.<sup>23</sup> Oak doors two planks thick were judged most suitable for the felons' cells, whilst those of the solitary cells were to be cast iron.<sup>24</sup>

Early in 1792, two of the felons' wards were almost ready, as it is recorded that cast iron bars were to be installed in these, next to the South West end of the buildings.<sup>25</sup> During the same year, the foundations of the division walls of the yards

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 48-49 (31 Jan. 1788).

<sup>12</sup> Cheshire R.O., Minutes of the Commissioners for rebuilding the Gaol, 1788-1800, Ref. QAB 1/1/2, pp. 5-6 (18 Aug. 1788).

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 21-22 (7 Oct. 1788).

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*, p. 27 (8 Nov. 1788).

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*, p. 39 (29 Apr. 1789).

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, p. 45 (16 June 1789).

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, p. 59 (4 Sep. 1789).

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 86 (12 Aug. 1790).

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*, p. 107 (16 Sep. 1791).

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 129 (1 Mar. 1792).

were being attended to;<sup>26</sup> by early 1793, some of the walls were standing and pumps were being installed in the centre of each yard.<sup>27</sup>

It seems that Harrison himself was responsible for the cast iron of the arcades, passages and furnishings of the felons' and solitary cells,<sup>28</sup> though Bell had earlier been asked to provide plans.<sup>29</sup> Harrison recommended cast iron beds, about 2 ft. 6 ins. wide and 6 ft. 4 ins. long, and a model was ordered.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile, the Clerk to the Commissioners was to write to the Governor of Gloucester Gaol for six of Sir George Paul's pamphlets on the care and regulation of gaols, as well as six copies of the printed rules.<sup>31</sup> They also asked to see 'The Strawbottom — a Hair Mattress' and bedding for a felons' cell, Sir George Paul's reply being received in October.<sup>32</sup>

The following month, the South East (left hand) end of the buildings and the three remaining divisions of the felons' wards were ready to receive their inmates, as iron bars, beds and proper bedding had been installed.<sup>33</sup> The prisoners confined in the old gaol were to be transferred on 12 December, and that and the old Prothonotary's Office were to be demolished as soon as practicable.<sup>34</sup>

Amongst the Thomas Harrison drawings in the Cheshire Record Office are several of gates which have sometimes been taken as alternative designs for the Propylaea. It seems that some of these were for access to the inner bailey of the old castle, and were built and subsequently removed when the part of the castle that they were serving was demolished. A meeting of 14 July 1787 records that a passage had been opened through the castle wall into the upper ward, and that a gate was to be immediately constructed to Thomas Harrison's plan.<sup>35</sup> Two years later, Harrison was directed to prepare a plan of a gateway with two lodges or guardrooms on each side, 'to be substituted in lieu of the present gateway at the entrance into the outer ward of the castle yard in case the commissioners should be inclined to take down the present old gateway'.<sup>36</sup> The order for demolition of the old gate was given that September,<sup>37</sup> and that for rebuilding to Harrison's plan in early 1790.<sup>38</sup> It seems to have been built, because in October 1791, better glass was being installed in the guard room windows.<sup>39</sup>

With work on the foundations of the felons' wards under way in early 1790, and with the gates put in hand, Harrison was next asked for plans and sections

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*, p. 135 (9 Apr. 1792).

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p. 153 (16 Jan. 1793).

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*, p. 166 (22 Aug. 1793).

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.*, p. 129 (1 Mar. 1792).

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p. 170 (4 Sep. 1793).

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 170-71; and *see below*.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, p. 175 (8 Oct. 1793).

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, p. 181 (11 Dec. 1793).

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>35</sup> Cheshire R.O., QAB 1/1, p. 47.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*, QAB 1/1/2, p. 53 (25 July 1789).

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, p. 59 (4 Sep. 1789).

<sup>38</sup> *ibid.*, p. 69 (13 Jan. 1790).

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p. 119 (25 Oct. 1791).

for the South West (i.e. right of the central range) of the buildings.<sup>40</sup> Some of these were supplied a month later,<sup>41</sup> and the order given for foundations to be laid. Once again, Cole and Spencer worked on these, with John Shone of Chester responsible for the brickwork, and James Lewthwaite for the smiths' work.<sup>42</sup>

By October, the Commissioners were beginning to lose patience; an earlier meeting records that Thomas Harrison had not sent all the drawings needed,<sup>43</sup> and the same was true of work for the felons' wards.<sup>44</sup> They decided to write 'informing him that the plans and sections which he is to furnish for carrying out the works . . . are . . . wanted and to desire he will immediately send them to Mr. Bell'.<sup>45</sup> This did not have the anticipated effect; at the beginning of 1791, the clerk to the Commissioners was instructed to write again:

informing [Thomas Harrison] that several of the Commissioners have observed that the works at the . . . gaol have been delayed and that the copings and parapet stones could not be put upon the walls so that they have received damage from the weather by reason of Mr. Harrison's delaying to send the plans, drawings and sections to carry out the works . . . and that unless Mr. Harrison furnishes the plans and drawings . . . so that the works may not be delayed a regular complaint must be laid before the Commissioners at their next meeting.<sup>46</sup>

Harrison remained oblivious to these warnings. In May 1791, he was asked to give Bell drawings for the cornice and uncompleted buildings and to send directions about the windows.<sup>47</sup> Four months later, these had still not arrived. Bell was therefore asked to prepare drawings of mouldings and sections for the roofs of the western range because the Exchequer Court, Grand Jury Room and Prothonotary's Office were now ready for roofing.<sup>48</sup> Bell's plans were rapidly approved,<sup>49</sup> though dropped soon after in favour of ones supplied by Harrison<sup>50</sup> which were thought to be more fitting, the latter having been spurred into action by a reprimand from the Clerk:

if he fails upon any future occasion to furnish the plans and sections . . . with punctuality . . . so that the work may not be delayed . . . as has been the case in many past instances — the Commissioners present are of the opinion that he be no further consulted . . . as architect.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, p. 69 (13 Jan. 1790).

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*, p. 71 (13 Feb. 1790).

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, p. 74 (9 Mar. 1790).

<sup>43</sup> *ibid.*, p. 78 (20 Apr. 1790).

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*, p. 86 (12 Aug. 1790).

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*, p. 91 (5 Oct. 1790).

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*, p. 95 (11 Jan. 1791).

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*, p. 105 (3 May 1791).

<sup>48</sup> *ibid.*, p. 107 (16 Sep. 1791).

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*, p. 110 (17 Sep. 1791).

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, p. 117 (25 Oct. 1791).

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, p. 110 (17 Sep. 1791).

Early in 1792, Harrison wisely improved his standing with the Commissioners by providing detailed, well thought out observations on the consumption of stone.<sup>52</sup>

The structure of the West end of the buildings seems to have been substantially complete by April 1792, as the Minutes record that these should be finished with the laying of the infirmary ground and upper floors and supplied with cast iron doors like the cells.<sup>53</sup> Harrison's plans for this ironwork were approved on 3 May 1793.<sup>54</sup>

By far the most problematic part of the rebuilding was the Shire Hall, Chapel and Gaoler's House complex. The old Shire Hall was still in use in December 1788, when a screen wall was ordered to divide the court from the part to be first demolished.<sup>55</sup> However, it was not until October 1791, that plans and sections for this complex were ordered, with the aim of building it in Spring the following year.<sup>56</sup> As usual, plans were not ready on time, the Commissioners recording that they 'are much surprised';<sup>57</sup> again, they resorted to threats so as to receive these by 1 March.<sup>58</sup> The plans were duly received and approved.<sup>59</sup> The old Shire Hall was to be demolished immediately after the next Assizes and the materials reused in the foundations,<sup>60</sup> though before this could take place, the foundations of the Chapel/Gaoler's House were to be built up to the level of the bottom of the solitary cells.<sup>61</sup>

By 13 November 1792, work was progressing so well that the committee were thinking of letting contracts for building the superstructure, and Harrison was asked to supply all the remaining plans, drawings and sections within the next two months.<sup>62</sup> During May 1793, white Manley stone was ordered for the Shire Hall and Chapel columns.<sup>63</sup> Five months later, Harrison had decided to alter access to the Shire Hall, with a different arrangement of columns; the foundations were to be adapted, if the Commissioners approved.<sup>64</sup> On 8 October 1793, several ground plans and an elevation indicating the changes were received and approved, subject to alteration in the internal disposition of the court.<sup>65</sup>

There were certainly changes of plan, both to interior and exterior. Several drawings in the Cheshire Record Office show a hexastyle pseudo portico<sup>66</sup> which

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, p. 129 (10 Jan. 1792).

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, p. 135 (9 Apr. 1792).

<sup>54</sup> *ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*, p. 30 (6 Dec. 1788).

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*, p. 119 (25 Oct. 1791).

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*, p. 123 (10 Jan. 1792).

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> *ibid.*, p. 129 (1 Mar. 1792).

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *ibid.*, p. 135 (9 Apr. 1792).

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>63</sup> *ibid.*, p. 161 (3 May 1793).

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, p. 172 (4 Sep. 1793).

<sup>65</sup> *ibid.*, p. 175.

<sup>66</sup> Cheshire R.O., Papers relating to the Gaol and County Hall at Chester, Ref. QAB 1/8, 1/11, 1/12, and 1/116.

was changed in favour of a hexastyle portico in antis,<sup>67</sup> and which then assumed its final form as a hexastyle distyle portico.<sup>68</sup> Sir Charles Cockerell records a fascinating story in his Royal Academy lectures, that: 'At Chester 6 monoliths of 10 tons each were placed on their pedestals one night by Mr. Harrison before the court of justice'. The effect was so great that 'they allowed him to carry out certain matters in which his taste and judgment might otherwise have been overruled'.<sup>69</sup> This cannot yet be substantiated, but it may be something to do with the second rank of columns, since the first stone of the portico had been laid on 1 October 1797 publicly and amidst much ceremony.<sup>70</sup> Behaviour of this sort seems to have been typical of Thomas Harrison, since connected also with the portico is another of Cockerell's stories which claims: 'Harrison told me [that] he had extended [the] portico of [the] court at the [castle] beyond a line designated in the Act of Parliament as extending from a tower to a certain point. He *took down* the tower and the line could no longer be discovered'.<sup>71</sup>

In August 1793, the old Prothonotary's Office was about to be demolished,<sup>72</sup> but it was not until April 1794 that the Commissioners were ready to contract for the building of the Shire Hall and the north eastern range.<sup>73</sup> At the same time, a plan and section of the roof of the Shire Hall was ordered.<sup>74</sup>

Meanwhile, it was fast becoming obvious that something was wrong. During April 1794, there was an investigation into the use of Manley and Runcorn stone,<sup>75</sup> and it was found that the carrier, Joseph Jones of Handbridge, had been paid for more stone than he had supplied.<sup>76</sup> Much Runcorn stone had been wasted.<sup>77</sup> Bell's resignation was called for, and he was dismissed on 7 June 1794,<sup>78</sup> Thomas Harrison being appointed temporary surveyor as well as architect on the condition that he employ an assistant, in this case, one Thomas Gray,<sup>79</sup> until a suitable replacement could be found.<sup>80</sup>

There were further complications. The Committee's Report dated 5 May 1794 had noted that white Manley stone had been squandered in the foundations;<sup>81</sup> more unscrupulous behaviour was discussed in a meeting on 7 July and summarised a week later, when it was declared that 'Mr. William Bell, their late surveyor, has been guilty of numerous instances of negligence and misconduct in the execution

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*, QAB 1/17.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, Plans and drawings, etc., of Chester Castle and its surroundings, by Thomas Harrison and others, Ref. QAB 2/1/35 and 2/1/36.

<sup>69</sup> Quoted in M. Gillinson (ed.), *The Modest Genius*, Grosvenor Museum, Chester, exhibition catalogue, 1977, p. 9.

<sup>70</sup> *Chester Chronicle*, 13 Oct. 1797, quoted by F. Simpson, *Chester Castle*, p. 36.

<sup>71</sup> J. M. Crook, 'A Neo-Classical Visionary', *Country Life*, vol. 149, 1971, p. 947.

<sup>72</sup> Cheshire R.O., Ref. QAB 1/1/2, p. 167 (22 Aug. 1783).

<sup>73</sup> *ibid.*, p. 188 (14 Apr. 1794).

<sup>74</sup> *ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>75</sup> *ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*, p. 196 (30 June 1794).

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*, p. 197.

<sup>78</sup> *ibid.*, p. 207.

<sup>79</sup> *ibid.*, p. 212 (7 July 1794).

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*, p. 198 (7 June 1794).

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*, Ref. QAB 1/1/2, p. 200 (5 May 1794).

of his office'.<sup>82</sup> Many points are listed: most seriously, that he had not accounted for the stone brought from Runcorn; had destroyed invoices,<sup>83</sup> and paid workmen more than originally agreed in their contracts.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, it was suspected that the foundations of the chapel and passage behind the solitary cells were negligently constructed.<sup>85</sup> In addition, Bell often absented himself to attend to other buildings, either leaving the works without supervision, or under the care of his inexperienced young nephew, William Burrel.<sup>86</sup>

Harrison was then appointed permanent surveyor and architect at a salary of £400 per annum,<sup>87</sup> the condition being that he was 'to reside . . . at Chester and to employ a confidential servant or foreman there at all times at his own expense and for whom he is to be answerable'.<sup>88</sup>

Unfortunately, the Chapel foundations were found to be badly constructed, with a depth of 23 ft. 5 ins. instead of the requisite 32 ft.,<sup>89</sup> though nothing was done until August 1795 when Harrison reported that the foundations of the columns and probably the outer walls too, would have to be secured.<sup>90</sup> After December of that year, the outer wall of the Chapel was demolished and rebuilt.<sup>91</sup>

Harrison seems now to have taken up residence in Chester at the insistence of the Commissioners:

Mr. Harrison shall immediately come to reside at Chester . . . unless he shall come to reside in . . . Chester before the next meeting of the . . . Commissioners and shall continue to make [Chester] his usual residence, his salary as architect and surveyor to the . . . Commissioners shall after their next meeting be withdrawn.<sup>92</sup>

In July 1796, he was asked for sections, working drawings and specifications for the Shire Hall and adjacent rooms so that contracts could be let.<sup>93</sup> The following February, he was summoned to Chester (presumably from Lancaster Castle, or Broomhall, Fife), as the Commissioners intended to build the Shire Hall during the Summer.<sup>94</sup> That April (1797) the superstructure of the Gaoler's House must have been almost complete, because the Commissioners were ready to advertise for glazing;<sup>95</sup> in August, they were about to slate the roof.<sup>96</sup> Harrison's plans for wood-

<sup>82</sup> *ibid.*, p. 214 (15 July 1794).

<sup>83</sup> *ibid.*, p. 216.

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*, p. 217.

<sup>85</sup> *ibid.*, p. 221 (16 July 1794).

<sup>86</sup> Cheshire R.O., Papers relating to William Bell, Surveyor, Ref. QAB 1/8.

<sup>87</sup> *ibid.*, Ref. QAB 1/1/2, p. 224 (16 July 1794).

<sup>88</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*, p. 232 (14 Jan. 1795).

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 245-46 (27 Aug. 1795).

<sup>91</sup> *ibid.*, (2 Dec. 1795).

<sup>92</sup> *ibid.*, p. 243 (14 July 1795).

<sup>93</sup> *ibid.*, p. 287 (12 July 1796).

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 296-97 (4 Feb. 1797).

<sup>95</sup> *ibid.*, p. 298 (1 Apr. 1797).

<sup>96</sup> *ibid.*, p. 302 (12 Aug. 1797).



work and plaster were supplied on 27 January 1798.<sup>97</sup> Work at the Chapel was not completed until about May 1800.<sup>98</sup> The roof of the Shire Hall was scheduled for completion rather later than planned, during the Summer of 1798,<sup>99</sup> Samuel Cooper of Wrexham to supply the oak unless lower terms could be found.<sup>100</sup> In fact, it was not ready to receive its roof until April 1799.<sup>101</sup>

There were alterations to the interior of the Shire Hall because of an echo. The recess, behind the judges' seats, and two additional columns were intended to counteract this (Plate 6).<sup>102</sup> In 1801, three years later, a further alteration was made<sup>103</sup> though it is not yet known what this was. As late as 1809, the acoustics were still causing problems;<sup>104</sup> this is again referred to in 1810, when some of the court accommodation was altered.<sup>105</sup> The gallery over the judges' seats dates from 1816, and was built to provide seating for visiting magistrates.<sup>106</sup>

Work at the Shire Hall dragged on until 1802, when Harrison claimed that building at the Gaol, Shire Hall, Grand Jury Room, Prothonotary's Office, Clerk of the Peace's and Exchequer Record Rooms could be completed on or before the next Autumn Assizes.<sup>107</sup> Delay over removing the Prothonotary's records from the half finished Grand Jury Room, through no fault of the architect's, so that the latter room could be completed, resulted in Harrison's salary being stopped,<sup>108</sup> and not reinstated until early 1807.<sup>109</sup>

It was intended that the eastern range be built at the same time as the Shire Hall complex.<sup>110</sup> Harrison supplied the designs for the arrangement of debtors' rooms in the North East wing, and plans for access to these, the Gaoler's House and felons' yards.<sup>111</sup> Foundations were laid out accordingly in October 1793.<sup>112</sup> Work here was drawing to a close in May 1800, as it is recorded that models for doors of the debtors' yard should be sent to Rigby, iron founder, 'on Monday next' and that models for windows should be supplied on or before 1 June 1800,<sup>113</sup> so that the whole of the North East wing should be fit for the reception of debtors before the next Assizes.<sup>114</sup>

<sup>97</sup> *ibid.*, p. 311.

<sup>98</sup> *ibid.*, Minutes of Commissioners for Rebuilding the Gaol, 1800-83, Ref. QAB 1/1/3, pp. 1-2 (22 Apr. 1800).

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*, Ref. QAB 1/1/2, p. 320 (14 Apr. 1798).

<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*, p. 322.

<sup>101</sup> *ibid.*, p. 345 (9 Apr. 1799).

<sup>102</sup> *ibid.*, p. 325 (12 May 1798).

<sup>103</sup> *ibid.*, Ref. QAB 1/1/3, p. 34 (4 Sep. 1801).

<sup>104</sup> *ibid.*, 20 May 1809.

<sup>105</sup> *ibid.*, 22 Sep. 1810.

<sup>106</sup> *ibid.*, 7 Apr. 1816.

<sup>107</sup> *ibid.*, p. 50 (9 Sep. 1802).

<sup>108</sup> *ibid.*, p. 65 (6 Sep. 1803).

<sup>109</sup> *ibid.*, p. 107 (24 Jan. 1807).

<sup>110</sup> *ibid.*, Ref. QAB 1/1/2, p. 152 (15 Jan. 1793).

<sup>111</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 175-76 (8 Oct. 1793).

<sup>112</sup> *ibid.*, p. 176.

<sup>113</sup> *ibid.*, Ref. QAB 1/1/3, p. 6 (17 May 1800).

<sup>114</sup> *ibid.*

By 1804, the Castle complex was moving towards its present appearance, with a plan under consideration for building an Armoury 'uniformly with the gaol of the castle of Chester',<sup>115</sup> the front and end walls to be built at the expense of the county, the rest out of the Government purse.<sup>116</sup> This was approved in August;<sup>117</sup> Harrison was to see to the clearing of the site and completing the front and end walls eleven months from receiving the Board of Ordnance's permission to demolish the pre-existing buildings. A drawing in the Cheshire Record Office shows an alternative treatment for an Armoury with a central Ionic pseudo portico,<sup>118</sup> and compares with a visionary perspective now at Weaver Hall Museum, and one at the Grosvenor Museum, Chester.

The scheme for the Barracks followed shortly after: it was proposed to extend the castle yard according to a plan by Harrison; to build the Barracks to match the Armoury, on the same terms and with consultation with the Barrack Board architect.<sup>119</sup> The new Barracks was on Gloverstone land: part of the ground floor at the South East was reserved for the Exchequer Court, and for occasionally holding the General Quarter Sessions.<sup>120</sup> Officers' rooms were at the front and privates' at the back.<sup>121</sup> The Barracks Office approved the plan in 1806.<sup>122</sup> Finally, in 1807, the order was given to clear the site,<sup>123</sup> and that October, the foundations had already been built up to the surface.<sup>124</sup> Work was delayed by the poor state of County funds. In 1808, Captain Henderson, the Barrack Master, had proposed to suspend part of the building,<sup>125</sup> and in 1809, the lack of money is noted in the Minute books:

no immediate supply is to be expected from the River Weaver Trustees, but . . . a sum of nearly £3,000 will be directly required for Gloverstone . . . also . . . there are several public bridges under repair . . . as soon as the roof and outside walls of the Exchequer Court and Barracks . . . are completed, no further buildings there shall be undertaken until the public funds of the county are in a more favourable state.<sup>126</sup>

During 1810, work was going on at the castle gateway and boundary wall.<sup>127</sup> In April that year, Harrison was asked to deliver plans of what remained to be done. Designs for the Propylaea were submitted that September, but it was impossible to

<sup>115</sup> *ibid.*, p. 77 (28 July 1804).

<sup>116</sup> *ibid.*, p. 78.

<sup>117</sup> *ibid.*, 23 Aug. 1804.

<sup>118</sup> *ibid.*, drawing inscribed 'Copy sent to London, August 1st, 1804', Ref. QAB 2/2/5; cf. also QAB 2/2/12.

<sup>119</sup> *ibid.*, Ref. QAB 1/1/3, pp. 91-92 (8 Oct. 1805).

<sup>120</sup> *ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>121</sup> *ibid.*, p. 100 (16 Apr. 1806).

<sup>122</sup> *ibid.*, p. 114 (16 July 1806).

<sup>123</sup> *ibid.*, 7 Oct. 1807.

<sup>124</sup> *ibid.*, 4 Oct. 1808.

<sup>125</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> *ibid.*, 3 Oct. 1809.

<sup>127</sup> *ibid.*, 10 Jan. 1810.

begin this until the approaches, on Crown land, leased to Earl Grosvenor, were finalised,<sup>128</sup> Harrison having seen Earl Grosvenor to explain these two years previously. In September 1810, Harrison presented an elevation of a Doric gateway which was to be built as soon as possible. In addition, he confirmed that the Exchequer Court and the boundary wall could be completed in one and three quarter years, provided that there were no problems with stone supply.<sup>129</sup> In April 1811, there was a change of plan to the Propylaea, though it is not known what this was. It was hoped to complete this and other buildings in September 1813,<sup>130</sup> though Harrison's fears over stone supply proved to be justified.<sup>131</sup> The design was altered once more, in 1813, when four columns were added to the West side.<sup>132</sup> The Commissioners acknowledged the problems over stone in 1814, when building works were apparently still going on. In 1815, they were putting the approaches to the gateway in hand.<sup>133</sup>

It must be remembered that, from 1795 on, whilst building was progressing, there were complicated negotiations over the buying of land in Gloverstone and Nun's Gardens, required for the new castle.<sup>134</sup> Early in 1811, it was decided that the whole of Gloverstone, part of Nun's Gardens and other land adjacent was to be used,<sup>135</sup> though some of this was sold in 1813 for building houses 'according to an elevation to be fixed upon by the Commissioners'.<sup>136</sup>

From the above summary, it is clear that the gaol block was substantially complete by 1801.<sup>137</sup> By 1810, the Commissioners were naturally anxious to determine whether the remaining work was sufficient to justify paying Harrison's salary.<sup>138</sup> In fact, they were still paying him in 1815, albeit in an arbitrary fashion, their opinion being 'that some regular arrangement should be made as to compensation . . . for his services'.<sup>139</sup> One of the things that they were paying for was the fence (which still remains), for which there are designs in the Cheshire Record Office.<sup>140</sup> Harrison was to put this 'on top of the boundary wall of the castle yard by iron railings and stone blocks or otherwise as shall appear . . . most proper for connecting the gateway with the two buildings on the north and south sides of the castle yard'.<sup>141</sup>

In 1816, operations must have been drawing to a close, since the accounts were being wound up: the '£45-13-11 balance remaining in [Harrison's] hands shall be

<sup>128</sup> *ibid.*, 20 Sep. 1810.

<sup>129</sup> *ibid.*, 22 Sep. 1810.

<sup>130</sup> *ibid.*, 14 July 1812.

<sup>131</sup> *ibid.*, 6 Oct. 1812.

<sup>132</sup> *ibid.*, 27 Apr. 1813.

<sup>133</sup> *ibid.*, 12 July 1815.

<sup>134</sup> *ibid.*, Ref. QAB 1/1/2, p. 249 (6 Oct. 1795).

<sup>135</sup> *ibid.*, QAB 1/1/3, p. 16 (13 Jan. 1801).

<sup>136</sup> *ibid.*, 27 Apr. 1813.

<sup>137</sup> *ibid.*, p. 30 (15 July 1801).

<sup>138</sup> *ibid.*, 10 July 1810.

<sup>139</sup> *ibid.*, 5 Apr. 1815.

<sup>140</sup> *ibid.*, drawing, Ref. QAB 2/3/26.

<sup>141</sup> *ibid.*, Ref. QAB 1/1/3, 5 Apr. 1815.

paid over. Ordered Mr. Harrison's bill for superintending new works at the castle amounting to £15-10-0 be paid to him'.<sup>142</sup>

The story of the rebuilding reveals something about Harrison himself. He was a man who obviously had far too much to do: he was often late in delivering plans, but whenever his position was threatened, was anxious to supply them. The Commissioners were certainly in no hurry to pay him: it was 1791 before he received the £50 for his original proposal of 1785, together with £257 'on account of his trouble and expenses to this time',<sup>143</sup> and 1792 before he got his expenses for a visit to London made five years before.<sup>144</sup> In 1792 also, is the first mention of a regular salary of £200 per annum,<sup>145</sup> though Harrison annoyed the Commissioners considerably by 'attributing his neglect of sending plans . . . in some degree to a want of encouragement from the Commissioners or to an expectation that his services would not be properly compensated by them',<sup>146</sup> comments which the Commissioners found 'to be in many instances unfounded and disrespectful'.<sup>147</sup>

In addition, work was delayed by stone supply; the complications over Bell, the surveyor; lack of finance; and the vagaries of the work force. Convict labour had been used throughout the building works. Initially, they were set to work preparing sand and rock gravel under the direction of the surveyor.<sup>148</sup> Later, as operations increased, they were to start work at 8 a.m. daily.<sup>149</sup> Harrison pointed out that:

the convicts are not always employed in those parts of the work where their labour may be more useful, and as their overlooker is not sufficiently acquainted with the nature of the work to give them proper directions for this purpose, it will frequently increase the expense without much forwarding the building.<sup>150</sup>

Harrison moved to Chester as a result of an ultimatum, rather than just a preference for this great commission, and he moved rather later than is often assumed. His office was in the western range of the Shire Hall block: 'the room above stairs now occupied by Mr. Harrison, which room together with the smaller room through it and the inner room below stairs now used as the prothonotary's office are for the future to be considered his offices'.<sup>151</sup> Prior to that, he kept models in a depository at 'Nun's Hall', on the East side of Nun's Gardens.<sup>152</sup>

Having looked at the history, it remains to analyse the key points of this building. Chester Castle is a remarkable building on two counts: first, the enlightened plan and secondly, the architecture. The plan introduced several innovations, prompting

<sup>142</sup> *ibid.*, 15 Oct. 1816.

<sup>143</sup> *ibid.*, Ref. QAB 1/1/2, p. 105 (12 July 1791).

<sup>144</sup> *ibid.*, p. 132 (9 Apr. 1792).

<sup>145</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> *ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>147</sup> *ibid.*, p. 134.

<sup>148</sup> *ibid.*, p. 44 (16 June 1789).

<sup>149</sup> *ibid.*, p. 311 (3 Oct. 1797).

<sup>150</sup> *ibid.*, T. Harrison, *Observations upon the Execution and Manner of conducting the works of the new Gaol at the Castle of Chester*, 1791.

<sup>151</sup> *ibid.*, Ref. QAB 1/1/3, p. 102 (23 Apr. 1806).

<sup>152</sup> J. Hemingway, *History of the City of Chester*, vol. 2, pp. 364-65.

George Dance's deputation of Aldermen from the City of London to praise it as 'in every respect, one of the best-constructed gaols in the kingdom'.<sup>153</sup> The traveller, M. Dupin, commented:

The Sessions House and Panoptic prison of Chester are united in the same building which is most assuredly the handsomest of this kind that is to be seen in Europe. The interior arrangements are well-contrived and bespeak much regard for humanity. The architecture is equally simple and majestic.<sup>154</sup>

John Howard in his *State of the Prisons* had made an impassioned plea for security, separation and surveillance, with particular emphasis on the circulation of air.<sup>155</sup> The Gaol Bill of 28 Geo. III, 1784-88, reinforced this by stipulating that there should be separate places of confinement; division by class of crime and by sex; dry and airy cells; and warm and cold baths.<sup>156</sup> Chester Castle clearly fulfilled all of these conditions, as is made clear by Hemingway, in one of the best contemporary descriptions, apparently supplied by the architect himself: the gaol

is from the nature of the ground built on two levels. The upper line of the building on the east side consists of the turnkey's room, the large and airy yard of the male debtors; on the west side the female debtors' rooms and court yard with the prison hospital adjoining. Both these yards from their elevated position command a delightful view of the fine ruins of Beeston Castle, the Peckforton, Broxton, and Carden Hills and etc., through the iron railing which prevents the debtors from overlooking the court yards on the lower level which are appropriated to the felons. In the centre is the Gaoler's House, projecting from the line of the upper level, so as to completely command a view of every part of the prison. The chapel of the prison is between the upper and lower level under the Gaoler's House and in the same semi-circular form: it is so contrived as to receive the debtors in a gallery, a very few steps only below the line of their own courts, while the criminals are seated in the inferior part which is a few steps above their courts and cells; in the centre, near the clergyman are seats for the family of the gaoler and his domestics. On the lower level, and immediately under the extreme line of the upper, are the cells for solitary confinement and condemned criminals; also the very complete cold and warm baths.<sup>157</sup>

The felons' yards were 'traversed by an area or passage completely round, and again enclosed by the thick and lofty exterior stone wall, forming the boundary of this prison'.<sup>158</sup> The basic idea for the felons' blocks raised on arcades, though not the elevational treatment nor the plan layout, was probably inspired by Howard's Model Gaol which had appeared in his publication.<sup>159</sup>

<sup>153</sup> *The Builder*, vol. 21, p. 204.

<sup>154</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>155</sup> J. Howard, *The State of the Prisons*, 1780 edit., section III, pp. 21-24.

<sup>156</sup> Cheshire R.O., Papers relating to the Gaol Act of 1788: Opinion of Mr. Leycester, Lincoln's Inn, 14 Feb. 1787, Ref. QAB 1/7.

<sup>157</sup> Hemingway, *History of Chester*, vol. 2, p. 182.

<sup>158</sup> *ibid.*, p. 183.

<sup>159</sup> J. Howard, *State of Prisons*, pl. 1.

Salubrity and healthiness of a gaol were at that time thought to depend upon the circulation of air, as it was wrongly assumed that gaol fever was carried by stale air.<sup>160</sup> It was therefore vital, according to the thinking of the day, to have well designed and detailed apertures:<sup>161</sup> at Chester, the influence of William Blackburn can be seen in the attention paid to the ironwork of the cells and arcades. Indeed, there is a similarity between those at Chester and those of Blackburn's and Sir George Paul's Gloucester Gaol. Thomas Harrison must have been aware of Blackburn quite early in the proceedings, since in 1784, Blackburn was brought in to examine some of the early plans.<sup>162</sup> Later, in March 1786, the Minute Books record a payment to William Blackburn of £10 12s. 0d. 'for his trouble and expenses in attending at Chester and viewing the County Gaol . . . and the plans which had been prepared by Mr. Turner architect for altering the same'.<sup>163</sup> Harrison was certainly aware of the latest in 'prison thinking', as the Magistrates at Chester Castle had contacted the Governor of Gloucester Gaol, then considered to be a model prison, for details of felons' beds, bedding, etc., at Harrison's instigation.<sup>164</sup> Gloucester had been designed by its Governor, Sir George Paul, with William Blackburn, and featured amongst other things a separate system of confinement. A letter of September 1793 to the Keeper of Gloucester records that the Commissioners have 'been informed by their architect, Mr. Thomas Harrison that the rules and orders for the regulation of the gaol under your care are well worth their attention' and requesting 'some pamphlets which he saw at Gloucester and which have been lately published by Sir George Paul containing many useful hints as to the care and regulation of gaols . . .'.<sup>165</sup> The same letter mentions the locks which Sir George Paul pointed out to one of the Chester Commissioners, Sir Henry Mainwaring, and which were subsequently recommended at Chester. Harrison later revisited Gloucester, in connection with Lancaster Castle, to view the interior arrangements.<sup>166</sup>

Harrison would also have known of Howard's recommendations: 'to get air over the doors, the tops of doors and passages to be circular',<sup>167</sup> though the lunettes used at Chester may well have been inspired by James Wyatt's Petworth Gaol of 1784<sup>168</sup> despite Harrison's derogatory comments on Wyatt.<sup>169</sup> It is true that semicircular headed windows are also used at George Dance II's Newgate Gaol of 1769.

It is true also that there was one outbreak of gaol fever, despite these precautions, at Chester in 1801, but the 'Observations of the Medical Faculty of the Infirmary'<sup>170</sup>

<sup>160</sup> R. M. Evans, 'Prison Design 1750-1842', Ph.D. thesis, University of Essex, 1975, p. 92.

<sup>161</sup> *ibid.*, p. 172.

<sup>162</sup> Cheshire R.O., Blackburn papers, 30 Sep. and 2 Oct. 1784, Ref. QAB 1/8.

<sup>163</sup> *ibid.*, Ref. QAB 1/1, 11 Mar. 1786.

<sup>164</sup> *See above.*

<sup>165</sup> Cheshire R.O., Letter from Charles Potts to Mr. Cunningham, Keeper of Gloucester Gaol, 10 Sep. 1793, Ref. QAB 1/8.

<sup>166</sup> Lancashire R.O., Minutes for the Rebuilding of Lancaster Castle, 14 Jan. 1794.

<sup>167</sup> Cheshire R.O., Notes on Original Proposals by John Howard, 16 Mar. 1784, Ref. QAB 1/8.

<sup>168</sup> Evans, 'Prison Design', pl. 6.11.

<sup>169</sup> *See below.*

<sup>170</sup> Cheshire R.O., Observations of the Medical Faculty of the Infirmary, 6 Mar. 1801.

make it clear that the cause was disregard to cleanliness, rather than faulty design. The Keeper, Faithful Thomas, was partly to blame, since he had become too old and infirm to carry out his duties.<sup>171</sup> Thomas Harrison was not entirely exonerated because the epidemic was 'principally occasioned by want of cleanliness and attention to the prisoners . . . and to the delay of the architect and surveyor . . . in finishing proper apartments for the separation and confinement of the different descriptions of prisoners'.<sup>172</sup> Commissioners and architect were well aware of what should have been done: a meeting in February 1801 records that a stove for heating water, and a bath were to be constructed within one month: 'that the felons on their first commitment shall be bathed in a warm bath and their hair cut when there is any suspicion of contagion and where it can be done without greatly changing the appearance of the prisoners';<sup>173</sup> and improvements were subsequently made. Even with these problems, the new gaol with its 'convenient and salubrious disposition of the courts and apartments of the present places of confinement'<sup>174</sup> was a great improvement upon the old structure.

Chester Castle has often been called 'panoptic': 'This was the first prison built on the panoptical arrangement in this country'.<sup>175</sup> It is not 'panoptic' in the true Benthamite sense of the word: the philosopher Jeremy Bentham's *Panopticon* was not published until 1791, by which time, Harrison's conception of the Gaoler's House overlooking the felons' yards must already have been worked out. It is 'panoptic' though, in the adoption of the 'inspection' principle. Again, the genesis of the idea may have come from Howard, as in his notes on the original proposals for Chester he recommended 'bow windows to the Gaoler's apartments at the end next the courts so that he may overlook the courts'.<sup>176</sup> Bow windows are not, of course, used at Chester, but the idea of overlooking is.

The configuration of the felons' yards is close to William Blackburn's Northleach Bridewell, Gloucestershire, of 1785,<sup>177</sup> or the celebrated Maison de Force, Ghent<sup>178</sup> which had been rebuilt in 1773. Harrison may have seen the Maison de Force on his return from Rome in 1776, and would have known of it through Howard:<sup>179</sup> plans were later published.

With regard to security, Harrison was well aware that walls must be carefully constructed since 'they have not only to support their own weight before the mortar can have much power in binding them together; but probably as soon as finished

<sup>171</sup> *ibid.*, Report laid before the Grand Jury, 13 Apr. 1801.

<sup>172</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>173</sup> *ibid.*, Ref. QAB 1/1/3, pp. 19-20 (28 Feb. 1801).

<sup>174</sup> Hemingway, *History of Chester*, vol. 2, p. 176.

<sup>175</sup> L. Stephen and S. Lee (eds.), *Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 9, p. 45; W. Papworth (ed.), *Dictionary of Architecture for the Architectural Publication Society*, 1852-92, vol. 4, p. 26.

<sup>176</sup> Cheshire R.O., Notes on Proposals by Howard, 16 Mar. 1784, Ref. QAB 1/8.

<sup>177</sup> Evans, 'Prison Design', pl. 6.15.

<sup>178</sup> *ibid.*, pl. 5.1.

<sup>179</sup> Howard, *State of Prisons*, 1777 edit., p. 141.

have to resist the most artful means of the subtlest of mankind'.<sup>180</sup> The stones must be properly laid, and he realised that rustication should be tapered slightly towards the top, so as not to provide footholds for the escaping prisoner.<sup>181</sup>

The plan of Chester Castle seems to have functioned well, with subterranean passages giving efficient circulation, on different levels: 'from [the prisoner's box] there is a commodious passage, under the hall to the gaol, by which means there is no noise or confusion in the bringing to, or removing prisoners from the court'.<sup>182</sup> Some of these passages remain today, and are still in use.

Of the architecture, Cockerell remarked: 'Certainly a great hand is visible . . . [there are] many hints in Chester for the history of English architecture'.<sup>183</sup> However, his praise was not unqualified: 'The Castle at Chester is open to criticism in many points of view, most obviously in the variety of Doric orders in the Propylaea and court and in the Ionic sides, each seeming of a different hand. The Grecian Doric is very imperfect, but it is in the great intelligence of the masonry that Harrison's merit lies'.<sup>184</sup> Certainly, Harrison did use additional orders as the scheme grew in magnitude: a scenic as opposed to the archaeological approach. The 'imperfect' Grecian Doric probably refers to the primitive, rudimentary Doric of the Shire Hall portico, which relates to antique prototypes but is simplified: 'undoubtedly the first significant application of primitive Doric to an eighteenth century building'.<sup>185</sup> This Doric carries an elided entablature (an architrave cornice) which may reflect an awareness of the writings of Laugier, and serves to emphasise both the solemnity and power of this building. The Ionic of the interior of the Shire Hall seems to have been inspired by the Ionic Ilissus Temple, illustrated in Stuart and Revett's *Antiquities of Athens* and drawn by Harrison several times from that publication.<sup>186</sup> Once again the order is simplified, unfluted: here it appears without the egg and dart adornment and it is also used for the streamlined exterior of the Armoury and Barrack blocks.

Cockerell's praise surely referred to the precision with which the stone is worked, both on the rusticated flanks of the Shire Hall and its contrasting ashlar centre and wings, and the impressive, Vanbrughian nature of the gaol elevation as it once appeared from the riverside with its dramatic massing of several layers of cells (Plate 4). The extraordinary, rugged power of this building is enhanced by the handling of the rustication, and the very great size of the blocks of Manley stone. Harrison was certainly concerned with the idea of primitive power, and the expressive qualities of architecture: in Cockerell's Diary there is a scornful note to the entry recording that Harrison had 'sent his friend to London to see the works of

<sup>180</sup> Cheshire R.O., T. Harrison, *Observations*.

<sup>181</sup> *ibid.*, Ref. QAB 2/1/103.

<sup>182</sup> Hemingway, *History of Chester*, vol. 2, p. 181.

<sup>183</sup> British Architectural Library, London, C. R. Cockerell's Diary, 9 November 1823.

<sup>184</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> M. Kappatos-Pavlikis, 'A Study of Greek Revival Architecture in England before 1800', Ph.D. thesis, University of Manchester, 1974, p. 87.

<sup>186</sup> Chester City R.O., Thomas Harrison drawings, Ref. CR 73/10 ff. 1-3.



flimsy Wyatts and frippery Adams'.<sup>187</sup> The detailed instructions on rustication at the Cheshire Record Office state that 'this building should not only . . . have the convenience as well as the appearance for the purpose it is intended but . . . it may likewise have . . . security from the construction of its several parts'.<sup>188</sup>

The closest precedent to this sort of expressive elevational treatment is George Dance II's Newgate Gaol of 1769, rebuilt after the Gordon Riots of 1780 and demolished in 1902 to make way for the Old Bailey.<sup>189</sup> Harrison would have known this building: he had already been to London on his return from Rome,<sup>190</sup> and in any case, both elevation and plan of Newgate Gaol appeared in Howard.<sup>191</sup> One of the elevations for the Infirmary Court, Chester, shows subtly varied courses of stone,<sup>192</sup> an idea which may have come from Newgate: the result is a build up of power to the elevation. Both Newgate and Chester have common roots in the rusticated structures of the Renaissance, such as Giulio Romano's Palazzo del Te, Mantua, which Harrison could have visited; it is also possible that both owe something to Piranesi's *Carceri* series, published in 1750.<sup>193</sup> Piranesi and Harrison were in Rome at the same time, and may have met.

At Chester, the sensitivity in the handling of stone, the rustication and beautifully worked ashlar, together with the meticulous instructions already referred to, indicate that Harrison may well have had a stone mason's training.

Thomas Harrison was up to date with continental architectural developments. The Shire Hall is the centrepiece of the design and 'a room of great beauty',<sup>194</sup> which Hemingway describes as:

the magnificent hall of justice. Before the latter is a portico, with 12 stupendous pillars, in double rows, each of which is 22' in height and 3' 1½" in diameter, hewn out of a single stone from the Manley quarry . . . The hall itself is of semicircular form, 80' in diameter, 44' high and including the recess for the judges, 50' in width. Round the extreme part of the semicircle is a colonnade of 12 Ionic columns, each of a single stone, 22' high, supporting a semidome, divided into large, deep and bold caissons or coffers; in the centre of each is an ornamented rose, which opening to the roof serves the useful purpose of ventilating the whole of the court to any degree requisite.<sup>195</sup>

The ground plan, and to some extent the internal elevation are reminiscent of Gondoin's Chirurgie (Plate 7): the Anatomy Theatre of the École de Medecine, Paris, which was being built from 1769 to 1774,<sup>196</sup> and which had been open only

<sup>187</sup> British Architectural Library, Cockerell's Diary, 9 Mar. 1828.

<sup>188</sup> Cheshire R.O., T. Harrison, *Observations*.

<sup>189</sup> J. Summerson, *Architecture in Britain 1530-1830*, 1979, p. 449.

<sup>190</sup> A. Graves, *The Royal Academy of Arts: A Complete Dictionary of Contributors and their Work from its Foundation in 1769 to 1904*, vol. 4, 1905-06, sub anno 1777.

<sup>191</sup> Howard, *State of Prisons*, 1780 edit., facing p. 123.

<sup>192</sup> Cheshire R.O., drawing, Ref. QAB 2/1/28.

<sup>193</sup> Summerson, *Architecture in Britain*, p. 449.

<sup>194</sup> N. Pevsner and E. Hubbard, *The Buildings of England: Cheshire*, 1978, p. 157.

<sup>195</sup> Hemingway, *History of Chester*, vol. 2, p. 181.

<sup>196</sup> A. Braham, *Architecture of the French Enlightenment*, 1980, p. 137.

two years when Harrison was returning from Rome. As this, next to Ste Geneviève, was the most celebrated building in Paris of its day,<sup>197</sup> it is more than likely that Harrison made a point of seeing it, as Sir John Soane certainly did some years later, when he ranked it as amongst models for our imitation.<sup>198</sup> Gondoin's designs were subsequently published in 1780.<sup>199</sup>

There are, of course, classical precedents too: the Shire Hall can be seen as half a Pantheon, with comparable coffering (the ornamented roses seem never to have been finished), and there are precedents in Renaissance architecture, such as Palladio's Teatro Olimpico of 1580-82, but it seems more likely that Harrison was influenced by French Neoclassicism of an advanced kind.

The motif of the bisected semi dome is a recurring one in French Grands Prix designs: Bernard's Palais de Justice, winner of the Grand Prix, 1782<sup>200</sup> resembles Chester Castle in section rather than in plan. However, Lemoine's École de Medecine, the winner in 1775,<sup>201</sup> is markedly close to Gondoin's Chirurgie both in plan and elevation, and therefore reminiscent of Chester Castle. The motif reappears in Lefebure's École de Medecine of 1787,<sup>202</sup> and Sobre's Town Hall of the same year.<sup>203</sup> These designs were published by Prieur in 1787,<sup>204</sup> but in any case, students' drawings were retained by the French Academy, and were available for study,<sup>205</sup> so Harrison could well have known of these before the designing of the Shire Hall, even assuming that he had not seen the Chirurgie. This motif is used contemporaneously (though with concealed fenestrations) by George Dance II in his design for the Gallery of Lansdowne House of c. 1792-94.<sup>206</sup> There are certainly Grands Prix overtones in Chester Castle: most notably the purity, simplification, the stripping down of ornament, the use of simple geometric shapes, and columnar architecture: a trait that is yet more pronounced in some of Harrison's projects, such as the 'Neoclassical Valhalla'.<sup>207</sup>

It is often said that Chester Castle Propylaea is pure Greek Revival, and its most archaeological moment: 'What he has achieved here is one of the most powerful monuments of the Greek Revival in the whole of England'.<sup>208</sup> Possible sources are the Temple of Theseus, the Temple of Philip at Delos, and the Propylaea of the Acropolis at Athens, all of which were drawn by Harrison from the folios of

<sup>197</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>198</sup> P. de la Ruffinière du Prey, *The Architectural Education of Sir John Soane 1753-80*, 1977, p. 106.

<sup>199</sup> Braham, *Architecture of French Enlightenment*, p. 139.

<sup>200</sup> H. Rosenau, 'Engravings of the Grands Prix of the French Academy of Architecture', *Architectural History*, vol. 3, 1960, pl. 14.

<sup>201</sup> *ibid.*, pl. 39.

<sup>202</sup> *ibid.*, pl. 88.

<sup>203</sup> *ibid.*, pl. 105.

<sup>204</sup> A.-P. Prieur and P. L. Van Cléemputtee, *Collection des prix que la cidevant Académie d'Architecture proposoit et couronnoit tous les ans*, Paris, 1787.

<sup>205</sup> Rosenau, 'Engravings of Grands Prix', p. 20.

<sup>206</sup> D. Stillman, 'The Gallery for Lansdowne House: International Neoclassical Architecture and Decoration in Microcosm', *Art Bulletin*, vol. 52, 1970, pp. 75-80.

<sup>207</sup> R.I.B.A. Drawings Collection, London.

<sup>208</sup> Pevsner and Hubbard, *Cheshire*, p. 157.

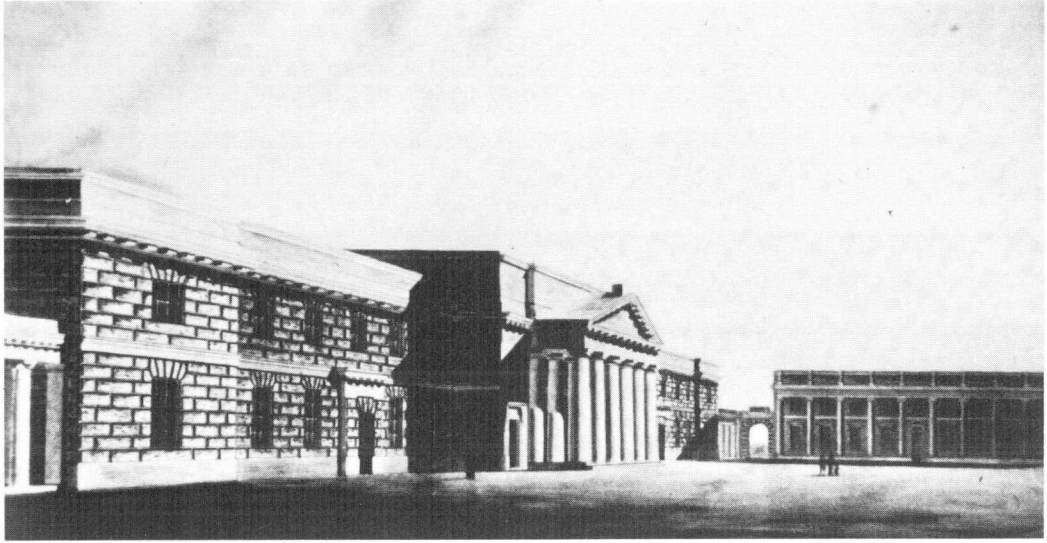


Plate 1 — Perspective of Chester Castle, showing Shire Hall and Armoury  
*Weaver Hall Museum, Northwich*

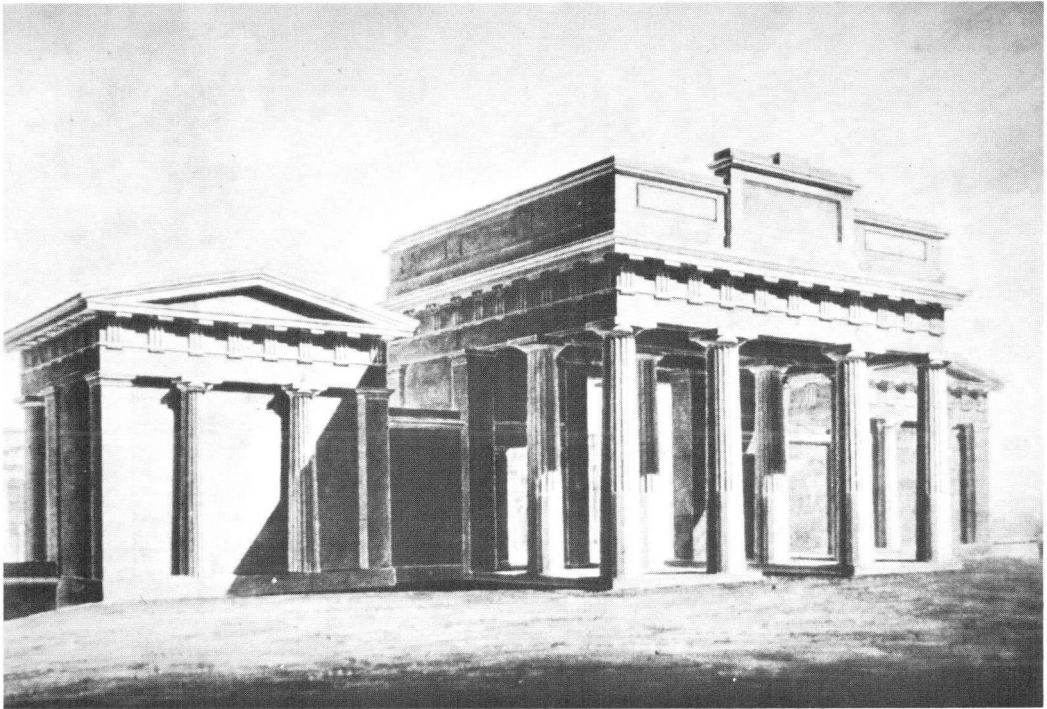


Plate 2 — Perspective of Propylaea, Chester Castle  
*Weaver Hall Museum, Northwich*

6A

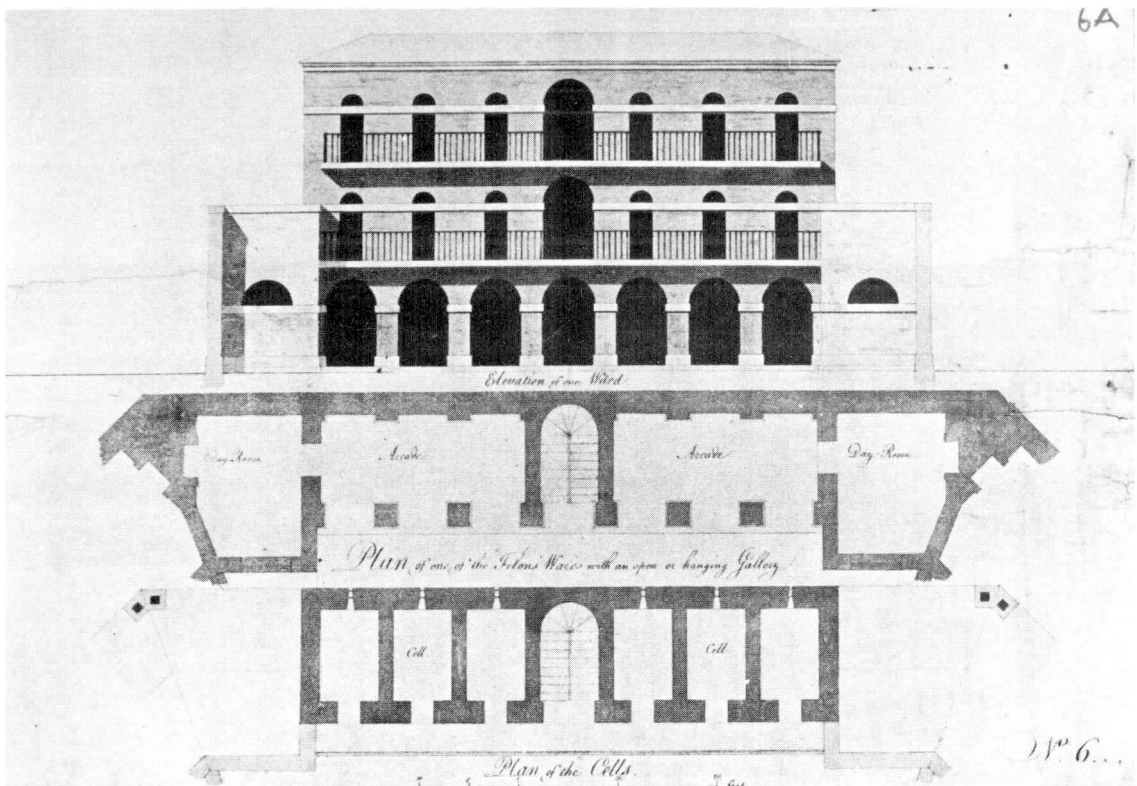


Plate 3 — Elevation and Plan of one of the Felons' Wards

Cheshire R.O., Ref. QAB 1/4

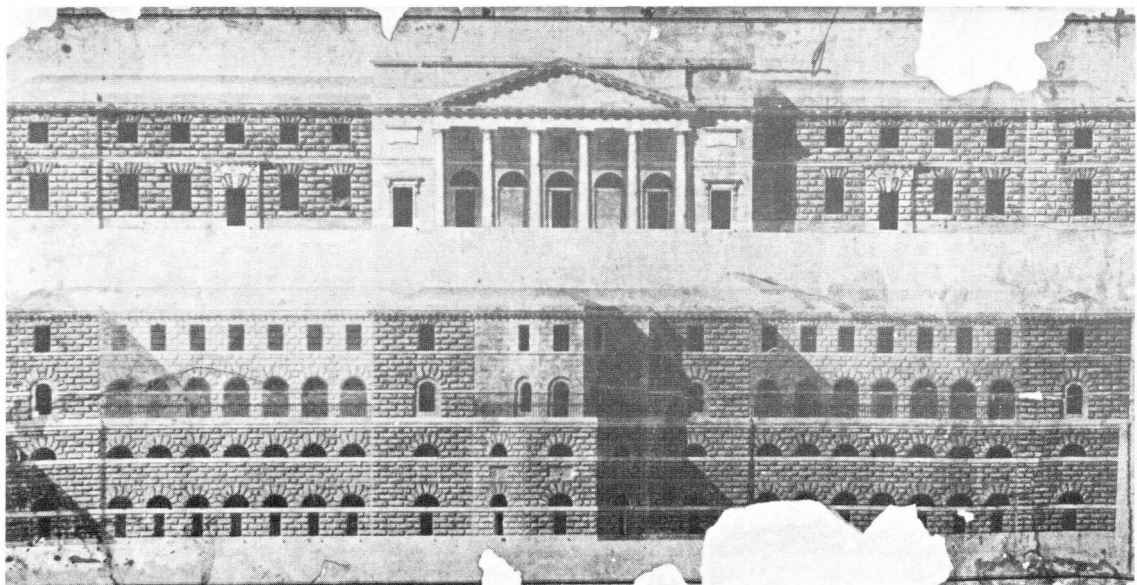


Plate 4 — Front and Rear Elevations of Shire Hall

Cheshire R.O., Ref. QAB 1/1

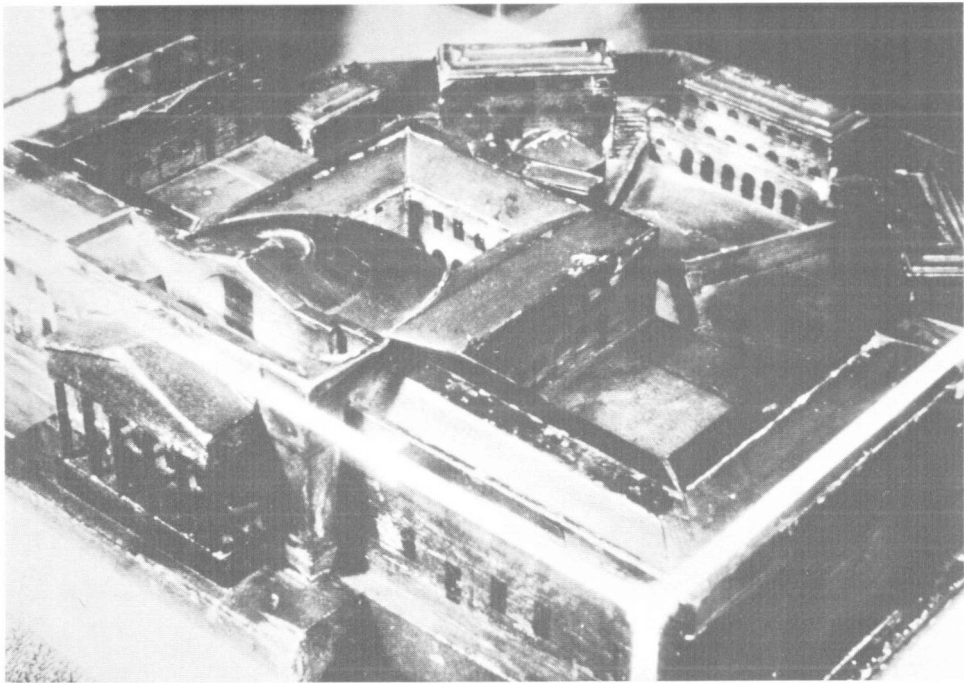


Plate 5 — Model of Chester Castle

*Weaver Hall Museum, Northwich*

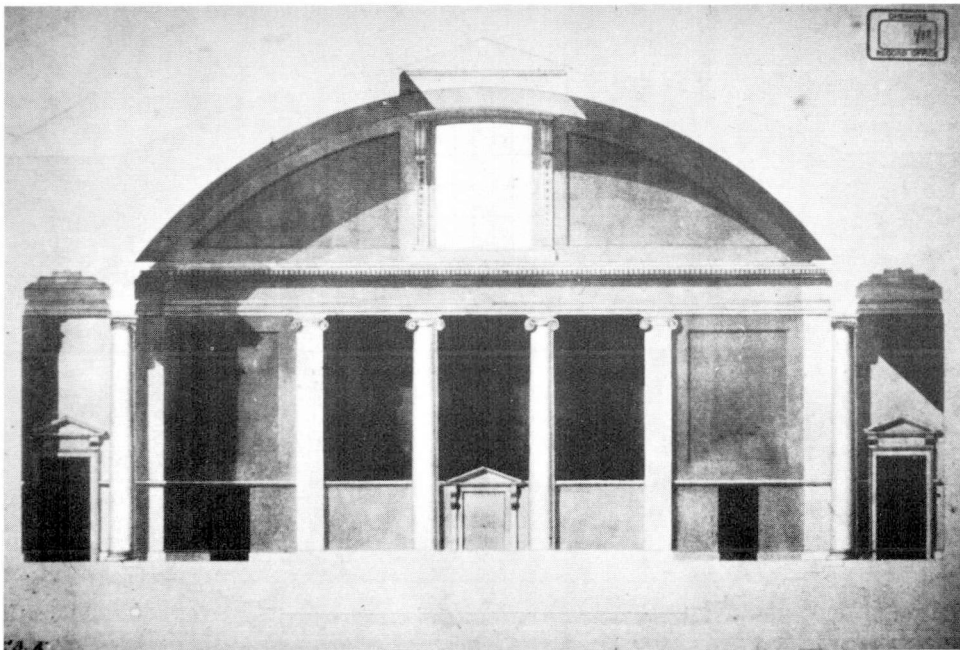


Plate 6 — Section of Interior of Shire Hall

*Cheshire R.O., Ref. QAB 1/37*

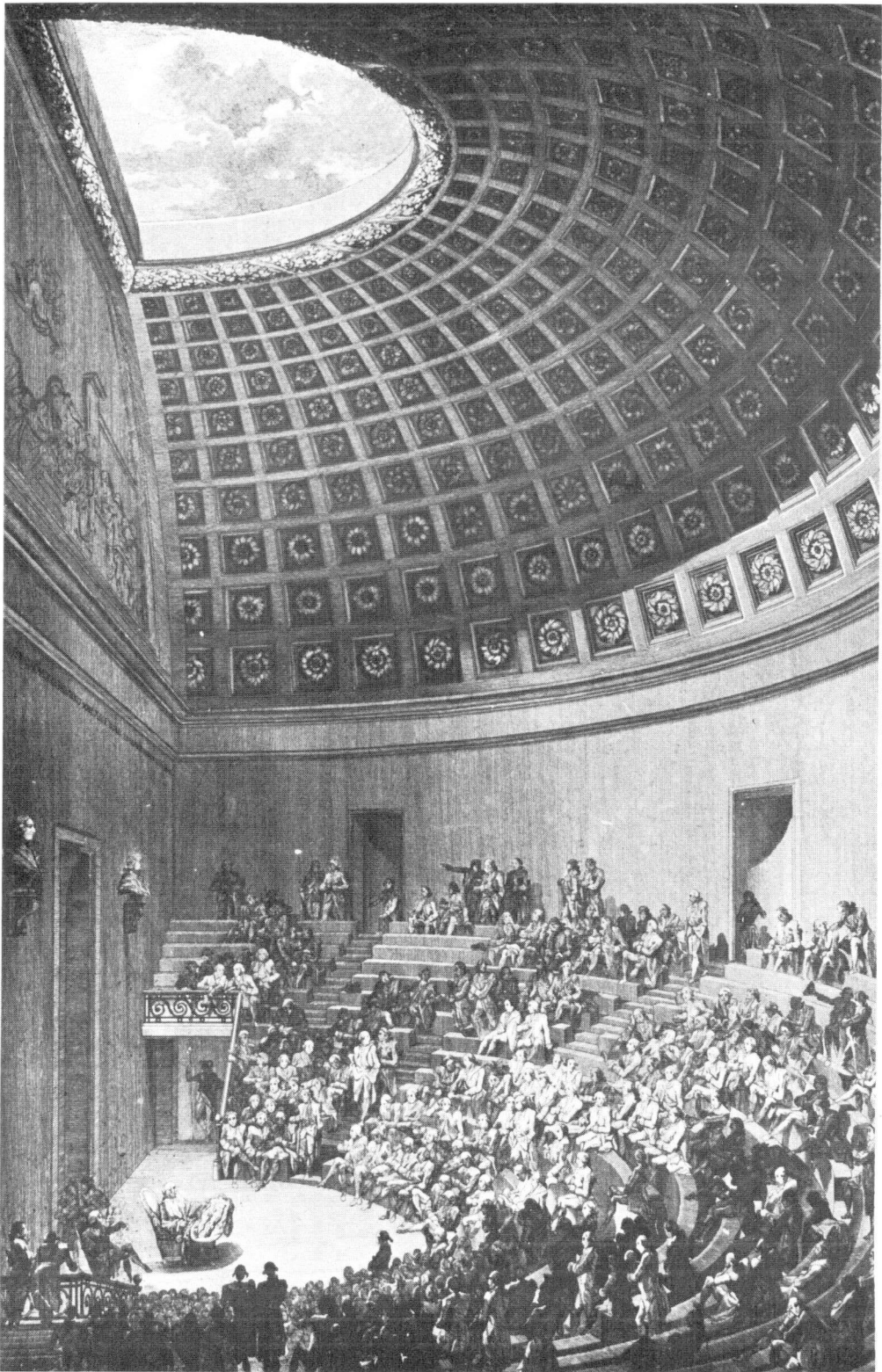


Plate 7 — Interior Elevation of Gondoin's Chirurgie, Paris

*Courtesy of Courtauld Institute, London*

Nicholson and Stuart and Revett.<sup>209</sup> Once again, there is a concern for power of stone and size: the Chester City Record Office holds a drawing in which the Propylaea of Chester Castle is compared in size with classical examples such as the 'Temple of Theseus from Nicholson . . . Temple of Minerva from Nicholson . . . The Propylaea from Nicholson . . . [and] Doric Portico from Nicholson'.<sup>210</sup> The Propylaea is both powerful and extravagant, housing, as it does, only an entrance lodge, and is reminiscent of Sir John Vanburgh and Nicholas Hawksmoor, as is the handling of the lintels of the Shire Hall wings, and the massing of the rear gaol elevation, with its juxtaposition of lunettes. There is a great feeling of load and support, enhanced by the fact that 'all the columns used in the gateway and the different buildings of the castle, amounting to 84, are each formed of a single stone'<sup>211</sup> and 'some of the beams [of the Propylaea] weigh as much as 4 to 5 tons each'.<sup>212</sup> In this, Thomas Harrison has not lost sight of the function: the central intercolumniation is obviously intended for carriages, and that on each side for pedestrians. The stopped flutes of the columns guard against traffic damage, as well as being a Pompeiian borrowing.

This regard to function is one of the keynotes of Chester Castle. Not only is this a splendid Neoclassical building, and one which combines diverse English and Continental influences, but it is also an outstanding solution to the problem of planning an 'enlightened' gaol. It is this combination of architectural quality and consideration to function that make it Thomas Harrison's masterpiece. It is not surprising that Cockerell exclaimed: 'Harrison has a spark divine'.<sup>213</sup>

<sup>209</sup> Chester City R.O., Harrison drawings, Refs. CR 73/4 f. 1, CR 83/16 ff. 1 and ff. 6-11 (Temple of Theseus); CR 73/5 ff. 1-2 (Portico of Philip); CR 73/13 f. 2, CR 73/14 ff. 1-3 and g. 5 (Propylaea and 'Capital at large of the columns of the gate at Chester').

<sup>210</sup> *ibid.*, Ref. CR 73/21.

<sup>211</sup> Hemingway, *History of Chester*, vol. 2, p. 179.

<sup>212</sup> *ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>213</sup> British Architectural Library, Cockerell's Diary, 9 Nov. 1823.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author's thanks are due to her supervisor, Mr. J. Archer of the School of Architecture, University of Manchester; Mr. B. C. Redwood, County Archivist, and Mr. F. I. Dunn, Principal Archivist, Cheshire Record Office; Miss Annette M. Kennett, City Archivist, Chester City Record Office; Ms. Catharine Rew of the Cheshire Museums Service, Weaver Hall Museum, Northwich; Mrs. Angela Mace and Mr. R. Elwall of the British Architectural Library, London; the R.I.B.A. Drawings Collection; the Courtauld Institute of Art (Conway Library), London; Mr. D. Huxley of Manchester Polytechnic Slide Library; Mr. P. Smith, and Mr. J. A. Ockrím.

## PHOTOGRAPHIC CREDITS

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