

# SIR GILBERT SCOTT'S CLASSICAL WORK IN BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

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George Gilbert Scott is well known as the architect of numerous Victorian church and cathedral restorations, and many new buildings in the Gothic manner,<sup>1</sup> with the Foreign Office in Downing Street, being the famous exception to his use of Gothic motifs to express his architectural conceptions. The story of "the Battle of the Styles" between 1859 and 1861, over the Foreign Office design, has been admirably related elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> with Scott representing the Gothic school, and Lord Palmerston leading the Classical group. Palmerston's final victory was a real triumph for not only did he persuade Scott to work in the Classical style, but he managed to obtain for the nation a monument of outstanding quality. The building we see today, although somewhat altered internally, still evokes pleasure in the way the spaces are handled, the Classical details are rich, but not overbearing, and its massing from St. James's Park is a masterly piece of townscape. It is a fine monument to the period in which it was built, and to its architect's ability.

Scott's ability to express himself so fluently in the Classical manner was a skill which he was not anxious at the time to display. Shortly beforehand he had attempted to assert his importance to the Gothic Revival movement by publishing, in 1857, his "Remarks on Secular and Domestic Architecture, present and future", which was a plea for the use of Gothic not only for churches and cathedrals but for all building types. It was a humiliating experience to him, that having so recently publicly proclaimed the universal virtues of Gothic, he was now forced to produce a Classical design for the most important building he had ever designed.

Scott's success was undoubtedly largely due to his personal background. Like most of his fellow Gothic protagonists he had studied Classical architecture during his pupilage, but unlike most of them he had personally designed and built a number of buildings in the style. His native county of Buckinghamshire<sup>3</sup> contains many buildings by Scott which can serve as examples of most aspects of his professional development during the whole of his career,<sup>4</sup> but it is the group of Classical, or late Georgian buildings, which are particularly relevant when considering the origins of the Foreign Office design. This

1. "The Builder" published lists, in April 1878, showing 757 works by Scott, and a list published by the R.I.B.A. shows 924 works by Scott alone, while David Cole (*Victorian Architecture* ed. Ferriday, 1964) says that Scott handled nearly a thousand jobs. I have been able to verify 887 and there are another 280 uncorroborated attributions. These figures include restorations, furniture and fittings, and minor alterations, so that the total of 887, includes 359 new buildings and 366 restorations.

2. See: Kenneth Clark: *The Gothic Revival, an Essay in the History of Taste* (London 1962) pp.168-171.

Charles L. Eastlake: *A History of the Gothic Revival*, (London 1872) pp.309-312.

H. S. Goodhart-Rendle: *English Architecture since the Regency* (London 1953) pp. 115-118.

3. Scott was born in the Parsonage at Gawcott on 13th July, 1811, where his father Thomas Scott was the first curate.

4. See appendix for Scott's work in Buckinghamshire.

group although very small provides a microcosm of Scott's Classical career from its inception, to its final flowering. They were built long before he employed the large staff, for which his office was known, at the height of his career,<sup>5</sup> and are therefore unquestionably his personal design. They show him as brilliant and completely committed exponent of the Classical style.

On the west side of Chesham High Street a tall elegant, red-brick facade is prominent among the neighbouring old inns and shop buildings. Its almost Regency grace is still discernable although a modern shop front has been inserted at ground-floor level. A stone inside the door is inscribed:

"HENRY RUMSEY SENR'  
LAID THIS STONE  
IN HIS SON'S HOUSE  
AUG 31 1834"

Scott in his *Recollections*,<sup>6</sup> describes his first two commissions, one was a rectory for his father who had been presented with the living of Wappenham in Northamptonshire in 1833, and of the other he says: "About this time, also, I was requested by my friend Henry Rumsey, who had succeeded to his father's practice at Chesham, to plan him a house there".

Early photographs<sup>7</sup> help to show the design of the house, before the shop front completely obliterated the whole ground floor of the facade, apart from the entrance door on the left side. The main portion of the elevation is a 30 foot square, originally crowned by a simple Tuscan cornice, three storeys high, and divided into four bays. The entrance door is treated separately in a blank bay recessed back from the main portion of the facade. The whole building is constructed of a small, hard, uniform dark-red brick, quite untypical of the area, with a Portland Stone string course at first-floor window-cill level. Above the string course the two differing floors of well-proportioned windows relate well to each other, and to the wall-space in which they are set. Over each of the windows are flat arches of rubbed bricks, with the extremities of each arch terminating on a line produced from the diagonals of the window. On the ground floor it appears that there was range of semi-circular headed windows, set back from the wall-plane of the facade by semi-circular relieving arches, giving a useful modelling to that portion of the building most readily discernable in the narrow street. A brick plinth provided a solid base line to the composition, which with the powerful ground-floor arcade treatment seems to imply the solid weight of the house. Scott's abiding interest in structure could perhaps be expressing itself here. The entrance door was linked to the main composition by a plain string-course on the line of the springing of the window arches, which passed between the door head and its fan-light and there develops into a full classical architrave. The lead fanlight is a simple nine petal design, with every third spoke co-inciding with spokes of the glazing of the ground floor windows. Internally, although considerably altered, a large room on the first floor, at the rear, contains an elegant marble fireplace surround, and a French window with margin lights.

5. When Sir Thomas Graham Jackson joined Scott's office in 1858 he says: "Scott's office was a very large one. Counting pupils, salaried assistants, and clerks I think we were twenty-seven in all." (B.H. Jackson: *Recollections of Thomas Graham Jackson 1835-1925*, (London 1950) p.58

6. Sir George Gilbert Scott R.A.: *Personal and Professional Recollections*, edited by his son G. Gilbert Scott F.S.A., London 1879, pp.74-5

7. In the Buckinghamshire Record Office, County Offices, Aylesbury.

While Scott was serving his articles with an architect in the City<sup>8</sup> he had met a fellow-pupil, William Bonythorn Moffatt (1812-87), the son of a builder. Scott appointed Moffatt to be the Clerk of Works on Rumsey's house and Moffatt's father provided most of the joinery work from London. The joinery details of the windows, particularly, have the superb delicacy of the late Regency, and seem to reflect a London production, rather than local craftsmanship. Five years later Moffatt entered into a formal partnership with Scott, which lasted until 1845.

Scott had helped<sup>9</sup> his friend Sampson Kempthorne, the architect to the Poor Law Commissioners,<sup>10</sup> on the designs for the new union workhouses, required under the Poor Law Amendment Act, and after the death of his father in 1835, he decided to set-up in practice on his own account,<sup>11</sup> using the knowledge gained while with Kempthorne. By "a strenuous canvas"<sup>12</sup> of the *Guardians* around his old home at Gawcott, he received commissions for the designs of four workhouses in the area. They were at Buckingham, Winslow, Northampton and Towcester, and all survive except Buckingham which was demolished a few years ago. Northampton is now St. Edmunds Hospital, and considerably altered. Towcester is small and plain, and now a council depot. Winslow, now the hospital, is the best remaining example in the group, both in architectural quality and condition.

In general layout, Winslow, like Buckingham and Northampton conforms to the standard plans for workhouses produced by Kempthorne, and published in the Poor Law Commissioners Annual Reports of 1835 and 1836. The master's accommodation was in an octagonal central block with the men and women's wings radiating off it from opposite sides. The children were in a central wing at the end of which was the reception block. This reception block at Winslow is architecturally the most rewarding part of the composition, and seems unaltered externally, apart from metal casements in the second floor windows. It is three storeys high, five bays wide, the three middle bays forming a canted projection, and built of a bright red uniform brick with slate roof. Here can be seen a remarkable affinity to the Chesham house, for although the wall plane projects forward in the centre of the block, the actual treatment of the wall surface is almost identical to the Chesham house. The two ranges of differently proportioned first and second floor windows, and the arcaded ground floor, with its semi-circular relieving arches, are features used before at Chesham. Even the treatment to the entrance door reflects Rumsey's house, with the door and fanlight separated by a Classical architrave on the line of the window springing, and the fanlight itself is the same pattern, although this time it is divided into seven petals instead of the nine at Chesham. The main difference between the two facades is the country craftsmanship used at Winslow, compared with the metropolitan sophistication of the builders at Chesham.

Scott's other surviving Classical building in Buckinghamshire is the Rectory at Weston

8. James Edmeston of Salvador House, White Hart Court, Bishopsgate. For further details see H.M. Colvin: *Biographical Dictionary of English Architects 1660-1840* (London 1964) p.189.

9. Scott's *Recollections* p.75.

10. For further details on Kempthorne see Colvin p. 338.

11. Between 1832 and 1834 Scott was an assistant to Henry Roberts (See Colvin p. 504) working on the Classical Fishmongers Hall next to London Bridge. His first office was in the same building as Kempthorne, Carlton Chambers, Regent Street. At the end of 1838 he moved to 20 Spring Gardens (later numbered 31) where he remained for the rest of his career.

12. *Recollections* p. 78.



PLATE 1. 16 High Street, Chesham before recent alterations.

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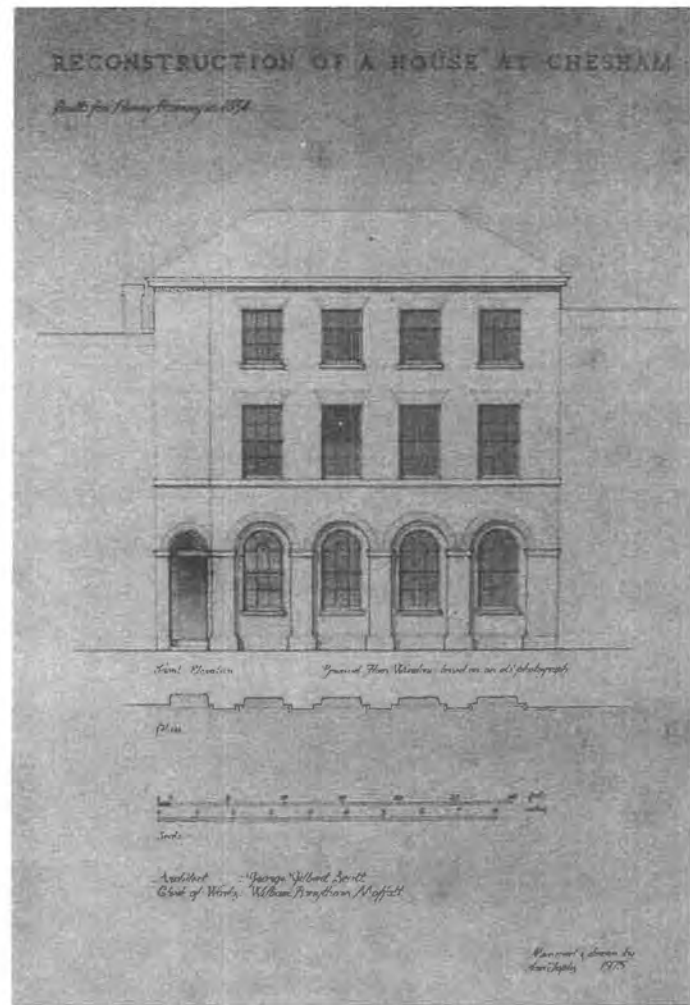


PLATE 2. 16 High Street, Chesham. Reconstruction of the original design.

Photo Mrs. M. Farneil  
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PLATE 3. Winslow Hospital, formerly the Workhouse.

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PLATE 4. Weston Turville Rectory.

Photo Mrs. M. Farnell  
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Turville, which, according to plans dated 8th February 1838, was built for the Rev. Arther Isham.<sup>13</sup> This is a fine apparently unaltered house of moulded red brick, square knapped flints, laid in courses, and a low pitched slate roof. It is still uncompromisingly Classical, both in spirit and in its elements, but assembled in an imaginative manner, producing a building of interest and quality. The house consists of a two storied symmetrical block with a service wing projecting on the west side. The central bay of the three bay main block projects forward to form an entrance porch with a room over. Very little affinity in detailed design can be seen with the Chesham and Winslow designs, except for the ubiquitous petal fanlight over the doorway, which is now divided into 13 sections. A greater affinity can be seen with the later Classical workhouses Scott had just produced, such as Flax Bourton, Somerset, and Tavistock,<sup>14</sup> where the main entrance is an arch with rusticated quoins, surmounted by a pediment. At Weston Turville moulded red brick quoins are used throughout, and the entrance is through an arch of rusticated brickwork. The small pediment crowing the central projection seems to echo the small pediments crowning the central portion of the later workhouses.

About this time Scott began to experiment with different styles of architecture, such as the church for his uncle at Flaunden in the Early English style, or Amersham Workhouse, in the Elizabethan style, or the warders house at Buckingham Old Gaol in a castle style. Amersham used the same materials as Weston Turville and Flaunden Church, and followed the same plan form as used at Flax Bourton and Tavistock. Scott soon became interested in the Gothic Revival and never again did he handle Classical elements in such an assured way as at Weston Turville, until he designed the Foreign Office, twenty-five years and several hundred jobs later, when he was compelled to produce a building in a style which he states he "had once understood pretty intimately", and "had allowed to grow rusty by twenty years neglect".<sup>15</sup> The three examples of his work in Buckinghamshire, examined, provide a clear indication of that intimacy, and show that Scott was more than a mere competent practioner of the Classical style. He was a Classical architect of real merit.

13. These are in the Rectory.

14. Flax Bourton Workhouse is now Farleigh Hospital, Avon, and Tavistock Workhouse has been converted into flats and called Russell Court.

15. Recollections p. 199.

## APPENDIX

### WORK BY SIR GILBERT SCOTT IN BUCKINGHAMSHIRE

AMERSHAM	Workhouse (now hospital)	1838
ASTON SANDFORD	Restoration of St. Michael's Church House	1877-78
AYLESBURY	Restoration of St. Mary's Church	1850-69
BLEDLOW	Restoration of Holy Trinity Church	1876-77
BUCKINGHAM	Restoration of the Church of St. Peter & St. Paul	1862-77
	Restoration of the Chantry Chapel of St. John	1875
	Workhouse (now demolished)	1835
	Gaoler's House added to the Old Gaol	1839
CHESHAM	Restoration of St. Mary's Church	1868-69
	House (16, High St.)	1834
CHETWODE	Restoration of the Church of St. Nicolas and St. Mary House (now demolished)	1868
DINTON	Vicarage	
EAST CLAYDON	Restoration of St. Mary's Church	1871
EDGCOTT	Restoration & extension to St. Michael's Church	1875
FLEET MARSTON	Restoration of St. Mary's Church	1868-69
GRANBOROUGH	Restoration of St. John's Church	1880-81*
GREAT HORWOOD	Restoration of St. James's Church	1873-74
HILLESDEN	Restoration of All Saints Church	1874-75
	Vicarage	1870-71
IVER	Restoration & extension to St. Peter's Church	1846-48
LATIMER	Extensions to St. Mary's Church	1867
MARLOW	Restoration of All Saints Church	1873
	Holy Trinity Church	1852
MIDDLE CLAYDON	Restoration of All Saints Church	1871
OLNEY	Restoration of St. Peter's Church	1870-77
PADBURY	Restoration of St. Mary's Church	1882*
SHALSTONE	Restoration of St. Edward's Church	1862
STEEPLE CLAYDON	Restoration of St. Michael's Church	1845 & 1875
STONY STRATFORD	St. Mary the Virgin's Church	1863-65
	St. Mary's Schools	1863-64
TAPLOW	Former Church of St. Nicholas (Chancel)	1868
TWYFORD	Restoration of the Church of the Assumption	1875
WESTON TURVILLE	Rectory	1838
WING	Restoration of All Saints Church	1850
WINSLOW	Workhouse (now hospital)	1835

\* Work designed by Scott but executed after his death.