The Architects of All Saints Church, Oxford

By H. M. COLVIN

IT is often said that the eighteenth century was the age of the amateur, and in the architectural sphere at least the statement finds its justification in the part played by the Earls of Burlington and Pembroke in moulding the taste of the aristocracy. The universities too had their amateur architects. In Cambridge Sir James Burrough had a hand in almost all the building projects of the mid-eighteenth century, and in Oxford his place was taken by Dean Aldrich and Dr. George Clarke. The materials for a life of Dr. Clarke are comparatively extensive, but it is doubtful whether Aldrich's place in the architectural history of Oxford will ever be precisely determined.[1] By ordering the destruction of his personal papers after his death he ensured that the extent of his building activities should remain for ever in some degree of obscurity. For in Oxford much could be settled by informal discussion that was never recorded in college archives, and it was only among his private papers that the evidence of Aldrich's career as an architect might have been preserved. And so his share in the design of Trinity College Chapel remains ambiguous ; his alleged responsibility for the Fellows' Building at Corpus is still uncertain ; and the only building of which he can unquestionably be regarded as the architect is the Peckwater Quadrangle in his own college of Christ Church. There remains All Saints Church, with which his name has always been connected, but whose architectural history has not hitherto been properly investigated.

It was on 8 March 1699/1700 that the spire of the medieval church collapsed, so injuring in its fall the rest of the structure that total rebuilding was deemed to be necessary. An appeal for £4,800 was launched, partly by means of a Brief, partly by soliciting private subscriptions, and a body of Trustees was appointed to administer the funds so raised.[2] One of them was the Dean of Christ Church ; the others were the Vice-Chancellor and Mayor for the time being, the Provost of Queen's (Dr. Halton), the Rector of Lincoln (Dr. Adams), Thomas Rowney, Esqr., and the Recorder. Later they were

---

[1] Aldrich's career as an architect is touched on by E. F. A. Suttle, ' Henry Aldrich ', *Oxoniensia*, v (1940), and discussed in greater detail by W. G. Hiscock in *A Christ Church Miscellany* (1946). For Trinity College see *Wren Society*, vol. v. It should be noted that the attribution of the Fellows' Building at Corpus to Aldrich first occurs in Dallaway's edition (1827) of Walpole's *Anecdotes of Painting*, but does not appear in Walpole's original text.

[2] Vestry Minutes, 2 April 1700.

joined by Dr. Charlett, the Master of University College. No record of their deliberations has been preserved, but one of their first decisions must have been to settle the design upon which the church was to be rebuilt, and to have it engraved by John Sturt for circulation to ' the Nobility, Gentry and Clergy and to all other Pious and well disposed Persons '. Later on a smaller version of the engraving was commissioned from Michael Burghers and distributed in the same way.[3] The plan and elevation from which Sturt's engraving was made is preserved among the Duke of Portland's manuscripts at Welbeck Abbey, and is here reproduced by His Grace's kind permission (PL. V).[4] Unfortunately the name of the architect appears neither on the drawing nor on the engraving. But there is no reason to doubt that the design was due to Aldrich. Peshall, in his *History of Oxford* (1773), states definitely that he ' designed the present most elegant and noble structure ', and although his testimony is not quite contemporary, he is unlikely to have been mistaken in his information. As a Trustee, Aldrich was bound to be consulted, and it was only natural that his colleagues should have turned for a design to one who had the reputation of being ' an able judge in architecture '.

The church which the Trustees proposed to build was strictly suited to the Church of England services of the eighteenth century, being simply a rectangle without any suggestion of a chancel. The rectangle was, it is true, arranged with its longer axis from east to west, but this orientation was almost negatived by the unbroken range of windows on all four sides except the west, and by the placing of the doorways in the middle of the north and south walls. The centrality of the southern entrance was further emphasized by a handsome Corinthian portico facing the High Street. Above the main order there was to be an attic storey, included for show rather than because of structural necessity, for there was of course no upper floor to light, and the attic windows would have been too high up to give light to internal galleries. In any case, no such galleries were contemplated, for the Corinthian Order of the exterior was duplicated in the interior, and galleries would have cut across both the pilasters and the windows in a most unsightly fashion.

The repetition of the Corinthian Order in the interior is perhaps the least satisfactory feature of Aldrich's design. The engraved plan shows that it was to have been exact : but in execution compound fluted pilasters were used in the interior instead of plain ones in pairs, and in this way the uncomfortable sensation that the church had been turned outside in was avoided. Nevertheless the use of almost the same elevation for the exterior and the

[3] There are copies of both in the Bodleian volume, G. A. Oxon. a.69. The copper-plate of the Burghers engraving is among the parish records.

[4] I am indebted to Mr. Francis Needham, Librarian at Welbeck, for kindly depositing the drawing in the Bodleian Library for my use.

interior of the same building suggests a certain lack of inventiveness such as is also apparent in Peckwater Quadrangle, where, faced with the problem of designing a three-sided court, Aldrich solved it by the simple but too obvious expedient of repeating the same façade three times over without any attempt at creating a unified composition. In short, Aldrich's two best-authenticated designs have just those faults which might be expected in an amateur architect who knew all about the Orders (upon which he was to write a treatise),[5] but who had very little notion of planning in three dimensions. In this respect All Saints compares unfavourably with the churches erected in London under the Act of 1711, but the comparison is hardly fair, for at the time Aldrich was designing All Saints, the ' Fifty New Churches ' had not yet been built, and it was with Wren's City churches that he must have been familiar, and which he was attempting to emulate in Oxford. The body of All Saints may, indeed, be regarded as an academic version of a Wren church of the simpler type, ' corrected ' by the rigid application of an Order in order to comply with Aldrich's more strictly classical ideas. It is, however, in his design for the proposed steeple that Aldrich's debt to Wren is most clearly apparent. For it is, as Mr. Summerson has pointed out,[6] a much simplified version of Bow steeple, and like its prototype, it is free-standing. Had it been built in London there would have been no difficulty in accepting it as one of the later Wren steeples.

But the engraved design was not to be carried out without several modifications. The altered treatment of the internal pilasters was one. Another was the placing of the entrances at the west end of the lateral walls instead of in the middle, and the duplication of the portico on the north side. Most important of all were the alterations in the design of the steeple, for in the existing building the drum of the lantern has been heightened, the broken entablature of Aldrich's design has been replaced by a continuous architrave, frieze and cornice, the design of the balustrade has been changed, and the spire is no longer pierced by four circular openings in each facet (PL. VII, A).

How did Aldrich's original design come to be thus altered ? So far as the body of the church is concerned, we do not know : it may be that Aldrich himself had second thoughts, as architects (especially amateur ones) often do.[7] But the parish records make it clear that he was not responsible for the final design of the steeple. The body of the church, including the tower, was

---

[5] Published posthumously as *Elementa Architecturae Civilis* (1750).

[6] *Architecture in Britain 1530-1830* (1953), p. 184.

[7] It should be noted that the altered position of the entrances is already indicated in Burghers' engraving made not long after 1700. The stone for the columns of the southern portico, valued at £30 15s., was given by Edward Strong, a well-known London mason and quarry-owner at Taynton.

built between 1706 and 1709, when the churchwardens paid Mr. Frogley the joiner £17-9-0 ' towards seating the church '.[8] The interior must have been fitted up for worship by 1711, when Bartholomew Peisley received £1-16-0 for re-erecting the seventeenth-century effigy of Alderman Levinz. Then the money ran out, and nothing more was done until October 1718, when the Vestry Minutes record that Messrs. Townesend and Peisley, ' the undertakers of the work ', were prepared ' to go on and finish the steeple ' if the parish would guarantee to pay them £50 within the next two years.[9] The parishioners agreed, and by 1720 the steeple was completed as we know it today.

Meanwhile Aldrich had died in 1710, and the parishioners had evidently consulted Nicholas Hawksmoor, who was already well-known in Oxford for his work at Blenheim, and his designs for Queen's, All Souls, and other colleges. There is no mention of Hawksmoor (or, indeed, of any other architect) in the parish records, but it is clear that he was consulted, for in the Bodleian Library there is a design by him for completing the steeple[10] (PL. VI). Unfortunately the date has been torn away, but there can be little doubt that the drawing belongs to the period between the completion of the church in c. 1710 and the decision to finish the steeple in 1718. It is a characteristic example of Hawksmoor's draughtsmanship, and represents a variation on the dome and peristyle theme which he was later to use in his designs for the Radcliffe Library and the Castle Howard Mausoleum.

Hawksmoor's design was not adopted : evidently the parishioners were not willing to depart so radically from the steeple with whose silhouette they had for so long been familiar from Sturt's and Burghers' engravings. Instead, a compromise design was worked out, incorporating features from both Aldrich and Hawksmoor. The drum was heightened and pierced by two rows of openings instead of one ; the break was taken out of the entablature to give it the firm outline shown in Hawksmoor's sketch ; an openwork parapet on Hawksmoor's favourite guilloche pattern was substituted for the conventional balustrading proposed by Aldrich ; and the spire was deprived of its circular openings.

[8] Churchwardens' Accounts, *sub anno*. These do not contain the building accounts for the structure of the church, which were evidently kept by the Trustees.

[9] The fifty pounds did not, of course, represent the total cost of the work to be done, and was merely a payment on account. The Bishop of Durham gave £200 ' for the Tower ' in August 1717, and in 1720 Townesend was paid £35 merely for ' wetharslating the Bell loft windows '.

[10] MS. Top. Oxon. a.48, f.74. I am indebted to Miss G. Bondi for kindly drawing my attention to the existence of this drawing. On the back of the copy of Sturt's engraving in G.A. Oxon. a.69 there is a contemporary inscription ' All Souls (*sic*) at Oxford with a proposall for a Tower by Nicholas Hawkesmoor Esqr.'. Although it seems unlikely that Hawksmoor had anything to do with the original design as engraved by Sturt, the endorsement may be regarded as confirmatory evidence that he was concerned in the design of the spire as built.

The result was a bolder and a stronger design than the rather finicky one originally proposed, and whatever architectural defects may be discovered in the body of the church, there are few who will deny that among the Gothic spires of Oxford the steeple of All Saints stands as a worthy representative of the classical tradition in English architecture.
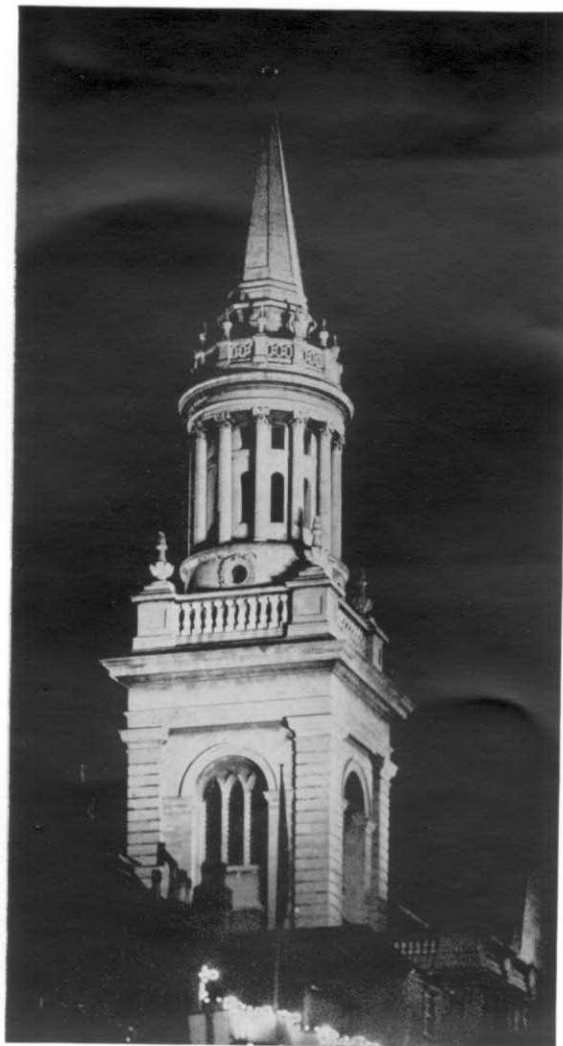
PLATE V
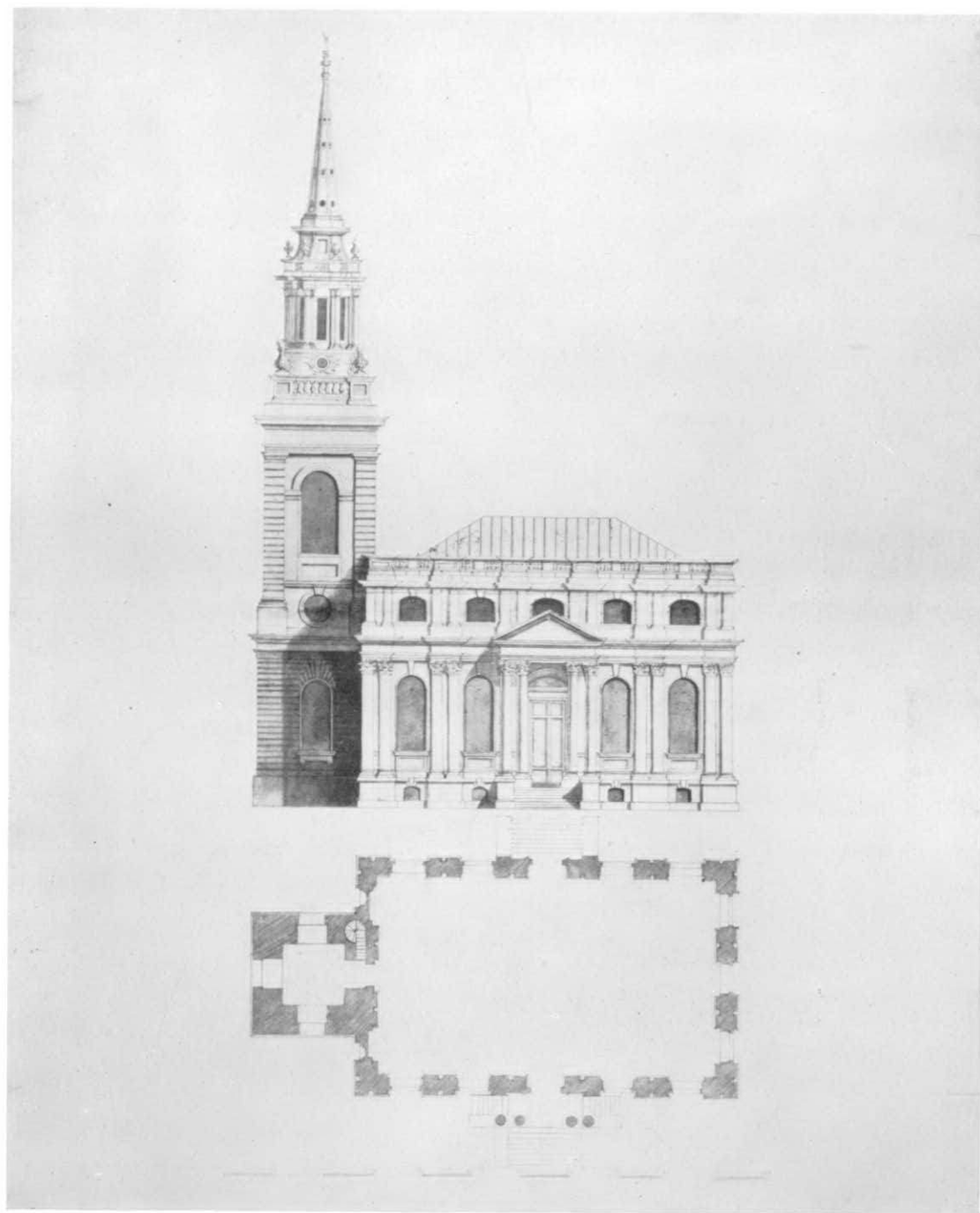
ALL SAINTS CHURCH, OXFORD: ALDRICH'S ORIGINAL DESIGN *c.* 1700

(Duke of Portland, Welbeck Abbey)

PLATE VI
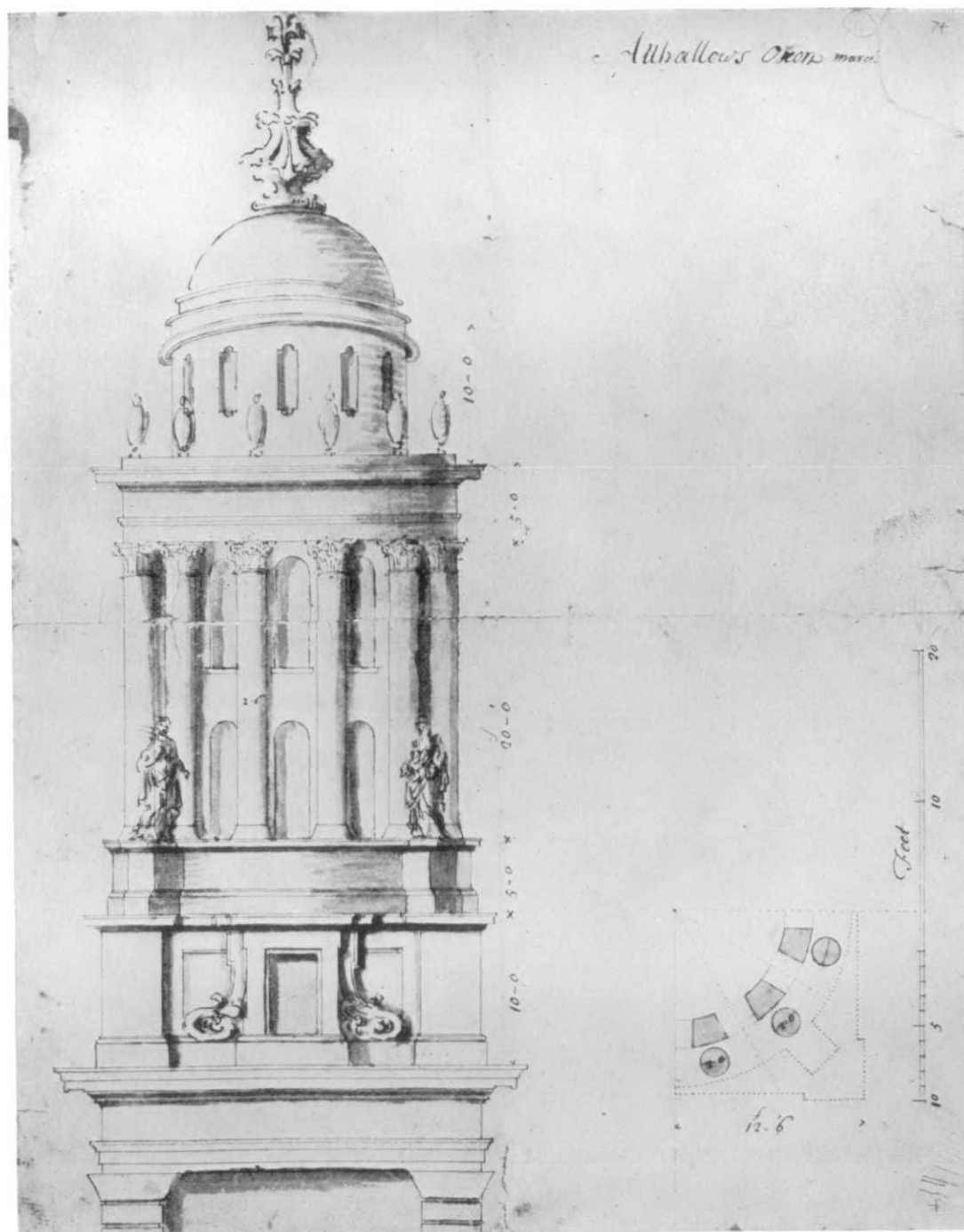
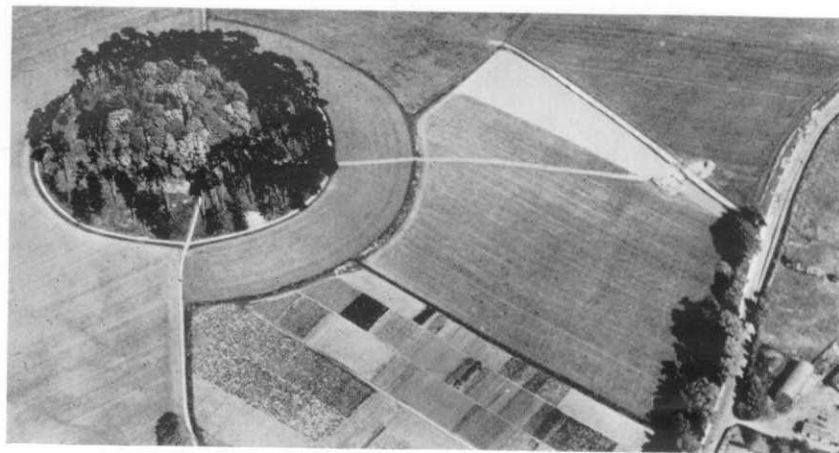ALL SAINTS CHURCH, OXFORD: HAWKSMOOR'S DESIGN FOR THE STEEPLE, *c.* 1715
(Bodleian, MS. Top. Oxon. a. 48, f. 74)

COLVIN, ARCHITECTS OF ALL SAINTS CHURCH, OXFORD

PLATE VII

A

A. ALL SAINTS CHURCH, OXFORD:
THE STEEPLE AS COMPLETED IN 1720

B

B. FARINGDON, BERKS.
Air-photograph showing semi-circle of marks in field between Faringdon Clump and the road (p. 117)

Ph.: the late G. W. G. Allen