

ELIZABETH WILBRAHAM AT WINDSOR & WILLIAMSBURG by John Fitzhugh Millar

Note: much of this is recent scholarship, and does not necessarily agree with long-held beliefs. The late John Cornforth asked me in 1959 to research and write about the architectural career of Elizabeth Wilbraham.

When I was a fourteen-year-old student more than sixty years ago at famous Charterhouse School at Godalming, Surrey, I stumbled across the work of a mystery architect who designed in the style of Christopher Wren. With help from leading British architectural historians John Cornforth and Giles Worsley, I found that the mystery architect was Elizabeth Mytton Lady Thomas Wilbraham (1632-1705) – the world's first woman architect. If she had been a man, she would possibly be more famous than Christopher Wren, who was in fact her star pupil. Elizabeth had been trained in quick succession during her year-long honeymoon at age 19 by Pieter Post in Amsterdam, Baldassare Longhena in Venice, and Gian-Lorenzo Bernini in Rome, and on her trip to Italy she also stopped to be greatly influenced by the 1536 Italian-designed Stadtresidenz at Landshut, Germany, which gave her the pattern for her design for the Queen's Gallery at Somerset House, London. She had been told by architect Inigo Jones (and everyone else) that it was illegal under English law for women to practice architecture, so she was very careful not to leave behind any piece of documentary paper that could serve to convict her. That is why she is so little-known today, and many of her buildings are falsely attributed to others, including Wren. As it happened, there was no statute on the books outlawing women as architects, but because everyone thought there was, it had just the same effect as if it were true.

She managed to be asked by Charles II to design a number of important buildings, including Winchester Palace, and the 1662 Queen's Gallery addition to Somerset House for Charles' mother, the French-born Henriette-Marie. That building contained the first ever sash windows in the British Isles, which means that she introduced the sash window to Britain, although no one really knows in which country the idea originated. That building also had England's first Italian-style chimneys, which is proof that its designer had visited Italy and Landshut. Elizabeth Wilbraham designed important buildings in England (think Belton, Lincolnshire, Greenwich Palace, and the original unaltered Stowe House, Buckinghamshire), Scotland (think Holyroodhouse Palace, Edinburgh, and Kinross House), Wales (think Tredegar, Newport, and Chirk Castle, Clwyd), and Ireland (think Kilkenny Castle Gateway and ruined Eyrecourt Castle), as well as North America and India; in India, she designed Saint Thomas' Church (now cathedral) in Mumbai. She also designed about half of "Wren's" London churches, including the Bernini-style St. Mary Aldermanbury, which was beautifully re-erected as the chapel for Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri after having received a direct hit from German incendiary bombs in the Second World War. Elizabeth designed more than thirty iconic staircase balustrades (and altar rails) with swirls of carved leaves and fruit, one example of which from Cassiobury Park House, Hertfordshire, can now be seen at the Metropolitan Museum of New York City; the earliest, from Eyrecourt Castle, Ireland (1654) has never been taken out of storage at the Detroit Institute of Arts, and the next earliest is at Lamport Hall, Northamptonshire, 1656. The best-known of these balustrades is at Sudbury Hall, Derbyshire. Sir Peter Lely painted an engaging portrait of Wilbraham, on display at her former house, Weston Park, Staffordshire.

Many of Wilbraham's buildings have been attributed to other people, the most important of whom are John Webb, Sir Christopher Wren, Nicholas Hawksmoor (a handful), Henry Bell, Hugh May, Sir Roger Pratt, William Winde, Sir William Bruce, James Smith, Edward Jerman, William Samwell, and Dean Henry Aldrich, to name the most important. One document survives, showing that Wilbraham was the architect of the substantial additions to Chirk Castle, Clwyd, Wales, but influential architectural historian Richard Hewlings chose to ignore that in his gratuitous writings that attempted to show that she was never an architect (but the only sure attribution to William Taylor, who he said was the real architect, Holy Trinity Church, Minsterley, Shropshire, is so dreadful that he could never have designed the other Wilbraham buildings!).

One of the many public buildings that Elizabeth Wilbraham was asked to design in the 1680s was the Guildhall or Town Hall at Windsor. The intention was that the ground floor of the building should serve as the area's produce market, surrounded by an elegant arcade, as shown in an early painting (much later, the arches were replaced by columns that look rather out of place). The large room upstairs over the market was a multi-purpose room, where the town council could meet, and where the courts could hold sessions, and where English Country Dance assemblies and concerts or even small theatrical plays could be held. Wilbraham apparently calculated carefully how strong the floor timbers needed to be in order to support the upstairs room for any conceivable activities to be held there.

Since Wilbraham could not be seen to be supervising construction, she arranged to place in overall charge of the project Sir Thomas Fitch of London, whom she had engaged on several previous occasions (and she in turn had designed a handsome mansion for him on the Thames, not far from the outflow of the River Fleet). Most people believed that Fitch had been the architect of the building, because he had been the one to present Elizabeth's plans to the city authorities. Construction began in 1687. When Fitch unfortunately died in 1689, the building was approximately 95% complete. However, the city fathers panicked when they learned of Fitch's death. They approached Sir Christopher Wren and told him that since he had been born in Windsor, he owed it to the city to see the construction through to the end.

Wren was rather annoyed, and pointed out that the workmen all knew what they were supposed to do in order to finish it; that he knew the architect well and had complete confidence in the architect's abilities. Then it transpired that the city fathers were actually terrified lest the upper room crash through down into the market below, and all of the platitudes that Wren could muster would not assuage them. They ordered Wren to place eight columns in the market under the middle of the upper room, so he did just as they demanded. The cost of the columns was met by omitting the planned cupola over the roof that would have contained a public clock and a bell.

However, in the nineteenth century, workmen were hired to paint the columns. One of the painters, standing near the top of his ladder, is reported to have exclaimed, "ere! Look at this! There's a two-inch gap between the tops of the columns and the underside of the upper room!" Of course, as soon as they learned about the gaps, the authorities ordered the gaps to be filled in with wedges and tiles, which is how matters stand today. So, Wren and Wilbraham had the last laugh, although of course they were no longer alive to watch the punch-line unfold.

Alas, the original building with its arcade was a lot more attractive than the present altered

building with its columns all around, but since it is a Grade-I Listed Building it is doubtful that permission could ever be obtained to return it to the original appearance as laid out in a period painting. HRH Prince Charles married Camilla in the building in 2005, so it is hypothetically possible that the architecturally sensitive King Charles III can be persuaded to lend his authority towards a complete restoration, but someone who knows him well will have to bring it to his attention.

Another Wilbraham-Wren connection involves Williamsburg, Virginia. A fabulous haul of gold had been brought back from the Pacific coast of South America in 1687-8 by the privateer/ pirate ship *Batchelors Delight* (crewed almost entirely by sixty young graduates of Oxford and Cambridge!). Three of the ship's officers were tried for piracy in London, but the judge had to exclude the prosecution's evidence. He therefore proposed to the defendants that he would free them if they contributed half their treasure to the court. The contribution came to about \$13 million in today's money, and the court turned it over to Queen Mary. Mary stated that the officers had been arrested in Virginia, which was quite a coincidence: a delegation from Virginia had recently asked her for enough money to found a college, so she turned the money over to the Virginia delegation. Therefore, the College of William & Mary was founded on pirate loot, a claim which no other college in the world can match!

Once they had the money, the Virginia delegation went to Wren to ask him to design their college. Wren was too busy, but he promised to have the work done. The work was done by none other than Elizabeth Wilbraham. Wren told her that she had already designed colleges at Oxford, Cambridge, and London, where buildings were required to be shoehorned in between existing buildings. The college in Virginia would be on a green-field site, so it should be a piece of cake.

Wilbraham designed a handsome octagonal building arranged around an arcaded courtyard, and containing three classical domes (there were no domes at all in Oxford or Cambridge at that time). The largest dome, which was to stand over the large lecture theatre, was almost an exact copy of the dome built by Le Vau at the College des Quatre Nations in 1660 on the Left Bank in Paris, near Notre Dame; Wilbraham would have seen it when she escorted Wren to Paris in 1664 to introduce him to her teacher Bernini, who was visiting from Rome. Incidentally, while she was in Paris, she visited the LeVau-designed Chateau of Vaux-le-Vicomte, where she saw some details that she used elsewhere. The Virginia delegation was very impressed when Wren handed them Wilbraham's design, and they asked a herald at the College of Arms to draw them a shield to represent the new college, showing the new building, and that is the shield of the College of William & Mary today.

When the delegation returned to Virginia, they handed the plans to the local builders and told them to start building. The builders replied that Virginia was the frontier, and it was impossible to construct domes on the frontier; it was even impossible to construct octagonal corners, so they told the delegation to ask Wren to design them something that they could actually build. Wren was still too busy, so he turned that job over to Wilbraham. Therefore, the so-called Wren building of 1693, the oldest college building in North America, was designed by Wilbraham, but it is now of course too late to rename it the Wilbraham Building! Once the College had been established, Governor Sir Francis Nicholson ordered in 1699 that the colony's capital be withdrawn from

disease-ridden Jamestown and placed near the college, and he named the new city after King William (Queen Mary having recently died). Nicholson, an amateur architect who had been trained by Wilbraham, drew the street plan for the city (which contains Francis Street and Nicholson Street, of course), and he designed the Statehouse or Capitol Building and the Governor's House or "Palace," and two additional buildings for the College, the Brafferton Hall Indian School, and the President's House.

WILBRAHAM'S OTHER COLLEGE BUILDINGS

OXFORD

Parts of Trinity College

Library (formerly named Codrington), All Souls College; projects for other parts of All Souls College

Library project, Christ Church College

Project for Peckwater Quad, Christ Church College (later built with few alterations)

Parts, and projects for other parts of Magdalen College

Library and other parts, and Williamson Building, the Queen's College

Part of Ashmolean Museum I

Sheldonian Theatre

Project for Bridge (later Hertford College)

Project for Fellows Building, Corpus Christi College (later built with few alterations)

CAMBRIDGE

Parts of Clare College

Parts of Saint Catharine's College

Pepysian Library, Magdalene College

Chapel, Pembroke College (usually attributed to Wren)

Parts of Emmanuel College (usually attributed to Wren)

Library (usually said to be by Wren); Bishop's Lodge; and part of older Chapel, Trinity College

LONDON and elsewhere

Masters Residence, and the Cloisters Dormitory, the Temple Law School

The Temple Bar Gateway (now moved to next to St. Paul's Cathedral)

The Old School, Winchester College, Hampshire (often attributed to Wren)

The Lincoln Cathedral Library (usually attributed to Wren)

Other women in the arts in 17th-century England

Painters: Joan Palmer Carlile (1600-1679); Mary Craddock Beale (1632-1699); Elizabeth Pickering Creed (1642-1728); Anne Killigrew (1660-1685).

Composer: Mary Harvey Lady Dering (1629-1705).

Sculptor: Winifred Goldsmith (fl. 1700).

Silversmith: Alice Sheene (fl. 1690-1705).