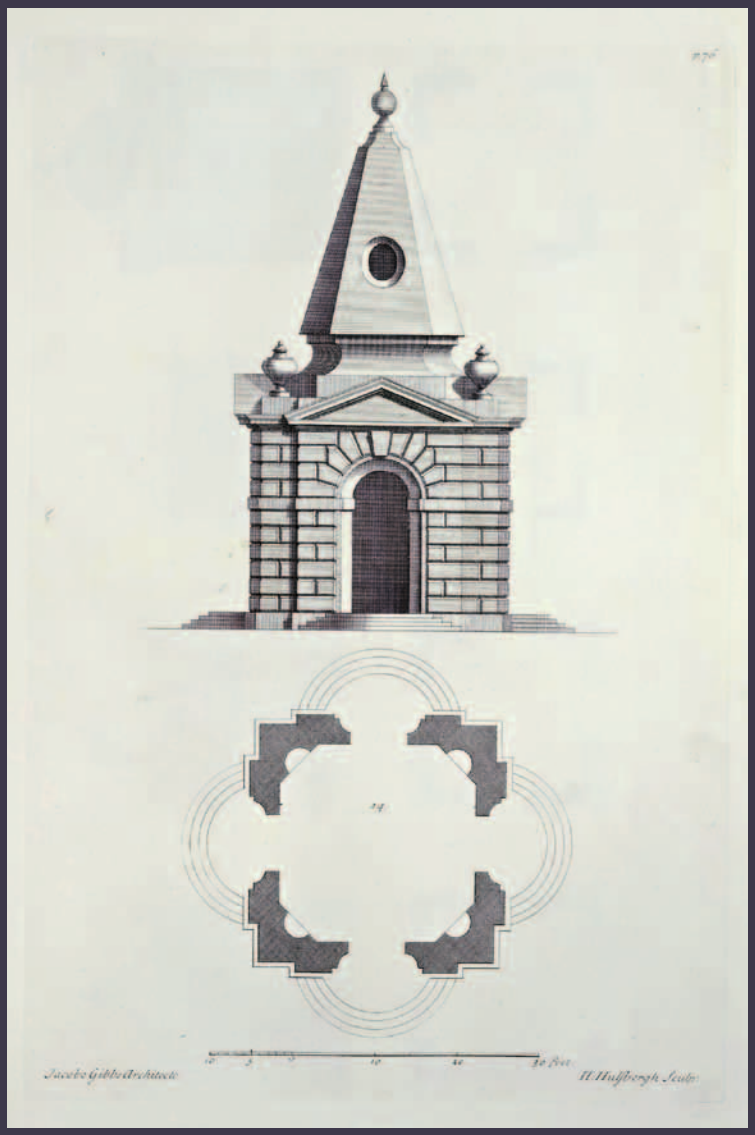
JAMES GIBBS AT STOWE



One of the Boycott Pavilions as it appears in the *Book of Architecture*

William Aslet, recipient of the George Clarke Prize for research pertinent to Stowe, re-evaluates the contribution of James Gibbs to the landscape of one of Britain's finest country houses

If you were looking to cite the acme of the British country house garden, then you could do no better than to choose Stowe. From the very moment that Sir Richard Temple was made Viscount Cobham in 1718 until its sale in 1921, to serve as a school, Stowe was a place of continual experimentation and evolution, always at the forefront of élite taste. Stowe was by no means the province of minor architects and today their achievements are lovingly tended by a combination of different bodies, spearheaded by the Stowe House Preservation Trust.

James Gibbs played a decisive role in altering the appearance of the house and its gardens. Yet, seen against those of his contemporaries – Sir John Vanbrugh, Charles Bridgeman, William Kent and Lancelot 'Capability' Brown – his achievements at Stowe are less celebrated. They were, however, no less extensive and, as we shall see, no less uniquely imaginative.

Gibbs's first period at Stowe began almost immediately after the death of Vanbrugh in March 1726. Only a few months later, Gibbs, having travelled to the house with Vanbrugh's erstwhile collaborator the landscape gardener Charles Bridgeman, makes his first appearance in the invaluable historic record now known as the Stowe Papers, today preserved at the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

Top: 'Gibbs's Building', engraved by Bernard Baron after a drawing by Jacques Rigaud *c*.1733, and published by Charles Bridgeman's widow Sarah in 1739

Above: The north and south fronts of Stowe, taken from a 1750 edition of Benton Seeley's *A Description of the Gardens of Lord Viscount Cobham at Stow in Buckinghamshire*

Gibbs was a natural successor to Vanbrugh, having by then established himself as the country's most successful and in-demand architect and with many of the major achievements of his early career already under his belt. St Martin's-in-the-Fields, London, was at an advanced stage of completion; so too was the Senate House at Cambridge, with the Fellows' Building at nearby King's College following close behind. Elsewhere, he could number the opulent chapel of the Duke of Chandos's vast seat at Cannons, the stately Doric colonnade at Burlington House, and the Earl of Lichfield's seat at Ditchley among his achievements.

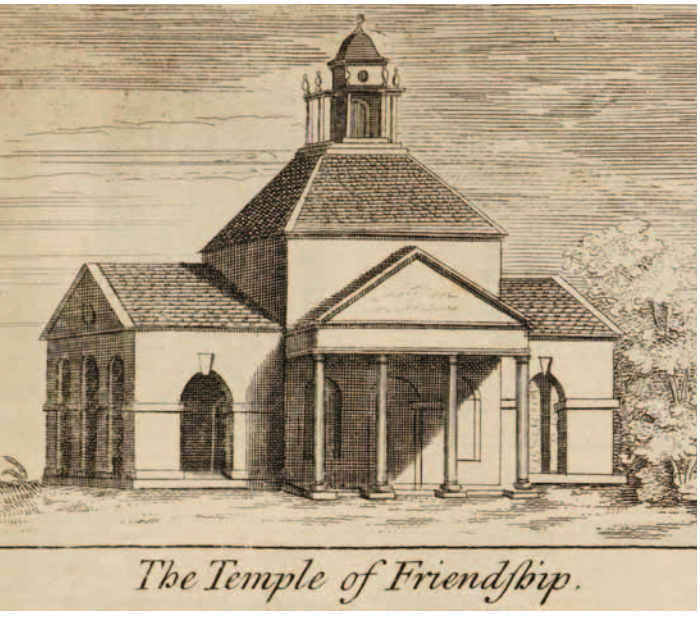
It was, therefore, with the confidence of a consummate professional that he began his work at Stowe. His first contributions were in the garden. Flanking the Oxford Avenue, the western approach to the house, he created the Boycott Pavilions, a striking pair of squat garden buildings. Engravings of the pavilions showing how they originally appeared, with rusticated bases surmounted by richly sculptural obelisks, can be found in Gibbs's runaway publishing success, *A Book of Architecture* (1728). Giovanni Battista Borra – one of the next generation of architects to work at the house – was later to replace these unusual obelisks with more conventional lead domes. Similarly modified is Gibbs's other securely attributed building of this date; known at first simply as 'Gibbs's Building' and then as the Belvedere, it was subsequently moved and refashioned into what is now called the Fane of Pastoral Poetry.

It was the arrival of William Kent as Cobham's architect around 1730 that marked the close of Gibbs's first period in the gardens at Stowe. He did not depart from the scene entirely, however, for it was likely that at this date he worked on the 'additions' to the interior, notably 'two noble apartments finely furnished, besides others for strangers', that he later recalled having made. Unfortunately, the at times uneven coverage of building works in the surviving archive, combined with the repeated and extensive interventions made to the fabric of the house, make it difficult to say with any degree of certainty what these rooms might have been. Nevertheless, we can be fairly sure that Gibbs was responsible for the design of Stowe's great south portico, which was erected in these years. An attempt to provide central emphasis to the increasingly broad and sprawling front of the house facing the gardens, the portico employed a two-tiered structure that Gibbs had doubtless taken from examples by Palladio, and which he was later to repeat in his unexecuted designs for the house of Hamstead Marshall, Berkshire.

Other than a respectful doff of the cap to Palladio, it is likely that the unusual portico was designed with a mind to providing an elevated prospect from which Cobham and his wife could survey their evolving gardens, then perhaps most exciting experiment in landscape design in Europe. Working with Kent, Cobham was continuing to increase their scale and ambition. No longer simply an expression of his lordly good taste, they had come to express his entire political philosophy. The key moment had been Prime Minister Sir Robert Walpole's introduction

Far left: The Villa Pisani at Montagnana as it appears in Palladio's 1570 *I Quattro Libri dell'Architettura*

The Radcliffe Library (Photograph: the author)



The Temple of Friendship as it originally appeared, taken from Benton Seeley's 1750 guide to Stowe

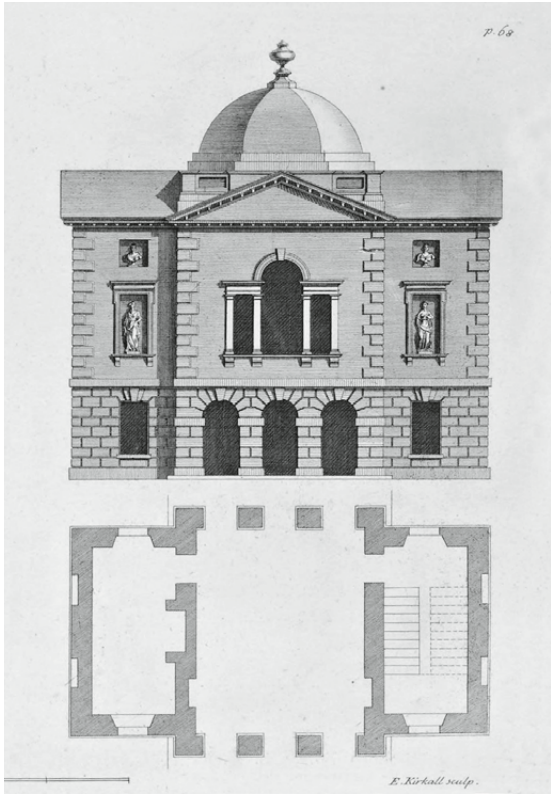
of the Excise Bill in 1733. Leading the Whig faction in opposition to the bill, the outraged Cobham had forced Walpole to abandon it. In retaliation, Walpole stripped Cobham of command of his regiment, which in turn caused Cobham to break from Walpole's government and enter political retirement at Stowe. Following this, Kent's contributions to the garden had taken on an increasingly ideological dimension: the magnificent Temple of Ancient Virtue, for instance, was juxtaposed by the deliberately decrepit and ruinous Temple of Modern Virtue, which housed a statue that, though headless, none could but see as representing Walpole.

Kent seems to have departed the scene around 1737 and the following year Gibbs reappears in the Stowe accounts. It was not just Cobham who had grown more ambitious in the intervening period. Gibbs, too, had been pushing his architectural aspirations to new levels. In 1736, following the death of Nicholas Hawksmoor, he had been engaged as the architect for the Radcliffe Library in Oxford. Going beyond Hawksmoor's schemes, he had intended to have the library topped with a massive dome built entirely in stone, a technically demanding feat which

would have had no parallel in England. Ultimately, Gibbs, or more likely his patrons, lost nerve and opted for the tried and tested method of a lead-covered timber-framed dome, but the intention shows that he had lost none of his architectural inventiveness as his career entered its last decade.

Thus, when Gibbs returned to Stowe, his mind was at the same time busily engaged in the problem-solving necessary to execute the largest public building in Britain since St Paul's. The result was a range of miniature architectural essays, each more inventive than the next. First was the Imperial Closet, a building long in gestation that celebrated the virtuous figures of imperial Rome. Then came the Temple of Friendship, which, being Stowe, was invested with a meaning that was wholly novel. Decorated internally with busts by Scheemakers representing Cobham and his allies loyal to Frederick, Prince of Wales (a figure around whom opposition to Walpole coalesced), it represented political friendship, specifically that of those who saw Walpole as a tyrant; the stocky Tuscan portico and low flanking wings on the exterior communicated its firmness and unshakability. Cobham's payment to Gibbs in 1739 of 10 guineas probably relates to its design. We know that it was built in September 1741 – the Stowe accounts are mercifully more complete for this period – to stand at the south end of a landscaped meadow that was dubbed Hawkwell Field. Viscountess Cobham later commissioned the Lady's Temple as a feminine counterpart, which was also built to Gibbs's design. Gibbs was less likely the architect of the Palladian Bridge, which in 1738 was under construction, as it would be out of character for him to have made a direct copy of another architect's work (the earlier Palladian Bridge at Wilton). Its true architect was more probably

The Palladian Bridge looking across Hawkwell Field, with the Gothic Temple in the background (Photograph: Derek Winterburn)



For the Lady's Temple, Gibbs drew on an earlier, unbuilt design for a bowling house at Down Hall, Essex, seen here in *A Book of Architecture*. Since it was built, the Lady's Temple has been greatly altered

Henry Flitcroft, to whom payment had been made the previous year, according the accounts.

Gibbs was certainly responsible for the building to which it leads. This is the Temple of Ancient Liberty. Otherwise known plainly as the Gothic Temple, it represents a perfect combination of Cobham's instinct for political allegory and the creative force of the mature Gibbs. Not just the crowning achievement of Gibbs's work at Stowe, it is one of the most inventive buildings of his whole career. The choice of Gothic must surely have been Cobham's as it was intended to convey a political meaning. The motto associated with the temple, 'je rends grace aux Dieux de n'estre pas Romain' – I thank the gods for not being Roman – a quotation from Pierre Corneille's play *Horace* (1640), alludes to the link that Cobham and his other contemporaries saw between Gothic architecture and the free British constitution, as distinct from illiberal Rome. This point is hammered home in the dome of the

Top: The Gothic Temple, seen from the gently-sloping upward approach (Photograph: Landmark Trust/John Miller)

Above: Inside the central space of the Gothic Temple looking up (Photograph: Landmark Trust/John Miller)

Opposite: A close-up of the dome showing the coats of arms (Photograph: Landmark Trust/John Miller)

Far right: Detail of the exterior of the Gothic Temple showing the arcading (Photograph: the author)

central space of the temple, on which are painted the coats of arms of Cobham's Saxon forebears.

Yet, Gibbs's execution is wholly idiosyncratic. Its boldness won over an otherwise critical Horace Walpole, who wrote in 1751 – while Strawberry Hill was taking shape – that 'I adore the Gothic building, which by some unusual inspiration Gibbs has made pure and venerable'. The success of the Gothic Temple is in part because of its deceptive simplicity. The plan – a circle enclosed by an equilateral triangle, with its corners expanded to provide rooms – reminds us that at his heart the Roman-trained Gibbs was always a classicist. On the rough and poetic ironstone exterior, it is possible to detect references to Gothic buildings familiar to Gibbs from his earlier work – the arcading, for instance, surely owes much to Westminster Abbey, where he worked extensively as an architect of funerary monuments.

But walk around it, and, with its ever-changing silhouette, the Gothic Temple becomes harder to pin down. This is even more true of the interior, with its dome painted in glittering fictive mosaic, an effect that would originally have been made even more opulent by the inclusion of painted glass. Walpole believed that this polychrome dazzle meant that it had 'a propensity to the Venetian or mosque Gothic', and certainly it would be true to say that it makes one feel on entering the temple as though one is in a miniature version of St Mark's, Venice. Walpole's comment was perceptive as, with no golden mosaics to draw on in English Medieval architecture, it is surely likely that Gibbs had turned to the Italy he knew so well as the source of his inspiration. But this eastern inflection to a building that was supposed to convey a message about English liberty? Instead of looking for meanings, it would be better perhaps to see this as an outpouring of Gibbs's creative fantasy, a dazzlingly original variation on the Gothic theme that shows his continued ability to surprise and to invent even as his career was nearing its close.

The Gothic Temple was not Gibbs's final work for Stowe. This was, fittingly, a monumental column celebrating the great patron Cobham, built at the request of the Viscountess. Yet, it was not Gibbs who supervised its construction but Capability Brown, marking the arrival of a new generation of architects, the next to be nurtured by Stowe's grounds.