

The Gothik and Gothic Revival as examples of the impact of Gothic architecture on the architecture and visual arts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The turn from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century was accompanied by a growing interest in and understanding of medieval history, and with this came a revival of Gothic architecture. This essay will explore how the designers of Gothic Revival buildings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries used and translated medieval Gothic forms and motifs to appeal to contemporary tastes, antiquarian interests and societal needs and values. The essay will be limited to discussions of British ecclesiastical architecture. Specifically, using the examples of St John's Church, Shobdon and St Luke's, Chelsea, it will show the contrast between the Gothik style of the late eighteenth century and the more historicized Gothic Revival of the nineteenth.

There is an argument that the Gothic never fully disappeared and that, in England especially, it can be traced through different elements of many buildings from the end of Tudor Gothic in the mid-sixteenth century to the emergence of Gothic Revival in the mid-seventeenth. This is termed Gothic Survival.¹ In contrast Gothic Revival constitutes the period in which Gothic buildings were designed and built for their own sake, not as restoration or to conform to earlier examples of the form.² Early interest in medieval history and architecture was fostered by antiquarians like Horace Walpole who, with the building of Strawberry Hill, could likely be considered the first true Gothic Revivalist.³ Walpole's desire to build himself a new Gothic castle within reach of London had a great impact on the landscape of British architecture, as it moved Gothic away from being a style used only for restoration or for follies and garden ornaments into an appropriate style for the design of country houses.⁴ A style more indigenous to northern Europe than the competing Classical alternative.⁵

¹ Howard Colvin, "Gothic survival," *Grove Art Online*, 2003.

² Georg Germann, Melissa Ragain, and Pippa Shirley, "Gothic Revival," *Grove Art Online*, 2003.

³ Susan Lang, "The Principles of the Gothic Revival in England," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 25, no. 4 (1966): 253.

⁴ Giles Worsley, "The Origins of the Gothic Revival: A Reappraisal (The Alexander Prize Essay)," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 3 (1993): 120.

⁵ Peter Collins, *Changing ideals in modern architecture 1750-1950* (London: Faber, 1965), 101.

Early attempts at Gothic Revival architecture, Strawberry Hill included, expose a lack of understanding of the Middle Ages, how medieval institutions functioned and a lack of specific terminology for Gothic features.⁶ It was not until Thomas Rickman invented the terminology for the classification of Gothic architecture in the 1810s, that its successive phases were truly understood.⁷ In John Ruskin's *The Nature of Gothic* he defines Gothic by both elements (variety, richness, fancifulness) and forms (pointed arches, vaulted ceilings) which in combination form the style.⁸ This defining of gothic not by successive phases but rather by a general 'Gothic' style demonstrates why Gothic Revival buildings often have such a confusing combination of elements from different phases.

The early phase of Gothic Revival architecture, sometimes referred to as 'Gothick,' is often separated from the later (more substantive) Gothic Revival proper. This is, simplistically, an eighteenth/nineteenth century divide, the earlier style being more decorative and fanciful and the latter drawing on the styles and forms of medieval Gothic more directly.⁹ Few churches were built in this style. The association between the style of the Middle Ages with the religion and worship of Roman Catholicism made many suspicious of its use in the construction of Anglican churches. Nevertheless, there are examples such Henry Keene's design for St Mary's Church, Hartwell. The prime example of an ecclesiastical Gothick building, however, must be St John's Church, Shobdon.

There is significant debate over the figure responsible for the design of Shobdon. Richard Bentley, William Kent, Henry Flitcroft, John Vardy and even Battey Langley have all been suggested to have contributed, at least in part.¹⁰ It was built for Richard Bateman, the uncle of the second Viscount Bateman, (the owner of Shobdon Court) and a member of Horace Walpole's Committee of Taste. There is no identified architect, but it is possible that whoever they were may have consulted an informal committee for ideas for their design

⁶ James Macaulay, *The Gothic Revival 1745-1845* (Glasgow : Blackie, 1975), 25.

⁷ Germann, Ragain and Shirley, "Gothic Revival".

⁸ John Ruskin. "The Nature of Gothic." In *The Works of John Ruskin*, edited by Edward Tyas Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 183.

⁹ Michael MacCarthy. "Gothick." *Grove Art Online*, 2003.

¹⁰ Roger White, 'The Influence of Batty Langley' in *A Gothick symposium at the Victoria and Albert Museum*, ed. J. Mordaunt Crook, (London: Georgian Group, 1984).

and they certainly had access to William Kent's drawings and to Vardy and Langley's volumes of Gothic engravings.¹¹

The exterior of Shobdon is low and square. The tower dates to slightly earlier than the rest of the building, having been erected in 1730 to replace the central tower of the earlier Romanesque church that had fallen in 1719.¹² The texture of the facade is coarse; the church has a simple slate roof and there is no external buttressing. However, the exterior is not entirely unassuming and there are Gothic elements which shine through. The tower and the walls are crenelated (not an especially common ecclesiastical medieval feature, but medieval all the same) and you can see the two light windows with ogee arches and spandrels punched with quatrefoils. It is the interior, however, that makes Shobdon such an interesting example of a Gothic inspired church.

The interior is striking and the bright white of the walls and the furnishings, combined with the plaster molded copies of Gothic forms create a storybook feel. Historicism was clearly not the first aim of this architect. It is not controversial to say that no medieval gothic church ever looked like this. However, it does employ a variety of gothic forms to create something new and whimsical.

The church is set out in a Latin-cross plan, with the transepts and the chancel all being the same dimensions, they are wide and deep. The nave has two-light windows, and the chancel and transepts have three-light windows articulated with plasterwork ogee arches.¹³ In keeping with the relative simplicity of Protestant Anglicanism, the Latin-cross plan focusses on the nave as Anglican Sunday services did not have the processional, ceremonial focus of Catholic liturgy. Services were instead centered on a sermon delivered from a pulpit to a knave acting essentially as an auditorium.¹⁴ As such the church is also missing aisles – common features even of smaller medieval Gothic churches – as they are not necessary when there is no complex liturgy to perform and no smaller chapels to house. The right-hand transept contains the family pew, and the left-hand is the baptistry area. The large pulpit sits at the corner where the left-hand transept meets the chancel, and the whole

¹¹ Howard Colvin, "Henry Flitcroft, William Kent and Shobdon Church, Herefordshire" in: *Essays in Scots and English architectural history*, ed. David Jones and Sam McKinsty. (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2009), 7.

¹² Colvin, "Shobdon Church," 5.

¹³ Michael MacCarthy, *The origins of the Gothic revival*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 154.

¹⁴ Chris Brooks, *The Gothic Revival* (London: Phaidon Press, 1999), 100-2.

church is set out so that all members of the congregation would be able to see and hear the sermon.

The windows are particularly interesting in how they take their form from their medieval Gothic predecessors. While the decorative moulding takes the form of ogee arches, a quintessentially Late Gothic kind of ornamentation, the lights themselves are plate tracery. Plate tracery was characteristic of the thirteenth century, when it was superseded by bar tracery that allowed for more complex forms.¹⁵ This use of plate tracery was unique in Georgian Gothick and creates a fascinating tension in the mixture of an Early Gothic technique contained within a Late Gothic form. And this itself is characteristic of the whole character of these Gothick buildings and of the philosophy under which they were built. There was little knowledge of medieval history at this time, and even if these designers did have the access to the rough dates separating the different phases of Gothic (like the architect of St Luke's as we will see) it may well not have prevented this kind of anachronism in the design. This is because the aim of building a church like Shobdon was not to create a brick-by-brick replica of a medieval Gothic monument, but rather to conjure the air of one with its mystery and its romanticism, which Shobdon does in its own way.

The medieval elements of Shobdon are playful, but plaster and as such are not structural. There are plaster panels mimicking blind tracery taking up much of the wall space, with florid forms and ogee arches. Groups of three hanging ogee arches separate the transepts and chancel from the nave, and the central arch of each has a finial which extends over the stringcourse. The designs for these features are taken from engravings after William Kent's pulpit at York Minster (1740-41) and choir screen for Gloucester Cathedral (1741), respectively.¹⁶ This makes the arches and panels a kind of Gothic twice removed – a form added to a medieval Gothic church as restoration, changed again to fit into the icing-sugar design of Shobdon. There are additional "architectural" features, but the whole decoration gives the effect that the church is missing a much larger building sitting on top. The compounded colonnettes topped with small arches seem prepared (if they were stone) to take the weight of a triforium and clearstory, anticipating something that does not exist. This adds to the unreal, storybook feel of the interior, as if it is aspiring to be a real building

¹⁵ Colvin, "Shobdon Church," 8.

¹⁶ Colvin, "Shobdon Church," 8.

but has not quite achieved it. Much of the effect of the interior is reinforced by the rich furnishings. The pews themselves have ends with ogee arches and punched quatrefoils, the moulding giving the effect of piped icing. This demonstrates how in these early years of the Revival it was not just an architectural movement, but a movement in crafts, literature, and many other areas of art too.

Shobdon is likely the best example of this early stage of Gothic Revival architecture applied to a church. It is evidence of a time when the prevailing interest was antiquarian, but not historical. It would not be until later, into the nineteenth century, that historicism took to the forefront of the Gothic Revival.¹⁷

There was a significant reduction in Church building of any style at the turn of the nineteenth century, but the 1810s brought with it a sea change.¹⁸ Expanding urban areas and newly built manufacturing centres meant new churches needed to be built to cater to increasing populations. Additionally, the perceived threat of the migration of Roman Catholic communities into Britain was combatted by the Church of England strengthening their hold by providing access to Anglican churches for as many people as possible. The shift back to Gothic as a style for ecclesiastical architecture was driven by the 1818 Church Building Act which was passed in order to fund the construction of new Churches for the growing nation.¹⁹ Of the two hundred and fourteen churches built under the Church Building Act a hundred and seventy-four were described at the time as Gothic.²⁰

There were two primary reasons for Gothic being the chosen style of the Church Building Commission. First: cost, there was no preference for style among the Commission, but Gothic buildings could be built in brick and had fewer decorative elements requiring large quantities of stone in comparison to classical buildings meaning they the more economical choice.²¹ Second was the influence of A. W. N. Pugin, one of the key figures of the Revival.²² Pugin's philosophy on Gothic Revival was propelled by his personal religious conviction and

¹⁷ McCarthy, *Gothic revival*, 154.

¹⁸ Brooks, *The Gothic Revival*, 227.

¹⁹ Germann, Ragain and Shirley, "Gothic Revival".

²⁰ Kenneth Clark, *The Gothic revival: an essay in the history of taste* (London: J. Murray, 1974), 96.

²¹ Brooks, *The Gothic Revival*, 277.

²² Germann, Ragain and Shirley, 'Gothic Revival'.

was noticeably more sober than the Rococo espoused by the likes of Kent and Walpole. Pugin attached Gothic architectural attributes to moral strength, thus the churches built by the commission, according to him, should reflect their medieval predecessors honestly.²³

The most famous example of a Gothic Revival church built under the Commission is St Luke's, Chelsea. Built under the Commission with additional financing, St Luke's is the most impressive production of the Church Building Act. Designed in 1819 and completed in 1824, the differences between this church and a church like Shobdon could not be clearer.²⁴ Gone is the mishmash of Gothic elements from across centuries, with the additional incorporation of rococo and chinoiserie styles. St. Luke's is no nonsense Perpendicular. The church is large, designed to accommodate a congregation of 2500 and the plan did away with the barn-like auditorium that had become the fashion for protestant English churches and replaced it with the low aisles and lofty nave of a Gothic church. Unusually for a Gothic Revival church of this period, St Luke's also has a stone vault (not just a wooden one or a plaster affectation) and the flying buttresses that support it were revolutionary in the period. The architect, James Savage, was a bridge builder and as such was able to design the church according to the demands that the stress of a traditional Gothic stone vault would exert on the building. The Gothik was a style defined by draftsmen, gentlemen, and archaeologists, not engineers. Figures like Savage show a change by which the aesthetics and structural system can be united and designed by a single figure, possibly this is part of the reason that churches like St Luke's are much more recognisably Gothic than those like Shobdon.²⁵

Beyond the vault there are many Gothic (and specifically Perpendicular) elements that make up St Luke's. Most significantly, the three-story elevation with clearstory and triforium niches, the high west tower with octagonal turrets topped with pinnacles made of open stonework, and the large perpendicular east window set in a four-centred arch.²⁶ These all mimic elements of medieval churches, but in a way wholly different to how they were applied at Shobdon. The aim here was to create a cohesive whole that could almost be

²³ Ayla Lepine, "The Persistence of Medievalism: Kenneth Clark and the Gothic Revival." *Architectural History* 57 (2014), 337-8.

²⁴ Clark, *The Gothic revival*, 97.

²⁵ Michael J. Lewis, *The Gothic Revival* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002). 49-51.

²⁶ Eastlake, *Gothic Revival*, 141.

mistaken for a church of the fifteenth century. However, there remain features uncommon to medieval Gothic. The gallery seating and the number of pews, for example, show it to be an Anglican church as it is still designed to accommodate a sermon despite its aesthetic allusions to Catholicism.

Charles Eastlake, who wrote the first major retrospective on the Gothic Revival, expressed a strong dislike of this building believing it not to capture the 'essential graces of Medieval architecture.'²⁷ The whole of Eastlake's book is quite demeaning of Gothic Revival as a whole but St Luke's serves as an example of exactly what he felt medieval Gothic had that the Revival was missing. First, a want of proportion. For Eastlake, the church is disproportionate, mostly because the both the decorative and structural features are regular in a manner unrealistic for a Gothic church. The identical outlines of windows, the buttress set offs that are divided into two equal heights rather than stepped unequally, the large blocks of stone with very little variety in size throughout, in combination all create a machine-made look that makes the church appear cold and unfeeling.²⁸ Writing some thirty years after the completion of St Luke's, Ruskin wrote of medieval Gothic churches, that one should look to see if the ornamentation of a Church is of 'perpetually varied design' and that if not the work is of poor quality.²⁹ This demonstrates how important the variety in these buildings became to those living later in the Period of the Gothic Revival. In Eastlake's view, these buildings have failed to capture the spirit of the Gothic style. They may be technically impressive, but they lack the energy and gravity that Gothic buildings, with their variety and substantiality, provide. Furthermore, Kenneth Clark agreed that there was a 'meagreness of construction' that gives St Luke's a cardboard look, despite its impressive slim tower and stone vault, and that this was common of Gothic churches in this period.³⁰

While churches like Shobdon mixed and matched Gothic elements with impunity, Revival churches like St Luke's almost overcompensated. The design is too unified, the proportions too regular to pass for a medieval church. Beyond a few notable exceptions, such as

²⁷ Eastlake, *Gothic Revival* 142-3.

²⁸ Eastlake, *Gothic Revival*, 142-3.

²⁹ Ruskin, "Gothic," 269.

³⁰ Clark, *The Gothic revival*, 97.

Salisbury cathedral, which was built in one extended campaign between 1220 and 1258, the majority of medieval churches were completed over the course of centuries. If you include the impacts of rebuilding and renovation this means that a medieval church is often identifiable by its inconsistent design. The style changing between naves and chapels, even changing from bay to bay. This means that despite their superficial adherence to accuracy (especially when compared to their whimsical Gothik counterparts) the unified styles of Revival churches like St Luke's retain a certain uncanny quality when examined in comparison to their medieval prototypes.

Whether you look to Walpole's Gothik or Pugin's Revival, Mediaeval Gothic architecture had a profound impact on the architectural landscape of eighteenth and nineteenth century Britain. Filtering through literature, visual culture and historical interest, a few key figures like Horace Walpole spearheaded a Revival challenging the supremacy of Classical and Palladian aesthetics in this period. The opposing philosophies of the Gothic Revival have left us a stunning variety of Gothic influenced churches, that continue to demonstrate the lasting influence of Medieval Gothic architecture into the modern day.

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