

Trinity Chapel, Conduit Street, Westminster

by

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Trinity chapel was originally a demountable and transportable chapel constructed to serve the army of James II with services in the Roman rite. Its design, with elements of central planning, is related to other chapels of the time. It was brought to Westminster by the vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields to serve the area north of Piccadilly pending the creation of a new parish and the construction of a permanent church. It was considered but rejected by the 1711 Act Commissioners for one of their Fifty New Churches. Its later history throws light upon the affairs of the two parishes—St Martin-in-the-Fields and St George, Hanover Square.

In the early part of the seventeenth century the late mediaeval parish of St Martin-in-the-Fields occupied a large part of the City of Westminster, much of it then rural in character. In the later part of the seventeenth and especially in the eighteenth century its population expanded greatly and with this increase came pressure to separate parts as new and distinct parishes. St Paul, Covent Garden, a parish entirely surrounded by St Martin's was established by Act of Parliament in 1645. St James, Piccadilly and St Anne, Soho followed in 1685. This left the church of St Martin, together with five of its wards in the eastern part of the parish, separated from two more to the north and west. These were known as the outwards of Mayfair and Belgravia. It was the intention of Thomas Tenison, vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields and Archdeacon of London, later Bishop of Lincoln and subsequently Archbishop of Canterbury, that these should also be a separate parish, with its church on ground to the north of Piccadilly. It was referred to in St Martin's vestry minutes as the "new intended parish of Holy Trinity".

This ground, known as Conduit Mead, was a large open area some twenty-seven acres in extent, owned by the Corporation of London and let for a term of ninety-nine years from 1666 to the Earl of Clarendon. By 1690 it was vested in one Hugh Hunt with trusts for the benefit of various people and a law suit was instituted by the Attorney General, to which Hunt and Dr Tenison were parties, for the purpose of having a portion of it set apart for a church and churchyard.¹ In July 1690 a decree was made ordering the defendant, Hugh Hunt, to convey to Dr Tenison and others, a specified plot of ground for the remainder of the lease and providing for

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the erection of a chapel, which was in the first place to be a serviceable wooden chapel, formerly belonging to James II.²

This plot is shown in two small plans attached to the decree as two separate parcels of land, one measuring sixty feet by eighty feet and the other a strip three hundred and forty feet long by about seventy wide, but the two together seemed to have formed an L-shaped piece. The short stem of the L was to the west of Lord Burlington's ground on Piccadilly and was used for the chapel, the long strip to the north of Burlington's land had a frontage to what was later to become Conduit Street.

Dr Tenison obtained a Royal Warrant³ to remove a tabernacle then lying on Hounslow Heath to the site in Conduit Mead, for use as a chapel until such time as a new church could be constructed. The tabernacle had been built to serve as a chapel for the army of James II on Hounslow Heath, used as a summer encampment. According to reports of the time mass was said in it using the Roman rite in an effort to convert the army to catholicism. In 1688, with the flight of James II, the tabernacle fell into disuse until brought to Conduit Mead by Dr Tenison at his own expense. The building had been constructed at a cost of over £500 in wood:

so artificially framed that it may speedily be put together and as suddenly disjointed which is for the service of the Camp that opened yesterday [9th June 1687].⁴

The intention was that it could readily be dismembered, transported and re-erected.⁵ According to Clinch,⁶ the chapel was wheeled to Hounslow and was occasionally moved from one part of the camp to the other, but the mobility of such a structure cannot have been high. A contemporary account records that it was large and handsome "all of carpenters and joiners work, with a very pretty steeple".⁷ It can be seen in the left-hand corner of a view of Burlington House drawn by Knyff and engraved by Kip, not later than 1704 (Fig. 1).⁸

The first sermon in the re-erected building was preached by Dr Tenison⁹ on 18 July 1691. He gave notice that the "church should be made a parish church so soone as the Parliament sate". The first attempt to obtain Parliamentary approval for the new parish was in November 1690,¹⁰ but nothing had come of it. A further attempt was made in December 1691 when a Bill was presented to the House of Commons¹¹ but there is no record of its receiving a first reading. The initiative for these attempts came from Dr Tenison and efforts to obtain parochial status for the two outwards ceased when he resigned the living of St Martin's in 1692, soon after his appointment to the See of Lincoln. In 1714 James Paterson¹² described the building as:

a very beautiful and stately chapel; covered with slate, beautified with large galleries, stately pews, a fine communion table and other ornaments ...

suggesting that by 1714 it had acquired the trappings of permanence although its wooden structure was in an advanced state of decay.

With the establishment of the Commission for Building Fifty New Churches following the Act of 1711, an enquiry was made of the vestry of St Martin-in-the-

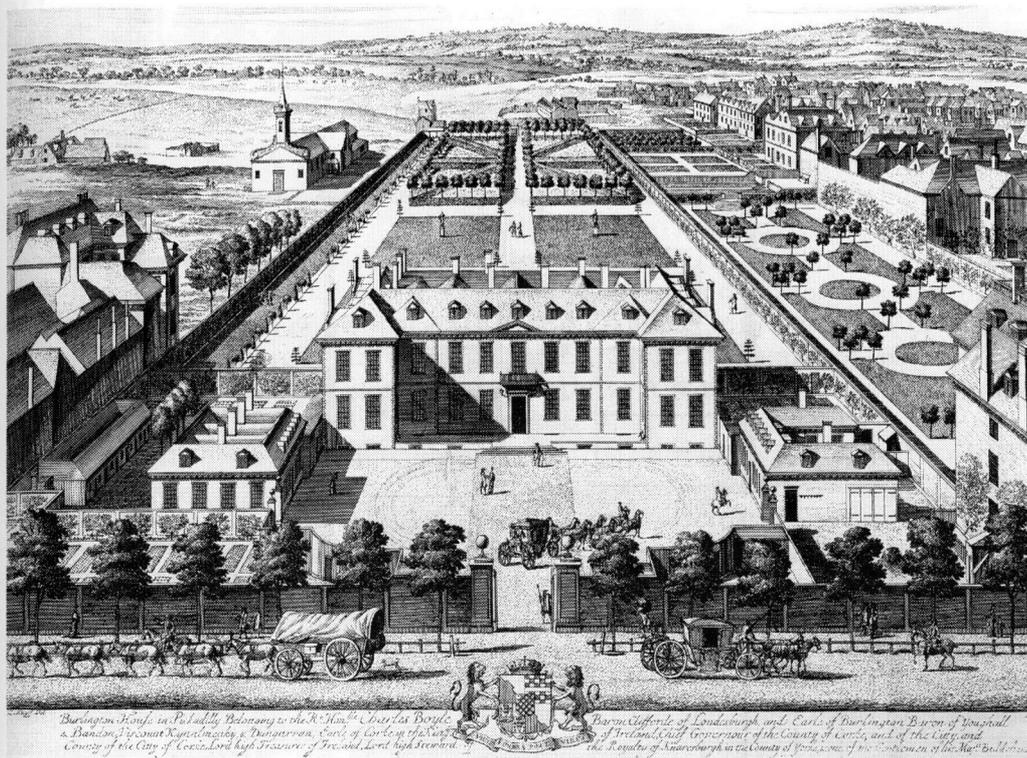


Fig. 1

Burlington House, bird's eye view from the south, from a drawing by L. Knyff engraved by J. Kip
Trinity chapel is shown upper left
Courtesy of the Museum of London

Fields concerning any chapels that could be turned into parish churches. In their reply¹³ St Martin's vestry indicated that there was none. As far as Trinity chapel was concerned, this was no doubt a correct view, a timber building then in poor condition and erected on ground held under a relatively short lease from the Corporation of London would certainly have been seen as not immediately suitable for conversion to a parish church, but the Commissioners were not content to take the word of the vestry and, on 11 June 1713 they ordered:

that Dickinson [William Dickinson, one of their surveyors] survey the ground whereon Trinity Chapel in the parish of St Martin-in-the-Fields stands and that he make a plan thereof...and lay the same before the Commissioners at their next meeting.¹⁴

Dickinson's plan of the church, (Fig. 2) surviving among the Commissioners' papers,¹⁵ shows the chapel, oriented north-south, basically cruciform in shape, and about seventy-two feet in length and fifty-five across the transepts, with galleries

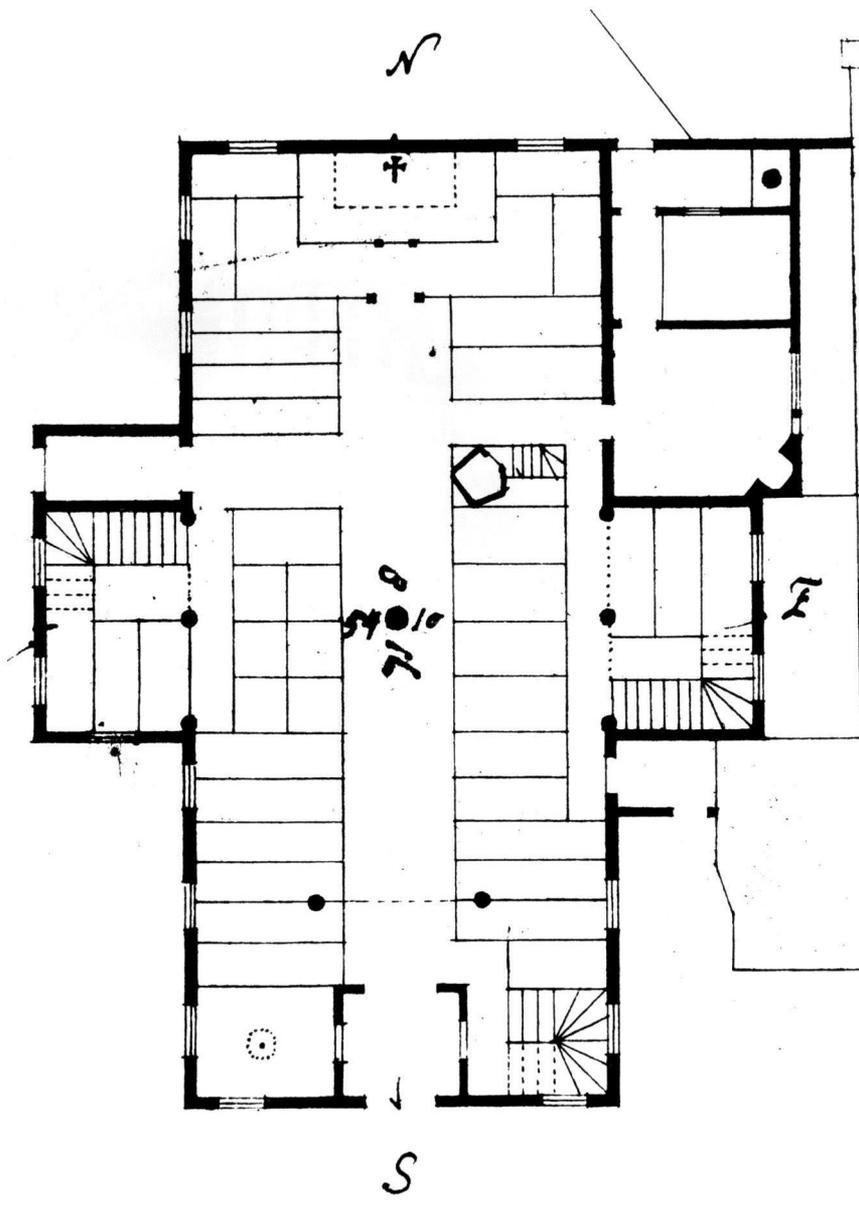


Fig. 2
Plan of Trinity chapel by William Dickinson
Courtesy of Lambeth Palace Library

at the (liturgical) west end and in the transepts. The altar or communion table, in a small sanctuary area, was raised one step above the level of the nave floor and the pulpit was five-sided, approached by a small flight of steps. The vestry was in the north-east angle, together with a 'lodging room', presumably for the curate. There is nothing about the plan to indicate either the temporary nature of the building as originally conceived or the catholic liturgy for which it was intended.

The late seventeenth century was a time when many churches were built, mostly for protestant sects. Details of these have not, apparently, survived and the extent to which they provided models for the army chapel remain unknown. Few of the post-Fire City of London parish churches erected under the direction of Sir Christopher Wren show evidence of central planning in the form of cruciform design but comparisons with these, St James, Garlickhithe and St Magnus-the-Martyr reveal little resemblance, particularly as it may reasonably be assumed that Trinity chapel originally had no entrance on the cross axis.

Although there are differences arising from the materials of construction, there is a clear resemblance of the temporary church to the Broadway chapel, each having six bays, three each side of a central crossing area, marked by intersecting roofs and a south front which can be seen from the Kip engraving to have been decorated with some kind of gable end with incurving volutes. The Broadway chapel,¹⁶ known for much of its life as the New Chapel, built in the 1630s as the Tothill Fields Chapel, was close to what is now Victoria Street, also in Westminster. There is no information as to who designed the Trinity chapel, nor who built it. The Office of Works must surely have had some hand in it but no names have emerged.

There is no record of any subsequent discussion concerning the chapel by the Commissioners, but no action was taken to acquire it and any thought of making it parochial must have been rejected. This did not prevent the Commissioners from considering the vacant part of the site—the long strip with frontage to Conduit Street—as a site for a new parish church, but according to a later report¹⁷ they could not be prevailed upon to accept it. It is not apparent why the Commissioners rejected it, but it may have been because the land was not held freehold. Freehold sites were required for parish churches, but there was nothing to stop the Commissioners approaching the Corporation of the City of London to buy it. This they did not do. The size of the plot amounted to about two-thirds of an acre, well short of the two to three acres that they were looking for in sites for their new churches, churchyards and ministers' houses, but in other areas they had been prepared to accept smaller sites for the church with the churchyard and minister's house placed elsewhere.

Earlier, probably in November 1711, Dickinson had surveyed a plot of land at the top of Albemarle Street. His site plan shows that he was then contemplating a seven-bay church for the site, but apparently it was rejected by the Commissioners. Rejected also was a site in the northern part of the area proposed by Lord Scarbrough¹⁸ which Thomas Archer and Thomas Medicott (MP for Westminster) had been asked to view.

In March 1715 Lord Scarbrough once again offered a site in the northern part of the area to the Commissioners, this time free of charge.¹⁹ Although the Commissioners acknowledged that the site was suitable for a church and apparently accepted it, little progress was made and in February 1716 they indicated that they were not then ready to proceed.²⁰ Financial difficulties soon engulfed the Commission, no move was made to transfer the property to them and their interest in the site lapsed. It was not to be revived and, even before their financial position had improved, the Commissioners were in discussion with General Steuart, a resident of the area, concerning another site in the outwards, a site which was then used by them for the church of St George, Hanover Square,²¹ erected to the design of John James.

On the face of it the behaviour of the Commissioners is difficult to understand. Was there some kind of antagonism between them and St Martin's vestry? Their recorded opposition to the setting up of the new parish of St George, Hanover Square suggests that there may have been an unwillingness on their part to collaborate with the Commissioners, no matter how persistent the residents of the outwards were in finding sites. St Martin's was a rich parish, probably the richest in the country, well able to look after itself and do its own building if it had a mind to.²² The Commissioners (who rejected also two other sites for churches in the eastern part of the parish) may have been conscious of a greater need for their efforts elsewhere and, although unable flatly to reject the parish, were achieving the same objective by rejecting the sites put forward by the vestry. In the end it was the persistence of the local residents, led by General Steuart, who not only gave a site to the Commissioners but arranged a loan to enable the building of St George, Hanover Square to be started.

At this time the wooden building must have been in very poor condition for, according to one report²³ it lasted until 1716 "when it perished for want of proper repairs". The suggestion by Green,²⁴ that it was replaced with a brick building by Thomas Tenison can be rejected. Archbishop Tenison died in 1715, the chapel is not mentioned in his will²⁵ and he seems to have had no connection with it after 1692.

Moves to replace the old dilapidated wooden building were initiated in 1716 by Dr William Lancaster, then vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields. By then the lease originally held by Hunt was held by Huntley Biggs, scrivener, a member of the vestry with Edward Nelthorp of St Andrew, Holborn parish. Biggs was prevailed upon to supervise the rebuilding of the chapel to a design by John Price and Benjamin Franklyn in a complicated deal by which part of the property was sold off to meet some of the costs. Unfortunately Dr Lancaster died before the rebuilding had been completed and paid for and the vestry refused to approve the expenditure or to refund the sums that Huntley Biggs had contracted to lay out. The vestry:

Ordered that the parish shall be putt unto, bear or sustaine no costs or charges which have been or shall be laid out about building or finishing the said chapel.²⁶

It may be that Dr Lancaster, although acting in the best interests of the parish, neglected to ensure that he had a formal resolution of the vestry behind him,

although the members of it could hardly have remained unaware of what was happening. The vestry, being short of cash at that time, argued that it had no contractual liability or authority to do so.

A case in Chancery²⁷ resolved the matter in favour of Huntley Biggs and the St Martin's vestry was obliged to borrow a sum of money to repay him. This was apparently from a Mr Grisedale, probably Robert Grisedale (a curate of St Martin-in-the-Fields who may have officiated at the chapel) on the security of the property. The debt and accumulated interest were discharged in 1732.²⁸

The new building, constructed of brick, was erected on a new site, a part of the strip fronting Conduit Street. It is shown on an engraving said to date from 1761, (Fig. 3),²⁹ one of a number in similar style showing chapels-of-ease in the area. In form and style it can be seen to resemble the earlier wooden building, but it had the altar to the south instead of to the north. It is shown with a cage for a bell on the northern gable and a small cupola surmounted by a weathercock. Franklyn, the carpenter, contracted to remove the pulpit, desk, galleries, seats and stairs from the old wooden chapel and replace them in the new, suggesting that the new chapel must have been designed with the same shape and dimensions as the old. The new chapel had a vestry (with two small vaults under) and a 'lodging room' for the curate. The craftsmen³⁰ who built the chapel and their bills are given in the bill of the plaintiff in *Biggs v. St Martin's parish*.

- Abrahams, mason	£ 44:10:00
John Prince, bricklayer	356:05:00
- Watkins, bricklayer	2:09:00
Jeremiah Franklyn, carpenter	407:00:00
- Robinson, carpenter	88:00:00
- Lobb, carver	8:05:00
- Booth, smith	66:10:00
- Waddell, plumber	32:11:00
- Wayte, plumber	4:02:00
- Barnes, slater	69:05:00
Robert Frith, plasterer	50:00:00
- Corner, glazier	21:19:00
- Dean, painter	39:00:00
- Rogers, labourer	22:14:00
Miscellaneous expenditure*	115:16:03
Total	£1328:06:03

*Including insurance, legal fees, stamp duty, interest, cost of covering the walls for the winter, surveyors' fees, 'measuring dinners', site surveillance, gratuities and a share of the party walls.

The new building could be seen from the portico of the parish church of St George, Hanover Square, erected 1721-25, and it must have seemed reasonable to the vestry of the newly created parish that Trinity chapel, a chapel-of-ease to St Martin-in-the-Fields, should be transferred to them. The St Martin's vestry was willing that this should be done, and negotiations were instituted in 1725. St Martin's demanded £2100 for the building and its site,³¹ a great deal more than it cost to build, at which St George's vestry lost interest.



Fig. 3
View of Trinity chapel ca.1761

The affairs of the chapel were kept largely separate from those of the mother church, with its own accounting and largely independent management. Excess sums from pew rents were used by St Martin's for various purposes but major decoration and repairs to the chapel were approved, authorised and paid by St Martin's vestry.

The lease granted to Lord Clarendon expired in 1765 but confusion of boundaries had occurred and the Corporation of the City of London had difficulty in distinguishing its property. It came to terms with St Martin's vestry, granting a new lease of the much reduced Trinity chapel site for forty years from 25th March 1768, with a covenant to renew at the same rent every fourteen years for ever.³²

By 1774 the chapel was once again in a dilapidated state. The St Martin's vestry, uncertain as to the future of the chapel, ordered the roof and slating to be repaired "only to keep out the rain" while the members considered what should be done with the building and its site. Although on a reduced site, the chapel still had vacant plots to either side. These, it was suggested, should be let on building leases. It was recognised that houses on each side would restrict the light to the building and a plan was devised for building a dome with, presumably, a lantern, giving top lighting to the building. No trace of this design has been found. The installation of the dome was to cost an estimated £114 of the total £279 needed to restore the building but after first agreeing this expenditure, the vestry changed its mind and advertised the land for sale with or without the chapel.³³

Articles of agreement were then signed with Messrs Robson and Mecluer granting a 99-year lease to them at a ground rent of £120 per annum. Mecluer has not been traced, but James Robson was a bookseller of Bond Street. He was reported to be the Reverend James Robson,³⁴ but this seems to be an error. He seems to have



TRINITY CHAPEL.

Fig. 4

Elevation of Trinity chapel front to Conduit Street, c.1804, from the *Gentleman's Magazine*.

taken the lead in managing the lease. A house was built on each side of the new-fronted chapel, the work being completed by September 1777. The interior was also refurbished "with great neatness and propriety", but no record has been found of what work was done or who did it. An engraving of the Conduit Street frontage by J. Swain for the *Gentleman's Magazine* but widely reproduced elsewhere (Fig. 4),³⁵ shows the bell-cage, cupola and weathervane of 1716, suggesting that the existing building was adapted, rather than rebuilt, in 1777. There is also a sepia drawing by C.P. Harding of 1797³⁶ with a similar view. James Robson engaged Dr Beamish, a popular preacher, for the chapel. He drew such crowds that extra galleries had to be installed.³⁷

In 1875 the lease expired and the vicar and churchwardens again took possession of the premises which then consisted of the chapel and two houses. The chapel had never been consecrated and, with the Bishop's consent to use the site for secular purposes, the site was again let on long lease. The chapel was pulled down and a new building known as Ulster house erected on the site.³⁸

The income generated from the lease of the site at first accrued to the vestry of St Martin-in-the-Fields, but as a result of an action in Chancery brought by the rector and churchwardens of St George, Hanover Square, the Vice-Chancellor

ordered that the revenue should be divided, four-fifths to St George and one-fifth to St Martin, for the upkeep of the fabric of each church and the maintenance of Divine service in each of the two parishes, with the nine district churches then existing in the parish of St George³⁹ being included as beneficiaries of the four-fifths allotted to that parish.

The Trinity chapel site in Conduit Street is now occupied by the Westbury Hotel.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 PRO, C5 78/71; C33 274, 614.
- 2 *The Times*, 15 November 1881.
- 3 *Calendar Treasury Books* 1689-92, vol.ix, Pt.1, 168, 26 June 1689.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 1685-9, vol.viii, 1372, 25 May 1687, 1416, 21 June 1687, 1444, 5 July 1687.
- 5 *Historical Manuscripts Commission*, Downshire, vol.i, 247, 9 June 1687.
- 6 Clinch, G., *Mayfair and Belgravia* (London, 1892), 62-3.
- 7 de Valbourg Misson, H., *Memoirs and Observations in his travels over England*, translation by Mr Ozell, (London, 1719), 49; Johnson, B.H., *Berkeley Square to Bond Street*, *London Topogr. Soc.*, (1952), 122-126.
- 8 The dedication is to Charles Boyle, Earl of Burlington; he died and was succeeded by Richard Boyle, the third Earl in 1704.
- 9 de Beer, E.S., ed., *The Diary of John Evelyn* (Oxford, 1955), v, 61-2; Carpenter, E., *Thomas Tenison, Archbishop of Canterbury, His Life and Times* (London, 1948), 22.
- 10 *Journal of the House of Commons*, 1688-93, vol.10, 458.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 583, 590.
- 12 Paterson, J., *Pietas Londinensis* (London, 1714), 272-8.
- 13 Lambeth Palace Library (LPL), MS 2716, f.3.
- 14 LPL, MS 2690, 92, 11 June 1713.
- 15 LPL, MS 2750/61. The dimensions of the plot shown by Dickinson do not agree with those given in the earlier law suit. His plan is no evidence of ownership and, in any case, by this time the boundaries had become confused.
- 16 Guillery, P., *The Broadway Chapel, Westminster: A Forgotten Exemplar*, *London Topogr. Record*, (1990), xxvi, 97-133.
- 17 PRO, C11 1398/9.
- 18 LPL, MS 2690, 84, 30 April 1713.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 206, 16 March 1715; MS 2750/22 and 23.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 250, 14 February 1715/16.
- 21 LPL, MS 2691, 95, 10 March 1720.
- 22 The parish vestry rebuilt the church of St Martin in 1721-6 at a cost usually given as £33,661.16s.7½d. (Friedman, T., *James Gibbs* (New Haven & London, 1984), 311) by a rate on its inhabitants.
- 23 Allen, T., *The History and Antiquities of London, Westminster, Southwark and Parts Adjoining* (London, 1828), iv, 362-3)
- 24 Green, M., *Gentleman's Magazine*, June 1804, 497-8; Malcolm, J.P., *Londinium Redivivum* (London 1807), vol.4, 334.
- 25 PRO, PCC PROB 11/550.
- 26 City of Westminster Archives, Victoria Library (CWA,VL), MS F.2006, 14 November 1717.
- 27 PRO, C33 329, 96-7 and 187; C38 339.
- 28 *Endowed Charities* (County of London), vol.5, (1903), 98-108.
- 29 Clinch, *op.cit.* 62.

- 30 Little is known of the craftsmen who rebuilt the chapel. John Prince, bricklayer, acted as agent and surveyor to Edward Harley in connection with the laying out of the Harley estate (Colvin, H.M., *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600-1840* (London, 1978), 661). James Brydges may have intended to employ him in the building of Cavendish House although there are no recorded payments to him (Collins Baker, C.H., and Baker, M.I., *James Brydges, First Duke of Chandos* (Oxford, 1949), 276).
Robinson, carpenter, may be William Robinson, author of a small book on architecture, possibly also the William Robinson surveyor to the Gresham Trustees (Colvin, *op.cit.* p.704). He undertook very little of the work at the chapel, £80 of his total bill of £88 being for the supply of timber. Lobb, carver, was probably Joell Lobb recorded in connection with carving work for the gardens at Hampton Court, *Wren Society* (Oxford, 1927) iv, 32. Corner, glazier, was possibly Charles Corner recorded in connection with estimates for work at Westminster Abbey, *Wren Society* (Oxford, 1934) xi, 30.
- 31 CWA,VL, MS F2006, 6 November and 2 December 1725.
- 32 Endowed Charities (County of London), *op.cit.*
- 33 CWA,VL, MS F2006, 24 May 1776.
- 34 *The Times*, *op.cit.*.
- 35 *Gentleman's Magazine*, June 1804, 497.
- 36 CWA,VL, Box 49, No.11a.
- 37 Colby, R., *Mayfair, A Town Within a Town* (London, 1966), 69.
- 38 Details of these events were lost when St Martin-in-the-Fields vestry minutes of this period were destroyed in the war of 1939-45.
- 39 Christchurch, Mayfair; Hanover Church, Regent Street; St Barnabas, Pimlico; St Gabriel, Pimlico; St Mark, North Audley Street; St Michael, Chester Square; St Paul, Knightsbridge; St Peter, Eaton Square; and St Saviour, St George's Square.

1. PRO, C10, 119870.

2. PRO, C10, 119870.

3. PRO, C10, 119870.

4. PRO, C10, 119870.

5. PRO, C10, 119870.

6. PRO, C10, 119870.

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28. PRO, C10, 119870.

29. PRO, C10, 119870.