

# Anniversary Address 2014

## The Church of St Lawrence, Little Stanmore

*based on the talk by*

SHEILA WOODWARD

St Lawrence's Church is a remarkable survival of an early 18th-century parish church, complete with all its Baroque painted decoration and almost all its fittings (Fig. 1). It was built in 1714-16 and rededicated at Easter 1716. Comparatively little is known about its medieval predecessor, of which the sole survival is the west tower, dated by our architect to *c.* 1340-60, with Tudor battlements (Fig. 2). Its fabric is a colourful mixture of various stones, knapped flints and fragments of Roman tiles (Fig. 3);<sup>1</sup> there is evidence of a Roman kiln site close by in Canons Park. Today, the interior of the tower is used as a Lady Chapel, created in 1966.

The body of the previous church was pulled down on the orders of James Brydges (1674-1744), who had acquired the adjacent estate of Cannons (or Canons) between 1709 and 1713 and who was created first Duke of Chandos in 1719 (Fig. 4).<sup>2</sup> He was the son of the 8th Baron Chandos of Sudeley Castle in Gloucestershire. Early in life he had made a grand tour on the continent, unusually to the Low Countries and Germany, where the family had contacts, and as a result of which fortuitously he encountered the future Hanoverian kings. Subsequently he amassed a fortune as Paymaster-General to the Duke of Marlborough's forces on the continent (1707-12), though he was to lose much of his wealth in the South Sea Bubble (1720) – the credit crunch of the 18th century. After retirement from this post, he set about demolishing and rebuilding the Tudor courtyard house at Cannons, to create one of the most flamboyant mansions of the period, and was famed for his lavish lifestyle there. Daniel Defoe called it 'the most magnificent house in England', though Alexander Pope was less enthusiastic. Between 1713 and *c.* 1720, a variety of famous architects were consulted, including William Talman and Sir John Vanbrugh. John James made designs for remodelling the old house, which were partly executed before he was replaced in 1715 by James Gibbs; the east and south facades are to Gibbs' design (Fig. 5). John James was the architect of the new church, and Gibbs the designer of the later mausoleum attached to it. Another artist active at both house and church was the Venetian, Antonio Bellucci, who painted the ceilings of the hall, staircase and chapel at Cannons.

---

Miss Sheila Woodward has been a parishioner at St Lawrence's since 1968 and has served variously as PCC secretary, churchwarden, sacristan, archivist and chief guide to the church. She has lectured regularly on the latter, and in 2010 oversaw the revision and reprinting of the church guidebook (written in 1985 by a former churchwarden, Lewis Angell).

This account of Miss Woodward's talk was compiled by Richard Morris.

John James (c. 1673-1746) was a master carpenter by training, becoming a competent and trustworthy architect who for much of his career played second fiddle to famous contemporaries like Nicholas Hawksmoor. At the time of his commission to rebuild St Lawrence, he was assistant clerk of the works at Greenwich Hospital and master carpenter at St Paul's Cathedral. Later in his career he rose to be Surveyor to the Fabric of St Paul's, succeeding Sir Christopher Wren, and Surveyor to the Dean and Chapter of Westminster Abbey. His best known church work is St George's, Hanover Square (1721-25).<sup>3</sup>

The church of St Lawrence consists of a nave without aisles, feeling more like a private chapel than a parish church. The austere plain exterior, of stock brick with Portland stone surrounds to the windows, leaves the visitor quite unprepared for the extraordinary magnificence of the interior, more in tune with continental Baroque architecture (Figs 1, 6). The effect is theatrical, with three boxes for the duke and his household in a gallery at the west end, with painted curtains held by cherubs (Fig. 7), and at the east end a fine proscenium arch of Corinthian pilasters and columns framing the organ in the retrochoir, dramatically lit by concealed lighting from a side window (Fig. 8).<sup>4</sup> Along the length of the interior, on the walls and vaulted ceiling, are *trompe-l'oeil* paintings in grisaille and sepia tones depicting the evangelists and Christian virtues, and scenes mainly from St John's Gospel (Fig. 9). The illusionism of the north wall paintings is particularly convincing when entering the church at dusk. The ceiling paintings are considered to be the work of the French painter, Louis Laguerre (1663-1721), who moved to England in 1683/84 from the court of Louis XIV and is best known for his interior decoration of great country houses like Chatsworth and Burghley.

The dramatic Baroque painting above the altar, dominating the east view of the church, depicts the Adoration of Jehovah, who is represented by Hebrew letters in the centre of the aureole (Fig. 10). The luminescence from the ceiling painting descends to permeate the painting of the Adoration of the Shepherds to the left of the altar, and that of the Pietà<sup>5</sup> to the right (Fig. 11). These two paintings are attributed to the Venetian artist, Antonio Bellucci. On either side of the organ are the Ten Commandments and their New Testament equivalent, the Sermon on the Mount (Figs 12, 13), probably the work of Laguerre.<sup>6</sup> At the west end, in the semi-dome over the ducal pew, is Bellucci's rendition of the Transfiguration (Fig. 14), inspired by Raphael's painting of the same subject now in the Vatican museum. The north wall paintings, dating to about 1736 after the mausoleum was added, are attributed to Francesco Sleter, who carried out comparable grisaille work at the mansion of Moor Park (Hertfordshire) at about this time. Between 1973 and 1984, all the paintings were cleaned and conserved, work commenced by the Eve Baker Trust and completed by Dr Hans-Dieter Ingenhoff and his team from Tübingen.

The church has a remarkable collection of original woodwork and furnishings. The carvings of the proscenium arch are outstanding and attributed to Grinling Gibbons (Fig. 8). In the nave the box pews are typical of an 18th-century parish church interior. They are made from oak, probably from the estate, and retain their original hinges, small pieces of chain indicating the location of chained prayer books, and all the scratch marks and patina of age (Fig. 15). The pulpit was originally a horizontal three-decker, but only the pulpit proper now survives. The altar is not original and has been replaced at various times. In the north-west corner of the nave is the Italian marble font given by the duke in 1716 (Fig. 16).

One of the treasures of the church is the organ, famous for its connection with George Frederick Handel. After he arrived in England in 1712, Handel sought out patrons such as Lord Burlington, and he worked at Cannons for the duke from about mid-1717 until the end of 1718. He was the duke's composer-in-residence and, amongst other things, he composed eleven Chandos anthems, which were almost certainly performed in the church. The instrument played by Handel was a chamber organ, which retains its original organ case with carvings attributed to Grinling Gibbons (Figs 17, 18).<sup>7</sup> It was built about 1716 by Gerard Smith, nephew of Father Smith, the famous organ builder, but subsequently has been enlarged several times to make it more suitable for parish services; it last had a major rebuild in 1994-95.

On the north side of the church is the mausoleum, added by the duke in 1735-36 (Fig. 19). It is entered from the church by way of the Antechamber, which was the duke's original monument room for the Brydges family, but which he considered inadequate after the death of his second wife, Cassandra Willoughby. The designer was James Gibbs, and the particularly effective *trompe-l'oeil* paintings of figures and classical architecture are by the Italian artist, Gaetano Brunetti. The fictive dome with an oculus, inspired by the Pantheon in Rome, is especially appropriate for a mausoleum (Fig. 20). The duke's magnificent marble monument stands against the west wall, depicting him in Roman tunic, flanked by his wives, Mary Lake and Cassandra Willoughby (Fig. 21). It was designed by Grinling Gibbons,<sup>8</sup> and originally stood in what is now the Antechamber. Against the south wall of the mausoleum are two monuments to later members of the family. On the left the Ionic aedicule framing a pyramid is Sir Henry Cheere's monument of 1738 to Mary Bruce, first wife of the second duke (Fig. 22). To the right is the large classical sarcophagus commemorating Margaret Nicholls (d.1768), the first wife of the third duke.

The only surviving son and heir of the first duke was a spendthrift, and at his father's death in 1744, encumbered by debts, the second duke sold off the contents of Cannons in 1747: today one sees bits of Cannons all over England as, for example, in the parish church at Witley Court (Worcs.).<sup>9</sup> The house itself was demolished in 1753, and the North London Collegiate School for Girls now stands on the site, so that all that now remains of the first duke's munificence is the church of St Lawrence. After the death of the third duke, the family had no male descent, but descendants through the female line still occasionally visit. Today St Lawrence remains an active and much loved church; we do our best to preserve it and share it with everyone. The mausoleum is now in the care of the Churches Conservation Trust.

---

At the end of the Address, Anna Stepler, former organ scholar at Merton College, Oxford, gave a short recital of Baroque music on the Handel organ, with pieces by Purcell, Sweelinck and Handel.



Fig. 1

St Lawrence, interior looking east from the ducal gallery

*Photograph, R K Morris*



Fig. 3

St Lawrence, the west tower, detail of building materials

*Photograph, R K Morris*



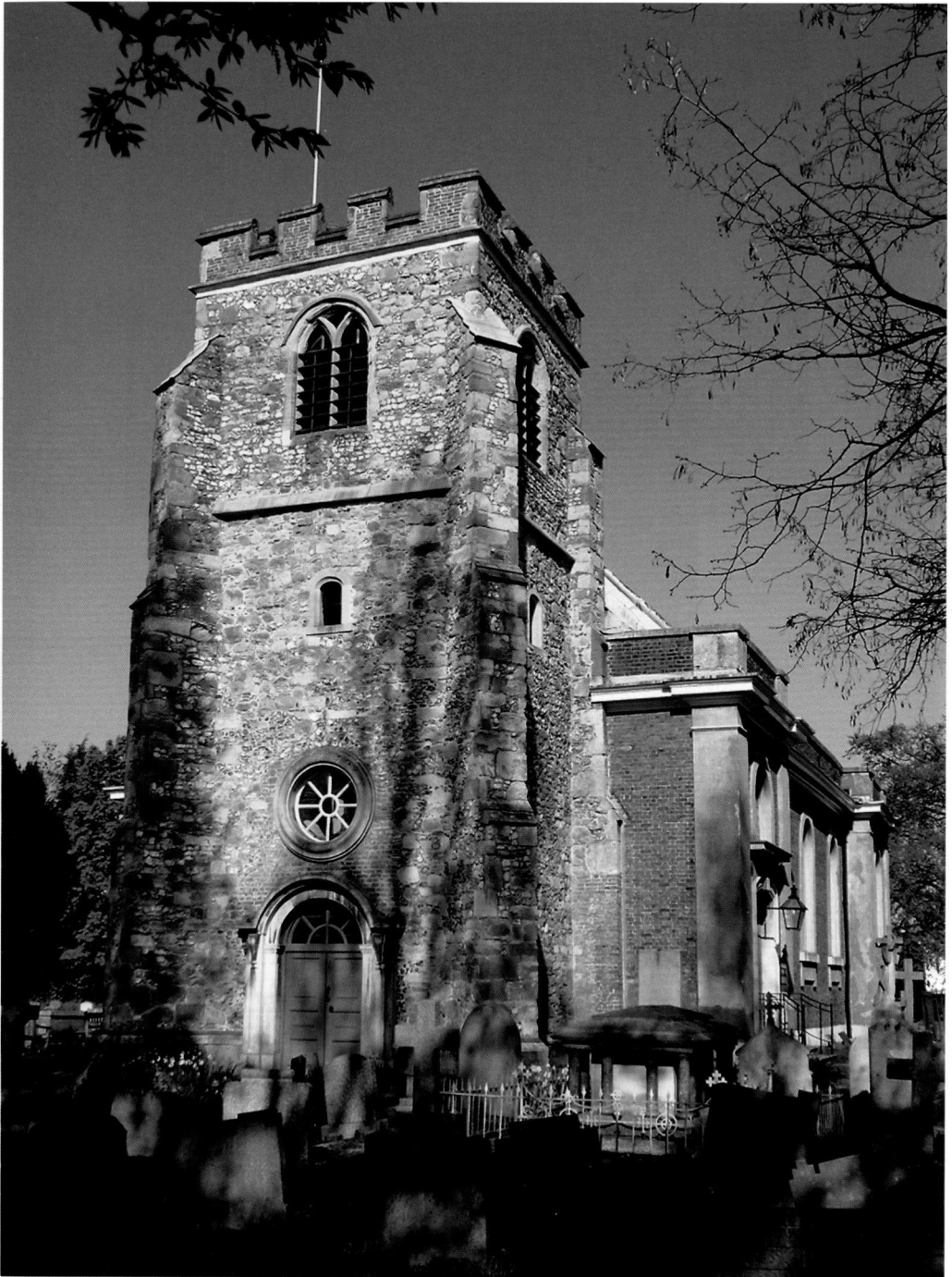


Fig. 2

St Lawrence, the medieval west tower

*Photograph, S Cawthorne*



Fig. 4  
 Statue of the first Duke of Chandos,  
 commissioned from Grinling Gibbons (1717), in  
 the Mausoleum  
*Photograph, R K Morris*

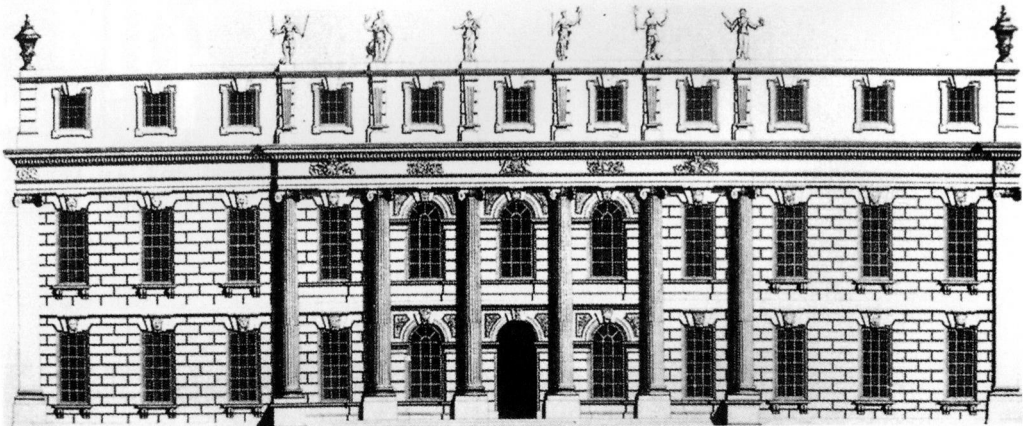


Fig. 5  
 Cannons, the south elevation of the great house  
*Engraving by Hulsbergh, 1720, British Library*

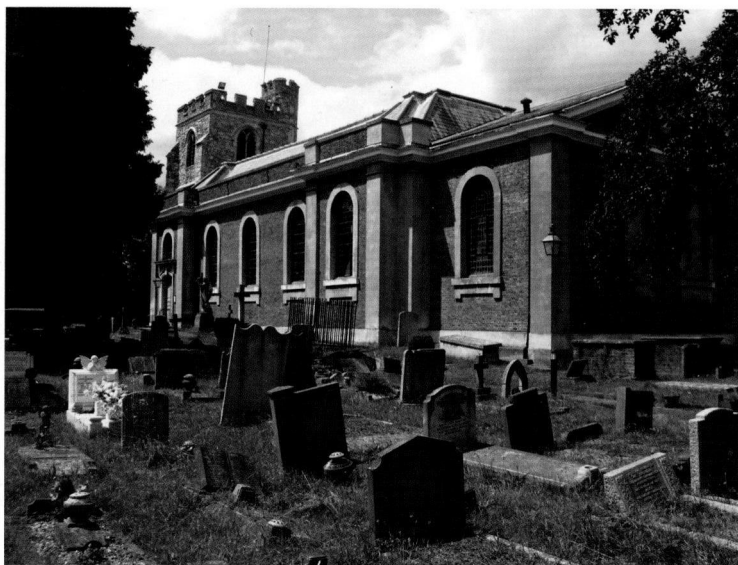


Fig. 6  
St Lawrence, exterior from the east  
*Photograph, R K Morris*



Fig. 7  
St Lawrence, interior looking west to the ducal gallery  
*Photograph, M Saunders*



Fig. 8

St Lawrence, the proscenium arch before the retrochoir

*Photograph, R K Morris*



Fig. 9

St Lawrence, nave north wall, grisaille paintings attributed to Francesco Sletter

*Photograph, S Cawthorne*

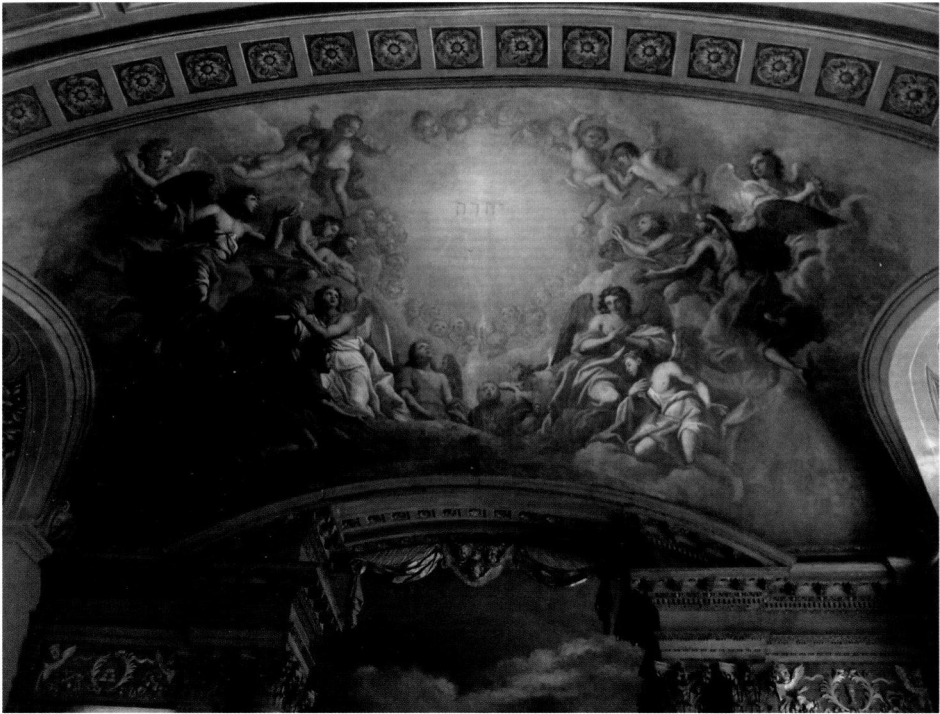


Fig. 10

St Lawrence, semi-dome above the high altar, 'The Adoration of Jehovah', attributed to Louis Laguerre

*Photograph, R K Morris*



Fig. 11

St Lawrence, flanking the high altar, 'The Pietà', attributed to Antonio Bellucci

*Photograph, R K Morris*



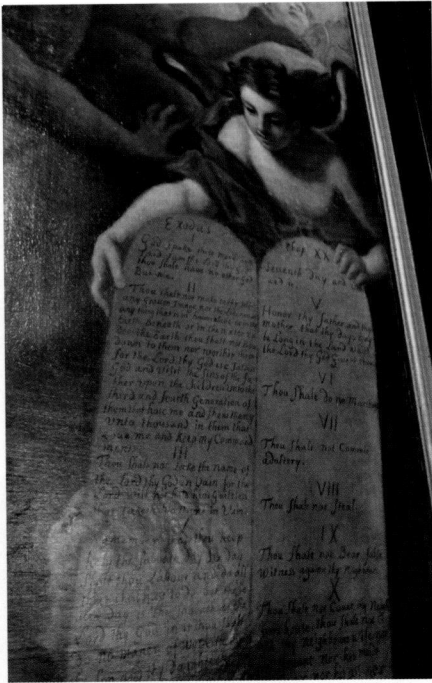


Fig. 12  
St Lawrence, flanking the organ, 'The  
Ten Commandments', detail, attributed to  
Louis Laguerre  
*Photograph, R K Morris*

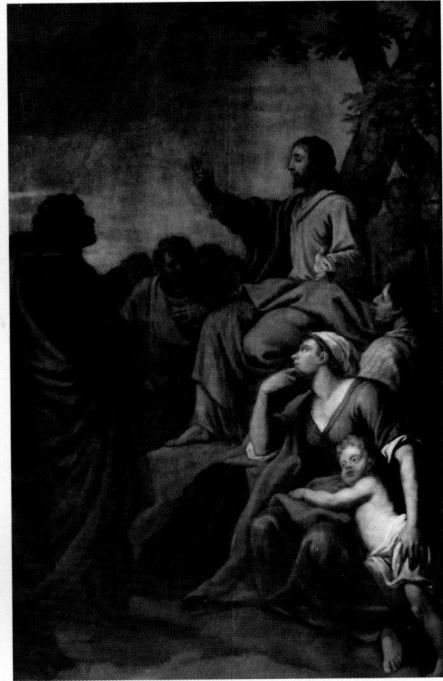


Fig. 13  
St Lawrence, flanking the organ, 'The  
Sermon on the Mount', attributed to Louis  
Laguerre  
*Photograph, S Cawthorne*



Fig. 14  
St Lawrence, the semi-dome over the ducal pew, 'The Transfiguration', attributed to Antonio Bellucci  
*Photograph, R K Morris*



Fig. 15 (top left) St Lawrence, the box pews on the north side of the nave, detail  
*Photograph, R K Morris*



Fig. 16 (top right) St Lawrence, the Italian marble font given in 1716  
*Photograph, R K Morris*

Fig. 17 (bottom left) St Lawrence, the organ case, carvings attributed to Grinling Gibbons  
*Photograph, R K Morris*

Fig. 18 (bottom right) St Lawrence, the organ case, some stops reconstructed in 1995, one of which is an original stop (restored)  
*Photograph, R K Morris*





Fig. 19

St Lawrence, exterior from the north, showing the Mausoleum in superior brickwork (right), added in 1735-36 to the design of James Gibbs

*Photograph, R K Morris*

Fig. 20  
St Lawrence, the Mausoleum,  
trompe l'oeil ceiling by Gaetano  
Brunetti  
*Photograph, M Saunders*



Fig. 21

St Lawrence, the Mausoleum,  
interior looking to the monument of  
the first Duke of Chandos and his  
two wives

*Photograph, S Cawthorne*

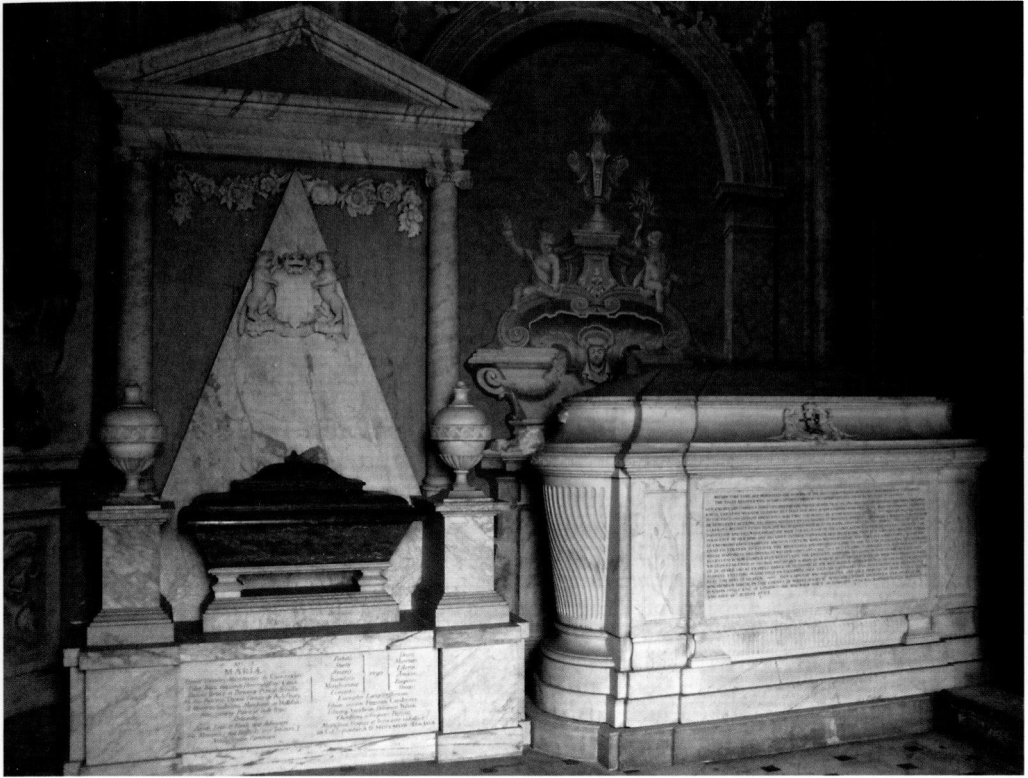


Fig. 22

St Lawrence, the Mausoleum, the monuments of Mary Bruce (1738) (left) and Margaret Nicholls (c. 1768)

*Photograph, R K Morris*

## NOTES

1. The stones include Hertfordshire 'puddingstone', the furthest south this material is known to have been used as a building material.
2. The estate derives its name from the medieval owners, the canons of St Bartholomew the Great, London.
3. See further H.M. Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600-1840* (4th edn, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2008), 564-8.
4. The idea of having a source of music behind the high altar, separated by a screen of classical columns, finds a precedent in the location of the choir in Venetian churches, e.g. Palladio's Benedictine church of S Giorgio Maggiore (1566-76).
5. The iconography is rather unusual, because to be a real 'Pietà' the Virgin should be nursing her dead Son. This painting has sometimes been called a 'Deposition', but then it does not show Christ actually being taken down from the Cross.
6. George Vertue attributed them to Laguerre, and in the 1980s conservation Wolfgang Gartner said he was convinced that the brush strokes of these two paintings were consistent with Laguerre's technique; pers.comm., Stuart Cawthorne.
7. The original keyboard is now conserved in a museum case.
8. He was paid for the commission in 1718.
9. Witley church, of similar chapel-like proportions to St Lawrence, was rebuilt for Lord Foley in 1733-35. In 1747, he acquired the ceiling paintings by Bellucci from the house chapel at Cannons (not to be confused with St Lawrence), along with ten fine stained glass windows by Joshua Price from the same source. He commissioned James Gibbs to fit these works of art into Witley church. See further, A. Brooks and N. Pevsner, *Worcestershire, Buildings of England* (New Haven and London, 2007), 323-5. A fuller account of the dispersal of fittings is given in B. Cherry and N. Pevsner, *London 3: North West, Buildings of England* (New Haven and London, 1991), 297-8.