

# PALLADIAN GIBBS

By Howard E. Stutchbury

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THE career of James Gibbs occupied precisely the period of the introduction and establishment of Georgian Palladianism, for he received his first commission when Wanstead House was approaching completion, and he died only nine months later than Lord Burlington. His Scottish Catholic upbringing and his Tory sympathies denied him both the most powerful patronage available in his time and the official preferment which his technical ability and aesthetic perception deserved. He won his appointment under the New Churches Act, against the opposition of the Whig Vanbrugh, but within two years his sponsors were in disgrace and Gibbs suffered a political dismissal. There were, consequently, political and personal reasons, if no others, for his making no consistent subscription to the rising neo-Palladian fashion, and his work as a whole shows so marked a stylistic versatility as to accord him independence of his contemporaries. His most important executed buildings suggest an association with the proto-Baroque of the Church architecture and the Royal works of Wren, while his lesser buildings range in character from the French of Marbury Hall to the Dutch-Caroline of Leighton House.

In spite, however, of his sharing none of the Whig admiration for the Venetian constitution, he clearly had a real respect for both Palladio and Jones, though this amounted to less than the dogmatic loyalty of the Burlington fraternity and its associates. There are several instances of Gibbs's alacrity in adopting in his own designs stylistic elements and ideas newly introduced or revived in the neo-Palladian repertoire, and some more significant instances of his anticipation of their introduction by the Burlington-Palladians. Most of these occur in designs given in his "Book of Architecture", but only few actually in his buildings, and they might in some cases be interpreted as symptomatic of his rivalry with Colen Campbell.

In 1715, in his first volume, Campbell betrayed his animosity toward his fellow Scot in London with a design for a church in Lincoln's Inn Fields probably intended as a response to St. Mary-le-Strand, and with an attack upon the Italian Baroque specifically directed at Gibbs's former master in Rome.<sup>1</sup> Campbell was, no doubt,

<sup>1</sup> *Vit. Brit.* (i), p. 1: "How affected and licentious are the works of . . . Fontana."

delighted when he himself replaced Gibbs three years later at Burlington House, and equally incensed at the employment of Gibbs in later years by his own patrons, Sir Robert Walpole and the Duke of Argyll. It seems, however, that Campbell was not above accepting in his own work either elements of Gibbs's designs or the Palladian models for them.

The *leit-motif* of English Palladianism was the Venetian window, and its re-introduction in the eighteenth century was first effected by Vanbrugh and Hawksmoor in 1712 and 1713, in designs for Eastbury<sup>2</sup> and for the re-building of Brasenose College, and on a greater scale, as pedimented versions of the "Palladian motif" in a garden pavilion at King's Weston, and in the East end of St. Alphege at Greenwich. The simple Venetian window was not given general attention, however, until the Eastbury designs were published in 1717,<sup>3</sup> and Campbell and Vanbrugh in 1719 built the early examples in Burlington House, and in the towers of Seaton and Eastbury, all of which appeared in Campbell's third volume. The Burlington House façade, therefore, provided the only recent effective precedent for Gibbs's Venetian window in the East end of the Ionic second circular design for St. Martin's,<sup>4</sup> upon which he was engaged in 1720, but its inspiration was without doubt in the Wren churches of St. Mary-at-Hill, St. James's, Westminster and St. Andrew, Holborn.<sup>5</sup>

To the same year, 1720, belong three other designs by Gibbs which show some sympathy with the neo-Palladian theme. All three of these were published in the *Book of Architecture*, but only one, for Ditchley, was executed, and its present relevance is principally in an earlier form of the design.<sup>6</sup> The plan of Ditchley has a superficially neo-Palladian form, having a pair of pavilions with quadrant links to the body of the house, a device usually and properly associated with Palladio's Mocenigo project, though where only two pavilions occur, the plans of the Villas Thiene at Cicogna and Badoer at Fratta Polesine are more appropriate Palladian models. This, however, was no innovation, for since the time of Stoke Bruerne, the same plan form had been adopted by Hugh May, William Wynne and Sir William Bruce, by Thomas Archer and John James; a hint of the idea is present

<sup>2</sup> L. Whistler, *Imagination of Vanbrugh*, 1954, Fig. 60.

<sup>3</sup> *Vit. Brit.* (ii), pl. 55 ("New Design for a person of Quality in Dorsetshire.")

<sup>4</sup> B.o.A., pl. 13.

<sup>5</sup> V. Fürst, *Architecture of Sir. C. Wren*, 1956, Figs. 7, 66 and 67.

<sup>6</sup> Published in C. Hussey, *English Country Houses*, 1955, (i), Fig. 86.

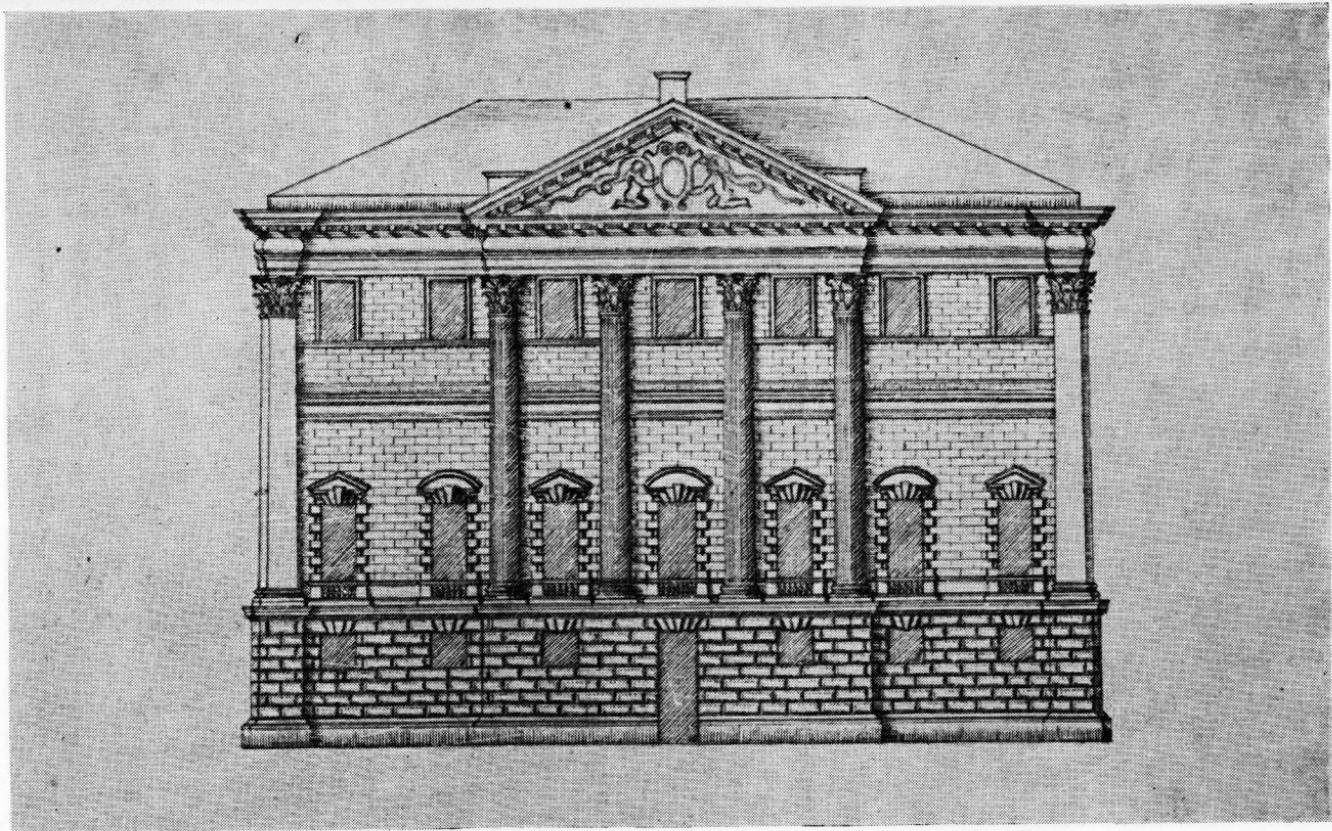


FIG. 1. Inigo Jones—Star Chamber design, 1617

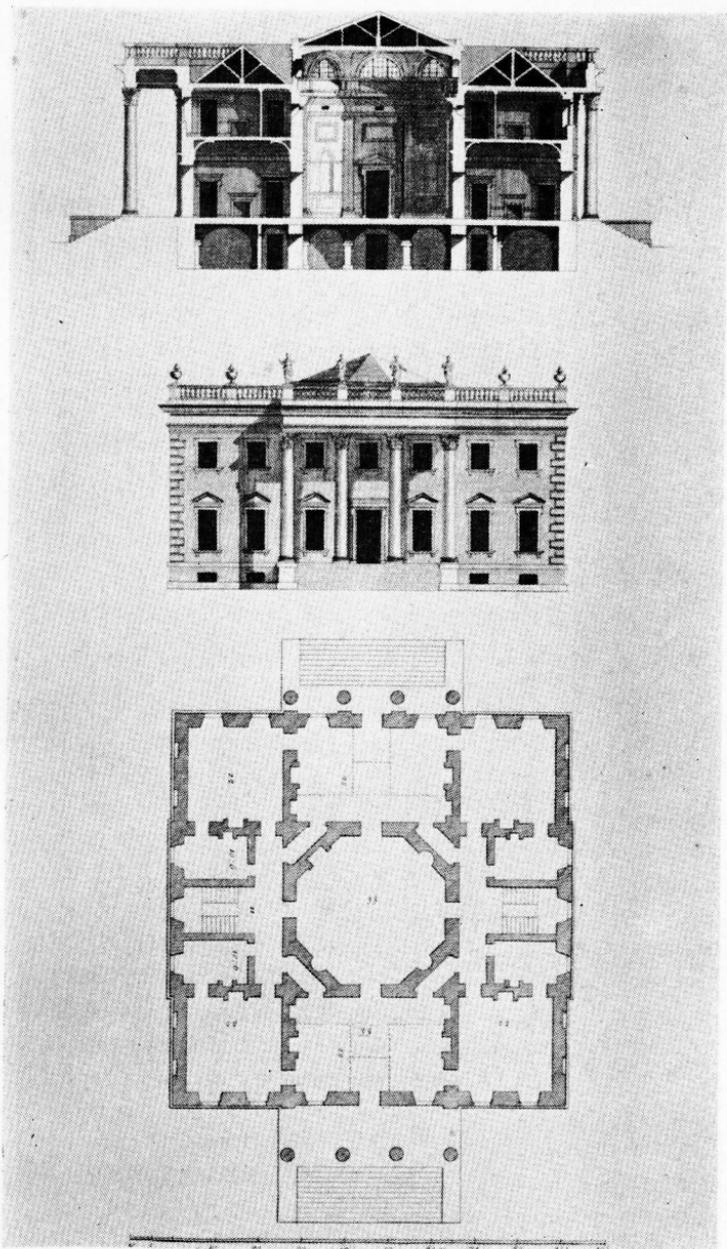


FIG. 2. James Gibbs—"Rotonda" design, 1720.

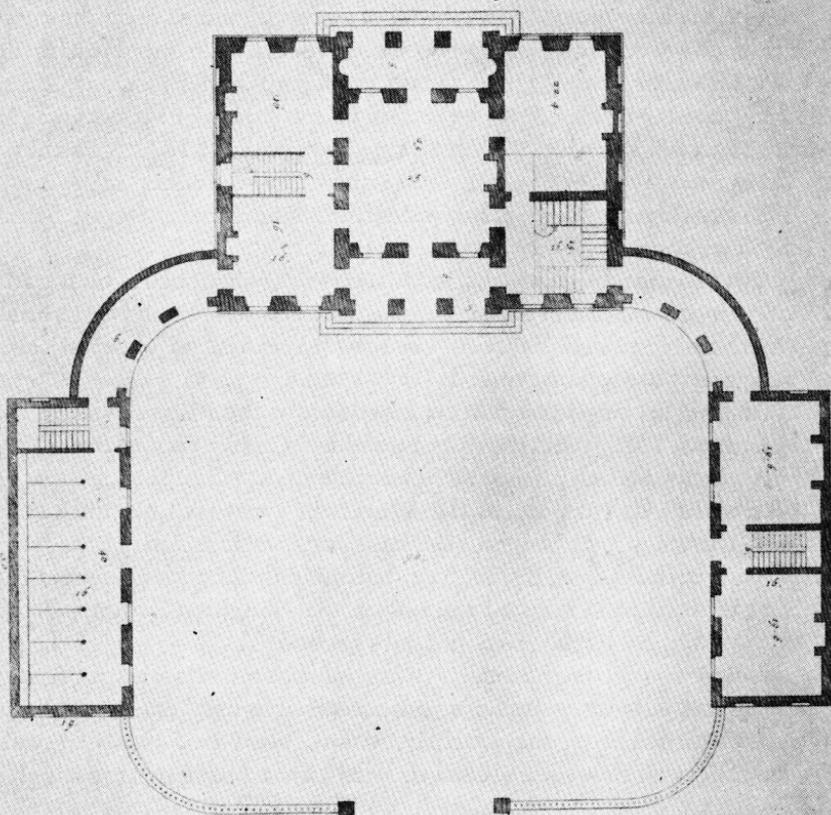
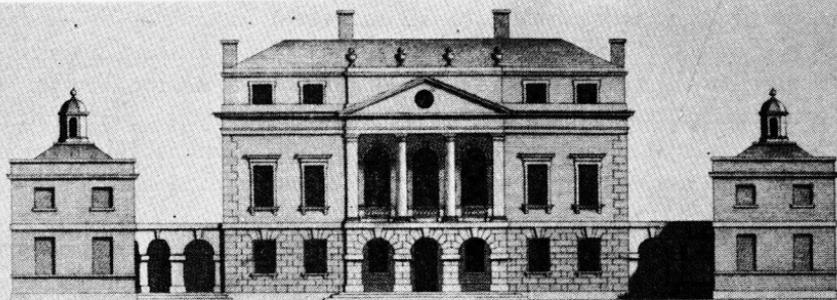


FIG. 3. James Gibbs—Second Down Hall design, 1720.

even in Vanbrugh's great houses. The plan of the body of the house too, is quite unremarkable for its date, being a developed "double pile" of a sort common since Pratt's time. Only in the plans of the pavilions themselves is there a sign of things to come, for they are of the three-part villa form adopted later at Holkham and by Brettingham for Kedleston, not as service wings only but for the accommodation of guests and for private apartments; the stable pavilion in the Ditchley design significantly included the chapel.

The façades in the Ditchley designs include three elements which were later to prove very popular with the Georgian Palladians. The main entrance doorways on both fronts are pedimented tabernacle frames with superimposed ashlar "dies". The provenance of this device has been traced to the school of Peruzzi,<sup>7</sup> and its English origins are in the work of Jones and Webb, particularly in this form in the Star Chamber design<sup>8</sup> (Fig. 1) and the King Charles block at Greenwich, then considered to be a design by Jones. Its Georgian re-introduction was due to Vanbrugh, soon after 1718, at Eastbury; Gibbs, however, was using ashlar dies to the frames of window openings of many kinds, in his St. Martin's designs and at Derby, before the final Eastbury design was published in 1725.

Meanwhile, probably in 1721 and 1722, Campbell's own early essays in the use of this motif were begun at Houghton and Stourhead, where his rusticated Venetian windows appeared, on paper at least, very nearly at the same time as Gibbs's at Derby.<sup>9</sup>

It is equally possible that the repetition of the rustic device in the Houghton East front was prompted by Gibbs's St. Martin's, by Vanbrugh's Eastbury, and by Jones's designs. Campbell, when he became Benson's deputy in the Works, in 1718, will certainly have met Vanbrugh; he might also have seen, before 1721, the Jones drawings acquired by Burlington; but the only English precedent for the rusticated round-arched opening in the Houghton design (altered in execution by Ripley) was in Gibbs's work.<sup>10</sup>

Gibbs was given normally to furnishing cornices and crowning balustrades with sculptured urns and acroterial figures, but he indicated in the quadrants of the Ditchley design, plain ball finials instead. These were no new idea. Used in isolation, and somewhat sparingly,

<sup>7</sup> R. Wittkower, *Pseudo-Palladian Elements in English Neo-Classical Architecture*, Warburg, Jul., (vi), 1943, pp. 160, *et seq.*

<sup>8</sup> Clarke Collection (Worcester College) I, 4.

<sup>9</sup> B.o.A., pl. 27.

<sup>10</sup> Though this could, with the adjacent openings, be interpreted as the central element of a disrupted Venetian window. (cf. Paine's North front for Thorndon.)

they had been making occasional appearances in England for nearly a century. Vanbrugh used them in Blenheim,<sup>11</sup> and Hawksmoor, at about the same time, on the coping of the screen wall of the Queen's College, Oxford; they appeared during the 1680's in the cupola at Chelsea Hospital, and possibly before the Civil War in the East front of Raynham Hall. Probably, plain isolated ball finials originated in England in the work of Jones. They appear in his details for the façade of Somerset House<sup>12</sup> and in designs attributed to him by Ware for the Coleshill gate piers.<sup>13</sup> The significance of their appearance in the Ditchley designs in 1720 (and singly in other Gibbs designs of about the same time<sup>14</sup>) is that they coincide with Campbell's first use of them in Wanstead III, and precede his Houghton and Stourhead designs, where they recur. When Burlington, with the Palladian sanction of the crenellations on walls flanking the West front of San Giorgio Maggiore, introduced at Chiswick the characteristic ball cresting which re-appeared at Holkham, the future of ball finials in neo-Palladian circles was assured. In later years they were the subject of some extravagance, and in 1779 the satirist "Roger Shanhagan" wrote "concerning Cow Hall in Yorkshire" (Cowick, for Viscount Downe—not in fact, a particularly over-endowed example): "Mr. Paine has found the treasure which the Dauphine sent to Harry the Sixth. There are almost as many balls in the two fronts as would supply all the tennis courts in Europe."

In the earlier Ditchley design, which he did not publish, Gibbs introduced corner cupolas which were eventually his most prominent contribution to Houghton, and in attic projections above the central pavilion doorways, a kind of "thermae" window which had previously appeared in England only in some early works of Wren;<sup>15</sup> but it became, with the authority of its occurrence in every one of Palladio's five Venetian churches, and its undoubted origins in cross-vault lunettes of classical antiquity, part of the common stock of English Palladianism. A more important and exactly contemporary instance of Gibbs's use of "thermae windows" occurs in a design based on Palladio's Rotonda<sup>16</sup> (Fig. 2). In this, he departed more from the

<sup>11</sup> North front, upper central pediment.

<sup>12</sup> Clarke Collection, I, 18. At letter "B."

<sup>13</sup> Ware, C.B.A., pl. 98. More probably by Webb.

<sup>14</sup> B.o.A., pls. 55, 56, 69.

<sup>15</sup> Notably St. Anne, Soho and St. Paul's West front (1669); Fürst, op. cit., Figs. 23, 34. The term "thermae window" enjoys no common acceptance, but is used by C. D. Ogden in an unpublished R.I.B.A. thesis: "James Paine the Elder", *passim*.

<sup>16</sup> B.o.A., pl. 44.

original than any of the four executed English adaptations of the Rotonda, replacing the dome with a shallow pyramid, two vestibules with staircases, and omitting the flanking porticoes. But, in spite of the substantial changes, the plan is closer to the original than that of Chiswick, (where the octagonal central space and the *thermae* windows re-appear) and the section than that of Nuthall. This design preceded that for Mereworth by about two years, and that for Chiswick, with which it has some remarkable affinities, by probably five. We know<sup>17</sup> that Wren was friendly to Gibbs, and had been impressed with his drawings. Gibbs might have seen Wren's Rotunda design<sup>18</sup> for Trinity College library and been equally impressed with its Palladian inspiration.

Again, in his second design, made in 1720, for a house for Matthew Prior at Down Hall in Essex,<sup>19</sup> (Fig. 3) Gibbs adopted the idea shortly to be exploited by both Campbell and the Morris-Herbert partnership, of adopting the Palladian villa model, though without the direct associations of the Rotonda derivatives. Gibbs's design has the three-part plan of the Anglicised villa of the Veneto, with neither Palladian room proportions, except for the square saloon, nor direct reference to any particular Palladian example, though with a strong similarity to that of the Villa Cornaro. The pavilions, with quadrant arcade links, are of the original Palladian kind, having long rectangular plans and being essentially service wings. The façade, in particular, has much less in common with the other house designs published by Gibbs, than with the English Palladian villa prototypes, most of which appeared very early in the 1720's.<sup>20</sup> Of these, the earliest were by Campbell. Newby (Baldersby) Park, near Ripon, modelled on the Villa Emo, was begun in 1720; the only other example likely to be so early was Lord Herbert's town house in Whitehall, the design of which cannot be securely dated, though it must be later than 1717, when the ground lease was acquired, and it was finished in 1724.<sup>21</sup> Gibbs must have made his Down Hall design either just before or soon after Lord Herbert's house was begun, and he used the same Palladian model for the façade. This was the Villa Tornieri at Vicenza, in which a distinctive feature, accurately quoted by both Campbell and Gibbs, was the arcaded perron. In both English derivatives, the "intersole"

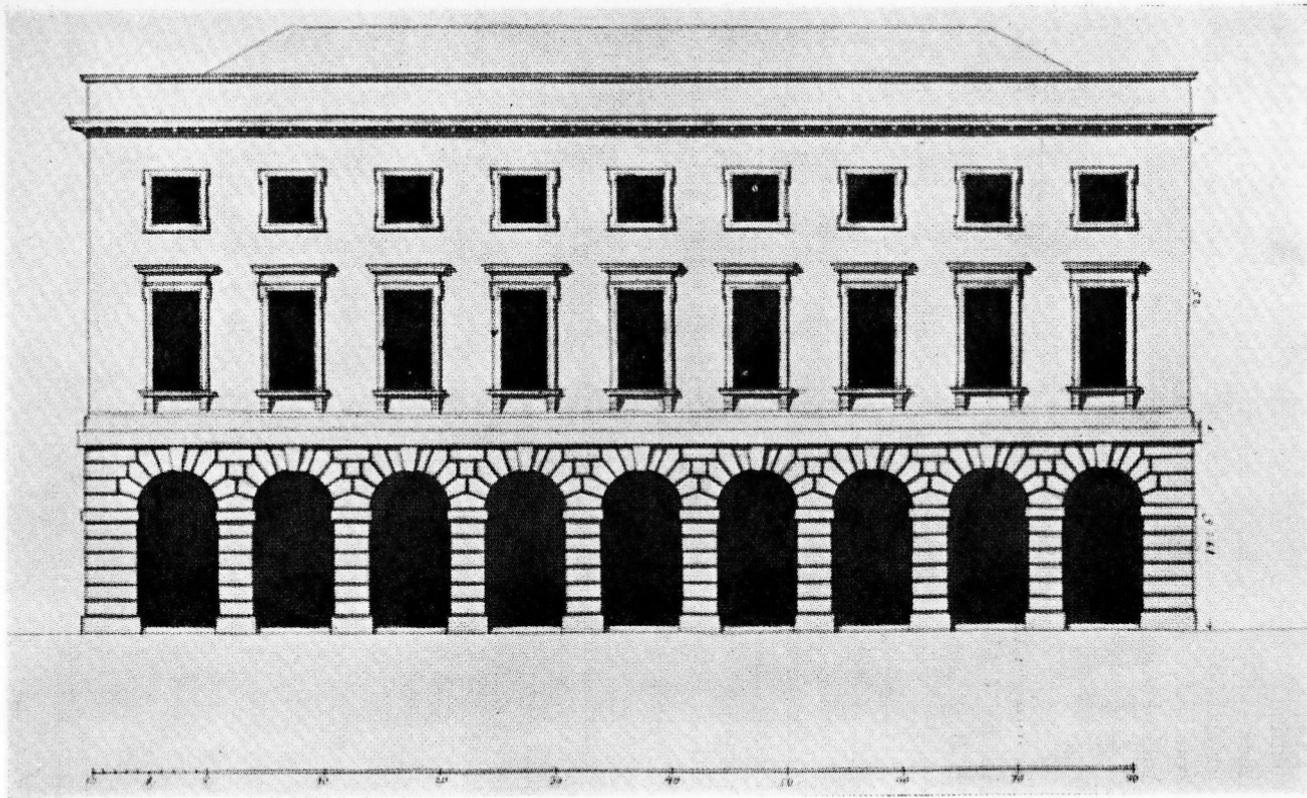
<sup>17</sup> From Gibbs's MS. memoir in the Soane Museum. V. B. Little, *Life and Work of Jas. Gibbs*, 1955, p. 29.

<sup>18</sup> Wren Soc., (v), pls. 19 and 21.

<sup>19</sup> B.O.A., pl. 55.

<sup>20</sup> Sir John Summerson, *R.S.A. Journal*, (cvii), pp. 571-574.

<sup>21</sup> London Survey, (xiii), p. 167. (No. 7, Whitehall Gardens.)



F.G. 4. James Gibbs—Design for Hertford Shire Hall, c. 1737.

windows are displaced to an attic; Gibbs committed the error of abutting the perron balustrades to the column shafts, and extended the fenestration by one bay at each end. If the owner had not so inconveniently died, and the project been consequently abandoned, Gibbs would have made an important early thoroughbred contribution to Anglo-Palladianism.

One among Gibbs's later designs is outstandingly neo-Palladian in character. He was invited, probably by a Mr. Cowper during the years 1737-39, to prepare proposals for a new "Town House for Harford",<sup>22</sup> which was not actually undertaken until 1767 by James Adam. Gibbs's design<sup>23</sup> for the West façade (Fig. 4) was modelled on Burlington's elevation for the Westminster School Dormitory of 1721,<sup>24</sup> which had a sound Jones-Palladian pedigree. The only significant difference between the Hertford and Westminster elevations was that Gibbs reverted, in the base storey, (which was to accommodate the market), to the rusticated arcade of Jones's Somerset House gallery and the Covent Garden piazzas, and the cortile façades of Palladio's Palazzo Thiene. The upper parts in both Burlington's and Gibbs's designs were astylar versions of the Jones buildings, and Adam, when he built the new Shire Hall, used for this façade a similar composition, simplified in detail, but with a slight projection of the end bays.

<sup>22</sup> Little, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

<sup>23</sup> Gibbs Collection in Ashmolean Museum, Vol. iv., nos. 19-21.

<sup>24</sup> Wren Soc., (xi), pls. 25-27.