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The Building of Ampthill Park

V—James Essex

By SIMON HOUFE

'CAPABILITY' BROWN'S natural landscape had sounded the death knell of formality in park land. It had also greatly reduced the need for temples, monuments and grottoes, so dearly loved by the Palladians, but a new interest had taken its place, the picturesque ruin. At Ampthill the rise and fall of the ground, its great oaks and its water, made a building unnecessary, but its history demanded a gothic monument.

Catherine of Aragon's imprisonment at Ampthill Castle with its romantic overtones of gloom and desolation would immediately have appealed to the antiquarian in Horace Walpole on his various visits. The idea of a monument was evidently suggested by Walpole to Lord Ossory during his visit in June 1771 and then worked on during subsequent correspondence until Ossory's enthusiasm equalled his own.

'I have lately been at Lord Ossory's at Ampthill', Walpole wrote to his fellow antiquarian the Rev William Cole the same month, 'You know Catherine of Aragon lived some time there. Nothing remains of the castle, nor any marks of residence, but a very small bit of her garden. I proposed to Lord Ossory to erect a Cross to her memory on the spot, and he will. I wish



The Catherine Cross in Ampthill Park, by James Essex

Photo: Hunting Engineering Ltd

therefore, you could, from your collection of books, or memory, pick out an authentic form of a Cross, of a better appearance than the common run. It must be raised on two or three steps; and if they were octagon would it not be handsomer? Her arms must be hung like an order upon it. Here is something of my idea. The shield appendant to a collar. We will have some inscriptions to mark the cause of erection. Adieu!'

Only five days later Walpole was writing to Lady Ossory to tell her what he had done. 'I have sent an injuncture to my antiquarian friend, who copied over the letters, to find me out a pattern of a genuine Cross, to be erected at Ampthill, and I am sure he will if there is such a thing above ground, for he is as true a Roman Catholic as it is possible for a Protestant clergyman to be – and there is but a very nice distinction between them, especially when they are antiquaries.'

William Cole, an authority on gothic and the owner of an extensive library gave much thought to the Ampthill Cross as is evidenced by his notes on the subject among the Cole MSS at the British Museum (Add MSS 5845 13–15). The study of gothic art was in its infancy and the published sources available rather crude and incomplete. Books that he may have consulted must have included Willis's *Survey of Cathedrals*, Buck's engravings and perhaps Dugdale and Bentham's *History of Ely*. But, like his friend at Strawberry Hill, Cole's was a rather superficial scholarship when it came to designing and as he records in his notes he consulted the architect James Essex. 'As I knew my own *Inability* to draw out a proper Cross for this Purpose I applied to Mr Essex, Architect, who was thorowly skilled in these Affairs for his Assistance, who sent me, after the Commencement at Cambridge was over, the following Letter, with an admirable Neat Drawing in Indian Ink, which I shall disgrace by my copy . . .'.

The letter was addressed to the 'rev Mr Cole at Milton' and was dated 3 July 1771.

'Dear Sir,

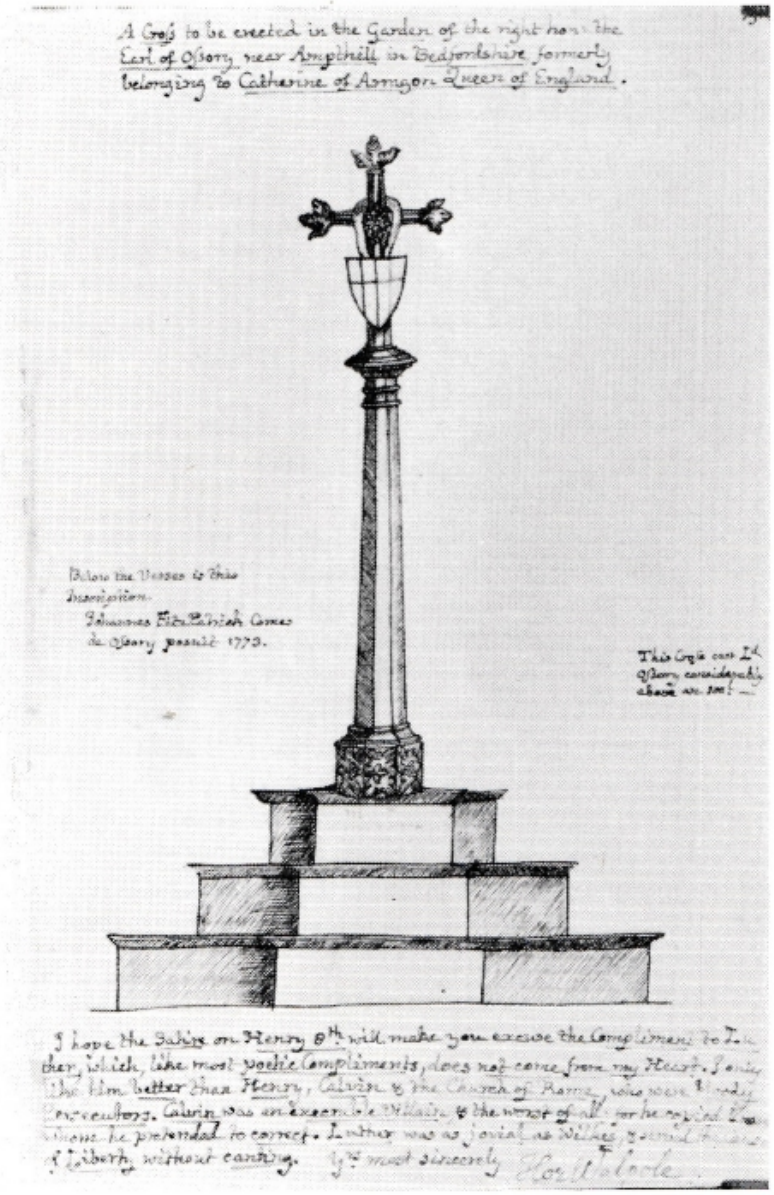
I have enclosed the sketch of a Cross the style is suted to the Age of Hen 8 but as near as possible to Mr Walpol's Designe. I have made it as simple as possible, without making too mean for the Person it is intended to commemmorate. I have made no Scale to the Drawing, not knowing the Height it is intended to make it; but when a Height is determined, the Person who executes it, may make a Scale to the given Height, which will serve to measure all the other parts. I should recommend the keeping exactly to the Proportions of Gothic Architecture. I think the whole Height, including the steps, sh'd not be less than 16 Feet. I beg you will present my Respects to Mr Walpole, & Compliments to Miss Cole, & am Sir, your obedt humb Servt, James Essex.'

The Cross stands today exactly as Essex envisaged it. It is a composite blending of several extant examples of the perpendicular period, the only gothic that appealed strongly to the Georgian mind. Essex was one of the first architects to approach the subject seriously and carried out sensitive repairs to the cathedrals of Lincoln and Ely. Essex's scale at Ampthill is a bit small however and his detailing almost that of a jeweller rather than an architect. The essence of the gothic revival was its decorative sensuousness and this little monument could hardly be more secular in effect or more rococo in feeling or more typical of its period. 'Lord Ossory is charmed with Mr Essex's Cross,' Walpole

wrote to Cole in October 1771, 'and wishes much to consult him on the proportions . . . He is determined to erect it at Ampthill and I have written the following lines to record the reason:

In days of old here Ampthill's towers were seen,
The mournful refuge of an injured queen,
Here flow'd her pure, but unavailing tears;
Her blinded zeal sustain'd her sinking years.
Yet Freedom hence her radiant banners waved,
And love avenged a realm by priests enslaved.
From Catherines wrongs a nation's bliss was spread,
And Luther's light from Henry's lawless bed.'

The position of the new Cross, within view of the carriage drive and according to an early but unflattering print, between two groves of trees, strongly suggests Brown's influence. He was still on Lord Ossory's pay-roll in 1771–72. Walpole makes the most cogent criticism in a letter to Cole after



The original design of the Catherine Cross as shown by the Rev William Cole in his manuscript notebook, 1773

another visit to Ampthill in 1774. 'I have lately been at Ampthill, and saw Queen Katherine's Cross. It is not near large enough for the situation, and would be fitter for a garden than a park: but it is executed in the truest and best taste. Lord Ossory is quite satisfied, as well as I, and designs Mr Essex a present of some guineas.' Cole adds some extra information on the cost. 'This Cross', he notes beside his drawing, 'cost Ld Ossory considerably above an £100.'

Walpole's comments are fair, the Cross is lost in a wide sweep of park land and indistinguishable at any distance from the background of trees and sky. But its importance lies more in its design and its history. It was the outcome of the imagination of four of the leading men of the age, Ossory the landowner, Walpole the dilletante, Cole the antiquary and Essex the architect. It was the earliest example of the gothic revival to be built in the county and is a rare example of a cross used as park scenery. Only one other example is known, at Stourhead in Wiltshire, and Ampthill pre-dates it. Above all it was the swan song of Ampthill Park's architectural development and sets a seal, a slender and graceful seal upon one hundred years of building.

A Bedfordshire Sketch-book

LXXXIX—Wymington

IT IS characteristic of the 'boot and shoe' town of the upper Nene Valley that in juxtaposition there are often dignified village centres, around a magnificent church, with a mean industrial sprawl beyond. This consists mostly of rows of bleak streets which have taken away the identity of the place; both the original town or village and its landscape setting. This has been the major crime, the meanness and wastage of land, the actual industry, iron mining and smelting, and the shoe factories are at least something with a strong identity and are almost preferable.

Wymington is the one Bedfordshire village which belongs to this minor black country; Rushden has drained its character away and what should have been a compact valley village is now largely amorphous and bleak. Experiments in the use of essentially urban forms for new housing have been a disaster both in siting and materials, an exercise for which misguided planning policies must take a large share of the blame. It is only around the church and Manor Farm where the village could be saved. Oliver Carey's additions to the Church of England school are a delight, and of course at St Lawrence we have our one Nene Valley church, not perhaps on a scale to compare with the amazing buildings at Raunds, Rushden and Higham Ferrars but rich in quality and detail. Whatever designers John Curteys used, they were conservative in style for a known start to the building in 1350, using a rich late Curvilinear which by then was old fashioned.

Manor Farm and its associated buildings, though now all empty and disused, makes a wonderful composition stepping down the slope to the west. Any development should preserve this sort of character as well as the invaluable *cordon sanitaire* between this end of the village and the dreary surburbia to the north.

At the time this drawing was done one of the most gorgeous Romany