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INTRODUCTION
'The best educated classic'

'At his residence, Lensfield, in the Town of Cambridge, on his sixty-first birthday, William Wilkins, Esq., M.A. F.S.A., a Royal Academician and Professor in Architecture in the Royal Academy.'[1]

Thus began the appreciative obituary published in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, some weeks after William Wilkins's death on 31 August 1839. It was one of a number about the Regency architect who, despite the fact that his work has passed out of favour, designed at least two public buildings that are among the most famous and well loved in England, for the screen of King's College, Cambridge and the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square, London have come to represent the national heritage and to be popularly associated with learning and the arts (Pls. 1 and 2).

The obituarist, apart from praising Wilkins's architecture and scholarship, gave a vignette of the man that adds reality to those facets of his personality discernible in his writings and the scant remains of his private papers. Much of his correspondence, all his notes and the diary of his Greek tour have been lost. That circumstance necessarily limits the understanding of his character, and to indulge in speculation might be unjust to him or fanciful. The loss of his papers and many of his designs also hampers study of his work, especially since a number of commissions, particularly those on a small scale, must be unrecorded (one, possibly, being the addition to Brooke Hall, Norfolk in 1830).[2]

The obituarist remembered Wilkins as 'tall and muscular, to appearance strongly framed but lately much altered by illness. In Society he was cheerful, and his conversation displayed a mind stored

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with various information' and, quoting from *The Athenaeum* obituary, agreed that he was 'a lover of the arts, which he encouraged to the extent of his means. In all the relations of private life, he was most amiable; and these combined high qualities of head and heart obtained for him the friendship of men in the highest walks of literature and fame.' Even more telling is the last paragraph of the obituary printed in the *Civil Engineer and Architect's Journal*:

> In his private character, Mr. Wilkins was a most amiable and honourable man, warm in temper, but kind hearted, affable, generous and liberal, without the slightest tinge of that ostentation which sometimes renders pecuniary liberality little better than pride and self-worship. Unlike his predecessor in the office at the Academy [Professor of Architecture, Sir John Soane], he was not given to make any parade of public donations, but his liberality was prompted by sincere benevolence, and placed beyond the suspicion of any unworthy motive. We have heard anecdotes of his kindness and generosity, that reflect the highest honour upon his memory, and prove him to have been, what is infinitely superior to his highest title as a scholar or an artist, a truely noble-minded and worthy man.

The physical description is borne out in the portrait of Wilkins and family painted by A. E. Chalon in their fashionable London home at 36 Weymouth Street in 1824 (Pl. 4).[3] Dressed in Caroline costume, perhaps to signify his pleasure in theatricals as much as his historical taste in art, Wilkins is seated beside his pretty wife, Alicia, with their three children, Henry Robert, Alicia and William Bushby (born in 1813, 1817 and 1822), posed about them. In the background is part of his large library and collection of paintings, with a copy of Raphael's 'Transfiguration' hung prominently. Such powers of perception that Chalon commanded seem to have been concentrated upon his patron. Wilkins appears alert, proud and even a trifle pompous, characteristics which, together with a lively wit, are to be found in his writings and extant correspondence. He was also loyal and possessed of a kindly disposition, especially towards less fortunate fellow artists, as evident in a letter fired off sometime in 1827 at Leonard Horner, Warden of University College, London:

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> Any decent drawing, or one worthy of the occasion you mention would occupy a young artist 14 days. I do not know any artist above the rank of a street sweeper that would consent to work for 18d a day! To talk of giving a young artist a Guinea for a drawing is paltrey [sic]. Such a proposition would disgrace even Mr Savings-banks [possibly a reference to Henry Bankes, M.P., who begrudged public expenditure on the arts].[4]

Later John Cotman wrote to his wife on 31 December 1833 about his application for the post of drawing master at King's College, London (which he secured), 'I have obtained a testimonial from Wilkins, R.A., the architect. He acknowledges his school-fellowship with me, and my *honourable conduct through life*, and my high character as an artist.'[5] The little that can be glimpsed of the Wilkins family life suggests that it was a close and affectionate one, as shown by the letters William Bushby wrote home when touring Europe. A delightful sample occurs in one sent from Rome on 21 September 1836 to cheer his father, depressed by professional reverses and afflicted by gout: 'the form of the Dome of St Peter's reminded me exactly of the London University'.[6]

Present in Chalon's depiction of Wilkins's gaze and countenance is more than a hint of the determination which had brought about his rise from a comfortable but modest background to wealth and esteem, confirmed by the three major Cambridge commissions upon which he was then working. In recognition of the success of one, Trinity College New Court, the Seniors later commissioned a bust from his friend, E. H. Baily, finished in 1830, which reinforces the impression of the strength and magnetism of Wilkins's personality (Frontispiece). Clearly this was a man of decision, the characteristics of whose work were deliberately chosen and not the result of chance or default.

As the obituarist remarked, Wilkins's mind and personality won him entrance into the ranks of that educated high society in Britain which exerted such an important influence on the national taste and patronage in his lifetime. He quickly became a respected member of the antiquarian group at Cambridge, among whom was Lord George Gordon, 4th Earl of Aberdeen, who merits particular attention not only as a friend and literary collaborator but because his correspon-

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dence and diaries as a young man help to re-create the intellectual background and experiences that set Wilkins's mind. As early as 1801 Wilkins was received into the Society of Antiquaries and, eight years later, into the Society of Dilettanti, thus mixing with the leading men of taste such as Sir Alexander Baring, Sir George Beaumont, Thomas Hope, Richard Payne Knight, Sir Thomas Lawrence, Charles Long (later Baron Farnborough), the Marquis of Lansdowne, Frederick Robinson (later Lord Goderich and Earl of Ripon), and the Earl of Stafford.

A brief outline of the careers of three, Aberdeen, Long and Robinson, is enlightening. Each graduated from Cambridge and entered politics, the young earl after a tour of Europe, Greece and Asia Minor, and eventually held senior appointments in government. Long was chairman of the Committee for the Inspection of National Monuments which, under its later sobriquet, the Committee of Taste, conducted most of the major official architectural competitions until the one for the Houses of Parliament in 1835, and whose members included Aberdeen, Baring, Knight and Lawrence. Apart from forming a fine collection of paintings and writing *Remarks on the Improvements in London* (1826), Long was a fellow of the Antiquaries and of the Royal Society, as were Aberdeen and Wilkins, a trustee of the British Museum and one of the first deputy presidents of the British Institution. Aberdeen occupied the same position before being elected president in 1825, and also presided over the Antiquaries between 1812 and 1846 and was a power in the Society of Dilettanti. Aberdeen, too, was a collector, though mainly of antique sculpture and coins, and was a trustee of the British Museum with Baring, Beaumont, Knight, Lansdowne, Lawrence and Stafford, and later, in company with most of these, on the Board of Trustees of the National Gallery, often acting as chairman of both bodies. Those honours were extended to Robinson who, as Chancellor or in the popular parlance 'Prosperity Robinson', channelled public funds into the erection of the new British Museum, the acquisition of the Angerstein Collection for the nation, and the housing of the National Gallery and Royal Academy in Trafalgar Square, a scheme brought to architectural fruition by Wilkins between 1832 and 1838. Acquaintance with such men as these advanced Wilkins's career, and some of his patrons came from the Antiquaries and Dilettanti though, clearly, they respected and valued his proven ability. And, as his

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acceptance of progressive ideas in the last years of his life testifies, Wilkins was not a place-seeker who attached himself to a particular political or social group in the hope of reward.

Wilkins was one of the most able antiquaries of the period, whose study of Greek and Gothic design was the source of a series of admirable publications and of the scholarly detailing of his revivalist architecture. The two were interdependent. Throughout his career he expended almost the same energy on his writings as on his architecture, and to effect, for, as the obituarist of the *Gentleman's Magazine* wrote, the former placed him 'amongst the most accomplished scholars of the architectural school; whilst the restoration of the mutilated Greek inscriptions relating to the public edifices of Athens bear ample testimony to the depth and extent of his scholarship'. In fact his translation of the so-called 'Athenian Inscription', retrieved by Richard Chandler in 1765, was consulted by some of those Germans who wrested the mantle of Greek scholarship from their English fellows in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. From the outset of his career Wilkins's publications provided the means of displaying, in the words of the obituarist of the Royal Society, 'a profound knowledge of the principles both of Grecian and Gothic architecture' and 'led to very extensive professional engagements, particularly in the University of Cambridge'.[7]

Neat in composition and learned and refined in articulation, his style caught the tenor of Regency taste and vied in critical regard with the styles of Soane, Nash, Smirke and Wyatville – until, at least, the disastrous commission for the combined National Gallery and Royal Academy. The lamentable conditions imposed on Wilkins by the Government for this commission threw into excessive relief his linear rather than plastic idea of design and laid him bare to severe censure in the press. Misguidedly he attempted to counter his critics through the same medium but only succeeded in presenting himself as an arrogant and dogmatic Greek Revivalist, as illustrated by a review in the *Gentleman's Magazine* of his rejected Greek Doric columnar design for the Duke of York's Monument, exhibited at the Academy in 1835: 'Alas! for Wren and Palladio, and Vitruvius, ancients and moderns your fame is fast waning; it will vanish with the National Gallery. Mr Wilkins has built a column; Trajan's pillar is thrown into shade. No more shall the graceful structures of Rome

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claim our attention.'[8] The critique also reflects the emergence of those changes in English taste that spelled doom for Wilkins's work: a renewed appreciation of Roman and Renaissance architecture, a growing preference for rich articulation and bold massing, and the decline of the Greek Revival in favour of a more full-blooded Gothicism than he wished to adopt. Indeed as early as March 1833 'E.I.C.' in the *Gentleman's Magazine* had arraigned the design for the National Gallery, 'the naked frigidity of Downing College' and 'the square posts which supply the place of columns in the pure Grecian of St. George's Hospital', among other examples of the 'miscalled Greek structures of the day', when supporting the case for the 'beauties and the merits of Pointed architecture' – quite forgetting Wilkins's competence in the Gothic.[9]

Wilkins's reputation revived temporarily following his retirement in 1837 and his death. In 1838 a correspondent wrote in the *Civil Engineer and Architect's Journal* that his 'fame will require no blazon from us; the integrity, taste and science which he has brought into his professional practice are evinced in so many ways and always so much to his honour that we look to his long enjoyment of his retreat with equal hope and pleasure'.[10] Nine years later the critic, James Elmes, stated in the same journal that Wilkins had been 'perhaps the best educated classic that has honoured the profession of architecture since Sir Christopher Wren'.[11] But he considered that Wilkins lacked 'the architect's greatest qualities, invention and freedom from pedantry', thus identifying him with those 'modern Greeks' whom he had castigated in his lectures on architecture, delivered in 1819–21, for copying 'the very fractions of lines and profiles instead of composing in the same spirit' as the ancient Greeks.[12] Worse, he stigmatised Wilkins's buildings as monotonous: 'so much Greek, so much *cold* was the practice of William Wilkins – for no liberty would he give or take, no line or member would he use, for which he could not find a precedent in some ancient Greek building'. While Wilkins was to receive fairer treatment from that unrepentant foe of revivalism, James Fergusson, in his *History of the Modern Styles of Architecture* (1862), Elmes's article, sweeping as it was, signalled his banishment to limbo for the remainder of the century.

The first rehabilitation of his reputation came in A. E. Richardson's pioneering study of English Classicism, *Monumental Classic Architecture in Great Britain and Ireland*, published in 1914.[13] He

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thought Wilkins to have been the most 'learned exponent' of the Greek Revival, being 'an accomplished draughtsman and archaeologist of considerable reputation', if lacking the 'elastic mind' and 'requisite power of adaptation essential to a first class designer' for, while his mouldings and ornaments were 'invariably beautiful, and well selected for the purposes they serve', he was not a 'strong man' as a monumental architect. At that time he did not take much account of the manifold difficulties Wilkins faced in his major commissions but, in the discussion that followed Bereford-Pite's lecture on his work at the R.I.B.A. in December 1932, Richardson assessed Wilkins as 'a great architect', particularly commending the beauty of the proportioning of the pilasters on the façade (Pl. 3), the use of cast iron girders in the large lecture theatres and the sheathing with copper of the iron cramps in the portico of University College.[14] Most recently H. M. Colvin has written in the second edition of his *Dictionary of British Architects* (1978) that in his handling of the Greek Orders Wilkins 'showed more scholarship than Nash or Burton, and more sensibility than Smirke or Burn'. He has also pointed out that Wilkins's Neo-Gothic has not been much studied, and applauded the King's screen as an 'ingenious and effective architectural impropriety'.

Wilkins was indeed as fascinated by mediaeval architecture and as active in its revival as in the Greek. In 1823 he told the Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, that the Gothic was his 'forte', and in 1827 presented an elevation of King's screen to the Royal Academy as his diploma piece.[15] His earliest antiquarian studies had centred upon East Anglian Gothic and, while an undergraduate at Gonville and Caius College, he completed a detailed survey of King's College Chapel. The number of his Neo-Gothic designs, both executed and unexecuted, almost equals those in the Greek style and earned him as many encomiums. He was respected as a restorer and arbiter of Gothic architecture, being consulted, for instance, as late as 1833 by the Rector of Exeter College, Oxford about H. J. Underwood's proposed alterations and offered 'our best thanks for the essential Services lately rendered us by your inspection and observations of certain designs for the front of the College...the improvements which you were kind enough to suggest, have been adopted by unanimous consent'.[16] Three of the architects who passed through his office, B. Ferrey, G. F. Jones and J. H. Stevens, worked

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mainly in the Gothic style.[17] Fergusson thought that Wilkins had been 'probably the first who really aspired to pre-eminence in both styles' even if 'the feelings of his heart...were towards the pure Greek'.[18]

Wilkins's aspirations took the form of accurate though not exact imitations of Greek and Gothic architecture. He did not seek to be original in the modern sense – on one occasion he remarked 'we are all plagiarists more or less; there is nothing new under the sun' – but rather to adapt his models sympathetically to the contemporary scene.[19] The 'beauty of ancient architecture' was not to be imitated, he wrote in 1831, quoting from Aberdeen's *Inquiry into the Principles of Beauty in Grecian Architecture* (1822), 'with the timid and servile hand of the copyist, but...transferred to our soil, preserving, at the same time, a due regard to the changes of customs and manners, and to the differences of our climate, and to the condition of modern society'.[20] The process touched upon in that last phrase did not strike his generation as illogical or unfeasible and, in his case, was achieved by first selecting a model or models appropriate to the setting and purpose and then by adjusting those to the specifications of each commission. Though a circumscribed approach, the results were striking and neither impractical nor without variety. The main façades of his three Neo-Greek colleges differ in articulation, composition and visual effect and, moreover, the last reveals a relaxation of his youthful purism, for the portico of University College is topped by a Neo-Renaissance dome. His was a reasoned as much as a scholarly revival which surely explains the indulgence shown by Fergusson to his work and especially to University College: 'If it were desired to make a building both monumental and ornamental, it would not be easy to do it at less cost, either in money or convenience.'[21] Keenly interested in the application of structural technology, Wilkins used cast iron extensively and kept abreast of progressive thinking on such utilitarian building types as the prison and hospital. The plans of his Neo-Gothic country houses were, relatively, as functional as those for his institutional buildings. He was diligent in providing the required accommodation with least extravagance either of space or expenditure, being among the first regularly to employ a quantity surveyor.

Wilkins's Janus-like posture, authoritarian and modernist, is apparent in replies to two questions about the optimum design for

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a theatre posed to him at the 1832 Select Committee on Dramatic Literature. He thought the best form as a semi-circle, as had been developed by the ancients, but, in pointing out the differences of environment, continued, 'I think it should be constructed of more permanent materials. If you could have a theatre of iron or a stage of iron you would have a perfect theatre.'[22]

Wilkins's interpretation of the Classical and mediaeval styles was novel when measured against those of his immediate predecessors. In the designs for Downing College, 1805, he produced the earliest consistent 'pure' Greek Revival. He eschewed the two predominating strands that had previously characterised the English Neo-Classical School: eclecticism and French rationalism, and set an example that influenced among others F. Bedford, D. Burton, J. P. Gandy (Gandy-Deering), H. W. Inwood, J. Sanders and the young Charles Barry. To a degree he also anticipated the direction taken by the Synthetic Classicists when he combined the Roman and Renaissance dome with the Greek Orders at University College, which was likened to that masterpiece of English architecture, St Paul's Cathedral, and said to honour England – praise more lavish than that accorded to Smirke's nearby British Museum. In the Gothic he staked out a new path by adopting a less Picturesque composition and also by basing his designs on the most appropriate historical sources. He modelled his houses upon the Tudor manor, and his additions at Cambridge on the adjacent Tudor buildings. The result was neither as dramatic nor as influential as his Neo-Greek style, though he instigated a more studious Neo-Tudor mode, imitated in Scotland by W. Burn, echoed in the work of Gandy-Deering and developed in that of H. Hutchinson, T. Rickman, Wyatville and Barry. At Cambridge Wilkins fostered the association between the Gothic style and university architecture that lasted into the twentieth century and spread beyond the shores of Britain. Moreover, Corpus Christi and King's Colleges gave him the opportunity to unite mediaeval ornament with mediaeval structural forms, a union which was to be a cardinal principle in A. W. N. Pugin's rigorous Gothic polemics. What is more, King's College scored a major critical success, one reviewer even writing that it would, when completed, 'present a pile of buildings unrivalled in this kingdom, and scarcely equalled by any Gothic edifices in Europe'.[23]

Yet there can be no gainsaying that Wilkins's talents as a designer

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were restricted. Unlike his greatest contemporaries, Soane and the German K. F. Schinkel (who realised Wilkins's Greek ideal with a brilliance and imagination he lacked), he either would not or could not conceive of architecture that transmuted historical authority. However, such an attitude found more favour in his period, since antiquarian study was accorded an essential rôle in the arts of design, as G. F. Waagen, Director of the National Gallery in Berlin, indicated in his brief biography of Wilkins, noting that apart from the translation of Vitruvius, he had undertaken

> the direction and editing of those splendid works on the Monuments of Ancient Greek Architecture, published by the celebrated Dilettanti Society, which has now existed above one hundred years, and has so astonishingly contributed to diffuse a knowledge of genuine Greek architecture, and to give to all the architects of Europe the means of acquiring the most profound acquaintance with the principles of art.[24]

The Regency men of taste tended to place greater value upon the studious emulation of historical art and architecture than had their predecessors. An amusing illustration can be found in a letter William Gell wrote to Aberdeen on 1 December 1806 about the choice of sculptor to carve a monument to William Pitt, Aberdeen's guardian, at Cambridge. Having heard that Nollekens and not Flaxman was to be commissioned, he asked Aberdeen to send 'some certain poison by return of post as I am determined not to survive such a misfortune. Of all the artists of England none but Flaxman have any taste for other Statues, than Gold laced coats & long flapped waistcoats – Flaxman has really done all that could be done to acquire Classical taste & real *Greek* knowledge – '[25]

This emphasis was to be found in the contemporary moves to improve the education offered by the Royal Academy through a renewed stress on copying celebrated models of historical painting, sculpture and architecture; and there was a continuing intercourse between the members of learned societies and the Academy, which Constable called a 'house of so much intellect', typified by Wilkins.[26] The members of those fraternities, some such as Knight, Hope or Fuseli with reservations, agreed upon the importance of assembling collections, either in the form of originals or copies and engravings,

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