

## WILLIAM ROSE'S BECKENHAM RECTORY

Beckenham once had at least one building designed by a top architectural practice, Robert Adam's rectory, probably built shortly after 1788 by the Rev. William Rose. It was demolished around 1930 to make way for another, more distinguished, neo-classical building also now lost, the massively towered Beckenham Town Hall (c.1932-92).<sup>1</sup>

A number of drawings survive in Adam's office records.<sup>2</sup> They beg several questions. Why was the design stripped back at least three times? Why was the built design so much plainer than Adam's proposals? Was his exotic barn ever built? And what, if anything, might this show about the internal politics of the well-connected London people who owned houses in parks or extensive gardens around what was then a small farming village? Later Ordnance Survey maps and images in local archives show what was finally built, but only deepen the mystery about Rose's motivation.

Rose was the son of the head of one of the leading building contractors in the country, Joseph Rose and Co., which did the plastering work on many of the most palatial buildings of fashionable architects like the Adam brothers and James Wyatt. He was a 'pluralist', the beneficiary of two livings, Beckenham in Kent and Carshalton in Surrey. Thus he had the expertise, connections and, presumably, money to build something special. He also had sufficient interest and ambition to commission at least four successive alternative designs for his new house.

Among his contemporaries Adam was perhaps the most reliant on decoration. The first surviving design, now in Sir John Soane's Museum, London, is a bravura performance in this manner, on a small scale. It shows the entrance front of a square three-storey town house embellished with two rows of classical pilasters one above the other, a small, single-storey columned and pedimented entrance portico, an 'Adam-style' fan decoration over the central window above, flanked by two pictorial roundels, the window framed by pairs of smaller pilasters echoing the portico columns. At the base of the roof is a decorative band and a narrow entablature topped by two guardian Greek sphinxes looking outward.

Rose seems to have thought better of this. An equally striking, but more restrained and robustly monumental, second design dropped the minor decoration while keeping the main pilasters, adding a balcony above the entrance portico, moving an enlarged pediment up to the base of the roof, and rusticating the ground floor, while softening the overall effect by developing the upper decorative band.

Finally this too was discarded, in favour of a plain and modest entrance façade with few architectural pretensions, almost undecorated.<sup>3</sup> This design is dated 1788 and signed off by Adam himself, with a full set of elevations and plans. However the house as built seems to have been even plainer. The successive designs for the entrance façade in the Soane Museum are annotated 'the north front',

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<sup>1</sup> Its style, materials and details in the manner of Sir Giles Gilbert Scott. Compare his Memorial Court, Clare College, Cambridge (built 1923-24) with the tower of his University Library (built 1931-34) close behind.

<sup>2</sup> Adam Sketchbooks, Sir John Soane's Museum, London, vols 4.40 (earliest design for entrance front, detailed sketch with full measurements), 1.184 (second design, initial sketch), 35.101 (second, finished design, in pen and wash), 35.102-110 (final elevations and plans, finished pen and wash drawings). See endnotes xxxvii and xlvi above. Images online at [collections.soane.org/Beckenham](http://collections.soane.org/Beckenham) © Sir John Soane's Museum, London.

<sup>3</sup> The photographic collection of the Local History and Archives Centre, London Borough of Bromley contains several images of the building, mostly taken shortly before demolition.

which is confirmed by surviving maps from c. 1860-1930.<sup>4</sup> Thus the ivy-clad façade in a later engraving and photographs, with the steeple (or, later, tower) of Saint George's in the distance, must be the rear of the building. In that case Adam's intended full-height bay was not built above the ground floor. Nor were the grandly decorative Serlio-style windows he specified for the reception rooms on either side of the bay. They were apparently replaced by simple rectangles lightly framed with plain pilaster arches, as on the entrance side.<sup>5</sup>

The Soane also preserves two designs for thatched barns with rustic tree-trunk columns and slit windows (in one case shaped as Latin crosses), rather like garden 'hermitages'. These show how taste in this period looked two ways, towards neo-classical 'purity' (in this case for the house) and towards the 'gothic' picturesque (here for the barn). A building with a footprint consistent with the latter appears in the 1861/71 map but seems to have been replaced with, or converted into, a similarly sized building labelled 'Church House' before 1894, possibly a small hall for parish use.<sup>6</sup>

What might this saga of initially ambitious, but increasingly austere designs suggest about Rose as a patron, and perhaps about his relations with John Cator who had built Beckenham Place in 1760-62?

One curiosity is that the rectory layout seems to duplicate the Place, albeit scaled down as a domestic town-house suitable for a salaried professional, not a country villa for a wealthy businessman and locally prominent landowner. In itself this is no great surprise, as they derive from a common arrangement for 'grandly simple' country retreats favoured by the sixteenth-century architect Andrea Palladio and his many followers.

But Beckenham Place was unusually plain and understated externally. In that sense it was un-Palladian, as were the later versions of the rectory. The internal traces of the Place's original entrance façade suggest that the rectory may have mirrored it before its later, rather discordant, extension. The only deviations in the rectory as built were the external windows of its top floor. These were needed for practical reasons since the central light-well above its central hall would have been too small for the top floor to be lit from within like the Place.

Moreover Rose seems to have moved first from a typically decorative Adam proposal to something equally impressive but more robustly masculine. Either would have been architecturally more distinguished than the Place. He then presumably requested a much plainer design, with a few grandly decorative flourishes adding interest to its least public façade. But finally he dropped even these, for a house that many provincial builders might have originated without the involvement of someone of Adam's calibre.

To speculate, it could be that Rose was simply the kind of patron who commissioned attractive designs but in the end settled for what he could afford. But he was no novice in the building world, so

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<sup>4</sup> Ordnance Survey, republ. Alan Godfrey Maps, Consett, n.d.: Kent Sheet 7/15 (1861-71) and London Sheet 146 (1894), as noted by the Friends of Beckenham Place Park, and Kent Sheet 7/15 (1930). These show the house at the southern end of its plot, parallel with the church, the earlier with a sweeping drive from the north skirting an extensive lawn suitable for parish events, the later entered from the SE corner, nearest to the church, after most of the N and NE of the plot had been sacrificed to commercial building near the new railway station.

<sup>5</sup> Partly obscured by ivy in the surviving, low-resolution images, but these features seem clear.

<sup>6</sup> Adam Sketchbooks, vols 21.105, 35.111 and 46.172 (the same barn facade, plan at 35.113); variant design with larger central rotunda and 'Latin cross' window-slits at 35.112 (plan, 35.114), all finished drawings in pen and wash. Apparently present on the east boundary in the O. S. map of 1861-71 but possibly rebuilt for parish use by before the 1894 map, where a building with a slightly different footprint is marked 'Church House': this existed until the surviving plot was redeveloped in 1931-32 (op. cit., Kent Sheet 7/15 (1930)).

the earlier, more ambitious plans represented by the drawings in the Soane archives probably embody the development of his own thoughts and guidance, not flights of fancy by Adam's office.

An alternative explanation is that in the end he thought it imprudent, or tasteless, to build something significantly more showy and competitive than what one of the largest local landowners had chosen to build. Cator seems to have been in some sense Rose's patron. Rose's father could well have been a family friend or acquaintance, given Cator's extensive involvement in the building world as a leading timber merchant, whether or not Joseph Rose and Co. was responsible for the Place's plasterwork, as they may have been. The advowson, the right of appointment to the rectory, was withheld by the previous owner from the sale of the manor of Beckenham to Cator in 1773. But it seems likely that its purchase by Rose's father in 1778 could have been initiated by him. The Roses are not known to have had previous connections with the area, and Cator would certainly have wanted his local rectory to be in sympathetic hands. Be that as it may, in 1796 he bought the advowson to Rose's other living, in Carshalton, where he is not known to have had any other involvement.

Whether or not there was any personal connection before the purchase of the Beckenham advowson, Rose may have decided to pay a deferential compliment to the taste of an influential and wealthy local ally, with whom it would have been important to be on good terms. And even perhaps to take his advice, explicitly or implicitly given, in favour of the outward modesty which seems to have governed Cator's own building?