

GLIMPSES INTO THE HISTORY, DESIGN AND CONSTRUCTION OF ST. ANDREW'S KIRK, MADRAS*

The metropolis that is now Chennai (erstwhile Madras)¹⁾, capital of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu, owes its inception to Francis Day and Andrew Cogan of the Honourable East India Company (EIC),²⁾ who in 1639 were granted a strip of sandy beach by the local *nayaks* (governors) to set up a trading post.³⁾ It was here that they built a fort, named after the patron saint of England – Saint George, that eventually became the nucleus of the city and first British presidency of Madras.⁴⁾ As this English settlement grew and subsumed surrounding areas and villages, numerous fortifications and various structures were erected to serve myriad functions.

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¹⁾ Henceforth, 'Madras' will be used in lieu of 'Chennai' as the city was called the former during the time period under consideration. Its name was changed to Chennai only in 1996.

²⁾ Henceforth, the Honourable (English) East India Company will be referred to as 'the Company' or 'the EIC'.

³⁾ Muthiah (2003: 19–20).

⁴⁾ Muthiah (2003: 19).

Significant among these were the different churches built to cater to the religious needs of the growing population of Madras. Most of these churches were Anglican⁵⁾ since the Protestant Reformation had swept through Europe in the first half of the 16th century and England had broken away from the religious authority of the Pope in 1534, during the reign of King Henry VIII (r. 1509–1547). However, by the early 19th century, almost a century after the unification of the Kingdom of England and the Kingdom of Scotland under a single monarch, due to the increasing number of Scottish settlers in Madras, there arose a need for a Presbyterian⁶⁾ church that followed the traditions of the Church of Scotland.⁷⁾

ST. ANDREW'S CHURCH: THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN MADRAS

St. Andrew's Church, located in Egmore, a few kilometres to the west of Fort St. George, is the first Presbyterian church to have been built in Madras. This church is locally known as St. Andrew's Kirk or just the Kirk⁸⁾. This is indicative of its unique identity and its historical ties to the Church of Scotland as the word 'kirk', which simply means church, is used predominantly in Scotland as well as parts of northern Ireland and England.⁹⁾ Funded by the EIC to cater to the Scottish Presbyterian demographic of Madras, the construction of St. Andrew's began in 1818, only a few years after the establishment of

⁵⁾ Anglican churches function under the authority of the Church of England and follow its religious practices and traditions. An Anglican church is headed by a priest. Anglican churches are grouped into regional administrative divisions (dioceses) and fall under the overarching authority of a diocesan bishop.

⁶⁾ The Church of Scotland follows the Presbyterian tradition of Christianity that emerged after the Protestant Reformation and adheres largely to the teachings of John Calvin and other theologians. A Presbyterian church is administered and/or governed by a 'session' or a council of elders who are ordained from amongst the congregation of the church.

⁷⁾ Inglis (2003: 52).

⁸⁾ This is not to be confused with 'The Kirk' which, when used generally, refers to the national Presbyterian Church of Scotland. Henceforth, St. Andrew's Church (Egmore, Chennai) will sometimes be referred to as St. Andrew's Kirk or simply the Kirk.

⁹⁾ MacCulloch (2010: 26).

St. George's Church¹⁰), an Anglican church which was also funded by the Company.

St. George's Church, located a few kilometres to the south of the Kirk, is a massive, majestic, well-proportioned, Neoclassical masterpiece embellished with a wealth of classical ornamentation and a soaring tower. When it was opened to public in 1815, it far surpassed, in scale and grandeur, the previous Anglican churches that had been built by the British in Madras and served as a testament to both the Anglican presence and proliferation in the region as well as the increasing wealth and power of the EIC. Thus, when plans were finally underway for the construction of St. Andrew's Church, St. George's had already set a rather high bar for British ecclesiastic architecture in Madras.

Consequently, St. Andrew's Kirk was envisioned not just as an architectural marvel, to match and possibly outdo St. George's, but also as a religious statement that would aid in the creation, preservation and propagation of a Scottish Presbyterian identity in a city where the Church of Scotland had no architectural representation and in a foreign land whose Christian landscape had been dominated largely by Anglicanism and Roman Catholicism in recent years.¹¹ Furthermore, the Kirk was also a political landmark that bore witness to the fact that the Kingdom of Scotland and its religious institutions were no less than the Kingdom of England and its church after the two had been united to form the Kingdom of Great Britain in 1707. Thus, the funding, siting, design, construction and ornamentation of St. Andrew's Church, which was overseen by a Presbyterian council called the Kirk Session, was a momentous task.

¹⁰ St. George's Church's status was elevated in 1835 and it has been known as St. George's Cathedral since. It is the seat of the Bishop of Madras.

¹¹ The Portuguese, who were Roman Catholic, had set foot on the Indian subcontinent as early as 1498, when Vasco da Gama landed on the west coast of India. By the time the English arrived in 1608, the Portuguese already had a strong mercantile presence especially along the western coast of India. The Portuguese Roman Catholic churches and basilicas of Goa and Kerala are quite well-known and well documented and researched.

SITE SELECTION AND CONSTRUCTION CHALLENGES

The process of choosing a suitable site for the construction of the Scottish church proved to be quite difficult. The 9 acre (approximately 36425 m²) plot of land that was finally acquired for the sum of 4698 *pagodas*¹²⁾ was located in Egmore close to the unpleasant River Cooum, also known as River Chindadripettah.¹³⁾ Due to the proximity to the river, the marshy soil had poor load bearing capacity and this posed major structural and architectural challenges for the construction of St. Andrew's Kirk. However, the site chosen for the Kirk was closer to Fort St. George than the site of St. George's Church.

THE DESIGN OF ST. ANDREW'S KIRK

GRANT, CALDWELL AND HAVILLAND

The very form of St. Andrew's Kirk needed to set it apart from the Anglican churches that had been constructed in Madras so far. It is also quite probable that the Presbyterian Church of Scotland, the Kirk Session and the Scottish settlers saw the construction of this church as a golden opportunity to permanently imprint upon the fabric of the city of Madras and upon the psyche of its inhabitants the richness, both material and spiritual, of Scotland and its Presbyterian tradition.

Lieutenant Grant, who was then Acting Superintending Engineer of Madras, in consultation with the Kirk Session conceived a centrally-planned circular building, wherein the pulpit could be ideally located at the focal point, and this met Governor Hugh Elliot's approval but Grant's sojourn in Madras was cut short as a result of his promotion and thus, his role in the design of the church came to a rather premature end.¹⁴⁾ Grant's involvement

¹²⁾ A *pagoda* is an Indian currency which was minted and used in south India in the past – usually in the form of a coin completely or partially made of gold.

¹³⁾ Transcript of correspondence dated 16th February 1817 to the then-Governor Hugh Elliot from the Kirk Session – John Allen, R. Fullerton, W. M. Taggart, D. Hill and K. Darlymple; archived in St. Andrew's Kirk, Egmore, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India.

“Celebrating God's Goodness Over 200 Years – St. Andrew's Church | The Kirk | Bicentenary Commemorative Film | 25-02-2021,” The Kirk, *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=780_668IGG0 (uploaded Feb 27, 2021).

¹⁴⁾ Havilland (1821: 2-3); Inglis (2003: 53).

in the original design of the church is substantiated by a letter dated 22nd September 1816, a copy of which is preserved in the archival documents of St. Andrew's, which states near the end:

“We again take the liberty of bringing to the notice of your Honor [*sic*] in Council the assistance which we have derived from Ensign Grant of the Corps of Engineers, by whom the plan of the Church was prepared & through whose means we have procured the tender now submitted for sanction.”¹⁵⁾

Although Grant had first submitted plans for the church, the governor opined that the work ought to be continued by the Superintending Engineer as was the practice of that time.¹⁶⁾ So Colonel James L. Caldwell, the Senior Engineer of Madras Presidency, who had also designed St. George's Church, took the helm. He anticipated that the construction of the central domical roof would be problematic from a structural standpoint and extremely expensive. Caldwell suggested covering it with lead or copper but this would further increase the cost and the heat load of the structure exponentially, making it even more difficult to keep cool in the hot and humid climate of Madras. Constructing the roof with wood instead, if possible, would have been risky due to the climate and the termite menace that plagued the region. Other climate-related issues and monetary, structural, spatial and aesthetic concerns, including the most basic issue of securing the foundations of the church in such poor quality soil, were also brought to light.¹⁷⁾

After Caldwell had done his part, Deputy Major Thomas Fiott de Havilland, who had supervised the construction of St. George's Church under Caldwell, took over as Superintending Engineer. He altered the design as needed and was responsible for strengthening the structure, making it more durable and beautiful. He decided to construct the dome in a structurally sound manner with masonry regardless of the cost.¹⁸⁾ In fact, so great was his ardour to see it through that he erected a domed building on his own plot of land on

¹⁵⁾ Excerpt from photocopy of correspondence dated 22nd September 1816 to the then-Governor Hugh Elliot from members of the first Kirk Session – Robert Fullerton, David Hill, W. M. Taggart and K. Darlymple; archived in St. Andrew's Kirk, Egmore, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India.

¹⁶⁾ Photocopy of correspondence dated 5th October 1816 from the then-Governor Hugh Elliot to the Kirk Session; archived in St. Andrew's Kirk, Egmore, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India.

¹⁷⁾ Havilland (1821: 3–4).

¹⁸⁾ Havilland (1821: 4).

Mount Road to better understand the loads acting on the dome and provide the necessary structural supports to counteract them. Once he had finished his calculations, he submitted his design and estimate to the then-Governor, Hugh Elliot, who approved of them regardless of the steep cost. This might have been because Elliot was himself a Scotsman and was greatly taken with the novelty of the design.¹⁹⁾

THE ROLE OF JAMES GIBBS

However, the story of the design of the Kirk is not as straightforward as that. Lieutenant Grant's design for a circular church was in fact originally the brain-child of famous Scottish-born, British architect, James Gibbs who had conceived of two such circular buildings after he had been selected to design a new structure, towards the end of the first quarter of the 18th century CE, to replace the old church of St. Martin-in-the-Fields, London, which was in a state of decay.²⁰⁾ Gibbs, whose individualistic style was influenced by his Baroque training in Rome, elements of classical Vitruvian, Palladian and Georgian architecture and the works of Christopher Wren, had laid out several plans before the commissioners of the project, two of which involved designs for spacious round churches.²¹⁾ Although the commissioners had approved of the round designs, they finally had to scrap the idea because of the expenditure such an ambitious undertaking would incur; in fact additional land would have had to have been purchased simply to accommodate the greater dimensions of the circular plans.²²⁾ The design that was eventually approved was that of the elegant but rather conventional rectangular structure with a centrally placed steeple that still stands in the northeast corner of Trafalgar Square in Westminster, London.

Although the commissioners had quashed Gibbs' pipe dream to construct a circular church, he was not so easily deterred and included these two unrealised designs in a book he authored in 1728 which included numerous folios and plates of his own architectural and ornamental designs.²³⁾ This book,

¹⁹⁾ Penny (1912: 253–4).

²⁰⁾ Havilland (1821: 2); Inglis (2003: 53).

²¹⁾ Gibbs (1728: iv, plates VIII–XV).

²²⁾ Gibbs (1728: iv); Inglis (2003: 53).

²³⁾ Gibbs (1728: plates VIII–XV).

much like his other published works, was quite influential and the designs therein served as guides or templates that others could put to use as such or with variations in the field of architecture and construction.²⁴⁾ Ensign Grant in all probability had access to this book²⁵⁾ and he was also in a position to accomplish what Gibbs himself had been unable to do thus far. So it was Grant who at long last gave Gibbs' design for St. Martin-in-the-Fields the chance to be realised and De Havilland who ensured that the project would come to fruition, albeit in a land almost 5,000 kms away.

Thus, the form and design of St. Andrew's Kirk was finalised through the confluence of the creative genius of Gibbs, the perspicacity of Grant and the technical brilliance of Havilland. Its unique and iconic form with its towering steeple are hard to miss and it continues to be one of the best and oldest known landmarks of Chennai city to date.

WELL FOUNDATIONS: ENGINEERING AND SOCIETAL STRUCTURES

In order to ensure that the foundations of the church would not sink or settle unevenly in the swampy substrate, Havilland sunk, with the help of Indian diggers and well-sinkers, about 300 wells deep into the soil.²⁶⁾ The sinking of the wells was a labour intensive task that required the aid of skilled Indian workers from the labour or agricultural class of south India, who led nomadic lives, living wherever employment was available, and married amongst themselves. Since their services were often in demand in Madras, they had a settlement close by. The men of the community sunk wells while the women and children assisted in the removal of the soil.

Havilland's perspicacity led to his astute observation of the connection between the well-sinkers' predilection for alcohol and their occupation, which required hard physical labour and the ability to spend great amounts of time in, under or around water, withstanding the wet and cold conditions. This gives us great insight into social structures and caste divisions, subaltern realities and the often symbiotic relationships between the settlers and the natives.²⁷⁾

²⁴⁾ Gibbs (1728: i); Inglis (2003: 53–54).

²⁵⁾ Inglis (2003: 54).

²⁶⁾ Havilland (1821: 16); Inglis (2003: 54–55).

²⁷⁾ Havilland (1821: 17–18).

ST. ANDREW'S CHURCH: A MONUMENT TO THE KNOWN AND THE UNKNOWN

It is interesting to note that although the names of many British people, such as Grant, Caldwell, Havilland, Gibbs and the names of the members of the Kirk Session, who were either directly or indirectly involved in the planning and design of the Kirk, have found a place in historical records, not a single name from the community of the well-sinkers, who were instrumental in ensuring that such an edifice could rise from the river bank as a result of their back-breaking labour, has been recorded by Havilland or mentioned in any of the other sources known to us thus far.

Therefore, not only is St. Andrew's Church a testament to the presence of a substantial Scottish population in early 19th century Madras, a hallmark of the Scottish Presbyterian identity and the Church of Scotland in the Indian subcontinent, a witness to the increasing wealth and power of the British East India Company and a product of collaborative design and engineering, but it is also a mute monument to the numerous nameless, faceless and, in some cases, placeless skilled and unskilled people and groups, who toiled for and under those whose names have been recorded and remembered.

NOTE: St. Andrew's Kirk celebrated its bicentennial anniversary on 25th February 2021. It continues to serve as a place of Christian worship for a predominantly Indian congregation and still functions in accordance with the Presbyterian system of administration.

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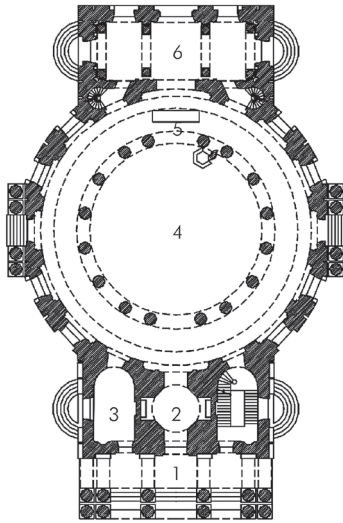


1. Aerial view of St. Andrew's Kirk,
Egmore, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India.

Source: <https://legacy.thekirk.in/roots>.

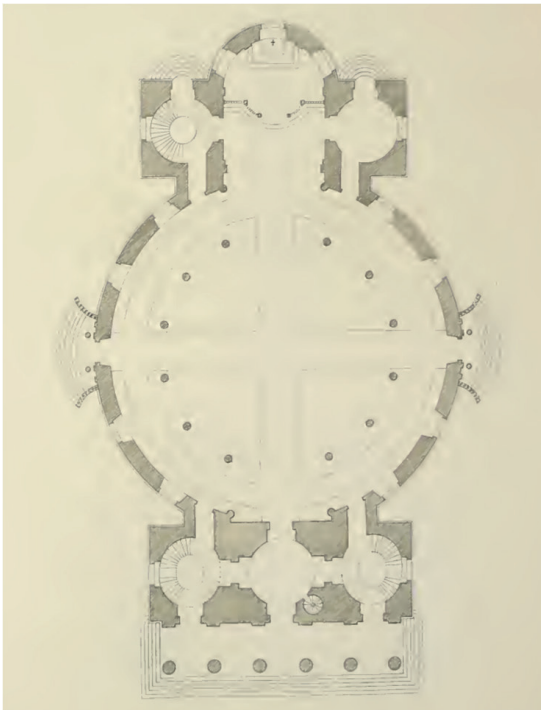


2. Justinian Gantz, *St. George's Cathedral, Madras, with carriages arriving at the door*, 1849, watercolour, 20.2 x 30.2 cm, British Library, WD4294.



3. Plan of St. Andrew's Kirk, 1 – Portico, 2 – Tower, 3 – Vestry, 4 – Nave, 5 – Altar, 6 – Sanctuary. Source: *Madras: The Architectural Heritage*.

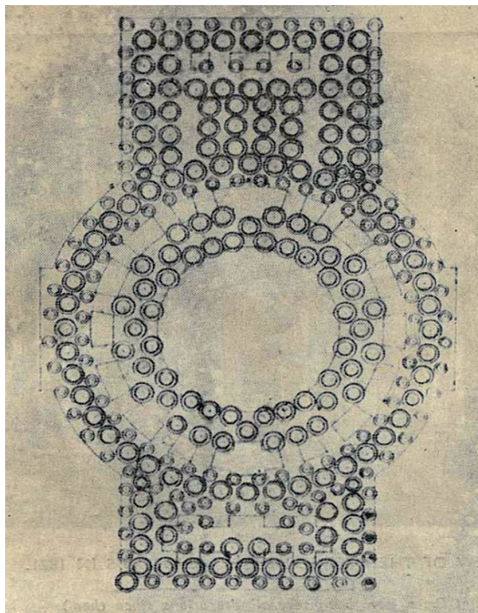
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4. One of James Gibbs' round plans for St. Martin in the Fields which was never realised. Source: James Gibbs, *A Book of Architecture, containing Designs of Buildings and Ornaments*, Plate 8, London 1728.



5. Proposed elevation for the round church plan.
Source: James Gibbs, *A Book of Architecture, containing Designs of Buildings and Ornaments*, Plate 9, London 1728.



6. Plan of Wells of Foundation of St. Andrew's Kirk, from original by Maj. T. F. de Havilland.