

A New Tooth

October 1834 to June 1835

ON 16 OCTOBER 1834 the old Palace of Westminster burned down. The story of that terrible fire need not detain us any longer here, for the problem of what to do about the ramshackle, patched-up, and wholly unfit-for-purpose collection of ancient parliamentary buildings on the banks of the Thames was at last resolved. Even before its ruins had cooled, the press was speculating about how the Palace should be replaced.¹ In the words of one magazine:

The aching tooth that interrupted all enjoyment, is extracted by a sudden wrench, in spite of the fears of him who suffered most from its vested interest in his mouth...And now he must have a new tooth, which shall perform its proper function of mastication, and prepare his food for the process of digestion. Already he begins to rejoice that his boring friend is gone, to trouble him no more; and that its place will be supplied by one which will save him from pain and trouble, and give him health, ease and happiness.²

It took five days for the embers to be finally extinguished and, once out, the immediate concern was how to provide temporary accommodation for the sittings of the Commons and Lords and new homes for the officials and servants who had previously lived on site. So it was that, on the

same day that the last fire engine left the site, the Office of Woods—the curiously named department in charge of maintaining royal palaces at the time, sometimes known as the Office of Works—received a report from their in-house architect, Sir Robert Smirke. In it he described how he had ‘examined the state of the Walls of the House of Lords and Painted Chamber, and I find that when partially repaired, they will be in a condition to receive a Roof and the fittings necessary for their temporary use with perfect safety’. Three days later the Treasury agreed to Smirke’s plan and granted £30,000 to build a pop-up Houses of Parliament amid the ruins of the old one, heedless of the offers (including one from the King to take over Buckingham Palace) to move elsewhere.³ Just over a week after the terrible disaster, which had changed the face of Parliament forever, the decision to stay on site until a permanent solution had been found was made without anyone considering the consequences for the future, thus laying the foundation for years of strife.

The shell of the former House of Lords chamber, where the disastrous blaze had originated, was still standing, and Smirke believed that its medieval walls were sturdy enough to be reroofed to become the temporary House of Commons. It was certainly larger and potentially more comfortable than their previous home. Nearby, the former Painted Chamber, one of the forgotten treasures of the old Palace, was in a similar state, and Smirke recommended that it be transformed into a temporary House of Lords chamber for the duration. All could be completed by February 1835 and, in the meantime, Parliament was prorogued several times.⁴ The suggestion that Westminster Hall could be fitted up for the use of both Houses in session found little favour with Smirke, who pointed out that the work of the adjacent Lawcourts (based at Westminster until the 1880s) would have to be stopped and activities moved out, and that it would pose a severe fire risk to a portion of the building—its most magnificent and ancient portion—which had only just been saved from total incineration the week before. He also remarked that his proposal

would leave the whole area between Westminster Hall and the River, a space exceeding four hundred feet in length and more than 250 feet in width, clear for the arrangement and erection of any Buildings that may

be required for the permanent reception of the Houses of Parliament or other purposes.⁵

The government took the hint. Smirke wanted the contract for any rebuilding, and the new Prime Minister, Peel, was already inclined to give it to him.⁶ This was a mistake. Only nine days after the fire, the *Spectator* had warned, ‘The cost is not an object. Money is not to be wasted, but it is not to be spared. There are also evils to be shunned—jobbing, secrecy and precipitancy.’⁷ Just as the fire had swept away the old Palace, now there was a chance to throw the old way of doing things onto the bonfire as well, including ‘jobbery’: in other words, the fixing of public commissions for political favourites.

With Smirke’s ambition well known and the ugly building schemes of the Office of Woods so spectacularly expensive, Sir Edward Cust took up the cudgels beyond Westminster. Cust was a discontented man. A former Tory MP, he had lost his rotten borough seat of Lostwithiel in Cornwall with its 24 voters due to the Great Reform Act, and had not sat in Parliament since 1833. In an open letter to Peel at the end of January he declared that he hoped the rumour of jobbery was untrue, and doubted that the ‘poverty of [Smirke’s] taste is counterbalanced even by his other professional accomplishments and by the unimpeachable respectability of his character.’⁸ This was just the first of hundreds of letters in which the matter of the rebuilding of the Houses of Parliament was played out in front of a public audience over the next three decades. Cust’s own suggestion was for a Royal Commission comprising five gentlemen of an artistic bent which would devise a competition to select an architect from a shortlist of prominent professionals, and direct the design and rebuilding, while the Office of Woods should be in charge of the budget. He, of course, would be more than happy to serve as its Chief Commissioner, (naturally ‘without fee or reward’) in order, ‘to try the experiment of a better method of selection and control over the architect’ than had been the case with the Office of Woods’ notoriously maladministered works.⁹

Parliament reopened in its makeshift accommodation on 19 February 1835. The King, William IV, lamented, ‘the destruction, by accidental fire, of that part of the ancient Palace of Westminster, which has been



Robert Smirke's temporary House of Commons (left) and House of Lords (right)

long appropriated to the use of the two Houses of Parliament' and went on to express his 'wish to adopt such plans for your permanent accommodation as shall be deemed, on your joint consideration, to be the most fitting and convenient'.¹⁰ Peel, stung by Cust's intervention, then proposed a select committee to consider 'the best means of remedying the mischief which had been done'. He had drawn up a list of its members himself for the approval of the House, to make things easier and quicker. Yes, the government had 'called in the advice of a Government architect, that Gentleman had drawn out a plan, which had met with the full approbation of his Majesty's present advisers, and this plan would be submitted to the proposed Committee'. But should the committee dislike it, 'nothing had passed with the architect which rendered it incumbent on the Government to adopt the plan in question'. Peel scored a temporary victory in this early skirmish, for in deciding that Parliament itself should specify the design requirements for the building

of the century rather than an independent commission, he made sure that its members did not include the irritating Cust. Joseph Hume MP, the Radical who had pressed so hard for a relocation of the Commons to the West End or Marylebone in the years leading up to the fire, immediately responded to Peel's statement by asking whether the committee would be considering a completely new site.¹¹ He was not alone. *The Westminster Review* had already expressed surprise that half of the public appeared to think 'that it would be a ravishment of the constitution to put the legislature anywhere but Westminster'.¹² Other papers, of all political persuasions, then piled in to make the point that public competition alone was the only way forward.¹³

This set the pattern for decades of argument over the location of Parliament, arguments which did not cease even as the building rose up around the debaters. The Tories wished it to stay on its ancient site, cheek-by-jowl with Westminster Hall—so redolent of former glories and national pride—thereby imbuing the new Houses with legitimacy and gravitas. The Whigs similarly clung to Westminster, but wanted a modern approach to appointing the architect, through an open competition, rather than the Tories' favoured option of sticking with tried and trusted methods which had served well for years; while the Radicals never ceased to yearn for a new parliamentary building elsewhere, far away from the pestilential quarter around the Abbey: modern, utilitarian, and shed of its associations with the corrupt politics, religion, and class-ridden traditions of the past. Peel knew he was beaten and following this firestorm of press lobbying and political pressure, at the beginning of March he appointed a large select committee of 23 members to decide the matter. Among them were a number who had helped fight the fire, and they now turned their thoughts to what might go in the old Palace's place. They met several times in the first weeks of the month, hearing evidence from clerks, the Commons' Librarian, Mr Vardon, and from Mr Bellamy the caterer (whose entire business had burned down in the fire), as to the space required for various operations beyond the chamber. Members already had decided views.¹⁴

Almost as soon as the politicians had moved into Smirke's papier maché, deal-boarded, interim chambers early in 1835, they began to complain

about them, continuing the squabbles of the pre-fire Parliament. The diarist, Greville, a regular at Holland House, expressed the view that the temporary House of Commons was very spacious and convenient, but that the 'present Lords is a wretched dog-hole'.¹⁵ The Duke of Newcastle felt lost in it: 'it is so small and mean looking [and] So like a private theatre, that one feels the more the degradation of taking our own room for the Commons & giving us a little hole that will not hold more than 250 people'.¹⁶ The new public gallery in the House of Commons, reserved for reporters, caused quite a stir: Greville thought it 'quite inconsistent with their standing orders, and the prohibition which still exists against publishing their debates. It is a sort of public and avowed homage to opinion, and a recognition of the right of the people to know through the medium of the press all that passes within those walls.'¹⁷ Some months later, the Duke of Newcastle was still moaning about the chamber:

our present room is so degradingly bad that it has called for universal complaint & the result is that this Evening a report was made, that the architect could construct a good and commodious room Equal to the old House of Lords for about £4000 & it was the opinion of the Lords that it was advisable to provide this temporary room for our better accommodation whilst the permanent buildings for the future Houses of Parliament are being builded.¹⁸

Additions and changes were being suggested to the temporary arrangements throughout the first half of the year, the Lords wanting 'more convenient' spaces and the Commons asking for additions to the library provision and also a second division lobby.¹⁹ Yet when the total outlay on the remedial work was announced, Herbert Curteis, MP for Sussex East, considered £44,000 'for building this and the other miserable House of Parliament most enormous; and he strongly protested against it'. In response he was told that £15,000 of this sum was for furniture, and that 'the very short time allowed for restoring the buildings, unavoidably increased the expense; and, under all the circumstances... the country had no reason to quarrel with the charge'. Curteis huffed that he considered the charge for furniture 'to be most scandalously extravagant. The country was called upon to pay upwards of £10,000 for

nothing but a parcel of deal tables and a few rusty old chairs'.²⁰ It was already proving impossible to find a consensus among politicians on the issue of their accommodation.



Artists were also circling the rotting corpse of the old Palace. In March the Duke of Wellington had to tell Benjamin Haydon—who had watched the fire with glee six months before—that his petition about creating paintings for the new Houses of Parliament would be considered by a Lords committee, but that the scheme for the whole building would need to be under the control of a single painter.²¹ Another was George Scharf. He had emigrated to England in 1816 from Bavaria, but never sold a single painting and instead had made his living from producing fashionable engravings and illustrations for scientific books. His lifetime bestseller was an exotic lithograph of the giraffes at London Zoo ‘with the Arabs who brought them over to this country’ which, when it was published in 1836, sold some five hundred copies in just two weeks. Like dozens of other artists in the days immediately after the fire he had wandered the ruins of the Palace and made drawings on the ground, but then, when the walls began to totter, and the salvage teams had moved in, and it became too dangerous to sketch, he had climbed up a stair and got out onto the roof of Westminster Hall. Taking two large pieces of paper, he began working in oils on a panoramic view across the Palace. To his right was the dismal scene of the Painted Chamber and the ruined House of Lords where the fire had been kindled. To the left from his vantage point, on a level with the chimneys, he could see the cloisters with a fire crew still checking for embers with their fire engine. Behind him were the Lawcourts and the Abbey, while ahead of him was the roofless House of Commons now revealed to be the medieval chapel it originally was. Residents of the Palace peered out of their windows at the destruction, and the debris left behind from the firefighting. Beyond was the river, then the houses of Lambeth and Southwark, and in the far distance, round the bend in the river, he could see Ludgate Hill and St Paul’s Cathedral.



Panorama of the ruins of the Old Palace of Westminster by George Scharf, 1834

But George had become so engrossed in painting this scene that when darkness fell and he tried to leave, he found that the door through which he reached his crow's nest had been locked. He was stuck. Stranded. *Völlig festsitzen*, as they said back home. Shouts for help and prolonged banging on doors finally resulted in his rescue over the rooftops, down a ladder, and through the house of the Yeoman Usher of the Exchequer, William Godwin. Mrs Godwin was highly amused with the adventure and told him he was welcome to use their house as a thoroughfare at any time. Accordingly, almost every day for the next three weeks Scharf did just that, and on at least one occasion he took his wife Elizabeth, his two sons, and a party of friends with him to see the view. His seemingly respectable rescuers were the very same William Godwin who had in his younger days been the philosopher-anarchist and husband of Mary Wollstonecraft, and Mrs Godwin was thus the stepmother of Mary Shelley, author of *Frankenstein*. The old firebrand, Godwin, was in fact spending his twilight years mouldering at the heart of the Establishment, and must have viewed the fire with a degree of ambiguity—for it had originated in the worn-out procedures of the corrupt Exchequer of Receipt itself.²²

On 30 March 1835 Scharf exhibited his completed panorama of the ruins of the Palace of Westminster at the New Water Colour Society's

annual exhibition at Exeter Hall in the Strand. His diptych—half of which is now in the Parliamentary Art Collection, the other half lost long ago—was so favourably received that Scharf decided to extend its commercial appeal by seeking subscribers for a giant printed version of the same, at the cost of £2 if hand-coloured. Only one person signed up for his printed version at Exeter Hall, but when Scharf arranged for it to be put on display in a committee room in the House of Lords, it was seen by many more people, including not just politicians but also visitors to the temporary buildings and ruins. Scharf's project never attracted enough interest to go ahead, nor, true to form, did he ever manage to sell his original painting, but he did persuade ten more people to sign up—including the Duke of Wellington, and a 39-year-old architect called Charles Barry.²³



Mr Barry had been observing developments at Westminster closely since the fire. On the night of the disaster he had been travelling back to the city from business in Brighton. His son Alfred takes up the story:

A red glare on the London side of the horizon showed that a great fire had begun. Eager questions elicited the news, that the Houses of Parliament had caught fire, and that all attempts to stop the conflagration were unavailing. No sooner had the coach reached the office, than he hurried to the spot, and remained there all night. All London was out, absorbed in the grandeur and terror of the sight.

The destruction was so far complete, that preservation or restoration was out of the question; the erection of a new building was inevitable, on a scale and with an opportunity for the exercise of architectural genius, hitherto unexampled in England. The thought of this great opportunity, and the conception of designs for the future, mingled in Mr Barry's mind, as in the minds of many other spectators, with those more obviously suggested by the spectacle itself.²⁴

Charles had more reason than many to wonder about the future of the Palace, for he had grown up in its shadow: he was the ninth of 11 children

of Walter Barry, a government Stationery Office supplier who lived at 2 Bridge Street, which ran along the northern side of New Palace Yard. Some 50 years after his birth on 23 May 1795, the Clock Tower of the New Palace of Westminster—its most well-known feature—was constructed opposite his birthplace, which stood there until 1867. He was christened at St Margaret's, Westminster, the parish church of Parliament, just a few steps from home. When Charles was 3, his mother Frances died in childbirth, but she was soon replaced by a devoted and rather extraordinary stepmother, Sarah, who took over care of the whole family when Walter himself died in 1805, as well as her husband's business concerns. The family's modest position meant that Charles emerged from school in 1810 with only 'a superficial knowledge of English, a good proficiency in arithmetic, and a remarkably beautiful handwriting'. He regretted his lack of formal education for the rest of his life, and may have embroidered details of the location of his schooling when he later became a prominent public figure.²⁵

The warm-hearted, spirited, and mischievous boy, who drew caricatures of his incompetent drawing master, turned into an amusing, impulsive, and inquisitive 15-year-old articled to Middleton & Bailey, surveyors of Paradise Row, Lambeth. For the next six years they trained and mentored him, giving him the technical education and business skills which he needed to set up in practice on his own.²⁶ For the first 21 years of his life then, Charles Barry lived and worked in the immediate neighbourhood of the Houses of Parliament, very different to the one which is familiar to us today. The Palace was ever-present. His commute over Westminster Bridge to Lambeth provided fine views of its eastern flank. From the top of the Barry home it would have been possible to see the north door of Westminster Hall, still with the Lawcourts held inside them, as they had been ever since Magna Carta, as well as the roof of St Stephen's chapel and the Georgian 'Gothick' turrets and crenellations added to the buildings by the Surveyor General of the Office of Woods, the architect James Wyatt, the year before Charles became an orphan aged 10. Growing up beyond its walls and then walking to and from work each day would have imprinted on Charles's vivid imagination the muddled shapes and textures of the riverside Palace, which had been home to the House of Lords since the thirteenth century, and to the House of Commons since the Reformation.²⁷

At Middleton & Bailey's Charles finally started to obtain the education so long denied him. His employers took a 'strong and affectionate' interest in him and he filled notebook after notebook learning his craft: surveying and architectural geometry, quantity surveying and financial estimates, and a sound technical understanding of building materials, techniques and workmanship. In later life he deplored the increasing separation of architectural design from construction engineering, regarding it as 'a serious evil, both in theory and in practice'. All of this, in addition to the family business run by Sarah Barry, made him in later life an exceptionally gifted manager of both people and his own firm.

One thing he couldn't be taught at Paradise Row though was creativity. This he had innately. From the time he left school he drew and painted in his spare time and constantly decorated and remodelled his attic bedroom. He built grotto-like structures in it and painted murals on its walls to turn it into a 'hermitage' with a rocky interior but 'with openings looking out onto a sunny landscape'. Once it was finished he used it as a painting studio and drew large-scale figures of all kinds on its walls. Sarah, whom he called mother, and his brothers and sisters looked on indulgently and with amusement as his ambitions grew. In 1812, at the age of 17, he successfully entered a drawing for exhibition at the Royal Academy for the first time. Tellingly, its subject was the interior of Westminster Hall. Over the next three years his designs for 'a church', 'a museum and library, with an observatory', and 'a group of buildings for a nobleman's park' all won a place on its walls.²⁸

In May 1816 Charles attained his majority and thus a share of his father's inheritance, which had been put in trust for him until he reached 21. It comprised just a few hundred pounds and a freehold property in Northamptonshire. By then Charles had been working as Middleton & Bailey's business manager for a few years but he decided to quit his job and see the world to complete his education as a gentleman would. With funds in his pocketbook and encouraged by his formidable step-mother, at the end of June 1817 he set off to spend 12 months in Europe, with all the advantages of 'a handsome person, great fascination of manner, high spirits and a sanguine temperament'.²⁹

Following victory at Waterloo two years before, the Continent had opened up once again to the English. A Grand Tour of this kind was

starting to become as *de rigueur* for aspiring architects in this period as a postgraduate training is today. For the self-taught stationer's son it also became the university in which he was exposed to wholly new ideas and influences, made lifelong friends and contacts, and began to polish his London commercial manners so he could move comfortably into wider social circles. He also visited, sketched, and measured many of the architectural masterpieces of Europe and the Ottoman Empire, which were to prove an inspiration to him when designing Britain's most iconic building, nearly 30 years later. Charles first spent three months in Paris, where he considerably improved his basic French through tutoring, and then by lodging with a French family. He spent days in the Louvre studying and drawing old masters, and began to teach himself Italian. He then travelled to the sunny shores of Lake Geneva and through the Simplon Pass, Napoleon's scheme of 1805 connecting Brig in Switzerland to Domodossola in Italy through the Alps. It meant that the mountains and the sublime scenery were navigable by stagecoach for the first time: a wonder. 'It is difficult to say who deserves the greatest admiration', wrote Charles in his travel diary, muffled into his woollen greatcoat:

the mind that conceived it or the mind that executed it... in some places tunnels are cut through the solid rock, with long icicles hanging from the roof. Near the top, the road was covered with 8"-10" of snow, and there were fine romantic views... It must be the finest route in Europe and will ever reflect much honour on Buonaparte. Though he has been the author of much evil, he has also done an infinite deal of good.³⁰

Forever after, grand civil engineering schemes fired his imagination and he strove to emulate them.

At the time Charles was travelling, Italy was not a nation, but still a collection of many individual kingdoms, dukedoms, city-states, and papal territories, despite Napoleonic reforms. Bribing border officials to ensure swift passage, armed with a couple of pistols in case of roadside brigands, and fighting off regular incursions from carriage fleas and bedbugs, he continued on his way via Milan, Piacenza, Parma, Bologna, Florence, and Siena: a familiar route for backpacking art students today. Everywhere he went he studied paintings and sculpture in galleries and

visited cathedrals, palazzi, and classical antiquities. In November he entered Rome, where he had letters of introduction from Benjamin West, the President of the Royal Academy, to give to Canova. On his first full day in the city Barry went to visit the famous neoclassical sculptor and found him in his studio 'engaged upon a fine figure of Venus, intended for the Prince Regent'. He stayed in Rome until the following Easter, sketching buildings everywhere, often visiting the Vatican galleries to draw with the help of Canova's permit, circulating among the *bel mondo* in parks, at churches and the opera, dancing, and perfecting his Italian. The Swiss Guards he thought similar to Beefeaters ('their dress a patchwork of red and yellow, with cocked hats and each carrying an old-fashioned pike').³¹ In Rome he fell in with a group of London artists and scholars, including Francis Johnson, an oriental linguist teaching at Haileybury, the East India Company college, and William Kinnard, an architect with a strong interest in ancient Greek buildings. Through them he was introduced to an English artist based in Rome who was to become a lifelong friend and collaborator at the Palace of Westminster, Charles Eastlake (1793–1865). Eastlake's first encounter with Charles was, however, not promising, whom he recorded in his diary as 'an Irishman called Barry, more an amateur than an artist'.³² Eastlake clearly found Barry's accent difficult to place, and his views on architecture were enthusiastic but untutored and naïve, so it was clear there was a considerable social and intellectual gulf to bridge if he were ever to make a favourable impression on the wealthy upper classes.

The quartet left Rome at the end of March 1818 for Greece, via Pompeii and Naples, crossing from Bari to Corfu in a felucca called *Le Anime di Purgatorio*. The boat lived up to its name and Charles was horribly seasick, but, fortified by Greek sausage, cod roe, white cheese, bread, and oranges once on dry land, they visited Mount Parnassus and Delphi by mule in the scorching sun, explored the bazaars of Corinth, and—braving rumours of a plague outbreak in Athens—finally rowed their way by moonlight to Piraeus and the Parthenon ('the truest model of grandeur, beauty and symmetry', he thought). At the end of June they parted ways with Eastlake, who wanted to stay in Greece to study the antiquities there, but he would come back into Charles's professional life

in 1841, alongside much more august company. The others went on to Constantinople via Smyrna, which had their own artistic and architectural wonders to discover.³³

In Athens they had made the acquaintance of a Mr David Baillie, and now he met up with them again on the crossing to Smyrna, arriving in the city during Ramadan in mid-July. Charles had now been away from home for a year, and his original intention had been to return to Westminster after 12 months, but when moving on to Constantinople with his new friend, Baillie proposed that Charles should continue to travel and study with him, at a salary of £200 a year—all expenses paid—in return for his producing sketches and plans of the buildings and antiquities they visited, with the chance to make his own copies at the same time, so long as they were not published. Charles rightly judged this as too good an opportunity to miss, and so he agreed.³⁴ It was the making of him. This bold decision would keep him away from London for another two years, but was to provide him with an unrivalled experience of near- and middle-Eastern culture among his contemporaries.

In later life Charles regularly declared the ancient city of Constantinople ‘the most glorious view in the world’.³⁵ The capital of the Byzantine and Ottoman empires, its massive fortress walls and projecting square towers, was an inspiration: one which found its way into the elevations and planning of the Palace of Westminster many years later, as anyone viewing the river front of the Houses of Parliament today may see. Yet while Constantinople had become the must-visit destination for his fellow architects, his next travels to Egypt, Palestine, and Syria were virtually unheard of as a professional excursion: ‘Egypt is a country which so far as I know, has never yet been explored by an English architect’, he said.³⁶ It also gives an early sense of the combination of boldness, imagination, and opportunism which later characterized his work on the new Palace of Westminster. He and Baillie sailed on to Cairo with some new companions: Thomas Wyse (who also came back into Charles’s life in 1841 as a member of the Fine Arts Commission) and a Mr Godfrey.

Through November and December they travelled up the Nile and here Charles discovered a string of astonishing sites: the temple at Dendera, which he measured and sketched (‘no object I have ever seen made such a forcible impression on me’), Luxor, Karnak (‘stupendous’),

Philae, Abu Simbel, and the Great Pyramid and Sphinx at Giza.³⁷ Charles now chose to dress in an Arab costume of 'loose trousers tied round the waist and a long gown of coarse linen, and a silk handkerchief on the head'. Travelling by camel across land, camping in tents in the desert, and suffering from food poisoning and the heat, Charles and his companions continued their travels to Gaza and Jaffa in the middle of March 1819, and reached Jerusalem shortly before Easter, where they stayed in the Latin Quarter. He washed in the River Jordan and floated in the Dead Sea. He met the Pasha of Damascus and went to Bethlehem. Days were spent surveying and sketching the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, until finally they were ready to move off once again at the end of April. Things were getting wilder for the travellers. The food was more erratic in both quality and quantity. Their Christian guide was incompetent and came to blows with their Muslim hosts. Their servants amused themselves by firing guns as entertainment. At Jerash, 'much annoyed by mosquitoes', Baillie and Barry travelled on, touring Nazareth, Beirut, and Baalbek where they stopped three days to study, and finally arrived in Damascus where, with their beards and tanned faces, 'we were universally taken for Turks': unrecognizable to polite London society.

On the way to Homs they were mistaken for a party of Bedouin raiders and shot at, and worse was to come when, on the road to Palmyra, they were kidnapped by Bedouins who hoped to ransom them and were forced to ride their camels at a gallop across the desert. Shots were fired and some of the party were wounded in the fight to get free. This was too much for Mr Baillie, who, once the group had recovered and made their way to Tripoli in Lebanon under the protection of the local governor, decided to end his employment of Barry and scurry back to the safety of Naples. Charles had made 500 sketches for Baillie over the previous ten months and had copied most of them for his own reference too.³⁸ It was now the end of June and he, Godfrey, and Wyse left Palestine for Cyprus, Rhodes, and finally reached Smyrna again, 'with heartfelt satisfaction. Our mameluke costume caused some curiosity.' There they shaved off their beards and changed back into clean European clothes, and were recognizable once more as the young men who had left the same city on their adventures a year previously. After recuperating for a while, they cast off again across the Mediterranean,



Charles Barry's sketch of the ruins of Jerash, 1819

this time in the direction of Malta—a British possession—where they were quarantined, and then they spent two weeks exploring the island. In the autumn and winter of 1819 the adventurous trio discovered Sicily, but Charles's precious portfolio of sketch copies from his travel, so carefully kept through all his journey was stolen. He was devastated. Once back in Naples the group was reunited with Baillie, and they explored the sights nearby together including the Palace at Caserta and Mount Vesuvius, climbing up to the active craters, getting stifled by the gases, and watching closely as the lava flowed past them at the rate of a foot a minute, and whose luminous streams at night were 'very grand'.³⁹

By February 1820 Charles was back in Rome, but had met up with the man who was to become another lifelong friend, John Lewis Wolfe. He had studied under Joseph Gwilt in London, but was much more an academic than practical architect. He quickly became his new friend's informal tutor and mentor. Although three years his junior, he now put Charles through a short but tremendously intensive period of critical architectural analysis, as they travelled through Florence, Pisa, Bologna, Venice, and

the Palladian villas of the Veneto. They parted company in July at Verona, but the two men stayed in touch, and forever after Charles would discuss all his designs with Wolfe.⁴⁰ Finally, Charles returned home by way of the glories of Turin, Nîmes, Avignon, Lyon, Autun, and Paris. He arrived back in England on 1 September 1820 ready to take on the world.

From modest beginnings, Charles attempted to launch his professional practice. He rented a small house in a Georgian Terrace at Ely Place, Holborn, as his home and office, directly opposite one of the finest surviving medieval churches in London—St Etheldreda's, a Gothic masterpiece. However, without rich patrons or the backing of a wealthy family, his first year working was difficult, and his early income came from modest alterations to urban churches. However, by 1822 two new Commissioners' churches at Prestwich and Campfield, Manchester, were being built to his designs, creating new places of worship in industrial areas where the population now outstripped the availability of spiritual nourishment. A growing string of church and hospital commissions in wealthy Manchester and fashionable Brighton followed, aided by recommendations from John Soane (who at that time was redeveloping parts of the chaotic Palace of Westminster, including knocking down the old House of Lords building which Guy Fawkes had tried to blow up in 1605). A widening circle of satisfied clients brought Charles to the attention of the Duke and Duchess of Sutherland who commissioned him to work on Trentham House in Staffordshire. He was then awarded first prize in the competition to build the Manchester Institution in 1825—now Manchester Art Gallery—in a neo-Grecian style. This was followed by his breakthrough London win in 1829 with the Traveller's Club in Pall Mall. It won wide critical acclaim not just for its daring introduction of the Florentine Renaissance palazzo style to London—that he had so admired with Wolfe on their final months of travel in Italy—but also for its elegant adeptness in planning and interior circulation, one of the later hallmarks of Charles's genius.⁴¹

Then in 1833, when he entered a design for the new Birmingham Grammar School competition, he took the decision to employ a Perpendicular Gothic style, as he had done in a number of previous church commissions, starting with his much-admired church of St Peter on the Steine in Brighton (1824), which launched his career when still under 30.



St Peter's Church, Brighton

Architectural historians generally now agree that in the grammar school, with its long street façade, which required repeated verticals to break it up, its brilliant management of the interplay between corridors and staircases to aid the movement of hundreds of boys around the building, and 'the stone panelling, the rich roof with bosses, the lighting from windows which open onto an interior court' were a testing ground for Westminster and would have been thoroughly familiar to anyone who wanders the corridors of power there daily.⁴² The grammar school building is long since demolished, but Barry's central corridor with his fan vaulting still survives today as the chapel of the relocated school, now King Edward's, Edgbaston.

Charles wasn't just turning into an architect of some fame. The early death of his parents; his youthful capacity for hard work; his society experiences in Europe; his hair-raising adventures in the Levant; and a string of competition disappointments, as well as successes, had begun to form in him quite some resilience to adversity. Dealing with aristocratic patrons, competition judges, and rich industrialists in the 1820s had made him more practised at handling the tricky and demanding. From 1833 he was starting to move in the highest Whig circles, dining

a few times a year with the Holland House set (including the Prime Minister, Melbourne) at their fashionable town house political and literary salon in Kensington.⁴³ This was exposing him to the ways of politicians and that in turn increased his ability to suppress his naturally outgoing, curious, and sociable personality into a smoother, more flattering one in order to achieve his artistic and professional ends. He was to need every ounce of those attributes in the decades that followed—when creating the new Houses of Parliament became both the greatest architectural achievement of Victorian Britain and, simultaneously, the biggest professional headache imaginable.

For review only