The Historic Anglican Churches of Kolkata

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St John's Church, Kolkata during conservation

Kolkata, formerly Calcutta, is the capital of West Bengal and stands on the east bank of the Hooghly River. The city grew from three small villages to a thriving trading post with the arrival of Job Charnock, the East India Company administrator who chose it as the company's Bengal headquarters. It became the capital city of the Indian subcontinent in 1772 following the establishment of British rule and remained so until New Delhi became the capital in 1911. Kolkata is now a teeming megalopolis of 15 million people.

The city has been blessed with architectural wealth. The ensemble of grandiose old buildings in Dalhousie Square, the historic seat of British administration and commerce from where the Indian subcontinent was governed, is rich in Georgian, high Victorian and late Gothic architecture, much of it surviving in its original form.

The World Monuments Fund (WMF) recognised Dalhousie Square as a significant historic city centre that needs to be protected for posterity, and it was placed on the WMF list of 'Watch' sites in 2004 and again in 2006. Over the last ten years or so, awareness has been growing in Kolkata, and in India generally, of the importance of conserving historic buildings and places.

This article is based on the author's experience over the past six years working as a conservation architect at the three most historically significant Anglican churches in the city: St John's Church, St James's Church and St Paul's Cathedral. These three historic Anglican landmarks, which have been part of the Church of North India since 1970, are an integral part of Kolkata's historical, cultural and architectural landscape, and have been recognised and listed by the local authority as heritage buildings.

The aim of this article is to highlight the historical and architectural significance of these three historic churches and to outline the conservation measures taken to save St James' Church, which was rededicated in December 2011 by the Rt Revd Ashoke Biswas, the 19th Bishop of Kolkata Diocese, after nearly two years of careful conservation.

ST JOHN'S CHURCH

St John's Church, the original parish church of Bengal, became the first Anglican cathedral in the Indian subcontinent when the first Bishop of Calcutta, Thomas Middleton, preached his first sermon there on Christmas Day, 1815. It remained a cathedral until the consecration of St Paul's Cathedral in 1847.

St John's was the most eligible candidate to take up the role of the East India Company's leading church in its leading city in India. Sir Evan Cotton, author of *Calcutta Old and New* (1907), wrote 'There are few public buildings in Calcutta richer in their memories of bygone days than the old church of St John'. It was built on the site of the old burial ground, which originally belonged to the Maharaja Nabakrishna Deb, who gifted the land for the construction of the church. Sandstone from Chunar was brought for the steeple and blue marble from the ruins of Gaur, the first capital of Bengal, for the flooring. It took three years to complete and was consecrated by Lord Cornwallis in 1787.

The church was designed by Lieutenant James Agg of the Bengal Engineers. While its inspiration was Sir James Gibbs' St Martin-in-the-Fields (1722) in London, Agg incorporated embellishments of his own and did away with the portico found in many London churches. The result is a classical temple of Grecian columns with a diminutive Baroque tower and spire, but adapted to Anglo-Indian requirements: its portico and main entrance was at the east, while the steeple housing the clock and the church bell was at the west end. The altar at the east end was enclosed in an apse. The curious layout was probably necessitated by the requirement of the approach to the east, as the western part was cluttered with tombs and mausolea, which by 1802 were in such a state of irreparable decay that they had to be removed. In many ways it was this church rather than Gibbs' original design which became the prototype for many subsequent churches in India.

Historically, the church has undergone several changes. In a Thomas Daniell aquatint of 1788, we see the main entrance at the east end with wide steps leading up to the majestic portico, while the tower rises from what appears to be the rear of the church. The congregation thus entered the church from behind the altar, allowing them to see who was present without having to discreetly turn round in their pews. However, this peculiar layout ultimately proved too much for the propriety of tradition and significant remodelling ensued. The west end of the church was duly converted into the main entrance, complete with a sheltered *porte-cochère* (a covered, carriage entrance). The eastern entrance was decommissioned. The splendid steps remain, albeit worn out, and the portico was turned into a sort of *demi porte-cochère*, with flanking inclined access drives known as palanquin slopes (a palanquin being a covered litter carried by bearers).

The Doric pillars inside the church were changed to Corinthian ones in 1811, and during the same year the porticos on the north and south sides were added. These stately verandahs do not detract from the original architecture, and are not easily recognised as later additions, because they were executed in a manner completely in concert with the rest of the building.

In 1901 the north and south galleries were removed, except the north west portion and its timber spiral staircase.

ST PAUL'S CATHEDRAL

St Paul's Cathedral, Kolkata

St Paul's, which shares a visual axis with the landmark Victoria Memorial building (Sir William Emerson, 1906-1921) was built opposite the Bishop's Palace on Chowringhee Road. Construction began in 1839, when the foundation stone was laid by Daniel Wilson, Bishop of Calcutta, and it was completed in 1847. With the consecration of St Paul's as the first Episcopal Church of the Orient in 1847, it assumed the role of cathedral from St John's.

The cathedral was designed in the Indo-Gothic style by William Nairn Forbes, a military engineer who was later promoted to Major General and was also responsible for the design of the old Calcutta Mint, where he held the post of Mint Master. The tall central spire and square tower beneath were inspired by a similar feature at the 12th-century cathedral in Canterbury, England. The upper portion of the tower, which originally reached a height of 61m (200ft), was destroyed twice by earthquakes, in 1897 and 1934. Finally, it was rebuilt as a replica of the Bell Harry Tower of Canterbury Cathedral.

The nave of the cathedral is large, with beautifully carved wooden pews and chairs, a stained glass window to the west, intricate coloured artwork covering the eastern walls, and two marvellous Florentine frescoes. The cathedral is 75m (247ft) long and 25m (81ft) wide and is set in huge grounds with several ancient trees. The church is a feast for the eyes, with fine murals vividly recording the life and work of St Paul. Bishop Wilson is buried at the cathedral and the commission plate conferred on him by Queen Victoria is still exhibited here.

Many interim repairs to the cathedral are now causing problems. The walls were rendered with hard cement plaster and painted with cement-based paint. This compromised the wall's ability to breathe and, compounded by rising damp, resulted in the de-bonding of plaster and flaking of paint finishes. The sacrificial gable tin roof, which covers the curvilinear wooden decorative ceiling and is supported on a truss, has been renewed several times.

The rainwater pipes, previously encased inside the buttress wall, were exposed and changed into water spouts. However, the water draining from the spouts falls from a great height onto the facade and the window panels, causing damage. Furthermore, the gutter at the end of the steep gable roof is not deep enough to discharge the rainwater in the event of a heavy shower. The diameter of the pipe that links the gutter and the spouts is too small and often becomes blocked with leaves or feathers resulting in water leaking, particularly on the peripheral wall.

Another serious problem is the cracks which have been gradually spreading since they appeared when the Kolkata Metro underground railway was constructed not far from the cathedral two decades ago.

On being approached by the church authority to look into the current problems of the cathedral, I have advised the members of the cathedral maintenance committee to devise a long-term repair strategy and to prepare a detailed conservation plan which will become a reference document for future maintenance or repair work. While we address the causes of the problems one by one, we have started compiling detailed documentation and a condition survey of the fabric. We have increased the depth of the gutter and the diameter of the pipe which has solved the problem of rainwater discharge leaking on the walls of the nave.

A more careful approach to the care of the cathedral is needed. Conservation is a continuous process, but this principle has yet to fully take root in Kolkata, even among the custodians of the city's heritage. A long-term view of preventive conservation and daily maintenance of the historic fabric

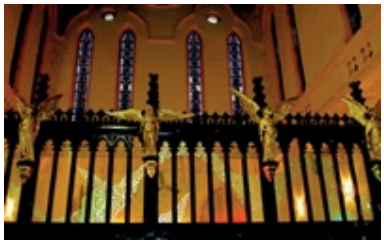
needs to be fostered. Any contrary approach leads to more invasive and often unnecessary intervention, which often results in more permanent damage and loss of historic fabric.

Promoting the conservation mindset can be a battle, but it is one that must be fought and won if Kolkata's historic buildings are to be protected for posterity.

ST JAMES' CHURCH, JORA GIRJA

The recently completed conservation of St James' Church took two years of meticulous planning and implementation and 21 consultative meetings with the members of the church. The project has seen the church rescued from a state of decline, carefully conserved and, finally, rededicated in December 2011 by Revd Bishop Ashoke Biswas nearly 150 years after its consecration by Bishop Cotton on 25 July 1864.

Interior of the restored St James' Church, Kolkata



Restored gilded angels in the south transept of St James' Church

The first design for St James' Church is believed to have been made by Sir Gilbert Scott, as illustrated in a watercolour by CG Wray, and it seems likely that the present design, by Walter Granville, is based on this proposal, but without the central church tower. It is one of the largest churches in the city and certainly unique in its architectural expression; a prominent 19th-century early English Gothic church with traces of Norman details. The outer walls are firmly supported on all sides by well-proportioned buttresses. The plan is cruciform, with the top of the cross formed by the sanctuary, the arms by the transepts and the foot by the nave. The semi-circular Norman apse at the far end completes the plan of the church. At the west-end there is a spacious *porte-cochère* with two pointed arches on the eastern and western sides. Above this, an ornamented gabled frontage is surmounted by a cross and flanked on both sides with the two double-tier towers which give the church its local name, *Jora Girja* (or 'the twin church'). The lofty spires are surmounted by large metal crosses, and on the upper portion of the southern tower is a double-dialled clock facing west and south.

The church had been slipping into decay since 2000 due to a wide range of factors. Parishioners could feel the dampness rising from the floor. The wooden floor at the second level and many of the door and window frames were infested with termites. Although the main mahogany roof was still strong, leaks had developed along the drip channels, leading to water ingress during the monsoon season. The lack of regular maintenance, shortage of funds and inappropriate repair interventions in the past led to deterioration of the physical fabric of the church.

This is when the church authority and the two neighbouring schools, Pratt Memorial School and St James' School, decided to conserve the church for posterity under professional guidance. Many restoration professionals and organisations were contacted.

Work started in September 2008 with archival research and a study of old drawings and photographs of the church in order to understand its significance. This information, along with a physical survey, was used to produce updated and accurate floor plans, elevations and sections of the church. A detailed study was then undertaken which included documentation, measured drawings, condition survey and assessment of the historic fabric of the church in order to prepare a detailed estimate and specification for an authentic and appropriate conservation programme.

CONSERVATION STRATEGY AT ST JAMES'

In addition to the preliminary research and survey activities, the strategy for conservation and the repair specifications were based on the following principles of conservation:

Authenticity of materials

Existing cement render was removed from the walls, which were then left to dry for over six months allowing the moisture trapped inside the thick walls to escape. The masonry was conserved using traditional lime and sand plaster, and lime and brick-dust mortar to match those used originally. Analysis of the plaster and mortar revealed several traditional admixtures which were incorporated in the same proportions. These included pozzolanic materials like brick powder, brick chips or marble dust which had been used to improve strength and vapour-permeability, and additives such as casein, egg white, molasses, black gram (a type of lentil known locally as *urad ki daal*) and curd which had been used for weather-resistance.

Arresting rising damp

The problem of rising damp has been addressed by grouting silicone just above the plinth of the church. The silicone was supplied by Wacker Chemicals of Germany who sent 400 litres of the product which was applied by one of its authorised operatives.

Removing plant growth

To minimise damage to the brick masonry, weeds growing on the parapet were treated with a herbicide, and not pulled out. This slow process ensured that the impregnated roots inside the wall were destroyed.

Drainage

The roof gutter was repaired and waterproofed, the downpipes renewed as necessary and the surface drainage was repaired and re-laid. Four downpipes in the front facade were concealed inside the buttresses as per the original design.

Breathability

The facade has been rendered with traditional lime and sand plaster and finished with a microporous silicone paint with a herbicidal additive. Although less porous than a traditional limewash, the high rate of moisture ingress during the monsoon season justified a trade-off between breathability and susceptibility to moisture retention and plant growth.

THE WAY FORWARD

For the parishioners, for the neighbouring schools and for the diocese, the conservation of St James' Church is an answered prayer. Finally, the church is being carefully conserved for the benefit of future generations. The rededication of the church to the people marks a celebration of heritage conservation in the city.

There is reason to hope that the project also reflects a growing awareness in Kolkata of the significance of our historic buildings and the need to develop long-term conservation strategies to ensure that their remarkable histories have many more years to run.

Author

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