

## THE HOBART SYNAGOGUE – THE DESIGN INSPIRATION.

The Hobart Synagogue was designed by colonial architect James Alexander Thomson in 1843. The design of the building was and remains unique in Hobart Town as it was constructed in what has been called the Egyptian Revival style.

This paper discusses the somewhat puzzling background to the design of the Synagogue.

James Thomson was convicted of theft on 18 th February 1824 and transported to Hobart Town in the *Medway* arriving 14 th December 1825. He was assigned to work in various capacities for colonial architect David Lambe. From 1827 Thomson was assigned to Lambe's successor John Lee Archer. James Thomson received a conditional pardon on 1 st January 1835.

Thomson immediately set up a business in Liverpool Street Hobart as an '*architect, engineer and surveyor, valuer, estate agent, map printer and dealer in machinery.*'

He subsequently received his free pardon 31 st July 1839.

In 1841 he was a partner of James Blackburn and the two men collaborated with the design and construction of a number of projects, although they also both worked independently.

John Lee Archer emigrated to Van Diemen's Land in 1827. He trained in London as an architect and engineer and was appointed Chief Engineer and Colonial Architect for the Colony. He held this position until 1838 when it was abolished because of financial stringency. In 1836 while acting as Colonial Architect, Archer designed the first stage of St. George's Church Battery Point (now the church nave). Construction was completed in 1838. This stage of the church contains trapezoidal shaped windows to the nave and a grand trapezoidal shaped entrance doorway said by many to be of Egyptian Revival style but, contested by others and said to be a Greek Revival building.

James Blackburn was convicted of forgery and transported to Van Diemen's Land in 1833. He was assigned to work under Archer and then under Alexander Cheyne until 1841 when he was granted a free pardon. Blackburn subsequently conducted an architectural and engineering practice in Hobart Town sometimes in partnership with James Thomson. Blackburn designed additions to St. George's Church in 1846 including the tower with its columns and tulip-shaped capitals, and the portico which was not completed until 1888.

The next piece of this puzzle dates back to 1798 when Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Egypt with his army and staff from his *Commission des Sciences et Arts*.

In 1802 Baron Dominique Vivant Denon, who had accompanied Napoleon as a member of the *Commission*, published an illustrated book – *Voyage dans la Basse et la Haute Egypte pendant les campagnes du Generale Bonaparte*. The publication of this folio generated a renewed interest in Europe of Egyptian styled architecture, furniture and the decorative arts.

An English translation of the book was published in 1803.

The interest this publication generated in London, was one of the factors which led William Bullock to construct the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly in which he displayed his collection of museum artifacts. This exhibition building was constructed in the Egyptian style in 1812 and was a huge success. It was later used for popular entertainments and lectures. In 1816 it was the venue for a display of Napoleonic era relics including Napoleon's carriage which had been confiscated at Waterloo. It was reported that this exhibition was viewed by 220,000 visitors.

Given the location of the Egyptian Hall and the popularity and timing of these exhibitions it seems highly likely that Archer, Thomson and Blackburn would all have seen the Egyptian Hall even if they had not visited the exhibitions.

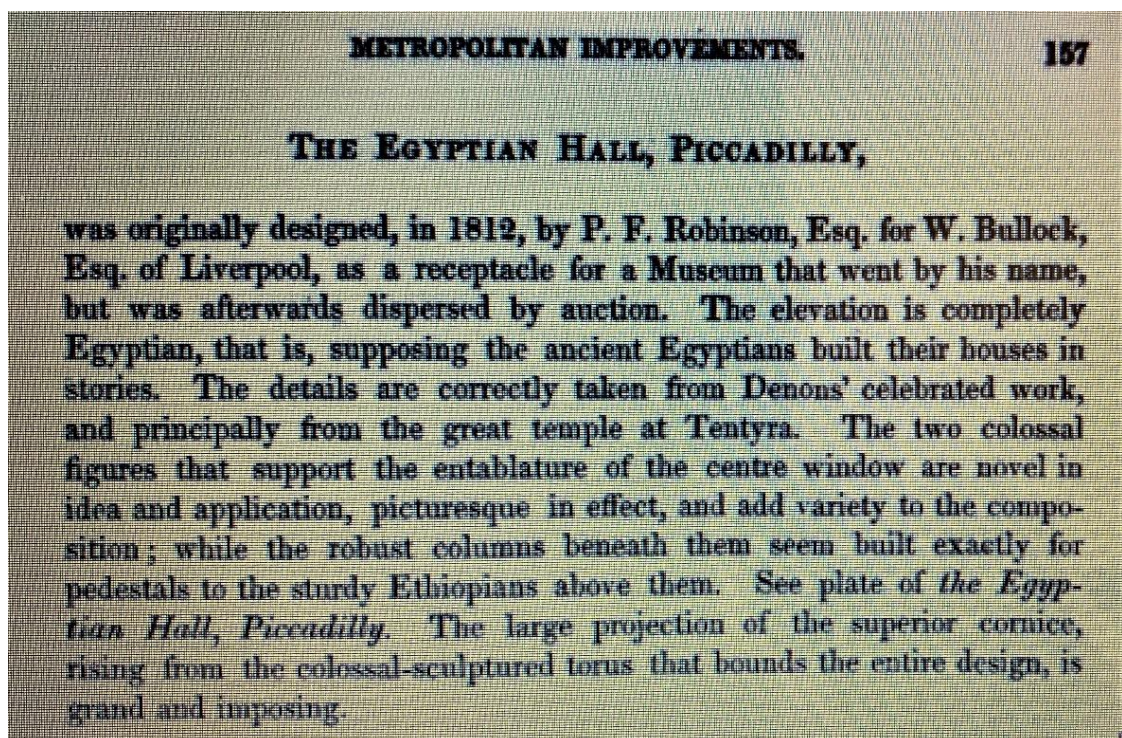
However, to continue the story – in 1828/9 Messrs Jones & Co., Finsbury Square, London published a folio book of engravings by Thomas Shepperd with commentaries by James Elmes MRIA entitled:

*METROPOLITAN IMPROVEMENTS;  
OR LONDON IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY*

The engravings included the one shown below of the Egyptian Hall.



The commentary on the Egyptian Hall by James Elmes was as follows:



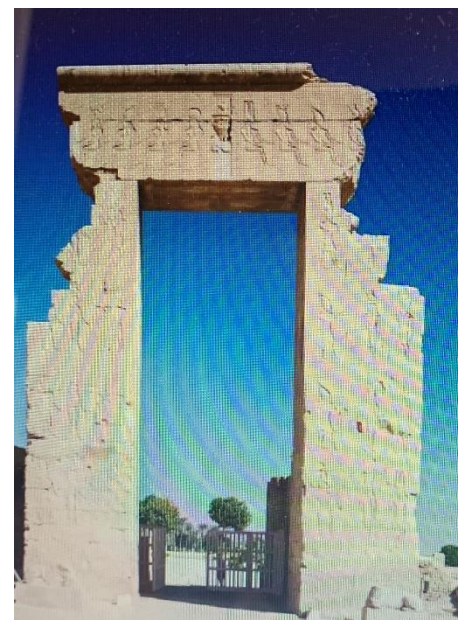
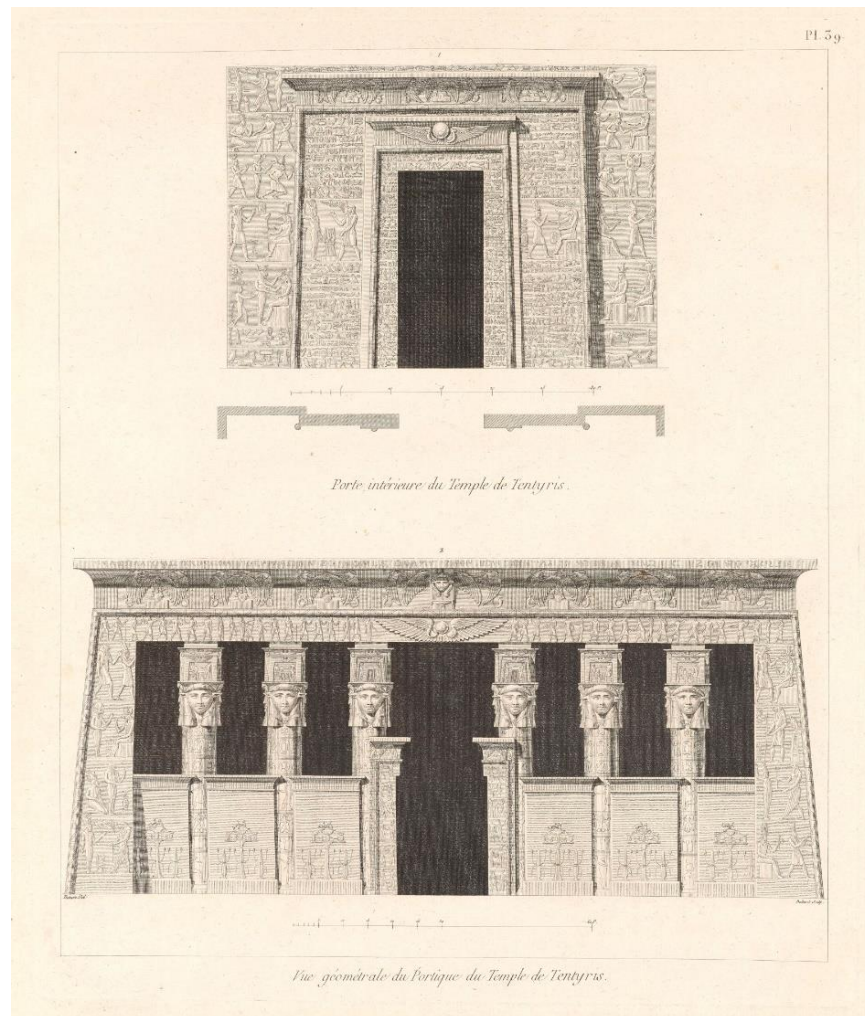


It is interesting to note the statement within the comments above that - *The details are correctly taken from Denons' celebrated work, and principally from the great temple at Tentyra.*

Reference to Denon's engravings of the temple at Tentyra (see adjacent illustration), and to recent photographs of the gateway into the temple enclosure and the front of this temple (both below) demonstrate that Elmes' claim is somewhat extravagant or exaggerated.

However, notwithstanding the commentary by Elmes what is evident is that this temple could have been the inspiration for, and led to, the design of the Egyptian Hall which was subsequently represented and accepted as a correct interpretation of the Egyptian style of architecture.

Of note is the imposing nature of the temple gateway which can be referenced to the grand entrance of the Exhibition Hall located within the dramatic decorated central bay and projecting panel of the London building.



In addition, these photographs of the Dendrah Temple demonstrate that the adoption of trapezoidal shaped openings for windows in the Egyptian Hall is a design aberration which rather reflects the pylon shaped wall panels and overall building profile of the Egyptian temple with its sloping external walls and not the opening profiles. Clearly the people of London were presented with and generally accepted the proposal that the Egyptian Hall was built in a style 'correctly' representative of Egyptian buildings.



Accepting the above, a comparison of the Egyptian Hall with the following photograph of the Hobart Synagogue indicates how the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly, most likely influenced the design of the building constructed in Van Diemen's Land.



Both buildings feature large coved and decorated cornices, torus or roll mouldings, and trapezoidal shaped windows complete with a central front door within a projecting pylon shaped panel and flanked by reeded columns with tulip-shaped capitals.

It seems that this design influence occurred and there has been consequential conjecture whether the specific engraving or even the folio of drawings was brought to the colony and was available to Thomson to influence his design for the synagogue.

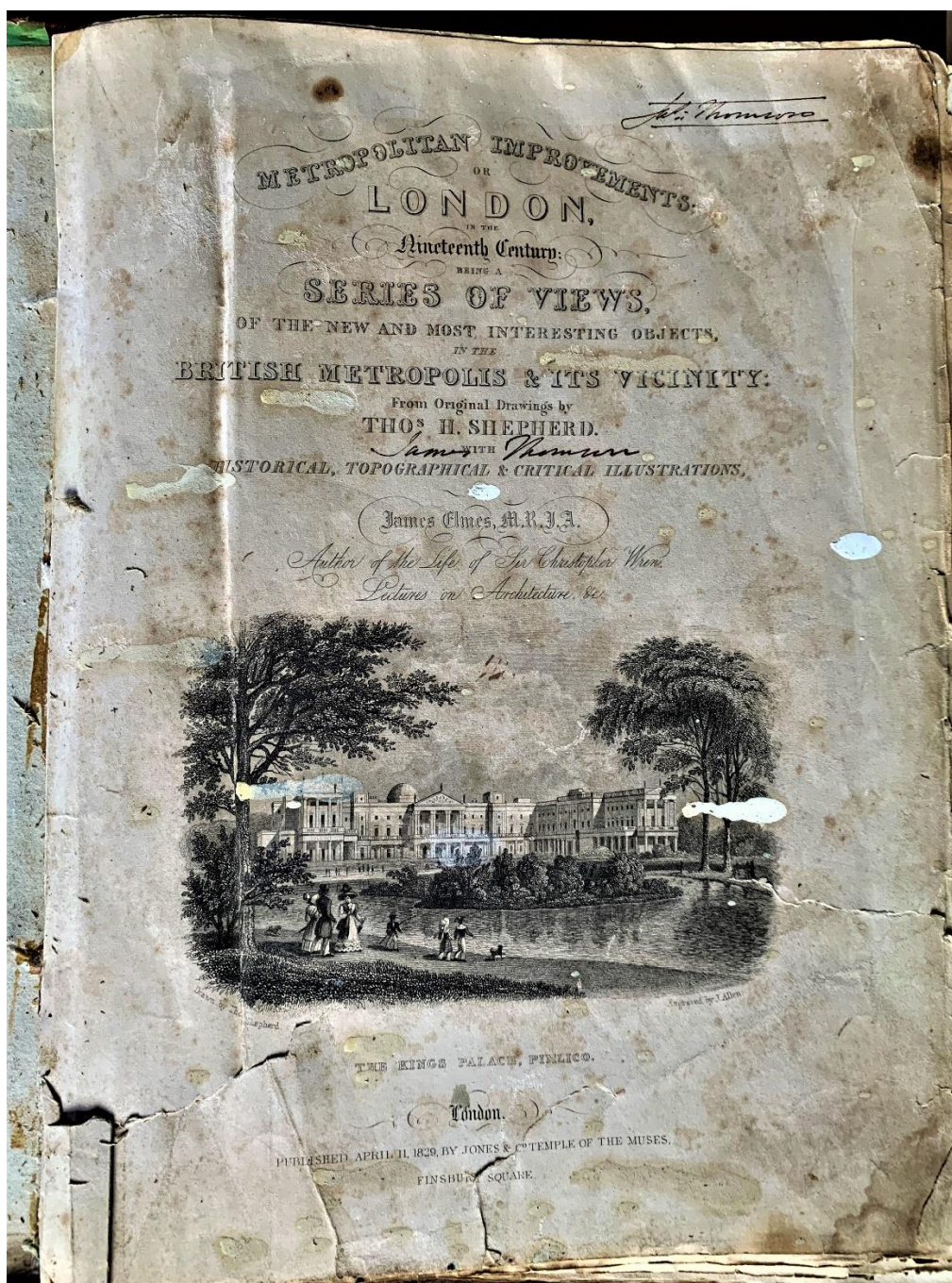


The alternative would have been that distant memories of the London building were relied upon and that this explains both the variation in the building details from that of the Egyptian Hall and from what might be considered a pure Egyptian style.

These questions have been recently answered.

A copy of *Metropolitan Improvements* with Thomas Shepperd's engravings has been found and is now held by a private collector in Hobart. (Not this author.)

The photograph below is of one of the two facing pages to this book which each bear the signature of James Thomson. (On the photographed page there are two signatures.)



A further point of interest is that the folio also includes an engraving of St. Pancras Church in London (constructed 1819 – 22) and this building is frequently referenced as the inspiration for the 'Greek' revival portico and tower designed by Blackburn for St. George's Church in Battery Point.

The remaining questions are - How and when was the folio brought to Hobart Town and how it became the possession of James Thomson?

Messrs Jones & Co. published this book in April 1829 after both Archer and Thomson arrived in Van Diemen's Land but before Blackburn was transported in 1833 so there appears to be three possibilities.

Perhaps Blackburn obtained the folio in London and brought it with him to Hobart Town. Blackburn was involved in the construction industry in London prior to being convicted of forgery and it is conceivable that the book would have been of interest to him at that time. If this occurred, the book could have subsequently been passed to Thomson.

Alternatively, any one of the three individuals could have imported the folio of engravings and given their working situation (Archer, Thomson and Blackburn were all employed in the Colonial Architects Office from 1833 to 1835) the folio could have been shared and/or referred to by all three architects and ultimately ended up in the ownership of Thomson.

A further possibility is that the folio was borrowed by and / or sold to one of these architects. This is suggested as in January 1835 Mr. J W Davis established a business at No. 23 Elizabeth Street which he described as a Music, Stationary, Toy, & Fancy Warehouse. Books were among the items he sold.

On December 14 th 1835 Davis advertised in the *Hobart Town Courier* that he had opened a 'Reading Room and Circulating Library for the accommodation of town and country subscribers.' This advertisement also advised that '... all the English newspapers, periodicals and new publications would be available.'

After finding himself in financial difficulties, Davis advertised in the *Hobart Town Courier* on 29 th September 1837 the sale at 'First Cost' of numerous items which included an extensive list of books. Amongst the books were:

*'Jones's views in London*  
*Do metropolitan improvements'*

This is the book in question, but it is not known if it was sold at this time.

However, it seems that the most likely scenario was that Davis had *Metropolitan Improvements* in his library collection. That the folio may have been borrowed by one or more of the three architects between January 1835 and the book sale in September 1837 at which time it was purchased by James Thomson.

Notwithstanding the above, what now appears indisputable is that all three architects could have referenced this volume while developing their designs for the Hobart Synagogue and St. George's Church.

In conclusion it seems that the catalyst for and acceptance of trapezoidal framed openings being one of the publicly accepted identifier design elements of Egyptian Revival style architecture as built in Australia most likely had its genesis in the façade of the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly.

This building identified itself and was publicly described as Egyptian in style and as George Bernard Shaw rightly suggested - "*effectiveness of assertion is the alpha and omega of style*".

Further, the trapezoidal shape was understandably repeated as a symbolic design element for the windows and other items within the synagogue.

Peter and Ann Elias in their book *A Few From Afar* recording the history of Jewish lives in Van Diemen's Land indicate that the reason for the selection of the Egyptian Revival style adopted for the Synagogue is not clear.

The answer may lie in the common acceptance of the view expressed in Sir Bannister Fletcher's introduction to his chapter on Jewish Architecture in *A HISTORY OF ARCHITECTURE ON THE COMPARATIVE METHOD*:

*"The chief characteristics of Hebrew architecture would seem to have been derived from Babylon on the east and Egypt on the west,"*

Peter Cripps.  
Architect.