



Joy Hancox  
*The Byrom Collection  
 and the Globe Theatre Mystery*  
 London: Jonathan Cape, 1997

*Reviewed by John Sharp*

Joy Hancox bought an old house in Salford, which is near Manchester in Northwest England. In trying to trace the history of one of its owners, she became engrossed in the links to John Byrom (1691-1793) and, one might say, obsessed with him. Byrom is best known as a hymn writer and the inventor of the shorthand from which Pitman's method was developed. Byrom was also an interesting political figure at the time of the Jacobite Revolution in England and Scotland in the early part of the eighteenth century. Hancox has written his biography in *The King's Chameleon*. The book being reviewed here predates *Chameleon*, but is much more interesting for architectural geometers.

While collecting papers relating to Byrom, Hancox came across a set of 516 "pieces of paper and card covered with geometrical drawings of mathematical precision, many intricately detailed, and all exquisitely constructed", which had been rescued at some time in the past and put away in a cupboard. No one knows who collected the drawings, but Byrom had been their keeper. The book gives a description of the drawings and some clues to their meaning, together with some very thorough research, which raises more questions than answers. I have written this review because I think the book deserves to be more well known. Apart from the fact that it merits a concentrated study in itself, it may hold clues as to where to look for other such original drawings that are not recognized for their true worth.

The book is an interesting read on two levels: as a kind of historical detective story, and as a picture book of fascinating drawings, geometrical and mysterious. Hancox is a musician, and obviously a painstaking and excellent researcher. The story of how she partly unravelled the mystery is told in a very readable manner. I say partly, because although the descriptions of many of the diagrams relate them to architectural monuments (such as King's College Chapel in Cambridge, Westminster Abbey and the Globe Theatre), she has only skimmed the surface in this part of the story. This is understandable because she is not a geometer. Moreover, the clues are very thin on the ground. She has tried to gain help but, I feel, not too

successfully. The drawings are so varied and so detailed that there is a lifetime's work for someone trying to unravel them. They were obviously meant to be disguised, or are capable of being interpreted only by those in the know. There is a great tradition of secrecy in this field, notably among the Neoplatonists of the Renaissance.

Clues as to the meaning of some of the drawings came when similar drawings were pointed out as part of a collection from the architect Hans Sloane, whose library was the nucleus for the British Library (which was initially part of the British Museum). Hancox was able to show that some of the drawings were based on printed material, since common errors were found. The British Library drawings were bound in with a Hermetic text; because of this, many could be classified. Byrom founded a secret society called the Cabala Club. Sloane was not only a member of this, but also proposed Byrom as a member of the Royal Society. Hancox also managed to trace some diagrams in a notebook belonging to Robert Boyle, an earlier member of the Royal Society, who is famous for Boyle's law of gases.

The collection contains a number of types of drawings, which obviously need to be seen first-hand rather than in reproduction. My experience with such drawings is that there are often holes, either where points of compasses or dividers have been used in construction or where significant points have been pricked through onto another drawing. That's not to say that the reproductions are not good, but they are so detailed that it is difficult to be sure whether the contrast is sufficient to be able to pick up all the detail. Some of the drawings reproduced have an "interpretation" superimposed on them. It is unfortunate that it is not always clear which is an original and which is not. Where an original is shown next to the one with additions, the latter seems to show more detail; that amount of detail almost certainly exists in the original, but the contrast is not the same so you can't be sure. There are many illustrations where the original is not shown, but only upon close inspection and comparison is this apparent; it is not made clear in the caption to the illustration.

It is also worth noting that there are many illustrations from other books that show geometrical figures. I was familiar with many of them, but not with others, such as figures from Girard Thibault's 1628 treatise on the art of fencing showing geometrical diagrams for human proportions. The combination of allegorical pictures, hermetic drawings and Byrom's collection is a powerful indication that our ancestors were more deeply involved with geometry than we are commonly aware, even if we are studying the subject in depth. Notable links between the Byrom drawings and the work of others are made, particularly with the work of artist/engraver Michel Le Blon, but the important point to make is that the drawings are in existence and need to be studied extensively.

It is difficult to cite an example to illustrate the collection, partly because of the variety and partly because of the detail. A note on the reverse of the title page says that most have been reduced to fit the page. The clearest ones have been "enhanced", particularly the set involved with London's early theatres, such as Shakespeare's Globe. I am still unsure as to whether the extensive theories that take up two chapters and nearly a quarter of the book are valid. The problem is that the drawings have so many lines and circles on them that, with judicious selection, it would be possible to match them to almost anything you choose. On the other hand, there are drawings that are within reach, such as the ones depicting the tree of life. These surely hold clues that could enhance previous research.



To conclude, then. This is an important book for anyone interested in sacred geometry, and for those who wish to understand how important geometry has been in past cultures. This means not only being able to appreciate our heritage, but also to prevent its being destroyed through ignorance of it. It is also an enthralling, very well-written, read, but the theories explaining the drawings should be taken with a pinch of salt.

*The reviewer*

John Sharp has researched and taught Geometry and Art for over 20 years in Adult Education in and around London. He is the illustrator of David Wells' *Penguin Dictionary of Curious and Interesting Geometry* and has written his own book on modelling geometrical surfaces called *Sliceforms*, some of which are in the "Strange Surfaces" exhibit in the Science Museum in London. He is the author of "Cosmati Pavements at Westminster Abbey" in the *Nexus Network Journal* vol. 1.

