Thomas Harrison: Georgian Architect of Chester and Lancaster 1744-1829, by John Champness, Centre for North-West Regional Studies, 2005 (£12.50)

This is a comprehensive account of the life and work of the architect and engineer Thomas Harrison, described by Pevsner as "a local architect whose work is as good as that of any in London". Harrison lived from 1744 to 1829 and practiced mainly in the North-West. He was responsible for a wide range of buildings including bridges, country houses, churches, gaols, libraries and monuments and is generally noted for being one of the first architects to introduce the Greek Revival style into England. A surprisingly large number (about fifty) of his buildings survive.

Little is known of Harrison's life before 1782 .The book describes his early years as a student in Rome from 1769 to 1776 and his probable return via Paris and Nimes in 1776. His first known work, in 1782 when he was 38, is the elegant Skerton Bridge in Lancaster which the author describes as perhaps the most beautiful bridge in Lancashire. Skerton Bridge displayed Harrison's knowledge of engineering as well as his architectural skill. It was the first bridge in England designed with a flat road surface and was a great success, leading to further commissions for bridges throughout his career.

Champness follows a broadly chronological approach, concentrating on the buildings that survive. He points out where Harrison's designs draw from his own previous buildings, from the work of others, or from his time in Italy and France. The author gives details of the clients and provides succinct architectural critiques of the works. Most of the buildings are illustrated by contemporary prints or recent black and white photographs. The book is enlivened by interesting asides on such matters as architectural practice in late 1700s, the history of monument design and comments on prison reform, together with concise explanations of architectural terms such as Palladianism.

Harrison initially lived in Lancaster where he worked on the gaol, the courts and other buildings in the 1780s and 1790s. Although he had left Lancaster by 1798, he continued to work there adding the tower and spire to St. John's Chapel and designing the Keeper's House and the Female Felon's Prison. While working in Lancaster he was also working in Chester where his major buildings were Chester Gaol (1788) and the Shire Hall. He was therefore involved in major additions to both Chester and Lancaster castles. He moved to Chester in 1795, becoming known as "Thomas Harrison of Chester". While living there, he was responsible for three buildings of a new type: gentlemen's newsrooms and libraries. These were in Liverpool (The Lyceum, 1800-02), Manchester (The Portico Library, 1802-06) and Chester (The City Club 1807-8).

Harrison was important in helping to introduce the Greek Revival style to Britain but built in other styles as clients or sites required it; for instance 'gothick' for Lancaster Gaol and Crown Court where the site was close to mediaeval buildings.

Harrison's final buildings, like his first, were bridges. One was an innovative bridge in Warrington made of laminated wood (it failed) and another, the Grosvenor Bridge in Chester (completed in 1833, after his death) remained the largest stone span in the world until 1864.

Champness speculates on the likely involvement of Harrison in the design of other buildings and makes a persuasive case for some buildings for which there is no documentary evidence. An appendix also lists designs by Harrison that were not built.

The author is not afraid to criticise some of Harrison's work, as Summerson did, for being a little tame and as Cockerill did, for the exteriors being better than the interiors. Champness suggests that only six of the buildings were really great works of architecture but says that Harrison was not a pedant or fanatic in his use of the Greek Revival style. A final chapter discusses the importance of Harrison. He was well regarded by contemporary architects such as Soane and Cockerell but left no dynasty of architects or followers.

There is a chronological list of Harrison's remaining buildings (with grid references and access information) in an appendix, and a further appendix includes a bar chart showing, year by year, the buildings that Harrison was working on

All in all this is an excellent architectural monograph about a skilful and neglected architect, many of whose buildings are still standing. As Champness states, Harrison deserves to be better known.