

MMT NEWS

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The Origins of the Darnley Mausoleum at Cobham

The Mausoleum was built under the terms of the will, made in 1767, of John Bligh, 3rd Earl of Darnley (1719-1781). A member of the Society of Dilettanti, he had spent almost two years in Italy on his Grand Tour in 1739-41 and clearly acquired a taste for antiquity and a keen interest in the Roman manner of sepulture. Darnley succeeded his brother (a prominent Freemason, and associate of Frederick, Prince of Wales) to the title in July 1747. He did not marry until 1766, when he took as his bride the wealthy Dublin heiress Mary Stoyte, a niece of the Earl of Clonmore.

Only then did Darnley's thoughts turn to the provision of a family burial place. Previous earls had been buried in one of the apsidal chapels on the south side of Henry VII's Chapel in

Westminster Abbey. Through a line of descent from the Stuart family, the Darnleys could lay claim to the privilege of burial in this prestigious place, below Hubert Le Sueur's vast 1630s tomb to the Duke of Lennox and Richmond, an earlier possessor of Cobham Hall. This option seems to have been no longer available, and his brother was the last Bligh to be laid to rest in this semi-royal vault. The 3rd Earl then resolved to create a fittingly grand alternative for the deposit of his line.

When it came to describing the sort of burial he desired in his will, Darnley went into exceptional detail about his exceptionally grand plans. He desired to leave £5,000 (or £10,000, should the lesser sum be insufficient) for



Figure 1: Nicolas Poussin: *The Sacrament of Ordination*, 1647

a Chapel or Mausoleum as a Family Burying Place to be built... on the top of a hill in my Park at Cobham called Williams Hill if they shall at such a time of my decease find that a convenient place, if not my will is that such Building shall be erected in some part of my said Park at Cobham as my Executors or Executrix shall judge more convenient and my will is to be there Buried and the said Chapel or Mausoleum shall be built large enough that more of my family may be there deposited if they shall desire it... such Building should be built of Stone and the best materialls with Marble Ornaments in the inside and that the outward form of such Building might be with a kind of four fronts supporting a Pyramid in the middle high enough to be conspicuous and that there should be a fossee or Ditch and a wall around it with only one entrance by a Bridge with an outward Iron Gate on the Bridge and that it should be vaulted with Stone with niches or Sarcophaguses for the Bodies to be therein deposited below the level of the Ground and over that in the manner of a Chapel with a Dome into the Pyramid.

The 3rd Earl was clearly responsible for the overall conception of the mausoleum himself, and his will is highly unusual in going into such architectural detail; his instructions were to be carried out to the letter. Since there is no other evidence of his having taken an active part in matters of

architectural design elsewhere, this invites the question of just what sources Lord Darnley might have had in mind.

The basic form of the structure consisted of a pyramid placed over a colonnaded base. This was derived from nothing less than one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World: the tomb of King Mausolus at Halicarnassus in Asia Minor, erected after the king's death in 353 BC by his grieving relict Queen Artemisia, as described by Pliny the Elder. As one of the most celebrated funerary structures of Antiquity, it was a constant inspiration for architects as well as patrons like Lord Darnley: its most famous quotation in English architecture up to this point had been Nicholas Hawksmoor's stepped steeple of St George, Bloomsbury which was completed in 1731.

The more precise inspiration for the Darnley Mausoleum came from a picture. In the background of Nicolas Poussin's 1647 painting *The Sacrament of Ordination* is a building with all the characteristic elements of the Cobham structure. [fig. 1] This painting, widely known through engravings, formed part of one of Poussin's two

celebrated Seven Sacraments series and for most of the 18th century was owned by the Dukes of Orleans. It now forms part of the Duke of Sutherland's collection, and is on long-term loan to the National Gallery of Scotland in Edinburgh. Similar structures are found in the backgrounds of several other paintings by the artist. Poussin was a painter held in huge esteem in 18th century England in general, and by the Lords of Cobham Hall in particular: no fewer than five paintings ascribed to Poussin were included in the 1925 sale of paintings from Cobham Hall and had probably formed part of the 3rd Earl's collection.

The eminent Poussin scholar Anthony Blunt looked into possible archaeological sources for pyramid-roofed structures which might have been available to the artist. Such structures did indeed exist in ancient Judaea. They had been illustrated in Giovanni Zuallardo's *Il devotissimo viaggio de Gerusalemme* (Rome 1576); Similar structures were also illustrated in Pirro Ligorio's *Archeiquae Urbis Imago* of 1561. Including such expressly Jewish tombs in his biblical scenes demonstrates Poussin's desire for convincing detail through

archaeological accuracy. It is unlikely that the 3rd Earl had such precise allusions in mind, however. There is no need to look beyond Poussin's *Ordination* to more arcane works for the inspiration for the Mausoleum.

More recent influences can be found on the detailed design of the building. Prominent among these were two plates [one is fig.2] in William Chambers's *A Treatise on Civil Architecture* of 1759 (and republished in 1768 and 1791). In these, the pyramid is absent but the diagonally set pairs of columns, the circular interior within an octagonal plan, the central steps: all were present, as they would be at Cobham. Chambers's plates depicted variant designs for a garden temple building intended for Lord Tylney at Wanstead, which Chambers designed while in Florence during his Italian sojourn of 1750-55, but which was never built. His *Treatise* was a much-quarried pattern book for Neo-classical designers, and these plates were to inspire numerous later mausolea in India as well as elsewhere in Britain. The influence of the *Treatise* on the Cobham Mausoleum has been advanced with much confidence by Sir

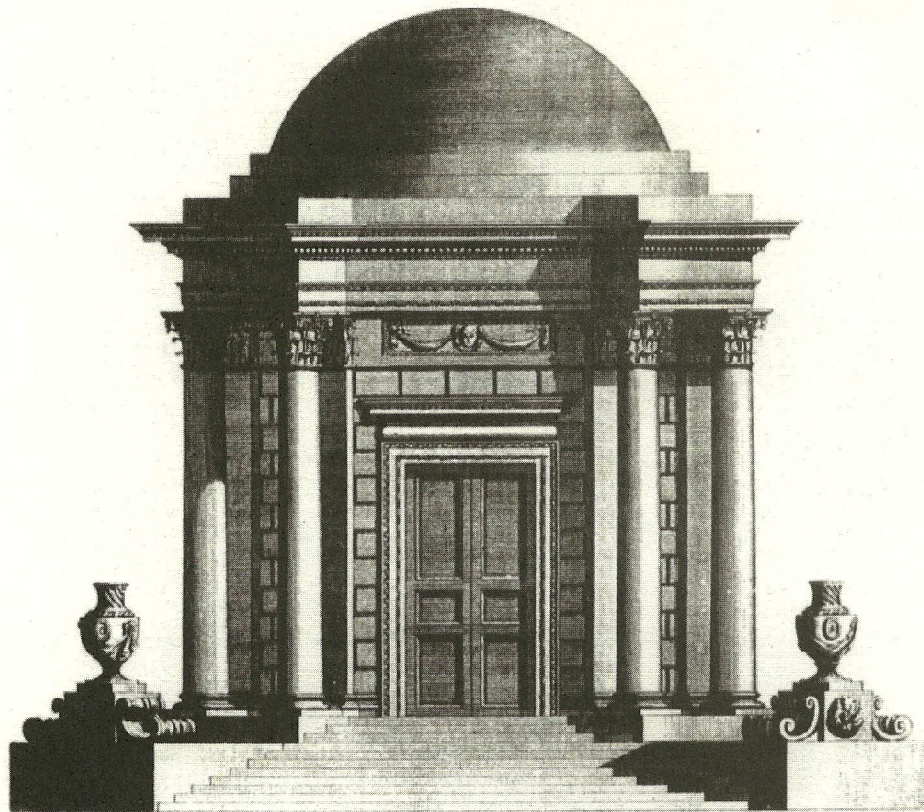


Figure 2: William Chambers, *A Treatise on Civil Architecture*, 1759

John Summerson.

The most memorable element of the Darnley Mausoleum is its pyramid. These were always rare in English Georgian architecture, and it is worthwhile briefly considering the outline history of this peculiar form. It made its English architectural debut in 1719, with Vanbrugh's Pyramid Gate at Castle Howard. Like that at Cobham six decades later, this consisted of a square pyramid perched on an ashlar base, in this case pierced with an entrance portal. Vanbrugh's other pyramid, at Stowe (and which was subsequently re-dedicated to the architect's memory after his death in 1726), was rather closer to its Egyptian prototypes in resting on the ground; Hawksmoor's Pyramid at Castle Howard of 1728 lay half way between the two in having a sunken base. The Guise Mausoleum at Elmore, Gloucestershire, erected in 1733, was the first funereal structure to feature a pyramid. This remarkable structure, the first in

England with baseless Greek Doric columns, closely followed a Roman monument in which the square pyramid sat upon a heavy arcaded base.

From the 1770s onwards, pyramids enjoyed something of a revival. Four such, with angle-set corner pedestals and a rusticated base, formed the corner pavilions in the young John Soane's fantastical 'Design for a Mausoleum to the Memory of James King Esq. drowned June 9. 1776'. Soane returned to the theme when designing his grandiose mausoleum for the Earl of Chatham, in 1778, and a circular pyramid formed the core of James Paine the younger's design for a similar structure, shown at the Royal Academy in 1781, the year of Lord Darnley's death. Not all pyramids were for mausolea, however. In 1776, Robert Adam's pyramidal entrance gateway for Nostell Priory, the Featherstone entrance or the 'Needle's Eye', a steeply tapering pyramid pierced with a portal, was constructed, and a pyramidal design

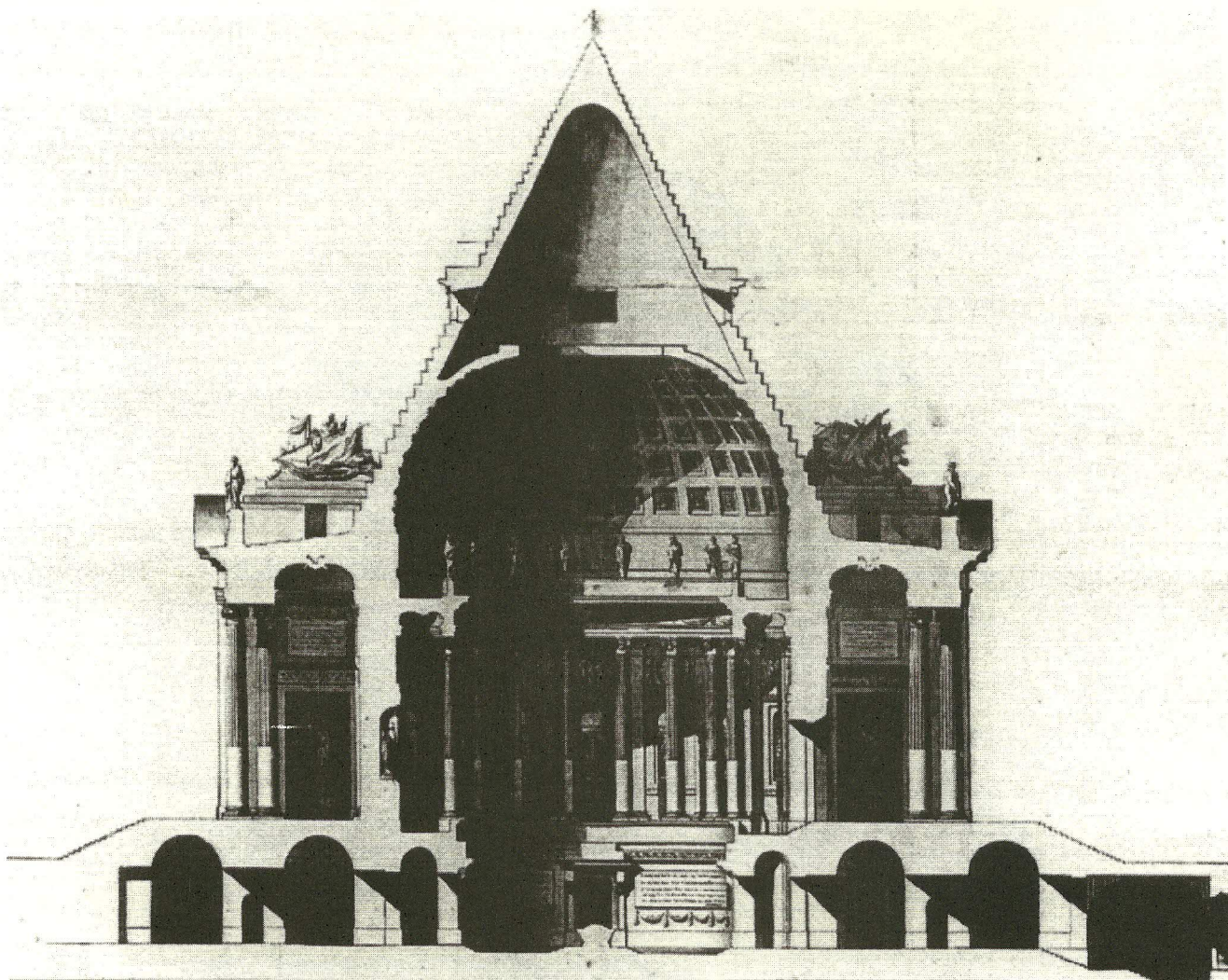


Figure 3: Jacques Rousseau, *Design for a Sepulchral Chapel*, 1755

for a dairy by John Carter appeared in the *Builders Magazine* in 1777. Pyramids may never have been common in England, but they did haunt the imaginations of the leading architects of the 18th century. Not until the mid-1790s would an English mausoleum actually consist of a pure pyramid, when Joseph Bonomi's design for the Earl of Buckinghamshire's mausoleum in Blickling Park, Norfolk was constructed.

Pyramids were also to be found in grandiose funereal designs emanating from French Academic Neo-classical circles, a rich source ground for architects such as Chambers and Wyatt. One such, almost certainly known to Wyatt, was Jacques Rousseau's design for a sepulchral chapel, which won third prize in the 1755 *Grand Prix* of the French Academy. This consisted of a circular chapel surmounted with a hollow pyramid and a vaulted ceiling just like that at Cobham [fig. 3]. Another gargantuan pyramidal mausoleum with angle-set corners designed by N.H. Jardin was published in 1765. The pyramid was again very much present in a group of mausoleum designs published by Neufforge in 1777. One of the supplements to his influential *Recueil Elementaire d'Architecture* contained four such designs which combined the severity of the pyramid with a colonnaded base and a richly detailed finish.

The scale of these proposed structures is altogether grander than that of the Darnley Mausoleum, but, once again, their existence demonstrates that Wyatt was designing very much in the manner of leading French Neo-classicists. All of them, and Lord Darnley too, were striving to resurrect the solemn grandeur of the ancients. In so doing, they turned to Poussin as the great interpreter of the Antique, the artist who, more than any other, made visible the classical world. The Darnley Mausoleum at Cobham thus belongs to a European context, and can claim a high place among British architectural designs from the Age of Enlightenment.

Roger Bowdler

Dr Bowdler is Head of Listing at English Heritage, a founder member of the MMT, and a leading authority on funerary architecture.

S T O P P R E S S

The Darnley Mausoleum is Saved

The Cobham Ashenbank Management Scheme is very pleased to announce that a grant of nearly £5 million has been made by the Heritage Lottery Fund to the Cobham Park Heritage Project. The grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund will provide 75 per cent of the project costs, with the remaining 25 per cent coming partly from English Heritage and the Cobham Ashenbank Management Scheme. It is hoped that further funding will come from central government. Phillip Smart, the Project Manager of CAMS (see below), said, "This is such a deserving project...Cobham Park provides something for everyone interested in our heritage." Sophie Raworth, the celebrity supporter of the Darnley Mausoleum from BBC television's RESTORATION series, said "It's fantastic news. I'm so pleased for the team who have worked really hard to save this building. It'll make a huge difference to the area and I'm really looking forward to seeing it again when it's restored to its former glory."

CAMS is short for the Cobham Ashenbank Management Scheme which was launched in September 1997 to carry out a range of projects as additional compensation for the effects of the Channel Tunnel Rail Link as it passes through historic Cobham Park and ancient Ashenbank Wood near Gravesend. For further information about open days and events, see details on their website at: www.gravesham.gov.uk/cams

NEWS from the SECRETARY

As briefly mentioned in the last edition of the *Newsletter*, the office moved from Spitalfields to new premises owned by Alan Baxter Associates at 70 Cowcross St, EC1, at the beginning of December, and we are now working in close proximity to other similar organisations and charities, including The Garden History Society, SAVE, The Association of Art Historians, ICOMOS (The International Council on Monuments and Sites), and the Council for the Protection of Rural England (CPRE).

Cowcross Street itself is a medieval street that was once lined with houses and workshops with open gardens at the rear, the latter filled in over time with alleyways and tight courtyards. The dramatic large scale civil engineering works of the 1860s, when the Metropolitan Railway line was extended past Farringdon and Smithfield Market left Cowcross Street unscathed but created a boom, especially for buildings connected with the meat trade, so I suppose there is a very tenuous connection to the MMT! We are housed in a building that was once a warehouse for Thomas Cook. Approached through a cobbled courtyard, the building is now converted to open plan office accommodation with meeting rooms and an exhibition gallery, all spacious and light - not at all like a mausoleum. The office is not manned continuously but I can usually be contacted here on Tuesday of each week when I aim to be available to answer supporters' calls and queries in person.

At its last meeting, the Council, being very aware of the need for a guaranteed annual income, approved a proposal to set up a formal membership scheme for the Trust, and this, I will be doing later in the year.

And...have you visited our website lately? It has been updated and will, in future, carry more topical features as well as all the necessary contact details. Our lectures on the 13th and 20th of April have been advertised in this way, and a ticket application form was available to download. We have added a Links page and we hope this will bring more interest from other like-minded charities and trusts, as well as those private individuals who have an interest in buildings of this kind but who have yet to hear about the Trust. If you have any good ideas about our site, or just want to comment, then please let me know. I look forward to hearing from you.

John St Brioc Hooper
Hon. Secretary

SAVE BRITAIN'S HERITAGE

would like to invite you to participate in our annual Conservation Book Fair. It will take place on Tuesday 20th May in The Gallery, 77 Cowcross Street, EC1, from 12 noon to 7 pm. After a hard day's book selling, wine will be available from 6 pm. To reserve your table (free of charge) please contact Meriel on 020 7253 3500 or on the internet at save@btinternet.com

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