

## Four Monuments at Wentworth

*By R. B. Wragg*

Landowners in the eighteenth century followed an almost invariable pattern of behaviour. They went on the Grand Tour, collected pictures and statues, put up for Parliament and having spent the Season in Town retired to rural pursuits at their seats in the country. The ruling passion of many was the development of their estates. By judicious marriages and purchases of land they build up vast acreages, some of which they let at profitable rents, some of which they reserved for their own cultivation, and some of which were retained as parkland settings for the mansion house. The park offered wide possibilities for fashionable treatment. The formality of the seventeenth century layout with its straight tree-lined avenues, was considered reactionary and was being replaced gradually with the artificially contrived romanticism of a "natural" landscape. Complete with serpentine lake and scenic bridge, the appropriate Arcadian touch required carefully placed "antique" and classical features.

The great Wentworth Estate, near Rotherham, is a typical illustration. Once owned by the famous but ill-fated Strafford, minister to Charles I, it descended to the 1st Marquis of Rockingham (1693-1750) and his successors whose contributions included, amongst other things, vast additions to the mansion, temples, ponds, obelisks, a menagerie, conservatories for growing pineapples and, in particular, four monuments, now the subject of this article.

The earliest is Hooper Stand built by Rockingham ostensibly to commemorate the defeat of the Scottish rebels in '45 but really as a grateful acknowledgement of George the Second's condescension in creating him Marquis (fig. 1). His Lordship, shortly after his elevation, writing to his young son in Geneva, in October, 1746, said, "I have had Mr. Flitcroft (the architect) here and fixed the Plan of a Pyramid for Hooper Hill, which is to be begun next Summer, it is to rise 70 Foot, no Room only a Staircase to carry you to the Top.

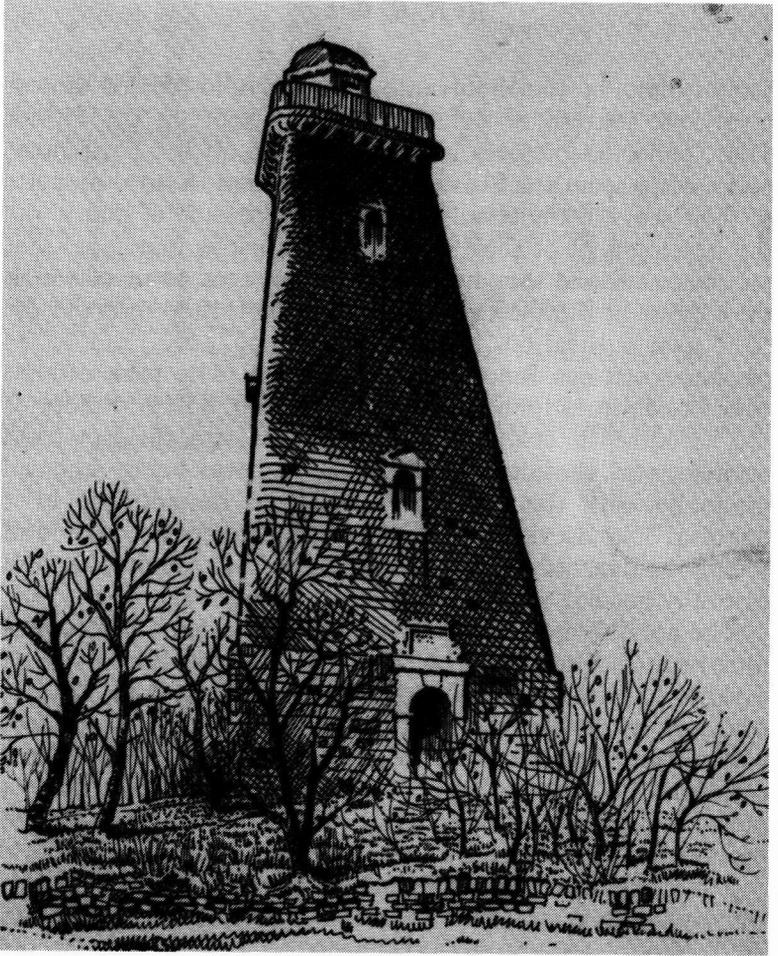


Fig. 1. Hooper Stand.

The Base 40 Foot diminishing as it rises". The following year, in November, he reported that work on the "fine Pyramid" had begun and that the operation would take *two or three summers*, although the rather sycophantic tribute to the "Preserver of our Religion, Laws and Liberties, King George the Second", inscribed on a marble slab over the doorway, is headed 1748.

The building, sited as a feature on elevated ground on the north of the estate, is most unusual. The walls are sloping—hence Rockingham's reference to a pyramid—but are abbreviated before the apex is reached so as to provide a flat viewing platform. However, as the plan is triangular the monument is only symmetrical about its axes; viewed from elsewhere its battered sides are thus differently angled and it appears to be leaning backwards. A hexagonal pepper pot of a cupola marks the staircase emerging onto the platform but as this too is placed to one side the effect of changing silhouette is heightened in the weirdest manner. The accurately cut ashlar blocks of the walls and the heavily corbelled cornice impart an air, not of landscape romance, but of civil engineering. We could easily imagine Smeaton of lighthouse fame being the perpetrator, but the designer was the eminent Henry Flitcroft (1697–1766), one-time assistant to Lord Burlington, and the most orthodox of classical architects: altogether an interesting and extraordinary reaction against prevailing taste.

Our next example can with reason be described as a pyramid. It is the delightful Needle's Eye, quite small and now hidden amongst the trees above Wentworth village (fig. 2). Walls splayed back and topped with a vase, it is pierced by a Gothic ogee-arched opening just wide enough to permit the passage of a coach. Indeed, the structure straddles the old coach road, long defunct, which ran from Brampton Lodge to North Lodge of the Wentworth Estate. There is a story that the 2nd Marquis, ever ready to place a bet—he once had a bet of £500 with the Earl of Orford to race five turkeys and five geese from Norwich to London—wagered that he could drive his carriage through the eye of a needle. Whether our building was already in existence or whether he hastily proceeded to make it so, is not stated. In fact, correspondence and accounts are curiously uninformative, not

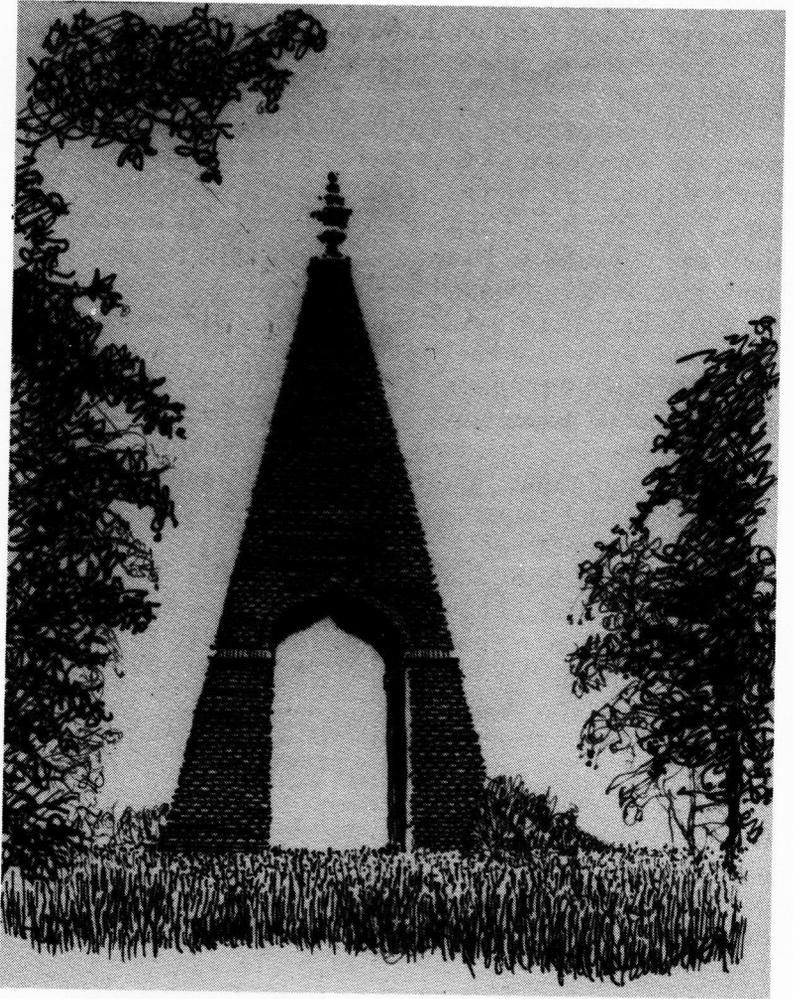


Fig. 2. The Needle's Eye.

merely as to date, but as to its very existence. However, we do know that the two lodges, earlier mentioned, were designed by John Carr of York (1723–1807) and as the details of the building are typical of his work, the pyramid can reasonably be attributed to him. Here again we have an essentially classical architect stepping out of line, as it were, and producing, this time, an Egyptian/Gothic fantasy though, by that date, c. 1770, the novelty was acceptable.

For the third illustration we have to move two miles to the south side of the valley to what is known as Scholes Coppice—though the wood has long since disappeared—where stands Keppels Column. Once towering “with proud prominence over the giant oaks”, the column of the Tuscan Order, with quiet dignity dominates the sprawl of speculators’ fussy red boxes creeping ever nearer to its base. Its simple detailing seems exactly right. The shaft is of coursed rubble but the bold torus mould at the foot and the cantilevered echinus of the cap are made up of carefully worked individual blocks of ashlar, each necessarily cut on the curve not only in plan but in section and fitted together beautifully in courses, a technical accomplishment greatly to be admired.

Close to, looking up at the foreshortened column, we wonder whether the architect, Carr of York, usually so abstemious in the use of entasis—that device for correcting the optical illusion of an apparent sag in a straight line by introducing a curve into the profile—had perhaps over-emphasized the bulge. The early history of the column offers a possible explanation.

Apparently the 2nd Marquis of Rockingham (1730–1782) was not too clear as to his requirements when the project was first put in hand. Possibly he simply wanted another fashionable feature to add to the landscape, possibly he wanted to emulate his father’s effort on Hooper Hill, possibly he felt that he ought to do something about the obelisks at the back of the mansion—Walpole thought that they made the garden look like a nine-pin bowling alley—and that he could use them elsewhere. At any rate, early accounts refer to a pyramid, then to an obelisk, and when operations first started in 1773 an estimate was prepared by John Hobson, the mason, detailing the proposed work “in the Pedestal &

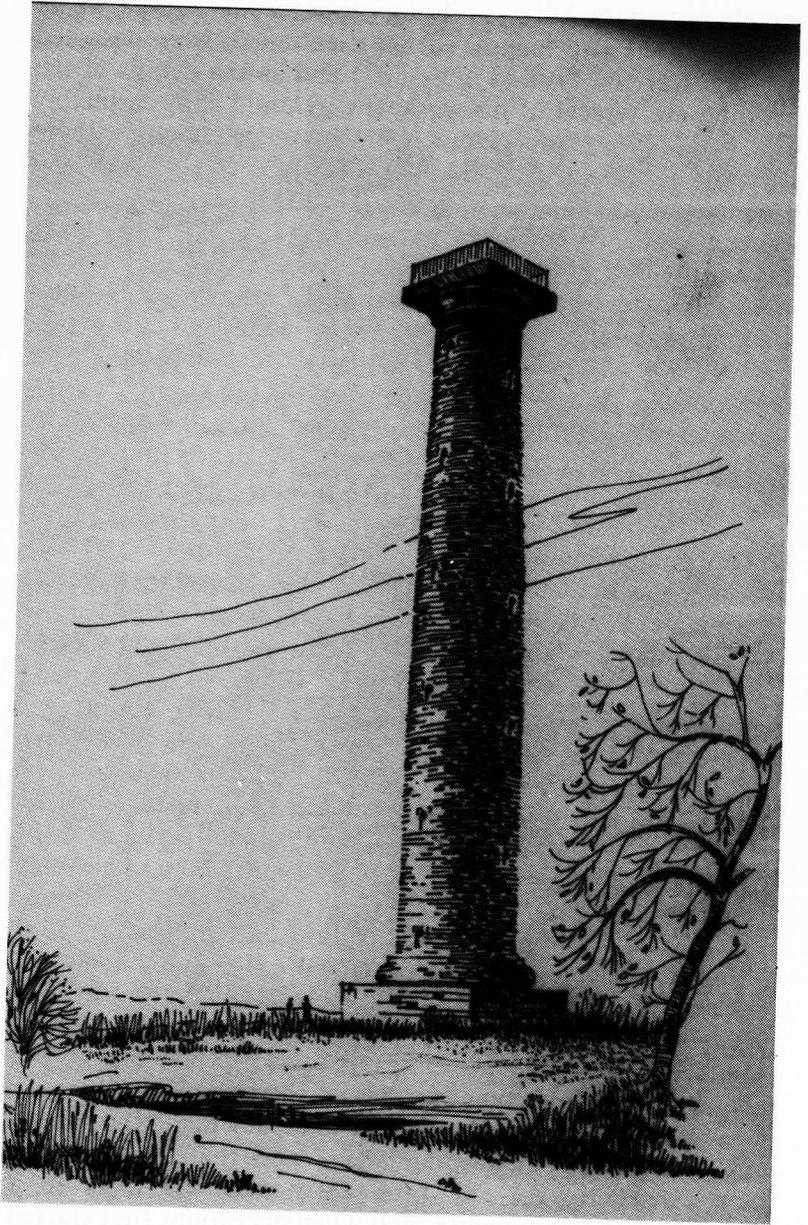


Fig. 3. Keppels Column.

Obelisk". This included the taking down of an obelisk in the garden and rebuilding it on a base, 45 feet high, incorporating sixty winding steps. Such a proposal must surely have been a mistake, yet a recently discovered drawing by Carr confirms the astonishing design: a great drum 17 feet in diameter sustaining improbably a 50 foot obelisk (fig. 4). Work proceeded slowly and in 1775 the pedestal was still under construction; yet, in some curious fashion, the monument was undergoing a transformation for in 1776, a new estimate was prepared of the "expencc" of raising "ye Column" by an additional 78 feet. The late change could possibly have resulted in the emphatic entasis. However, decision came to the Marquis in 1779. His friend and fellow Whig, Admiral Keppel had been court-martialled for failing to engage the French fleet. The trial, politically inspired, could have had unfortunate consequences: Admiral Byng, found guilty on a similar charge only twenty years earlier, had been shot on his own quarter deck. In the event, Keppel was honourably acquitted and rejoicing crowds thronged Wentworth park in celebration. Rockingham decided to commemorate the occasion. In amateur but enthusiastic hand, he sketched out a proposal for a column 150 feet high with strange wings sprouting out from near the base which on examination turned out to be the bows of men o' war. An enormous 30-foot statue holding a flag topped the column. The whole was to be dedicated to naval honour and integrity. However, the impractical nature of the design became apparent and Rockingham anxious for an early result turned his attention to the unfinished Scholes monument. A drawing of the latter was requested from the architect and it could well be at this stage that the height was curtailed leaving the shaft with the entasis of a taller column.

William Bray, the noted traveller, indicated that the column was finished in 1780. However, payments dragged on into 1782, the year of Rockingham's death so that, in a sense, the column could be nominated as a monument to the nobleman's memory—were it not for the subsequent erection of the Rockingham Mausoleum, our fourth illustration.

Rockingham, prime minister when he died, presumably should have been buried in Westminster Abbey but for his estrangement from George III. In fact, York Minster was the

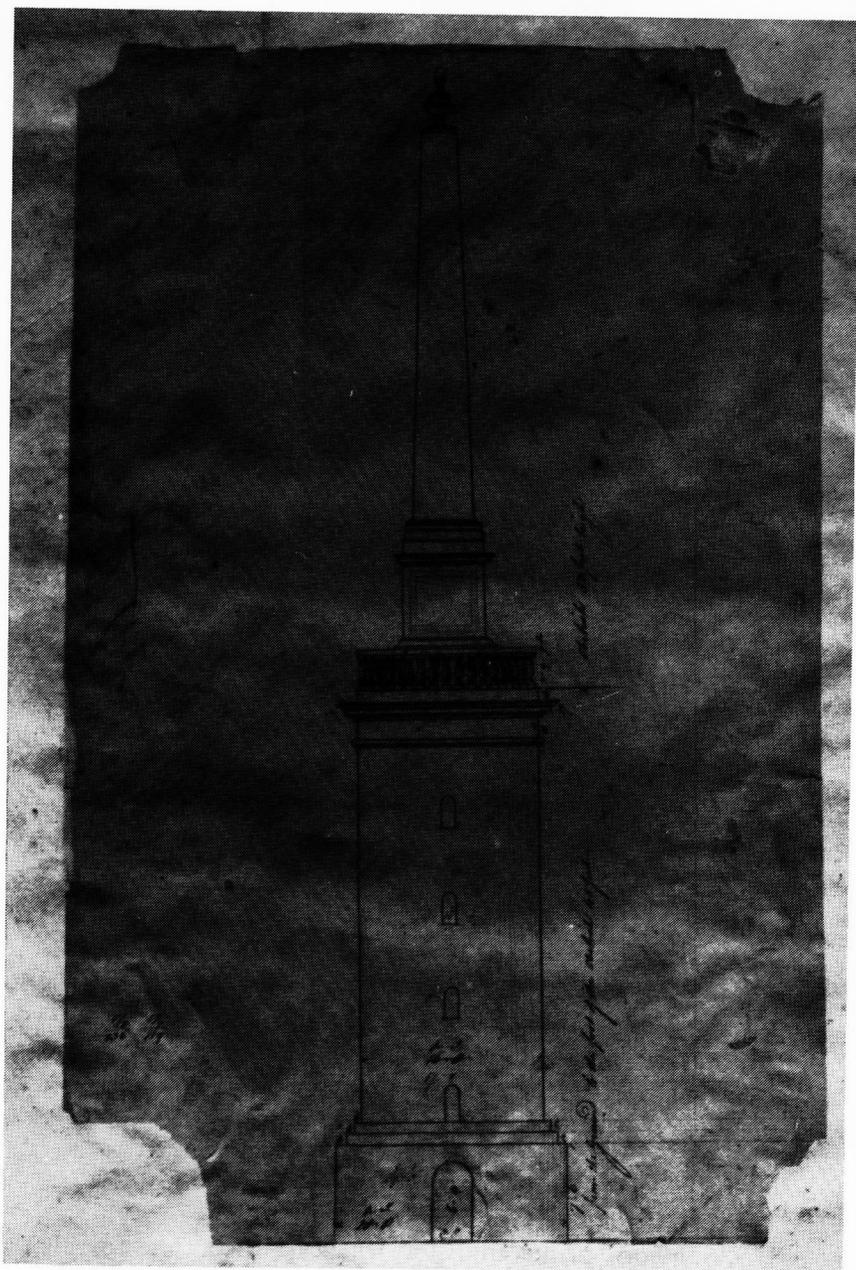


Fig. 4. Design by Carr for "the Pedestal and Obelisk".

scene of his interment. Maybe this was intended only as a temporary resting place, for the 4th Earl FitzWilliam, who inherited his uncle's estates, decided on something more personal, a mausoleum at Wentworth. Accordingly, the ubiquitous Carr of York was instructed to prepare designs. Two of his schemes, one dated 1783, were similar and consisted of a square base story enclosing a vaulted room and supporting a lofty obelisk. Carr had previously built an obelisk for Lord Bingley at the intersection of the rides in Bramham Park, and designed another for Archbishop Robinson for erection on Knox Hill, near Armagh, but neither were as original as the Wentworth submissions. Of course, the Egyptians considered the obelisk to be a symbol of life, the base representing the beginning and the apex the end of human endeavour. Doubtless Carr felt the symbolism appropriate to a sepulchre. Obviously Fitzwilliam thought otherwise, and the mausoleum emerged as a three storey affair. The square base was retained but, replacing the obelisk, there was now a second storey, colonnaded and arcaded containing the sarcophagus, which in turn carried a cupola in the form of a Roman temple (fig. 5). Altogether it is a combination unmatched elsewhere. Decried and admired, one wonders from where the inspiration came. The campanile to S. Paolo fuori le Mura, Rome, is vaguely similar; likewise the Tomb of the Julii, near Arles, has a tenuous connection. However, Carr was not noted for scholarly rummagings and it is likely that the conception was entirely his own.

The room in the base, in contrast to the sombre exterior, is anything but funereal. Well-lit with graceful Adamesque detailing and domed ceiling, it has almost the appearance of an elegant drawing room. Solemnity is provided by the remarkable group of statuary by Nollekens. The busts of eight of Rockingham's friends line the walls (or they did so until recently), and forming the central interest, is a life size statue of the Marquis, in Garter robes.

Work started on the Mausoleum in 1785 and finishing about 1791 cost £3,208. 3.4¼. Then two years later, Fitzwilliam had further ideas. Could he have been influenced by Carr's earlier obsession with "Egyptianalia"? Four obelisks were put up at the corners of the site. Maybe these, at last, came from the garden.

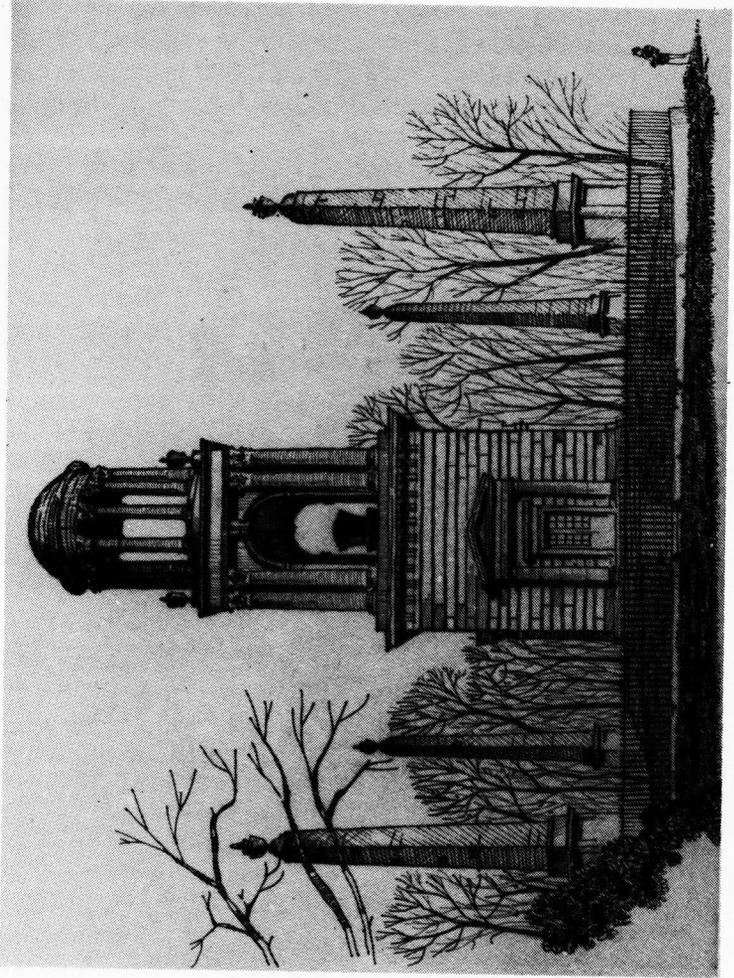


Fig. 5. The Rockingham Mausoleum.

Hooper Stand and Keppel's Column were placed prominently to demonstrate to the world the status of the Rockingham family. They are not easily seen from the mansion. Yet the Mausoleum—supposedly a tomb—must surely have been intended, with its relatively low elevational siting, to form an integral part of the park prospect from the house. Certainly it gives to the landscape the appropriate classical air of Poussin and Claude—so much so that we question whether Fitzwilliam really intended the building as a mausoleum but rather as a landscape feature with memorial connotations. Needless to say Lord Rockingham still rests in York Minster.

Time and mining subsidence have taken toll of the four monuments. The Earl Fitzwilliam Estates Co. lacks the funds necessary to maintain these works of national importance. The Wentworth Monuments Society, a private organization of people interested in the preservation of our heritage, has just been formed with the object of attempting to safeguard the future of the four buildings. The Secretary's address is 126 Broom Road, Rotherham.

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