Foll-e

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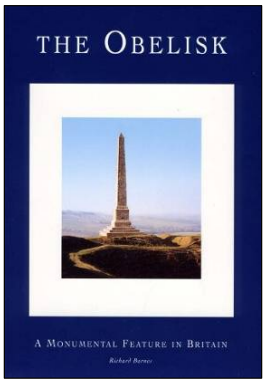
Obelisk Special

In our pursuit of the more exotic and imaginative of follies, it is easy to forget the role played by the humble obelisk in embellishing the British countryside. Even though we see them everywhere during our travels, use them as landmarks and as navigation aids, and take pleasure in the way they provide focal points in gardens, parks and country estates, we often pay them little respect. They are, however, an accepted part of follydom, providing monuments to human achievement and mankind's improvement of the natural world.

Their inclusion was something that troubled Gwyn Headley and Wim Meulenkamp when they wrote their book *Follies: A National Trust Guide*, leaving them with the dilemma of how many to include and which ones to leave out. In the end they concluded that the subject was too large for them and warranted a book of its own. At that time no publisher wanted to take on the subject so their extensive research lay idle in storage cases. All that changed recently with the publication of Richard Barnes's book *The Obelisk: a monumental feature in Britain*, released by Frontier Publishing, giving us a detailed and invaluable guide to these fascinating structures.



Although a Greek word, obelisks were much favoured by the Ancient Egyptians who believed they symbolized the Sun God Ra and the petrified rays of the sun. The Romans were particularly besotted by obelisks and built more of them than the Egyptians ever did, and in doing so inspired later travellers to copy them across Europe. The first of these to arrive in the United Kingdom was a marble obelisk that was set up at Nonsuch Palace in 1570 for Henry VIII. The courtier who brought it from Rome also built a balustrade formed by a line of smaller obelisks, a feature that was repeated at Montacute House and on many Jacobean church tombs.

The first of the large masonry obelisks to appear in Britain was erected at Ripon in 1702 by Nicholas Hawksmoor. It was quickly followed by Sir John Vanbrugh's mighty obelisk at Castle Howard in 1714, and copied by all of the great architects of the eighteenth century like Kent, Gibbs, Adam and Soane. Even Sir Edwyn Lutyens included them in his gardens and city plans, usually as nodes to key focal points and as terminations to key vistas. Modern urban expansion and the breaking up of old estates has changed much of this, often with obelisks now standing clumsily in odd and unusual locations, but despite their embarrassment at being so removed from their design setting, their charm remains and many people retain a deep affection for them. So, in respect for all they do to improve the appearance of our countryside, this edition of the Bulletin focuses on a selection of the more notable obelisks in Britain and Ireland, and a very special new obelisk in The Netherlands.

Andrew Plumridge
andrew@follies.fsnet.co.uk

The Simon de Montfort Obelisk at Abbey Manor to the north of Evesham, Worcestershire

Conolly's Folly, County Kildare

Known simply as The Obelisk, the correctly named Conolly (not Connolly) Folly stands next to the Castletown estate and one of Ireland's best Palladian houses. Dating from 1722 the house was built for William Conolly (1662-1729), who was Speaker of the Irish Parliament and the richest man in Ireland.

The folly was designed by the German-born Richard Castle (1690-1751), who was one of the most important architects working in Ireland during the eighteenth century: among his more notable works are Trinity College Printing House, Carton House, Powerscourt House and Rotunda Hospital, as well as the Irish Parliament building where he played a mainly supporting role. In 1740, thanks to his connection with Edward Lovett Pearce (one of the architects responsible for Castletown House), he was commissioned by Conolly's widow to design a structure that would improve her view and at the same time provide employment for the poor of Celbridge after a particularly hard winter left many of them at risk of starving. The result was a folly *par excellence*, with a 70 feet high (21 metre) stone obelisk standing atop a series of diminishing arches that stand a further 70 feet tall, and then all decorated with stone pineapples and eagles. As James Howley's book *The Follies and Garden Buildings of Ireland* points out, the folly has been described by some the ugliest building in Ireland, and by others its one real piece of architecture. But whichever camp is right, it is impossible not to admire the impressive structural means by which each arch transfers the weight of the great obelisk down to ground level like an ensemble of gymnasts performing a circus trapeze act. It also includes an internal staircase to allow views from a gallery over the central arch.

Workers for the project were drawn from the local villages and in an act of great philanthropy were each paid a halfpenny per day for their toil. It caused the final project cost to rise to a massive £400.

It has often been said that the greatest thing to have happened to Co. Kildare was the arrival of the Hon. Desmond Guinness. In the 1960s the folly was in a poor state of repair and in much need of help. Having motivated the Irish Georgian Society, Desmond and a firm of Belfast steeplejacks set to work to restore the folly and save it from collapse. During their work they discovered many original and ingenious methods for keeping rainwater out of structural joints and to shed the water off of the masonry. Having completed their task, it became a fitting marker for the grave of Mariga, Desmond's first wife. It is now maintained by the Leixlip Boy Scouts.

The Tallest Obelisk in Europe

Standing tall in Dublin's Phoenix Park is an obelisk built to commemorate the victories of the Dublin-born Arthur Wellesley, the first Duke of Wellington, and designed by Sir Robert Smirke. At 205 feet (63 metres) it is said to be the tallest in Europe, and would have been taller still but for a disappointing shortage of funds.

The Iron Man of Cumbria

John 'Iron-Man' Wilkinson (1728-1808) was an English Industrialist who was fond of cast iron and proposed its use where other materials performed perfectly successfully. Although born of humble beginnings, he married well and was a natural entrepreneur, so much so that by the time he was 30 he had established an ironworks at Willey in Shropshire, and a couple of years later took control of the Bersham and Bradley works in Staffordshire. It was at Bradley that he perfected the art of making iron canons for the Board of Ordnance using a method where he cast them whole and bored out their centre to make perfect barrels. This avoided the creation of air pockets during the casting process, which weakened them and caused the canons to explode when fired. The accuracy of his borings also led him to become the market leader in the production of steam engine cylinders.

In 1779 Wilkinson was a major force behind the project to build the world's first iron bridge across the River Severn at Coalbrookdale. Eight years later he launched the world's first iron barge long before Brunel had begun to think about doing something similar with the SS Great Britain. His obsession with the material continued in the 1790s when he paid to have iron windows, an iron pulpit and other fittings installed into his local Methodist Chapel at Bradley, and leading to the soubriquet of 'Iron-Mad' Wilkinson.

His career was enormous; by 1796, when he was 68 years of age, he was producing one eighth of Britain's total stock of cast iron, and was a leading but often forgotten genius of the Industrial Revolution. It made him extremely wealthy, something that fuelled his eccentric wish to have everything around him made of cast iron, including several coffins. On 14 July 1808, when he died at his Bradley Works, his body was taken to Cumbria for burial but found to be too big to fit inside the iron coffin that he kept there for just that occasion. Another coffin was hastily ordered and shipped by boat to the Port of Ulverston along with a 36-feet (12-metre) iron obelisk and plinth weighing 20 tons.

Wilkinson's body was buried on his Castlehead Estate at Lindale-in-Cartmel, Cumbria. His widow chose a beautiful spot part way up the crag to the south of the mansion, but when the gravediggers started work they quickly struck bedrock and had to make do with a shallow grave. It meant that the coffin was covered by only a few inches of soil, something that was unsatisfactory in the eyes of the church, so after the burial service had ended the gravediggers returned to create a deeper hole. In the end no amount of labour was enough so they resorted to explosives as a way of removing the bedrock before returning the coffin and marking the spot with the memorial obelisk.

It would be nice to say that Wilkinson's body was finally at peace, but alas no. He left a fortune of more than £130,000, the majority of which was placed in a 20-year trust but wasted through the arguing and incompetence of its lawyer trustees. When that money finally ran out in 1828 a decision was taken to sell the Castlehead Estate but the agents were worried that Wilkinson's tomb might deter prospective buyers. As a result the obelisk was knocked over and pushed into the shrubbery where it was left to rot, and workmen arrived in the middle of the night to dig up the iron coffin and move it to Lindale-in-Cartmel Church.

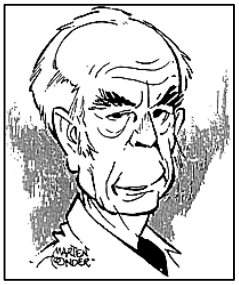
The estate was bought in 1863 by Earnest Mucklow who retrieved the obelisk and re-erected it beside the coach road in Lindale village. After falling into disrepair it ended up in the hands of a local scrap metal merchant and was eventually rescued after an appeal in the 1980s by Allithwaite Parish Council. Most of the restoration work was completed by Dorothea Restoration Ltd in Buxton, but the plinth was beyond repair and had to be replaced by Thomas Armstrong of Cockermouth. The memorial was finally returned to Lindale in October 1984.

Wilkinson's achievements were recorded in a popular song that was written in the year of his death, saying:

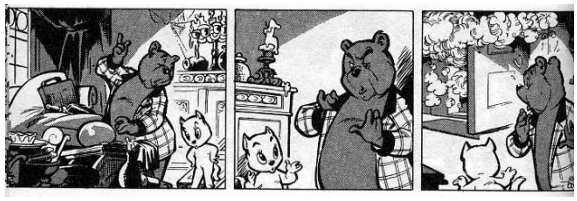
Then let each jolly fellow take hold of his glass
And drink to the health of his friend and his lass.
May we always have plenty of stingo and pence,
And Wilkinson's fame blaze a thousand years hence.

Folly of the Month: The Toonder Obelisk, Rotterdam, Netherlands

Marten Toonder was undoubtedly the most important Dutch author of comics. His works appeared in daily newspapers in both the Netherlands and other countries too. The stories always came in strips of three pictures with a lot of text running underneath, and his best known creations for the cartoons were *Tom Poes en Heer Bommel* (Tom Cat and Sir Bommel), which ran virtually non-stop for 45 years. Unsurprisingly, he received numerous awards and distinctions for both his illustrating skills and literary output, but he was mainly appreciated for his enormous contribution to the Dutch language. Countless of his neologisms have become household words over the years.

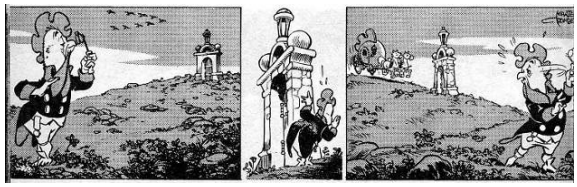


The first adventure of Tom Poes appeared during the Nazi occupation of The Netherlands, and courageously showed the villains as a gang of marching and jack-booted robbers in a thinly veiled depiction of German troopers. It proved to be very popular with Dutch readers but less so with the occupying forces who only allowed the comic strip to continue if Toonder showed them in a softer and non-controversial light. It was the start of 174



stories showing Tom Poes and Olivier B. Bommel, in which his snobbery and good intentions always bring Sir Bommel into trouble leaving it to his little friend Tom Poes to come up with a cunning plan.

Toonder lived in a mansion in Ireland for a long time, so he will have known follies. In one of his stories a gate appears that looks like an eye-catcher. At the first sight it is considered completely useless, a perfect folly. It later turns out to be the entrance to the dream house of any



person that enters – a wonderful image of folly.

In 1985, at the age of 72, Toonder finally retired saying that he had told all he had to tell: his last comic strip (aptly titled *Sir Bommel and the End of Endlessness)* appeared on 20 January 1986. But his strips were reprinted in newspapers for another decade, the books with bundles of strips are still available today and Tom Poes was serialised as a podcastable radio play in 2007.

Near Blaak station and the Central Library in Toonder's birthplace Rotterdam, a six-metre high obelisk was erected in 2002 with the inscription *Ode to Marten Toonder.* Designed by four artists calling themselves the Artoonists (art–cartoon–Toonder) it has Tom Poes, the cunning 'saver of the day', on top of a winged globe in the pattern of Bommel's coat, resting on Toonder's emblem of a crossed brush and pen. The obelisk itself has reliefs representing philosophy, politics, economy and science, attributes of the four surrounding characters from the Tom Poes comics. The lightning-flashed cloud represents the clashing of earthly matters (Bommel) and pure reason (Tom Poes), as in the comics. The whole monument is represents Rommeldam, Bommel's world. The obelisk was unveiled by Toonder himself, together with the mayor on the occasion of his 90th birthday.

When in 2005 he died in an old artists' home in his own country, his admirers gathered at the obelisk with flowers and wreaths and paid homage. The shamrock-shaped bench around the base is the best spot to ponder on the achievements of a great and venerable man. You will not often be alone, for he was and still is immensely popular.

Rita Boogaart

The Obelisk at Castle Howard

During 2003-04, the grade I listed obelisk at Castle Howard was repaired following its damage by aggregate lorries travelling from the quarry at nearby Hovingham. The problem was that quarry's planning permission required stone-laden lorries headed for the southbound A64 to use the four-mile avenue through the park, and in doing so occasionally clipped the stonework. They also caused vibration. At the same time the upper parts of the obelisk were being further damaged by rusting cramps holding the stone blocks together.

The obelisk, which is the first to be designed and erected in a private garden, stands 100 feet (30 metres) high on a low stone plinth. It was built by Vanbrugh in 1714 and includes inscriptions to his two main clients: the Duke of Marlborough and Charles Howard, the latter of which reads:

IF TO PERFECTION THESE PLANTATIONS RISE
IF THEY AGREEABLY MY HEIRS SURPRISE
THIS FAITHFUL PILLAR WILL THEIR AGE DECLARE
AS LONG AS TIME THESE CHARACTERS WILL SPARE
HERE THEN WITH KIND REMEMBRANCE READ HIS NAME
WHO FOR POSTERITY PERFORM'D THE SAME.
CHARLES THE III EARL OF CARLISLE
OF THE FAMILY OF THE HOWARDS
ERECTED A CASTLE WHERE THE OLD CASTLE OF
HENDERSKELFE STOOD, AND CALL'D IT CASTLE HOWARD.
HE LIKEWISE MADE THE PLANTATIONS IN THIS PARK
AND ALL THE OUT-WORKS, MONUMENTS AND OTHER
PLANTATIONS BELONGING TO THE SAID SEAT.
HE BEGAN THESE WORKS
IN THE YEAR MDCCII
ANNO D: MDCCXXXI

The project involved the usual stone repairs as well as the construction of a new road traffic roundabout and island to protect the obelisk from further damage. It cost approximately £200,000, of which 60% was met by the Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund.

Hampshire's Mayflower Memorial

Southampton has never been happy knowing that history records that the *Mayflower* set sail for America from its rival naval city of Plymouth. This is because the Pilgrim Fathers actually began their voyage from Southampton on 5 August 1620, but quickly ran into difficulties with their ships and stopped for repairs at Dartmouth, and again at Plymouth. It was during this last stop that the early settlers decided to abandon their support ships and make the journey in the May-flower alone.

To remind the world of its role in this very important event, the City erected a monument to the Mayflower in 1913 inside the south-west corner of the old city, close to the point where the Mayflower set sail. Typical of the architectural style adopted in its magnificent City Hall, the tall white obelisk is carved from Portland Stone and topped with a gazebo and boat-heads in a similar way to the Rostral Columns of Ancient Rome. It also gave it a cap in the style of a Roman temple topped with a mosaic dome and a copper weathervane of the Mayflower.

The Pilgrim Fathers arrived in America on 21 November 1620. Having left England from the wrong port, bad weather prevented them from doing the same in Virginia where they had been granted land so they headed north and established the first permanent settlements in New England.

A plaque on the monument commemorates the sailing of a local man called John Alden who joined the voyage as a way of avoiding debts he inherited after his father's death. By accident he discovered that the expedition needed a qualified cooper to look after its barrel stores during the long journey, so having signed up, he was able to depart for America and leave his debts behind him. Other plaques have been put up by descendents of *Mayflower* families.

Sir Solomon's Memorial, Belton

Close to the Lincolnshire village of Belton, and engulfed by the A161 and M180, are the remains of the Temple Belwood estate. In its heyday the estate surrounded a rather ugly Georgian mansion that had been spoiled by the addition of two large and unadorned side wings, but had a few buildings of interest to us, including two castellated gate lodges at the Bracon entrance that were demolished after World War II following many years of neglect.

The only surviving folly of the estate is a 30-feet (10 metre) high brick obelisk that was erected by William Johnson in 1787 in memory of his favourite horse Sir Solomon. One day while he was hunting, Johnson's horse stumbled and fell to the ground with a broken leg and had to be destroyed. It is said that Johnson was so upset by his loss that he personally shot his two best hounds so they could be buried on either side of the horse as a guard of honour. Local gossip, however, tells that the grave is not beneath the obelisk but is instead located in the Dog and Horse Plantation to the north east of the site of the old house.

The Boy Sweep's Obelisk

During the early nineteenth century the usual way of sweeping any substantial chimney was to send a little boy up with a brush, and require him to sweep away the soot as he went. It was a dangerous job for these young children and many died from suffocation, slipping and breaking their limbs or necks, or simply losing their way and not finding the way down again alive.

One of these child sweeps was a ten-year-old boy from Alverstoke on the Isle of Wight called Valentine Gray. In 1821 he started work as an apprentice to the Newport Sweep Mr Davis, but was found dead one morning in his bed rather than up a chimney. The surgeon who examined the body found it was covered by a mass of bruises and that the cause of death was a severe blow to the head. After a lengthy inquest Davis and his wife were found guilty of beating the boy and were imprisoned for manslaughter.

The public was outraged by the death and showed sympathy for the boy through the erection of an obelisk in the Church Litten area of Newport. An inscription reads *'To the memory of Valentine Gray, the little sweep. Interred January the 5th AD 1822, in the 10th year of his age. In testimony of the general feeling for suffering innocence this monument is erected by public subscription.'*

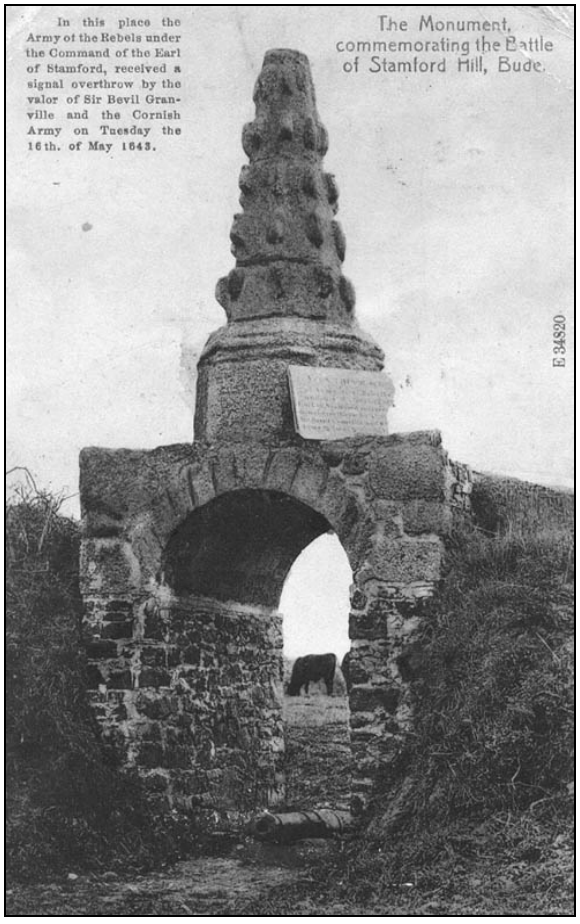
Gray's death was not entirely in vain. It put pressure on politicians to change the law and stop young children from working in such dangerous conditions. After abortive Acts in 1840 and 1864, Lord Shaftesbury successfully pushed through an Act in 1875, paving the way for a healthier future for Britain's poor and illegitimate children.

John Francis Campbell's Monument on the Isle of Islay

Stamford Hill Memorial, Cornwall

On the morning of 16 May 1643, the Battle of Stratton took place less than half a mile to the north of the town. Having reached the town first on the previous day, the Earl of Stamford deployed his troops on the summit of a substantial hill to the north of the Stratton that is still known as Stamford Hill. Although outnumbered by almost two to one, and far less well equipped, the Royalist Sir Bevill Granville attacked Stamford's formidable position so he could take advantage of the fact that Stamford couldn't use his horses.

Despite overwhelming odds, Grenville had the tactical superiority and won victory after a 10-hour-long fight. Despite its duration the losses were comparatively few, with the recorded death of 300 Parliamentarian soldiers and the capture of 1,700. Grenville also captured 13 pieces of artillery, a mortar and a substantial quantity of provisions. More importantly he secured Cornwall and its tin mines and ports for the Royalist cause.



The site of the battle is marked by a small crocketed obelisk taken from the tower of Poughill Church and set on a low stone arch. Officially the victorious Royalists were under the command of the Somerset-born Sir Ralph, later 1st Baron Hopton, but Cornish folklore would never admit to this nor let you think that the Battle of Stratton was anything other than a Cornish triumph.

Camberley's Mystery Obelisk

Last August Rick Kirby's design showing three stainless steel figures on a thin obelisk was chosen to adorn a new shopping and leisure centre at Camberley, in West Surrey. At a cost of £50,000, it shows three figures with their arms out-stretched and palms open, guiding pedestrians along Park Street and Obelisk Way. When he was asked about the inspiration for the work of art, Kirby admitted that it came from the eighteenth century obelisk tower at Camberley, which once stood 100 feet (30 metres) tall, but is now reduced to the bottom 30 feet (9.5 metres) only.

The original tower obelisk stood on rising ground close to the A30, and was built around 1765-70 by John Norris of Hawley Place, some two miles to the west. At that time Camberley did not exist and was instead open heathland that spread across many acres. As such the obelisk would have been far more notable than it is today.

The obelisk was called "Norris's Whim", and appears in a John Hassall watercolour of 1822 in the British Museum. In the 1880s it was occupied by a group of travellers who used the wooden staircase for firewood. Being a tall, hollow structure the brick obelisk acted like an industrial chimney and causing the fire to rage out of control. In doing so it damaged the top of the structure, which had to be partially demolished for safety reasons, giving it the stunted appearance that it has today.

When the town of Camberley started to grow the obelisk became engulfed by houses. It now stands in the grounds of a Victorian House called

"The Knoll," forming part of Camberley Park and allowing it to be visible to the general public again.

Over the years there have been numerous suggestions about the obelisk's purpose, including its use as a signal tower. Since semaphore was not introduced until 1800, however, this suggestion is largely dismissed, especially since a semaphore tower was erected on Chatley Heath (to the north of Guildford) in 1820. Another suggestion was that Norris was a friend of Sir Francis Dashwood and used his tower to send signals to Dashwood sitting in the golden ball above West Wycombe Church. Again, there is no evidence to support this. Far more plausible is the simple notion that the tower served as a watchtower protecting people from attack by local highwaymen, or as a hunting stand or simple landmark to guide travellers and hunts-men across the heath. It would most certainly have been used as a belvedere in 1792 when 5,000 troops were camped on Bagshot Heath, and with 150,000 horsemen in attendance, were reviewed on more than one occasion by King George III.

Restoration Milestone at St. Ives

The newly restored obelisk at Stocks Bridge on the Needingworth Road, St. Ives, Huntingdonshire

The Late Pauline Flick Memorial

Older members will recall with considerable affection the late Pauline Flick, who lived by the disused railway line at Little Rollright, near Chipping Norton, Oxfordshire. She was well-known to many as the owner of The Rollright Stones, which she inherited from her father; but was also an authority on Children's China, Dolls Houses and Workhouses. Moreover she was a friend to all forms of wildlife, especially cats, which she rescued by the score. Visits to her picturesque Georgian cottage were memorable affairs because they often meant sharing a seat in the drawing room with a wild rabbit, or finding one of her many cats nibbling at your sandwich or homemade cake.

Those of us who were at her funeral will remember always the moment during the eulogy when a white butterfly appeared from the flowers on the lid of her coffin and flew around the church. It was as if it was Pauline's spirit had been set free and she was flying around the packed church to see who had turned up and say her final farewell: at that moment we all shed a tear.

Although little has changed in her corner of the village, one significant development is the creation of a wildlife reserve along the disused railway. In what is a lovely gesture to the last of her type the village has named the reserve in Pauline's honour. I know she would have approved of the idea, but probably been much embarrassed by the attention and the acclaim.

Time Gentlemen Please!

David Roe, editor of *The Journal of The Inn Sign Society* would like details of any pub signs that feature follies. If you know of any, please send details direct to him (with photographs if possible) at davidroe24@yahoo.co.uk

Forthcoming Events

Sunday, 13 April 2008 – Tour of Somerset follies with Jonathan Holt. Further details published in the January *Foll-e*, and from jm.holt@virgin.net

Sunday, 15 June 2008 – Tour of Painshill Park, Cobham, Surrey with Iain Gray. Further information given in the leaflet posted in February or from Iain Gray at 020-8870 4567 or gg@candycollect.co.uk

Sunday, 29 June 2008 – Open Day at Pelham Place, East Tisted, Alton, Hampshire, in aid of the Army Benevolent Fund. Details available through andrew@follies.fsnet.co.uk.

Sunday, 13 July 2008 – Tour of Derbyshire follies. Further details from Joy Cotton on 01332 705165.

Richard Barnes's book *The Obelisk: a monumental feature in Britain* is available from Frontier Publishing at www.frontierpublishing.co.uk

Picture credits: *de Montfort Obelisk – Robert Hill; Conolly's Folly – Peter Donnelly; Phoenix Park – www.archiseek.com; John 'Iron Man' Wilkinson – www.bbc.co.uk/history; Iron Obelisk – www.waymarking.com; Toonder Obelisk – Rita Boogaart; Toonder self portrait – www.nederlandierland-bravehost.com; Castle Howard – www.yorkshirewalks.org; Mayflower Memorial - http://bio.fsu.edu; Temple Belwood (all) – Michael John Fotheringham; Valentine Gray Memorial – Geoff Allan; Campbell Obelisk – www.islayinfo.com; Stamford Hill postcard – Andrew Plumridge; Camberley Obelisk – Tim Dodds; St. Ives Milestone – Huntingdonshire District Council.*

Important announcement for 2009

Next year is our 21st anniversary and we want to make it a memorable one. Although we already have some events planned, here is your choice to shape the festivities. So, if there is anything folly-related that you have always wanted to do, like sit inside the Golden Ball at West Wycombe Church, or dance in the Underwater Ballroom at Witley Park, or if you simply want to visit a folly that has always eluded you, please let us know and we will do our best to arrange it. Likewise, let us know if you can help to arrange a visit, especially if you know the person with the keys and the authority to let us use them.