



Pyramidal Follies

Issue 29:
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What's on this month:

- **05—Release of Gillian Mawrey and Linden Groves' book *The Gardens of English Heritage*, published by Francis Lincoln Limited—see back page.**
- **15—Annual Garden Party** at Hall Barn, Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire. Details from www.follies.org.uk or 07866 593501
- **15—Capability Brown's Vision for Gatton Walk:** A tour of Gatton Park (Surrey) to learn about Brown's vision and its management today. Details from www.gattonpark.com or 01737 649066.

And later...

- **9-12 September—Heritage Open Days.** A list of follies and other properties taking part in the scheme is available from www.heritageopendays.org.uk
- **11 September—Cotswold Weekend** visiting Painswick Rococo Gardens to see the newly restored Red House, Exedra, Bothy, Pigeon House and more, and then to Woodchester Mansion and Frampton-on-Severn. Details from 0117-929 1673

The Folly Fellowship

Articles, pictures, comments and feedback for the e-Bulletin should be sent to andrew@follies.fsnet.co.uk. All other correspondence should be sent to membership@follies.org.uk.



Mausoleum of John Hobart, 2nd Earl of Buckingham and his two wives at Blickling Hall, Norfolk
Photo: Graham Gilmore on Flickr

According to the 15 April edition of *TMZ*—an online celebrity gossip magazine—the Hollywood actor Nicholas Cage has reserved his burial plot in a New Orleans cemetery and built on it a 3-metre high concrete tomb in the form of a pyramid.

The actor is as well-known for his unusual property portfolio as he is for his range of films, having once owned a medieval castle in Germany and two islands in the Caribbean. In 2007 he purchased Midford Castle in Somerset for a reported £5-million, from where it would be nice to think that he found inspiration for his mausoleum after



Nicholas Cage's mausoleum under construction
Photo: David Appelman on yovia.com

visiting Jack Fuller's pyramid at Brightling (East Sussex) or John Hobart's at Blickling Hall (Norfolk). The view in America, however, is

that the idea sprang from a small pyramid in the top corner of the movie poster for his 2004 film *National Treasure*.

Cage's tomb is not the only pyramid or Egyptian monument in New Orleans, and is unlikely to be the last. Local people believe that since their City is on the opposite side of the World to Cairo, a psychic bond links them with the pyramids of Egypt. Even if that is true, it does not explain why so many pyramid tombs are built in the United States, or why they are so popular elsewhere in the World.

Britain's interest in Egyptian architecture began when gentlemen on the Grand Tour brought home details of obelisks, sphinxes

and pyramids that they saw during their travels in Italy. The first of these to be copied in Britain was Hawksmoor's obelisk in Ripon (North Yorkshire), erected in 1702 in honour of John Aislabie, and copied twelve years later by Vanbrugh at nearby Castle Howard, along with two pyramids and two gateways with pyramidal features. It started a fashion for obelisks to be incorporated in the 'improved landscapes' of country houses, and their use as funerary monuments, the earliest of which is Sir Edward Lovatt Pierce's memorial to the Allen family at Stillorgan in Ireland (1717), which he based on Bernini's obelisk in Rome's Piazza Navona.

Interest in Egypt re-emerged in 1798 when Napoleon invaded it as part of his campaign to undermine Britain's trade interests with India. Having been appointed to the French Academy of Sciences in May of that year, he took with him a group of 167 mathematicians, scientists and artists so they could record everything they saw during the campaign. One of them was Dominique Vivant Denon, whose drawings caused a sensation when they were eventually published as *Voyage dans la basse et la haute Egypte* in 1802.



One of Vivant Denon's drawings of the Sphinx

Denon's book inspired Thomas Hope to devote a room in his London house to Egyptian decoration, furniture and antiquities, and later to publish their designs in his book *Household furniture and interior decoration* (1807). But, while the style was admired by Britain's furniture designers, it was less popular with architects, causing C. A. Busby to say in his book *A Series of Designs for Villas and Country Houses* (1808) that 'of all the vanities which a sickly fashion has produced, the Egyptian style in modern architecture appears the most absurd: a style which, for domestic

buildings, borders on the monstrous. Its massy members and barbarous ornaments are a reproach to the taste of its admirers; and the travels of Denon have produced more evil than the elegance of the engravings and splendour of his publication can be allowed to have compensated.'

Although Busby's view was not shared by everyone, only a few Egyptian-style buildings were built in Britain. The first was an office on the Strand, built in 1804 for *The Courier* newspaper, complete with cavetto cornice and columns with palmiform capitals. Seven years later P.F. Robinson completed an Egyptian Museum in London's Piccadilly (demolished 1904), which John Foulston later imitated in his Masonic Hall at Stonehouse (Glos), his Library at Devonport, and house for John Lavin in Chapel Street, Penzance.



The Egyptian Museum in London's Piccadilly (top)
John Lavin's house in Penzance (bottom)

In contrast, the style was welcomed by the designers of mausoleums and funerary monuments, helped by stories of mummies and the belief that burial in an Egyptian tomb preserved the body so it was ready for the afterlife. One of the first of these was the Gillow family mausoleum at Turnham (Lancs), while in London a large number appeared together at Highgate Cemetery. A fine example stands against a remote hill at Wotton

House in Surrey, and was built in the early part of the 19th century for the Evelyn family (below).

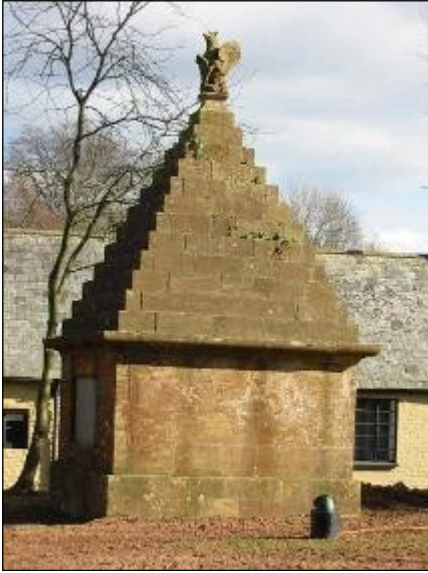


While Egyptian style inspired builders of individual follies, it never gained popularity with garden designers of the past. One of the early exceptions was the Duke of Württemberg's garden at Château de Montbéliard in France, where an Egyptian bridge, swing, bathhouse and billiards room were all built in 1787. In Britain, Egypt was used for small parts of larger garden plans, including the Rev Edwards' secret garden at Stancombe Park in Gloucestershire (1840s), and for James Bateman's garden at Biddulph Grange in Staffordshire (1842-69).



The Egyptian Garden at Biddulph Grange
Photo: Kev747 on Flickr

Pyramids have always held a fascination for folly builders, even though the architect Vernon Gibberd once told me they are among the most difficult of structures to build. With the exception of those by Vanbrugh and Hawksmoor at Castle Howard (1719-28), the first pyramid was built by Sir Charles Kemys-Tynte at Halswell House (Somerset), long before Denon's books were published, and said to be in memory of his niece who died unexpectedly in 1744.



The well-head at Halswell House
 Photo: www.halswell.co.uk

Barbara Jones tells us that the earliest examples were 'tall and Roman in proportion, like the tomb of Cestius...' in Rome (*Follies and Grottoes*, 1979). Typical of this type is Needle's Eye at Wentworth Woodhouse (South Yorkshire) which, like many of Britain's best follies, emerged through a bizarre wager.

At 14 metres high and straddling a drive that connects Wentworth Woodhouse to the Lion Lodges near Brampton Bierlow, the folly is said to have been built by Earl Fitzwilliam after boasting of his driving skills and betting that he could drive his horse and carriage through the eye of a needle. Since the arch is only just wide enough for this, his feat (if true) is a remarkable one.

Needle's Eye, Wentworth Woodhouse
 Photo: Eddie Robinson (Flickr)



Also associated with gambling is William McKenzie's pyramid in St. Andrew's churchyard on Rodney Street, Liverpool. McKenzie was a habitual gambler who bet and lost his soul one night in a game of poker with the devil. Prior to his death in 1851, McKenzie convinced himself that if he was not buried the devil would be unable to claim his prize, so he left instructions for his body to be seated in a chair with a table in front of him and a winning hand of cards between his fingers.



The chronicle will be familiar to anyone who knows the story of the pyramid at St. Thomas à Beckett's Church, Brightling (East Sussex), where the 22-stone body of Jack Fuller is said to be seated in an iron chair with a bottle of Port and a roast chicken by his side. Knowing that he had led a colourful life, and just in case the devil tried to claim his soul, he asked for the floor of the pyramid to be covered with broken glass to cut the devil's hooves.

Building pyramids was something of a family tradition for Fuller. One of his relatives was Francis Douce who built a small pyramid tomb outside St. Andrew's Church in Nether Wallop (Hampshire) in 1760, and left a fund so that the children of the parish could be 'taught to read and write and cast an account a little way'. His Will went on to say, however, that their education 'must not go too far lest it makes them saucy and the girls all want to be chamber maids, and

in a few years you will be in want of cooks'. In return, the parish was instructed to paint the iron railings every other year, but in 1941 they decided instead to melt them down for the war effort.



Francis Douce's pyramid at Nether Wallop (above)
 William McKenzie's pyramid in Liverpool (left)
 Paulet St. John's pyramid at Farley Mount (below)



Another relative was Paulet St. John, who erected a 9 metre high pyramid on Farley Mount (near King's Somborne, Hampshire) in honour of his favourite horse. The reason was that while fox hunting in September 1733, the pair stumbled upon a chalk quarry and had no option but to jump in. Having survived the 8-metre fall, the pair went on to win the Hunter's Plate in October 1734, by which time the horse had been renamed 'Beware Chalk Pit'.

Pyramids that are dedicated to animals are rare. In Shropshire, the second George Durant built a pyramidal pigsty in the grounds of Tong Castle and inscribed it with the motto "To Please the Pigs." His story is said to have inspired P. G. Wodehouse in his creation of the eccentric Lord Emsworth,

whose own pig “Empress” lived in luxury behind Blandings Castle. George also marked the boundary of his estate with a series of pyramid-shaped stones, one of which can still be seen at Acorn Cottage in Bishops Wood (Staffordshire). In 1842 he rounded off his group of follies with an Egyptian Aviary at Vauxhall Farm, and used it to keep hens. Again, he covered it with mottos, including ‘SCRATCH BEFORE YOU PECK’ and the Latin AB OVO, meaning ‘From the Egg’.



The Egyptian Aviary at Tong (left)
Photo: From Stuart Barton's *Monumental Follies*

Unlike Gothic or Chinese, the Egyptian style ‘never seriously caught the imagination of the English until the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun in 1922’ (Barbara Jones, *Follies and Grottoes*, 1979). In a period of nearly 300 years, it has nonetheless inspired some of our wittiest men and given us some of our best follies and monuments.



The Stephens Mausoleum in Green Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn, New York.
Photo: <http://sorabji.com>

A gazetteer of pyramid follies, monuments and mausoleums will shortly be available on the Folly Fellowship's website www.follies.org.uk

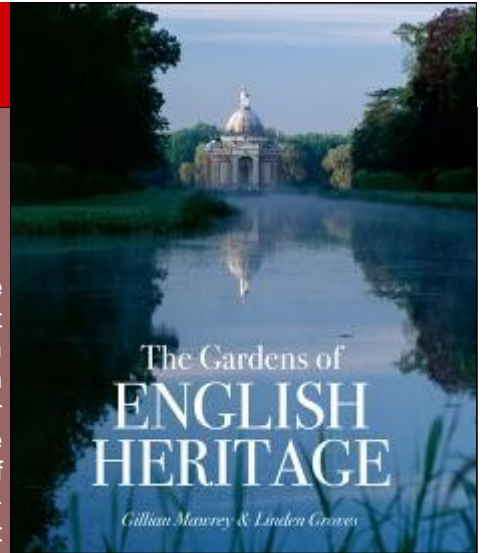
Newly published:

The Gardens of English Heritage
Gillian Mawrey and Linden Groves,
Francis Lincoln, August 2010
ISBN 9780711227712 £25.00 Hardback

The Gardens of English Heritage is the first book to describe the magnificent parks and gardens owned by English Heritage, which are far less well-known than its evocative medieval abbeys or Victorian mansions. Yet these remarkable places offer a wide-ranging variety of gardening pleasures. Some have stunning designs, while others are important for their history or their plants. A surprising number are brand new and a few of the best are tiny. All have marvelously atmospheric surroundings.

From the formality of Wrest Park and Chiswick House to the rolling parkland slopes around Kenwood House; from Queen Victoria's garden at Osborne, complete with charming vegetable plots for the royal children, to the exotic Quarry Garden at Belsay Hall and the modern restraint of the Contemporary Heritage Scheme, here are gardens from every corner of England and almost every century. These essays tell the story of how each was created and of the sometimes eccentric families who owned them. The decay their trees, fountains and statues so often fell into is described - and the way they have been restored and survive to delight us today.

The book is written by Gillian Mawrey, who set up the Historic Gardens Foundation in 1995, and by Linden Groves, who is a conservation officer with the Garden History Society and assistant to the HGF. The book is released on sale on 5 August 2010—further information and copies can be ordered from www.francislincoln.com.



The same is true of the United States of America where there is a long tradition of building pyramids as a final resting place for wealthy and important families. So, in contrast to the ridicule he has endured since it became known, Nicholas Cage's decision is welcomed. Perhaps he might now do what he should have done when he first bought Midford Castle and join the Folly Fellowship. We'll send him a membership form, just in case!

Recommended further reading on pyramids and the Egyptian Revival:

Carrott, R. G., *Egyptian Revival: Its Sources, Monuments and Meaning 1808-1858*, University of California Press (1978).

Curl, J. S., *The Egyptian Revival: Ancient Egypt as the Inspiration for Design Motifs in the West*, Routledge (2005).

Winpenny, D., *Up to a Point: In Search of Pyramids in Britain and Ireland*, Sessions of York (2009).

Gobbets

- May's Folly at Hadlow, Kent heads the list of 'at risk' buildings in the latest At Risk Register published by English Heritage. A full list of the buildings (given by county and by local authority) is available at:

www.english-heritage.org.uk

- A number of follies have been added to the Atlas Obscura website, which is a Compendium of the World's Wonders, Curiosities and Esoterica.

See—<http://atlasobscura.com>

Next Month:

- The September edition of Folly will look at the follies that are included in this year's Heritage Open Day Scheme.

Unless otherwise stated, all pictures in this edition of the Bulletin are taken by the editor or from the Folly Fellowship Picture Library. We are grateful to all of the photographers for the generous use of their pictures. All views and comments that are expressed are those of the authors and are not necessarily the opinion or belief of The Folly Fellowship.