

# MMT News

September 2000

Newsletter of The Mausolea and Monuments Trust, *Registered Charity No. 1063416*

## Unpeopled by the Living

*Dr Julian Litten finds romance in the beauty and melancholy of the burial chamber*

As with most charlatans, I manage to survive by adopting the characteristics of the chameleon. My colleagues on the Mausolea and Monuments Trust are architectural historians, whereas I am a funerary historian with an approach to the subject akin to that of J Meade Faulkner and M R James. But put these two ingredients together and you will create a committee with a balanced view on the subject to hand.

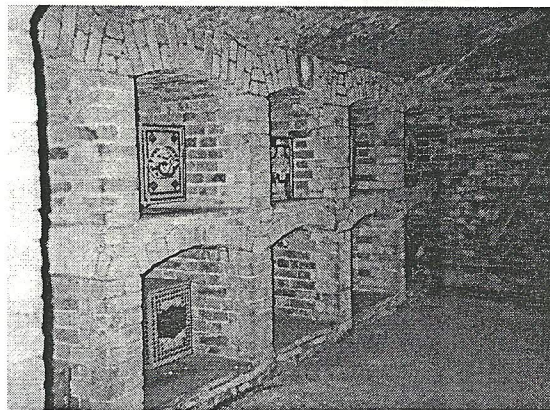
That there is an 'architecture of death' cannot be denied; it is to be seen not only in the freestanding mausolea in remote country churchyards but also in the attached mortuary aisles and private chapels in countless churches. Synonymous with these are the burial vaults beneath: dank, dismal chambers, whose darkness is pierced by narrow shafts of light filtering



*The Muilman Trench Chiswell vault at the Church of St Mary, Debden, Essex (1792-3)*

through the ventilation grilles, themselves partially blocked, choked by the descending roots of ivy, creeping their inexorable approach towards the coffins on the vault's shelves. Against the damp wall, the hulking lead shells within upholstered wooden cases display a dreadful panoply of tin-dipped stamped iron coffin furniture, and here and there a gilt metal coronet; items manufactured by the living solely for the twilight world of the dead.

I have been disappointed that these chambers have, to some extent, been forgotten by the architectural historian. This is not a criticism, and neither am I arguing that burial vaults should receive as much attention as the architectural structure above them, but I would argue that, without them, the grandiose mausoleum, vault or mortuary aisle might never have been built. Descend the steps into the Trench Chiswell vault at the east end of St Mary's, Debden, Essex, and you will be faced with two brick chambers, each with loculi for fifteen coffins and a two-light gothic window looking out onto the south side of the churchyard. But why it is a place of both light and sorrow needs to be explained.



*View of the interior of the vault, the Chiswell coffin occupies the centre-top loculus*

In the summer of 1793, it became apparent that the chancel was failing. Exercising his licence as a lay rector, patron of the living, and lord of the manor, Richard Muilman Trench Chiswell demolished it and erected in its place an octagonal chancel, 5.49m east to west, 5.49m north to south and 1.52m above the level of the nave, connected to the church by an arched opening 4.57m wide and 4.27m east to west. The new chancel is in Strawberry Hill gothic, of white Suffolk brick with stone dressings and Coade stone

*The Mausolea and Monuments Trust, Chairman: Tim Knox, Patron: Sir Howard Colvin  
24 Hanbury Street, Spitalfields, London E1 6QR, Tel/Fax: (020) 7377 8431, Email: mausolea@btinternet.com*

armorials; inside, there is a delightful and playful pendent plaster vault of exquisite delicacy. It was designed by Richard Holland, who had recently completed extensions at Debden Hall for Trench Chiswell, though it has been suggested that the antiquary, John Carter, also played a part. Following his success at nearby Audley End, James Pearson was asked to insert armorial glass in the east window, flanked on either side by eloquent marble mural monuments, to Trench Chiswell's uncle and parents, off the chisel of Thomas King of Bath. Everything was in the best possible taste and here, against the north wall, Mr and Mrs Trench Chiswell, and their daughter, sat Sunday by Sunday in their gothic chairs to participate in Matins and, later in the day, Evensong.

Against the north-west angle of the chancel, a flight of brick steps led down from the churchyard into the vaults. That area beneath the west end of the octagon is the first to be entered; the structure is of brick, with a two-light stone gothic window in the south wall providing both ventilation and illumination, together with a delightful view of the churchyard, for this vault is only 2.75m below ground level. Against the west wall are the brick loculi: two tiers, five coffins wide, occupied by the last owners of Debden Hall. But the east vault, directly beneath the octagonal chancel, is unusual, for it is square, and equipped with three tiers of loculi addressed to the north. In the south-east angle can be seen the relieving arch of Holland's octagon above, and presents a unique opportunity to examine at close quarters the structural engineering required to support an octagon above a square chamber. In the south wall is another two-light gothic window, also looking onto the churchyard, through which the sun streams in, illuminating the white Suffolk bricks and bathing the chamber in a warm glow. Nothing could be more remote from the standard image of a burial vault.

As Richard Trench Chiswell sat in his chancel, it is tempting to think of him occasionally musing on his end, and how grand a coffin would be in that central position of the east upper loculi, above which he had placed a Coade stone representation of his coat of arms. But the musing was not to last for long for, on 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1797, he received the intelligence that his plantations in Barbados had been wiped out by a hurricane. Quietly, he went into his study and shot himself. Thus he became the first occupant of his vault.

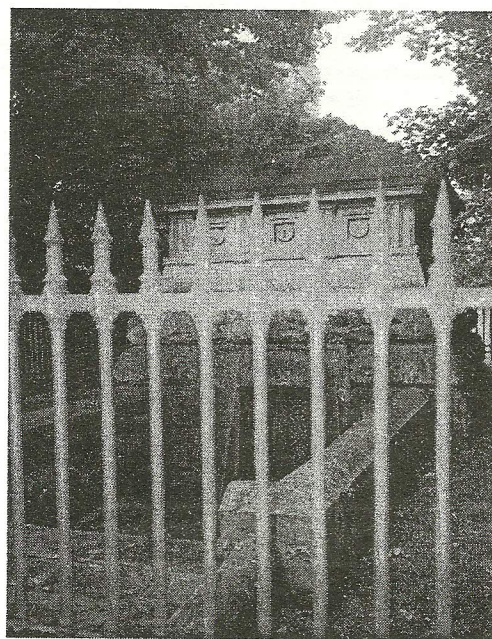
And, to some extent, the same story can be told regarding countless other mausolea and vaults. Yes, they may be attractive buildings to look at, but for me they will always be associated with human tragedy, sorrow and loss; and if for that reason alone, they need friends.

*Dr Julian Litten FSA is a Trustee of the MMT, President of the Friends of Kensal Green Cemetery and Chairman of the Church Maintenance Trust. He has been involved in funerary archaeology and architecture since the 1970s and his book, 'The English Way of Death: The Common Funeral since 1450' is the standard work of reference on the subject.*

## Message from the Chairman

### *Progress at the Wynn Ellis Mausoleum*

Perhaps the most architecturally satisfying of all the mausolea owned by the Mausolea and Monuments Trust is the Wynn Ellis Mausoleum, which stands in a lonely corner of the churchyard of All Saints Church, high on the hill above Whitstable in Kent. Designed by Charles Barry junior (the son of the celebrated architect of the Palace of Westminster), it takes the form of a squat stepped pyramid raised up upon a battered base of cyclopean rockwork, surrounded by ornate cast-iron railings. It is a curious structure, which - to adapt Horace Walpole's famous description of the grotto at Mereworth - 'by a most unnatural copulation is at once' both a grotto and a pyramid. Its sources of inspiration remain an intriguing puzzle but its form is perhaps indebted to contemporary reconstructions of the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus (the first relics of which arrived in London in 1846), combined with motifs from the so-called Tomb of Scipio in the Vatican.



The pyramidal Darnley Mausoleum in nearby Cobham Park may also have been an influence. The entrance to the tomb, sunk below ground level and reached by a flight of steps, has inward sloping jambs of a vaguely Egyptian inspiration. They originally enclosed a pair of handsome oak doors embellished with magnificent bronze grilles bearing the cypher of Wynn Ellis, the opulent silk merchant and art lover who built the mausoleum in 1872. When the Mausolea and Monuments Trust acquired the Wynn Ellis Mausoleum in October 1996 it was badly neglected. A bomb which had fallen in the area during the War had damaged the railings and self-seeded sycamores were forcing apart the stonework of the enclosure. Worse, the oak doors to the mausoleum had rotted and been smashed by vandals, leaving the interior open and filled with foetid

rubbish. Luckily someone had rescued the ornamental bronze grilles and taken them to the church for safe-keeping.

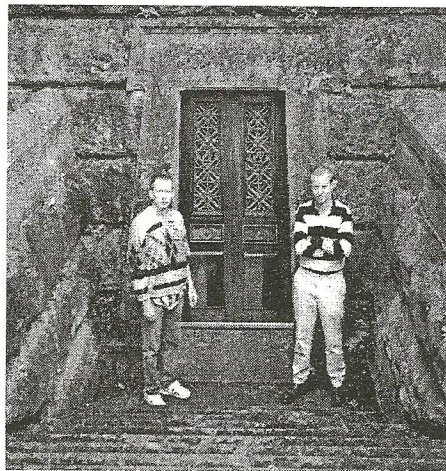
It was our foundress, Jill Allibone, who had discovered the plight of the building and it was she who galvanised the Trust into action; cutting back the rank undergrowth which surrounded it, carrying out emergency repairs to the railings and boarding up the tomb entrance to prevent further incursions of the small boy population of Whitstable. But the building had to be made permanently secure and the Trust looked into the options of bricking the entrance up or inserting a steel door. Neither were very aesthetically satisfying solutions and the latter was extremely expensive. Moreover, we all felt unsettled at the prospect of losing the oak doors, which, with their bold mouldings and bronze ornaments, were an essential part of Barry's design. Eventually it was decided to have copies made of the doors and remount them with the original bronze fittings.

David Allibone, who since Jill's death has kept a kindly and interested eye on the progress of the MMT, generously agreed to defray the cost of the work. All the surviving fragments were rescued from the site and the architect Fraser Brown made measured drawings from them. A skilled carpenter, Bogdan Majkowski, who had learned his trade of bespoke joinery in his native Poland, was commissioned to carry out the work - two Spitalfields residents, Peter Sinden and Jim Howett, being exceptionally generous with their time and advice. Before embarking upon the project, Bogdan carefully cleaned and examined the surviving fragments of the original doors and found that, with ingenious splicing in and repairs, he was able to re-use over fifty per cent of the original woodwork in the new doors. The bronze grilles, which had been retrieved from safekeeping, were reattached to the wooden core with specially made brass fixings, and the original hinges and bolts were also reused.

The hanging of the doors was accomplished over two Sunday mornings in July, Bogdan making numerous alterations on site so as to ensure that they fitted snugly into the stone surround. The doors are now installed and, as shown in the illustration, now look extremely handsome. The contrast between the old and new wood will soon weather down to a uniform silvery grey.

But who was Wynn Ellis and why did he build his magnificent mausoleum? Wynn Ellis was born in Oundle, Northamptonshire in 1790 and, after a good education, established himself as a haberdasher, hosier and mercer in premises in Ludgate Street in the City of London. The firm prospered and by time Ellis retired in 1871 he was the largest silk merchant in London, a business doubtless built upon the appetite for silk in that profuse age of crinolines and richly upholstered drawing rooms. Wealth provided opportunities for Ellis; he entered politics for the advanced Liberal

cause, sitting as M.P. for Leicester between 1831 and 1834, and again between 1839 and 1847. Being a fierce advocate of free trade, he is said to have exerted a strong influence in the Parliamentary Committees he served upon. Wynn Ellis also collected pictures, both ancient and modern.



The great German art historian Gustav Waagen described Ellis's gallery as 'in the highest degree attractive', and devoted six pages of his *Treasures of Art* ... to descriptions of the works, particularly those by Dutch masters, although he noted that 'in the Italian School' he 'has been less fortunate in his selection'. On his death in 1874 Wynn Ellis bequeathed over 400 of his 'ancient' pictures to the nation, from which the National Gallery selected only 44 works. The rest of his collection, including important 'modern' pictures by Turner and Richard Wilson, as well as 'dubious Corregios, Raffaelles, Titians and Murillos', were dispersed in a controversial five-day sale in 1876 conducted by Messrs Christies. Perhaps the most famous Wynn Ellis pictures in the National Gallery today are Claude's lyrical *Landscape with Aeneas at Delos*, Pollaiuolo's *Apollo and Daphne* and Cuyp's *The Large Dort*, but his bequest also included no less than five pictures by Ruysdael, four by Canaletto and works by Veronese, Hobbema, and Teniers.

Wynn Ellis lived at Ponsbourne Park in Hertfordshire and at Cadogan Place in London, but he also maintained a 'marine residence', a toy castle called Tankerton Tower, overlooking the sea at Whitstable, to which he retired in 1871. It was there where his wife, Mary, died in 1872 and the mausoleum was built to contain her remains on an eminence in Whitstable churchyard - it must have once been visible from Tankerton Tower, now called Whitstable Castle. A row of almshouses was also built in her memory in Tower Parade, 'with perpetual endowment for twenty poor men and women'. The eighty-five year old Mr Wynn Ellis joined her in the vault in November 1875, having left a personal fortune of £600,000 from which bequests were made to 'over forty different hospitals, orphanages, asylums and benevolent societies'.

