

# 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

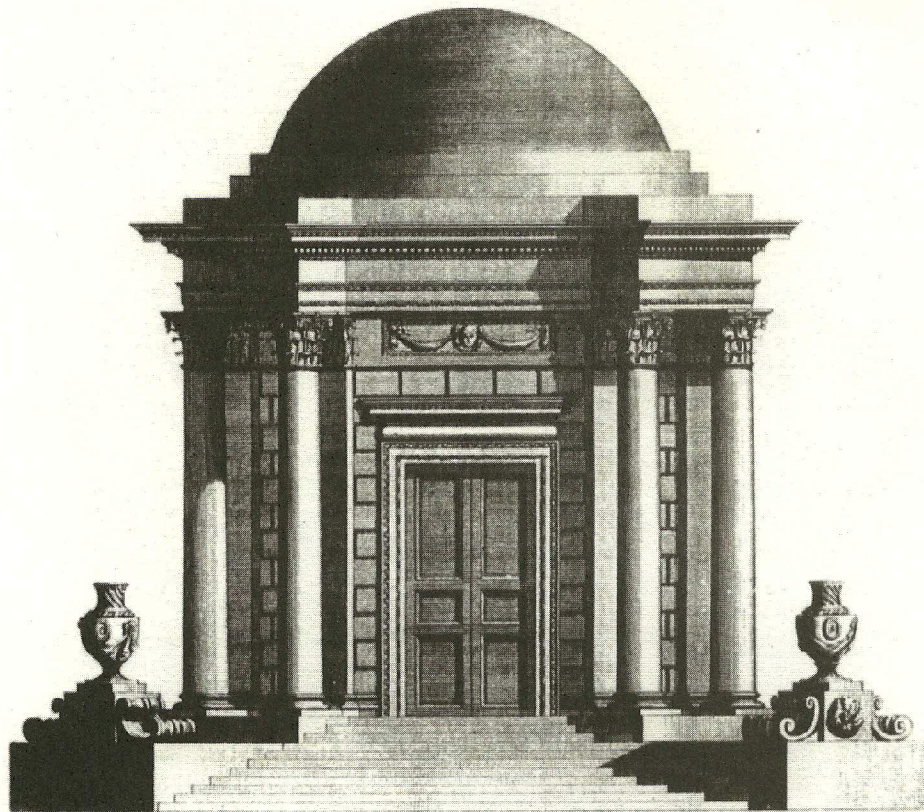


Figure 2: William Chambers, *A Treatise on Civil Architecture*, 1759

