

THE MAUSOLEA AND MONUMENTS TRUST

by Dr Roger Bowdler

The architectural and historic importance of mausolea has often been ignored. In an attempt to rectify this situation and increase awareness of these unique structures a new trust has been formed. This paper discusses the significance of mausolea and introduces the work of the Mausolea and Monuments Trust.

The mausoleum is best thought of as a mansion for the dead. They were built in their hundreds from the mid-seventeenth century up until the First World War to provide shelter for the interment of human remains, and their sombre forms now stand in churchyard, cemetery and park, a prey to the elements, neglect, vandalism and indifference.

Few sorts of building invite so varied a reaction. The utilitarian scowls at their profligacy and frets that the monies that went into them were not spent on poor relief or the maintenance of the church; the puritan dismisses them as erections of vainglory; the hard-pressed incumbent regards them as a liability; the distant descendant – even if the heir-at-law – regards them as a nuisance. Church architects see them as something to get round to when (O happy day) the church is finally made weatherproof and secure, while ecclesiologists regard them as trivial mushroom structures. The lover of the picturesque will generally seek them out, but often will not overly mind if they are sinking into dissolution and on the point of irrevocable collapse. Who, then, will champion their cause? Is it one worth fighting for?

A new trust has been established that is dedicated to the salvation of mausolea. It is called the Mausolea and Monuments Trust (MMT), and it was set up in 1996 by Jill Allibone, who died earlier this year. The biographer of the architects Anthony Salvin and George Devey, and long time Victorian Society stalwart, Dr Allibone brought an art historian's sensitivity together with a campaigner's concern to bear on the matter and concluded that something had to be done.

Dr Allibone did more than simply fret. Her considerable legal experience taught her that the key to ensuring the long-term future of an abandoned mausoleum was to identify its legal guardian. No work could be done without their consent, and in their hands would be found whatever funds had been put by in days past towards the upkeep of these structures. All too often, these funds have been the victims of inflation and indifferent management and now amount to derisory amounts: the mausoleum at All Saints, Whistable to the Wynn Ellis family brings with it a maintenance fund with an annual income of £8. Designed by Charles Barry junior in 1875, it is now one of the mausolea in the MMT's care. Another one in its charge came with a cheque for £216: one pound for each year of the building's existence. Money simply has to be found elsewhere.

Not surprisingly, many legal guardians are unable or unwilling to shoulder the burden of looking after the

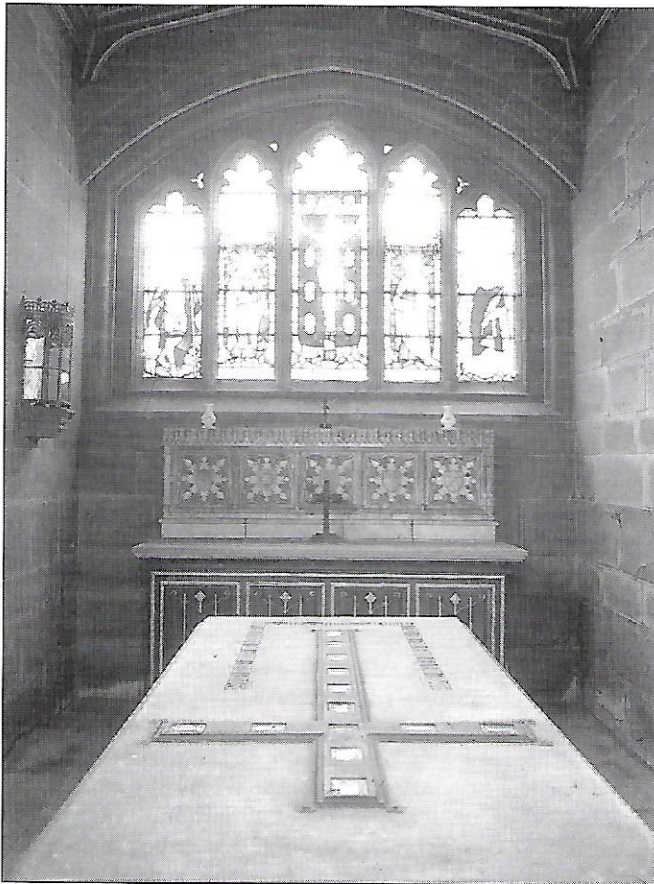
mausolea in their care. Many are also owners of demandingly costly houses and estates; they may in any case be but distant and indirect descendants of the families buried within. The passing of the years makes ever more distant our connection with our ancestors. Can heirs-at-law really be expected to shoulder the burden for such financially worthless assets? Mausolea tend to be low priorities, and some guardians wash their hands entirely of any involvement, as the recent well-publicised case of the Elgin mausoleum in the Bedfordshire churchyard at Maulden graphically demonstrates.

The Trust's patron is the distinguished architectural historian, Sir Howard Colvin. His important book *Architecture and the Afterlife* (1991) revealed how inspirational the urge to commemorate has been for architects, and outlined – for the first time – the development of the mausoleum in Britain. One of the sadder observations in the book deals with a mausoleum that is in the MMT's guardianship: the Guise mausoleum at Elmore, in Gloucestershire. Built in 1733, it consisted of a close replica of a square, pyramid capped Roman tomb and it enjoyed the distinction (a very real one in the eyes of historians) of being probably the first building in Europe since Antiquity to boast Roman Doric columns without bases. The weight of the pyramid has proved too much for the sub-structure, and the mausoleum has steadily collapsed since the last war. It is in desperate need of consolidation and perhaps of partial reconstruction too, a task that will require substantial grant aid, aid that has not been forthcoming in the past. One of the MMT's tasks is to tackle the issue of grant support, and assist guardians of mausolea in attracting funds towards the consolidation of these buildings.

The recently computerised lists of historic buildings can now be consulted to produce an overview of how many of these buildings there are in England, of how highly they are graded, and hence, through the current Buildings at Risk initiatives, of which ones really are at risk. These print-outs make odd reading. One learns that some 226 individual mausolea are listed. Northamptonshire, Shropshire and Somerset appear to be wholly devoid of them, while London, endowed with its fine necklace of cemeteries, has by far the most, at 49; many buildings listed as mausolea turn out, on inspection, to be churches with funerary chapels attached. A high proportion of those listed are grade I or II*, which indicates the particular quality which attaches to this very special building type. It is highly evident that much research is needed into mausolea, and another of the MMT's



The Nash Mausoleum at Farningham possibly by Nash, 1775 and below, the Sacheverell-Bateman Mausoleum by Bodley, at Morley.



tasks is to prepare a thorough gazetteer which will make better known the outstanding interest of Britain's funerary architecture. All offers of assistance and information in this area will be most gratefully received.

The MMT's trustees include a solicitor, historians, an architect, the nation's leading coffin-boffin, and leading members of the Victorian Society. It is a fledgling body, and its meagre funds received a melancholy boost through donations made in memory of Jill Allibone. Much remains to be done, but it has made a start. The MMT is prepared, in some circumstances, to assume legal responsibility for mausolea. It currently has five in its guardianship, mainly in south-east England, which range from restrained Georgian brick boxes to highly wrought Victorian miniature chapels. Some need no more than regular weeding and inspection of their outer shells; others present greater challenges and carry

daunting financial concerns with them. This diversity raises the matter of degrees of intervention. To what extent should one restore? Is not that element of 'pleasing decay' the very thing that imbues these gloomy structures with their appeal? Why should they not be left to fall quietly and romantically down?

Two of the MMT's mausolean charges point to an answer. The Nash mausoleum at Farningham, Kent was built in c.1775 and may well have been an early work of John Nash, who was left money by his namesake interred within. It is in sound condition externally, but vandals, encouraged by the wartime removal of the railings, have broken into some coffins and the elaborate plaster ceiling is now largely lying on the floor. A light but firm touch is required here, which will once more make the mausoleum secure. Otherwise, all is generally well with the structure and regular monitoring ought to ensure that this remains the case.

The Sacheverell-Bateman mausoleum at Morley, Derbyshire presents a different issue. It was designed by G.F. Bodley, architect of the rebuilt Sacheverell manor house close by, in 1895. Sumptuously appointed, with an illuminated vellum scroll within, stained glass by Burlison and Grylls, and elaborate figural sculpture, it epitomises the late Victorian High Church desire to give people a proper send off. Its problems are acute: its red sandstone fabric is weathering away relentlessly, and its component parts are good enough in their own right to warrant full (and costly) conservation treatment. This mausoleum is more funerary chapel than grave-shelter, and it poses a real challenge to its newest guardians as estimates for treatment begin to come in.

Another issue is the key to access. Mausolea were, by definition, exclusive chambers that were not intended to be seen by the public. Most are too small to make visiting practicable, and thus the MMT is keen to concentrate on securing the external envelope of buildings rather than spending hard-won funds on their hidden interiors. The Trust's priority is to ensure that mausolea remain secure, wind- and weather-proof, and standing: interiors will, of necessity, be a secondary consideration. Even in this age of open house and the Open Churches Trust, the great majority of mausolea will remain closed for inspection.

A number of local initiatives have recently been successful in winning funds for the conservation of their mausolea: outstanding among these is the case of the Thompson mausoleum at Little Ouseburn, Yorkshire, (see front cover), a chaste and perfect classical rotunda (possibly by Roger Morris) of c.1742 which has recently won a sizeable grant. The MMT is keen to help these campaigns wherever possible. Yet it wishes to do something more. One of the plans currently afoot is to secure some sort of core funding for its activities, which can be put towards an organised programme of inspection, assessment, maintenance and vigilance, and try to head off the more drastic cases of decay which can make for such daunting restoration projects. The 'stitch in time' approach is the MMT's preferred course of action. That way, the nation's mausolea will continue to stand in all their sepulchral splendour: not too tidy, but cared for; not in perfect condition, but with their dignity intact.

The Mausolea and Monuments Trust can be contacted at The Georgian Group, 6 Fitzroy Square, London W1P 6DX.

Roger Bowdler, a trustee of the MMT, is a historian specialising in funerary matters. He also works for English Heritage.