

# THE STRANGE STORY OF THE SAMUELSON MAUSOLEUM AT HATCHFORD PARK

*Joy Grant*

... who knows the fate of his bones,  
or how often he is to be buried?  
Who hath the Oracle of his Ashes . . . ?  
Sir Thomes Browne (1605-82)

In a remote stretch of wooded common near Hatchford, a mile south-west of Cobham, stands a handsome stone structure in the classical style, clearly in its time an object dear to someone's heart, now sadly neglected. Wind and weather have worked their will on the masonry - a limb of a beech tree has crashed down, knocking off ornaments and chipping the roof - while man has left his distasteful mark in the form of graffiti, and done darker deeds than that, as we shall see. But the four-arched core of the building, with its surround of Doric columns, is intact, the dome survives, and the crypt, though doorless and open to the elements, looks to be sound and dry. A closer scrutiny at eye level reveals memorial inscriptions to some people called Samuelson: but the name means nothing in Surrey today, and the wanderer in the woods continues on his way none the wiser.

For the answer to the riddle, one must go back ninety years, to the afternoon of Wednesday, 10th. May 1905, when the Right Honourable Sir Bernhard Samuelson, Bart., ironmaster and agricultural machinery manufacturer, pioneer of technical education (for services to which he owed his title), Privy Councillor, Fellow of the Royal Society, one-time Liberal Member of Parliament for Banbury and later for North Oxfordshire, died of pneumonia at his London house, 56 Prince's Gate, South Kensington. He was in his eighty-fifth year, and had been ill for a week.<sup>1</sup>

As his final resting place Sir Bernhard had chosen Torquay. It held memories for him from the days when he had rented a house nearby at Churston, mooring his steamyacht *Brilliant* (one of the largest private yachts then afloat) in Torquay harbour. But there were more solemn reasons for his choice: his wife and daughter were buried in Torquay cemetery, and his wish was to lie peacefully with them there - a wish piously echoed in some lines of verse composed, probably, by his eldest daughter:

And now he comes, who dearly loved them both,  
Wearied with years and honours, nobly borne;  
He comes to lie beside them, nothing loth  
To rest and sleep beneath the smiling morn.<sup>2</sup>

Sir Bernhard's mortal remains came on Saturday 13th. May in a coffin of polished oak with brass mountings. The crowd of mourners doubtless felt inward relief as the coffin was lowered into the moss-lined grave. Most of them had travelled with it on the midnight train from Paddington, then waited for several hours in Torquay until the cortege of mourning carriages moved off to the cemetery.<sup>3</sup> Among them was the eldest son, Henry, the new baronet, who was sixty. Sir Bernhard had given all his sons the privileged education he himself had missed. After Rugby school and Oxford, Henry had entered parliament, whence he had retired at forty owing to poor health.<sup>4</sup> From then on he seems to have led a life of leisure, forming habits and tastes that his inheritance of £ 75,000 (a million or more today) when at last it came his way, gave him the opportunity to indulge.

Sir Henry was by all accounts an amiable man, and he certainly showed a becoming regard for the parent to whom he owed his ample share of the good things of life. Anxious to do his father honour even *post mortem*, and knowing a thing or two about art, he commissioned the sculptor George Frampton, R.A.<sup>5</sup>, a leading figure in the Arts and Crafts movement, then at the height of his career, to design a chest-tomb to stand over the great man's grave. Cast in bronze, it weighed a ton and - after the earth had settled - was installed on 21st. December 1906.<sup>6</sup> Emblazoned upon the top surface were the Samuelson coat of arms,<sup>7</sup> and the family motto, *Post Tenebras Lux* - colloquially, 'It's always darkest before the dawn'. Inscribed elsewhere on the tomb were the enigmatic words: 'By my own works before the night, great Overseer, I make my prayer'. Those in the know will recognise the masonic connection: Mark Master-masons address the supreme being as Overseer.<sup>9</sup>

In the same year as Sir Henry Samuelson offered this melancholy tribute to his father's memory, he treated himself to a sizeable estate in Surrey, buying Hatchford Park. In due course he would set up a racing stable there, and his wife - the couple had no children - would breed prize-winning Pekinese. The mansion at Hatchford Park dated from earlier times, but in 1890 had been given a fashionable half-timbered and multi-gabled look by Rowland Plumbe (1838-1919), an architect who, in addition to designing hospitals, churches and polytechnics, was adept at turning harmless old residential properties into the Tudor fantasies beloved of the *nouveaux riches*. He had just performed such a feat for Mr. F.C. Bryant, son of the match manufacturer (at Woodlands Park, Stoke d'Abernon). Sir Henry, one feels, should have known better: he had a feeling for the past and its legacy of beautiful artifacts, cramming his home with antiques,<sup>10</sup> and could well have afforded a house of genuine antiquity in which to put them. As it was, he and Lady Samuelson decided that the best thing to do with mock-Tudor was to go along with it. They set about introducing features that would enhance the 'period' look - a formal Renaissance garden, and an elaborate stone forecourt (contrasting unhappily with the mansion's red brick) closely modelled on that at Montacute, the great Elizabethan house in Somerset, which Sir Henry remembered from the long-ago days of boyhood, when his father had rented it.<sup>11</sup> But however correct and delightful the etceteras might be, there was really no hope of disguising the bogusness of the looming great house.

Nevertheless, Sir Henry soldiered on. He was in his mid-seventies, and getting perhaps a trifle woolly-minded, when in 1919 or thereabouts a new idea for improvement struck him. Nearly a century had passed since his parents' births.<sup>12</sup> How better to honour the anniversary than to build for them - as a final resting

place for their mortal remains - a mausoleum in the grounds of Hatchford Park? The mausoleum would be at once a monument to filial affection, a mark of the family's status as landed gentry, and the ultimate in garden ornaments. Sir Henry chose a site a few minutes' walk uphill from the house, and there one day he gathered his servants together for a charmingly feudal little ceremony - they were allowed to lay the foundation stone.<sup>13</sup>

The building that arose owed everything to Montacute, and (with the forecourt and other additions) is likely to be the work of Rowland Plumbe, the re-creator of Hatchford House thirty years earlier. Still, at eighty, an active partner in his London practice, he was the obvious man to approach, and the fact that he had 'an untiring interest in freemasonry'<sup>14</sup> and, more particularly, had served as Past Grand Superintendent of Works in the Craft and Mark degrees would have recommended the connection to both parties. But if Plumbe designed the mausoleum, he was not to see it completed, dying as he did of heart failure in April 1919. Within the limits of the brief, which was to use design elements drawn from Montacute - in other words to produce a pastiche - Rowland Plumbe, if he it was, did well. Even in its present state of dilapidation the mausoleum is pleasing to the eye, but in its pristine condition, complete with jaunty miniature obelisks at the angles of the entablature, and a spirited motif of intersecting circles atop the dome, it must have been spectacular. Credit is due to the person of taste and discrimination (Sir Henry Samuelson himself?) who chose the mottoes in English, Greek and Latin carved on the architrave.<sup>15</sup>

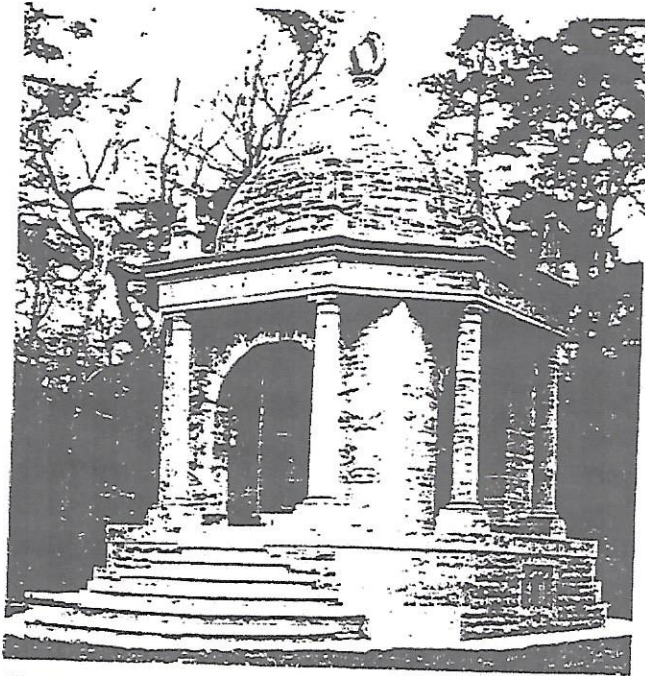


Fig. 1. The Hatchford Mausoleum in 1960, before it was vandalised. (Courtesy of Surrey Archaeological Society)

The crypt (or burial chamber) was the *raison d'être* of the edifice, but the finishing touches could not be put to it until its grisly occupants were installed. Accordingly, by order of the Home Office,<sup>16</sup> on 14th. April 1920 the remains of Bernhard, Caroline and Florence Samuelson - for the young daughter was coming too - were exhumed from their graves in Torquay cemetery, in readiness for transferral to Surrey. The bronze chest-tomb would travel as well: it was destined to stand conspicuously on a plinth beneath the dome, while the coffins (possibly replacements of decayed originals) would be bricked away in recesses in the side walls of the crypt. The crypt, eight by fifteen feet, down a flight of steps, was entered through a double-leaved door. Fresh from the decorator's hand the crypt must have been extremely attractive. It was fitted out like a chapel, with a miniature altar, a cross in black stone on the floor, a stone-mullioned Gothic window, and a ceiling painted with gold stars on a ground of midnight blue; wood-panelling, probably with inscriptions attached, was fixed to the walls after the coffins had been deposited. Today all that remains are the cross on the floor, a broken window, and traces of the paint. The panelling has disappeared, together with any indication of where the various bodies lay. However, clues are to be found in the outer walls of the monument: three sets of tiny holes, two sets on one side, one on the other. They mark the ends of narrow channels, the diameter of a straw, that ran from the coffins to the outside air, with the dual purpose of providing ventilation and hastening the process of decomposition. The set of holes on its own presents no problem - it must lead to Florence's coffin - and as for the other two, one strongly suspects that Sir Bernhard got pride of place near the altar.

The Samuelsons, of Jewish descent, had abandoned the practice of Judaism more than a century earlier. Sir Henry worshipped at the Anglican church of St. Matthew's, Hatchford<sup>17</sup> and it was his wish to see the mausoleum consecrated according to the rites and ceremonies of the Church of England. However,

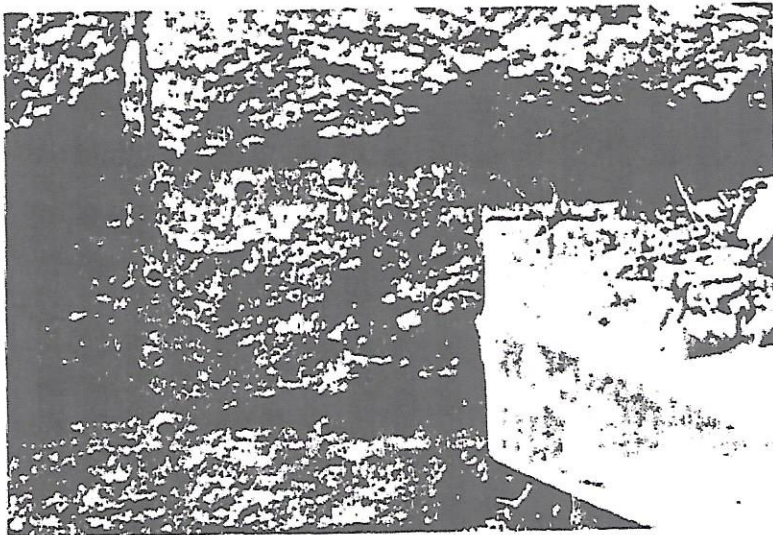


Fig. 2. Hatchford Park Mausoleum ventilation holes.

owing to the fact that bishops and their aides, like anyone else, took summer holidays, there was a tiresome delay before the ceremony could take place. Anxious letters from Sir Henry's solicitor, Mr. Fladgate of Pall Mall, to Mr. Moore, the Surrey Registrar at Doctors' Commons, rose to a crescendo of concern on 15th. September: "I have again had a piteous letter from my friend and client Sir Henry Samuelson . . . who is of very considerable years and a great invalid," he writes, "[He] is worrying himself really to death over the delay. Incidentally he blames me, but that is immaterial".<sup>18</sup> So upset was Fladgate that he volunteered to interrupt his fortnight's holiday to attend the ceremony, if necessary. Sir Henry's proposal that his friend and diocesan in the south of France, the Right Reverend Henry Joseph Corbett Knight, Bishop of Gibraltar, who was on holiday in England, should take the service proved helpful. Both elderly gentlemen were eager to escape to warmer climes before the approach of autumn, the bishop's need being perhaps greater than the baronet's, for he was dead before the autumn was out. Even so, it was 8th. October before the consecration took place. On the mausoleum steps, Bishop Knight read the appropriate service, and repeated the official Sentence of Consecration, which declared the building set apart "from all common and profane uses as a place for the interment of the dead for ever". Who was present? A contingent of Samuelsons, one assumes. Certainly Mr. Fladgate and Mr. Moore, who - their tranquility restored - had travelled down together on the 11. 07 from Waterloo to Effingham Junction. The ceremony over, one imagines Sir Henry descending the young avenue of specially planted conifers that led to the house, modestly confident that the spirits of his parents were gazing down on him with approval.

Yet the whole scheme seems strangely ill-advised. The Samuelsons' roots were - if anywhere - in Poland, the U.S.A, London, the north of England, certainly not in Surrey.<sup>19</sup> And if Sir Henry was dreaming of a future in which Samuelsons yet unborn would make their way to Hatchford to venerate the tomb of their great ancestor, he was, to put it kindly, allowing the romantic side of his nature to run away with his common sense. In the event, the Samuelson presence at Hatchford continued for a short space of time only: Sir Henry's health declined, and in 1924 he and Lady Samuelson moved permanently to Beaulieu-sur-mer in the Alpes Maritimes, where for years they had been going in the winter. Hatchford Park was sold to the steel magnate William Firth, but excluded from the sale were the mausoleum and the parcel of land on which it stood, which before the consecration Sir Henry had conveyed to the vicar of Hatchford and his successors in perpetuity.

No doubt the mausoleum was well looked after during Sir Henry's lifetime, and when he died in 1937<sup>20</sup> he desired "that the members of my family . . . and particularly my residuary legatee will see that the Mausoleum in Hatchford Park is kept in good order and repair". Certainly the mausoleum appears to have been in good shape in 1960, as can be seen from a photograph. It was in the next decade that unpleasant things happened. In the winter of 1960-61, a local resident<sup>21</sup> was crossing the common on his way to work when he espied some men equipped with a winch, planks and a lorry: they were deep in the business of removing the bronze tomb. He telephoned the police, but by the time they arrived the thieves and their loot had vanished. They got their comeuppance soon afterwards, however, for as luck would have it, a tail-light on their lorry was faulty, and in Chertsey they were halted by police who, not caring for their look, took a peep under the tarpaulin. The tomb was duly replaced, only to

disappear again soon afterwards, its fate, no doubt, to be sold for its weight in bronze. Next to go were the crypt doors and panelling. Smoke-marks on the stone show where fires were kindled; there was rumour of witches. Meantime, the fabric was threatened not only by the action of the weather, but by encroaching yews, rampant undergrowth, and a ring of fallen timber. This was the state of affairs when in 1989 Sir Michael Samuelson, the fifth baronet, was informed - to his great surprise - by Surrey County Council of the mausoleum's existence. The Council assumed responsibility for the site in 1992. Trees have been cut back and scattered masonry collected, and the intention is to bar entry to the crypt by means of gates or a grille. A welcome addition will be a notice board offering the passer-by information about the origin and history of the monument.

One cannot help wondering what Sir Bernhard and Lady Samuelson and their daughter Florence would make of it all. For over half a century they have dwelt on their lonely islet of consecrated land, unrecognised and disregarded, while the tide of history has flowed round them. After the retreat from Dunkirk in 1940, Sir William Firth offered the use of Hatchford House to the War Office as a convalescent hospital. In 1952 - acquired by London County Council - it became a boarding-school for physically handicapped boys, mostly victims of the post-war polio epidemic, and more recently it was used by the Borough of Greenwich as a home for severely disabled children. At the time of writing it is up for sale, though its desirability as a rural property is not enhanced by the London orbital motorway, the M25, which runs past its boundary. Sir Henry meant well by his loved ones. But had he and they known what the future held, it is quite likely that, in preference to years of neglect and vandalism followed by resuscitation as a focal point for Sunday afternoon rambles, they might well have opted for the decent ordinariness of Torquay cemetery.

In Victorian times, mausolea enjoyed something of a vogue in Britain, the royal family having set the example at Frogmore House, Windsor, where imposing mausolea were erected in the grounds for the Duchess of Kent and for the Queen and Prince Albert. Attitudes to death change, and funeral customs with them. To quote a recent study: "The big statement, the public memorial and the grandeur and awesomeness of death have passed out of fashion. Death is a bad joke, and is best avoided: the dead are got rid of as soon as possible" - via the crematorium. As a result of this, and of the rigours of taxation, the present century has seen the virtual demise of the mausoleum in this country. Probably fewer than a dozen examples exist, most of them (like the two designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens) located not on private estates but in cemeteries or churchyards. Thus the Samuelson Mausoleum at Hatchford turns out to be more than just an attractive building with a curious history: it is a rarity from the point of view of the architectural historian, another good reason to be thankful that at last its future seems secure.

## Notes and References

1. *Banbury Guardian*, 11th. May 1905.
2. Anon, *Banbury Guardian*, 18th. May 1905.
3. *Banbury Guardian*, 18th. May 1905.
4. Sir Henry Samuelson was Liberal member for Cheltenham (1868-74) and for Frome (1876-85).
5. Sir George Frampton (1860-1928) is perhaps best remembered to-day for the Peter Pan statue in Kensington Gardens, and the (less successful) Edith Cavell monument at the foot of St. Martin's Lane.
6. Information from the Torquay borough engineer.
7. Samuelson arms: Sable, three piles wavy, two issuant from the chief and one from the base, or, each charged with a phoenix in flames, gules. Crest: a phoenix in flames, holding a torch in its beak.
8. R.R. Langham-Carter, 'Note on Hatchford Mausoleum', in *Surrey Archaeological Collections*, Vol. 59, (1962), p.92, and plate VII (with two exterior photographs) - the only published source of information about the building, apart from a brief note in Pevsner's *Surrey*.
9. The librarian at Freemasons' Hall in London finds no reference to Sir Bernhard Samuelson in the records of the lodges with which he is most likely to have had a connection. However, the inscription is strong evidence of his having been a member of the Society. Sir Henry was certainly a freemason: he was initiated whilst at Oxford into Apollo Lodge, going on to be Worshipful Master of Cherwell Lodge, based in Banbury, and Provincial Senior Grand Warden for Oxfordshire.
10. Sale catalogue of Phillips Son and Neale, March 1924. (copy in Victoria and Albert Museum Library).
11. Information given by Sir Michael Samuelson.
12. Sir Bernhard was born on 22nd. November 1820, his wife Caroline (née Blundell) on 10th. March 1821.
13. See letter in *Follies, the International Magazine for Follies, Grottoes and Garden Buildings*, Vol. 6, no. 1, (Spring 1993).
14. Obituary Notice, *Journal of the Royal Institute of British Architects*, Vol. 00, (1919).
15. The inscriptions read as follows: "A Temple of Sleep"; "Το παιδιον ουκ απεθανεν αλλα καθευδει" - "the child is not dead but sleeps" (Matthew ix, 24); "ο θανατου ουκ εστι ετι ουτε πνεθος ουτε κραυγη ουτε πονος" - "there shall be no more death, nor weeping, neither shall there be any more pain" (Revelation xxi, 4); "lautus cui in diem licet dixisse vixisse" - "happy the man who can say each day 'I have lived life to the full'" (adapted from Horace, Odes III, 29).
16. Licence dated 10th. February 1920.
17. St. Matthew's, Hatchford, was then in the diocese of Winchester, becoming part of the new diocese of Guildford in 1927. It was demolished in 1968 on the ground of underuse.
18. Archdeaconry of Surrey Papers, Greater London Record Office.
19. See Margaret S. Brown, *Chapters towards a Biography of Sir Bernhard Samuelson*, unpublished thesis, submitted for the Diploma in Adult Education of Liverpool University, (1974), copy in Banbury Public Library.
20. Sir Henry died in the south of France; his body was embalmed and buried beside his wife's at Sherborne, Dorset.
21. Mr John Johnson of Cobham, who at that time lived in the nearby Chatley Heath semaphore tower, a relic of the Napoleonic Wars now restored and open to the public. I am indebted to him for this story, and to his son Graham for the description of the crypt, where in the 1960s he and his young friends used to play, gaining entrance by way of the broken window.
22. J.S. Curl, *A Celebration of Death*, (1980).