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THE DECAY OF DYING

The churchyard of Stoke Poges, a village near Slough, is supposed to have inspired Thomas Gray's *Elegy*. The melancholy site is well preserved today. The ivy has been unravelled from the poet's 'ivy-mantled tower', his 'moping owl' is in the cheerrul care of a local Wildlife Trust, and the 'stubborn glebe' forms the tricky ninth hole of a private golf club.

Is there a demand for yet another preservation Trust? The Mausolea and Monuments Trust was founded in the autumn of 1996, based on the premise that tombs fare worse than any structures of comparable architectural value. The MMT has now assumed responsibility for three delapidated mausolea: the Sacheverell-Batemans' in Morley, Derbyshire (Bodley, 1897); the Wynn Ellis' at

Whitstable, Kent (Charles Barry Jr, c. 1875) and the Thomas Nash Mausoleum at Farningham, Kent (attributed to John Nash, 1778). Its present initiatives are to repair these structures and to compile a register of mausolea and churchyard monuments of architectural value which are seriously at risk. It is hoped that SAHGB members can help us in this research. The *eminence noire* of this movement is Dr Julian Litten of the V & A: a Trustee of the MMT, President of the Friends of Kensal Green Cemetery, author of *The English Way of Death* (1991) and organizer of the V & A's *Art of Death* exhibition of 1992. Litten believes that since the late 1980s there has been a significant increase in interest in tombs, progressing from the field of local history to art historians and antiquarians. *Architecture and the After Life* (1991) by Sir Howard Colvin, Patron of the MMT, was the first authoritative general study of the subject, demonstrating that tombs are the foundation of architecture in Western Europe and have been fundamental to every later stage of its development until the present century.

Litten has purchased the last remaining plot on the principal avenue at Kensal Green cemetery but does not intend to erect a monument over his bones. He has no heirs-at-law and there is no one else to maintain such a structure: no burial authority in England has a maintenance programme of this kind.

The MMT has encountered two principal problems. Firstly, numerous mausolea of aristocratic families have fallen into ruin because heirs lack the resources or the inclination to maintain them. Like country houses after the war, this is a crisis of an anachronistic inheritance. Unlike country houses, however, the 'heritage' public shows less enthusiasm to share the burden: pots and pans in the servants' kitchen are preferable to the bones in the family crypt. This relates to the second, much broader, problem: the decline of a collective culture of contemplating the dead, as expressed by the language of tombs. Discussing the plight of the Victorian cemetery in his introduction to the Victorian Society's book *Mortal Remains* (1989) Chris Brooks comments: 'Its funerary eloquence is a constant reminder of our own inarticulacy'.

The churchyard at Stoke Poges is now closed and the descendants of Gray's villagers are buried at 'Parkside', 'The South Bucks Municipal Cemetery'. It is a flat field beside the M40 and a third of the site is asphalted, ensuring that no mourner has to walk more than twenty yards from their car to the grave of their loved one. Despite this, despite the hum of the motorway, the relationship between the quick and the dead explored in Gray's *Elegy* survives essentially intact in Parkside Municipal Cemetery. There is no shortage of visitors but what is missing is the use of architectural and cultural rhetoric



The Pyramids of Memphis and a tomb, frontispiece to *Sphinx Mystagoga* by Athanasius Kircher (Amsterdam, 1676)

to encourage a collective sense of 'Death'. The epitaphs on Roman mausolea built on the highways leading in and out of the cities often begin: *Siste Viator...* The passer-by is urged to pause and contemplate the universal condition of mortality. In Parkside the mourners pause at strangers' graves but only to read the tags on the shrubs, as if browsing in a garden centre.

The new Trust believes that mausolea should express 'pleasing decay' and concentrates on those structures which have deteriorated to the point at which the survival of its structure or its ornament is at risk. The Grade I pyramidal mausoleum at Cobham Hall, Kent, is the most notorious example. Designed by James Wyatt for the 3rd Earl of Darnley in 1783, this masterpiece has been progressively vandalized for many years. It was sold by the current Lord Darnley for conversion into a house and two alternative designs for conversion were granted consent in 1986 but the purchaser was bankrupted and the structure is now in the hands of receivers. The vault separating the crypt from the domed chapel has collapsed and fires are lit inside by motocross riders from Chatham who congregate here each Sunday.

The crypt at Cobham was never used, as the Bishop of Rochester refused to consecrate a mausoleum in a landscape park. In general, however, the idea of burial in an Arcadian, unconsecrated setting was fundamental to the development of the eighteenth-century mausoleum, following the precedent begun by Lord Carlisle at Castle Howard in 1729. Thomas Hope's early nineteenth-century Egyptian-style mausoleum in the grounds of the Deepdene, Sussex, was only recently rediscovered by Tim Knox of the MMT: last used to bury the Duke of

Newcastle in 1957 it has since been buried under a mound of earth.

'Since the dead did not require air, light and warmth but only shelter and veneration, the mausoleum is a theme around which the imagination can freely play' wrote Sir John Summerson ('Sir John Soane and the Furniture of Death' in *The Unromantic Castle*, 1990), describing the young Soane's design for his drowned friend, James King, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1777. The mausoleum's suitability as a vehicle for architectural innovation was accelerated by the Academy's exhibitions and Medal prizes and became an accepted device for an ambitious young architect like Soane to attract attention. Or as Pecksniff tells Martin Chuzzlewit (in 1844): 'Suppose you were given me your idea of a monument to a Lord Mayor of London; or a tomb for a sheriff...'. In this century, however, the mausoleum lost this experimental role to other building types: architects preferred to demonstrate their powers of imagination at the expense of the living, not the dead.

The Victorian cemetery is less of an individual statement, of course, but it is a great urban achievement at risk in an age when sixty to seventy per cent of burials are cremations and when (in 1986) Westminster City Council could sell three cemeteries for fifteen pence to save maintenance costs. The Victorian Society plumbed these depths in *Mortal Remains* (1989), a book which presented several positive alternatives for cemeteries in the future: for example, St Mary Magdalene's churchyard in East London is managed as a nature reserve by the London Borough of Newham.

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The Friends of Kensal Green have had outstanding success, and the Chiswick Society has restored three fine tombs in the churchyard of St Nicholas. In Yorkshire, the Friends of Little Ousebourn Mausoleum are raising funds for the restoration of the Thompson Mausoleum in the churchyard, designed with Lord Burlington's involvement in c.1742. The work of the Soane Monuments Trust (founded 1987) in particular led to the major exhibition 'Soane and Death' at the Dulwich Picture

Gallery in the spring of 1996. These stirrings suggested a budding new conservation movement and encouraged Dr Jill Allibone to assemble the MMT.

All information on structures of architectural interest which readers consider to be at risk will be gratefully received: please write — if possible with photographs which will be returned, if requested — to Dr Jill Allibone, 5/34 Emperor's Gate, London SW7 4JA.

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