



The Twickenham Museum Archive

The Statues in York House Gardens Twickenham

by Dr J Payan (09/09/1995)

A talk given by Dr J Payan at the 9th Annual Conference of the Fountain Society at Sidney Sussex College on 9th September 1995.

The subject of my talk is the cascade and statuary in the gardens of York House, Twickenham. There might be some, even in this distinguished gathering, to whom the name of Twickenham means little more than Rugby football. May I therefore set the scene by reading to you the following enchanting description?

“...Twickenham was one of the most agreeable places of residence in England. Situated on a long curving reach of the unpolluted Thames, looking across rich meadows and rushy eyots to the woods and parkland of Richmond and Ham, a pleasant drive from London through charming country landscapes, it had been for the last hundred years a favoured place of residence for people of wealth and condition. Its many large and comfortable houses, sometimes adorned by their owners with unrestrained whimsicality, were occupied by a variety of dowagers, dilettanti, retired generals, opulent merchants, and other well-do members of society.”

That was in 1747, from Ketton-Cremer's life of Horace Walpole. I shall not strain your credulity by telling you that nothing has changed, but Twickenham in its old riverside area remains a place of great charm and historical interest. I hope I may never leave it.

A boat trip upstream at the time described would have passed the royal family from Kew to Richmond, the Duke of Northumberland at Syon and the Dysarts at Ham before reaching Twickenham – and York House. A little beyond York House stood Alexander Pope's villa, his garden and his famous grotto. Small wonder that as Pope lay dying in 1744 James Thomson should write in his poem 'the seasons':

“Slow let us traverse the matchless Vale of Thames;
Fair-winding up to where the Muses haunt
In Twitnam's bowers, and for their Pope implore
The healing God”

The Gardens

York House was built in the mid-seventeenth century and among its early owners was the family of Edward Hyde, Earl of Clarendon and Chancellor of Oxford University. The earliest surviving plan showing the gardens of the house is dated 1784, when its boundaries were as they are today. With the arrival of the Duc d'Orleans in 1897 the riverside gardens, the part which concerns us, were laid to lawn and linked to the main gardens by a rustic bridge long since disappeared and replaced by the present footbridge.

You might wonder idly what the Duc d'Orleans was doing in Twickenham at all, let alone building rustic footbridges. The connection of the Orleans family with Twickenham is a remarkable one, which began in 1800 with the arrival, as a political exile, of the man who in 1830 became King Louis Philippe of France. His was the first of five successive generations of the Orleans family to live in Twickenham. The last link was broken as recently as 1961 with the death of the Duc d'Orleans sister Isabelle, who had married from York House in 1899.

The riverside gardens we know today came with Sir Ratan Tata, a Parsee merchant prince from Bombay who bought the house in 1906 from the Duc and was the last private owner. He remodelled the gardens and installed our fine group of eight over lifesize Carrara marble human and equestrian figures.

The Statues

The origin and history of these statues is not precisely known. The style is distinctly fin-de-siecle, and we believe them to be Italian. They were brought into the country, probably at Southampton, by the financier Whitaker Wright, who lived in immense style at Lea Park (later called Witley Park) near Godalming, a house with thirty two bedrooms, eleven bathrooms and a 450 acre estate.

We cannot be sure whether they were ever removed from their packing cases, but it is believed that they were intended for a domed steel and glass room Whitaker Wright had constructed beneath his twenty-five acre lake, an extravagant folly typical of the man and his age. Typical also, of his age and ours, was the financial scandal, which led in 1904 to this conviction for fraud and his suicide in court from cyanide. This abrupt end and the ensuing confusion make it unlikely that we shall ever find the original bill for the statues, which Charles Avery of Christie's has urged us to seek.

Child-Beale Park: a clue

When Lea Park was burned down in 1952 the buildings were demolished and much of the statuary sold off. Four nymphs, furiously riding sea horses, found their way to the Child-Beale Wildlife Park near Pangbourne, and the base of one statue bears the inscription: 'O SPALMACH, STUDIO O ANDREONI, ROMA'. This is our only clue as to who might have sculpted the York House Statues, which also come from Lea Park and on stylistic grounds seem likely to be by the same hand, or at least from the same studio. The nymphs surround a boy and dolphin, in what is to me a different and inferior style.

In 1992 Anthony Beckles Willson, retired architect, local historian and sculptor, living in Strawberry Hill, wrote to the Director of the Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna in Rome asking for information concerning both sculptor and studio, but the letter was not answered. He pursued the matter with Philip Ward-Jackson of the Conway Library at the Courtauld Institute, who thought that 'O ANDREONI' must refer to Orazio Andreoni, a sculptor known to have exhibited in Turin and Berlin and to have carried out many works which reached English and American collections. He seems to have run a studio in Rome where a number of sculptors, including presumably Spalmach, worked under his aegis – a 'marble factory' as Ward-Jackson put it.

Another strong runner in the field, he felt, was the Sicilian Mario Rutelli (1859–1941), whose 'Naiads' in the Piazza dell' Esedra in Rome are perhaps the cousins, if not the sisters, or our own maidens. Alan Urwin, another prominent local historian, has favoured Camille Gresland (born Paris 1872) and another Sicilian, Marabitti (the second sculptor of that name).

It is the old problem (which can occasionally be turned to great financial advantage) of attribution on grounds of style alone when that style is for a time nearly universal. I have more than once been startled by the resemblance to our statues of figures casually encountered in a quiet square of some European city. Indeed the Society's visit to Barcelona last year provided just such an example.

The Statues come to Twickenham

There is a report that Tata paid £600 for the group, which arrived, not without incident, in 1909. Thus The Thames Valley Times of 23rd June:

" A large piece of Marble part of a huge statue ... for erection in the grounds of York House, was being conveyed there on a trolley ...when as it was turning the corner into Oak Lane, the Van overturned. The case containing the marble was thrown heavily to the ground and smashed, whilst the shafts of the cart were broken, and the horse, which was thrown down, was slightly hurt.... It was some hours before the marble was raised by means of a huge pulley and conveyed to its destination." (The implication is that the statue itself suffered no damage)

Statuary, engine and pump were taken through the wall of the riverside gardens at a point once identifiable by a change in the colour of the bricks. This event was witnessed by Edmund Viner-Brady, son of the founder of the York House Society. A member of the Society was told by a lady whose father had brought them to Twickenham from Lea Park that they had been collected from an underground room.

The Council acquires the Statues

Returning to England from India in 1916 Sir Ratan Tata spent some hours in an open boat when his ship was torpedoed, an experience which may have led to his demise two years later. His widow lived on in York House until she returned to India in 1922. In 1924, under pressure from local public opinion led by Noel Viner-Brady, the Council agreed to purchase the house for use as its offices.

Curiously, the purchase price did not include the statues, which had failed to attract a buyer at the 1922 auction of antiques and collectors' items from the house. We have it from Edward Morris, lifelong resident of Twickenham and President of the York House Society, that Miss Dorothy Viner-Brady, sister to Edmund, wrote to the Richmond and Twickenham Times on 6th November 1948 to explain that following the completion of the sale to the Borough Lady Tata had made a present of the statues to Mr. Noel Viner-Brady, her father. This seems to have been the result of a joking reference he had made to his

"commission" for arranging the sale of the house. Presumably he let the Council keep them.

Decline of the Statues

They remained in the same place and the years took their toll. During World War II the statues seem to have been sprayed with a kind of grey sludge to prevent enemy bombers being guided up the Thames by the brilliance of the moon reflected off marble. There must have been an obsession with this risk: I learned recently that gilding was removed from the Albert Memorial for the same reason. Then came vandals, insupportable electricity bills, pump failures and leaks.

Once the fountains had ceased to flow access became even easier, to drunken louts by night and homeward-bound school-children by day. Fingers, toes, even feet were broken off and graffiti completed a picture of desolation. This naturally did not pass unnoticed. In 1976 Edward Morris got in touch with the Civic Trust, but a promised grant did not materialise. As the Jubilee celebrations approached, the Council roused itself and spent some money but to no lasting effect. In retrospect, attempts to reverse the accelerating destruction were bound to fail because of the openness and vulnerability of the site.

By 1986 to do nothing would have been to consign statues and fountain to the rubbish heap. Many believed that what was inevitable should be allowed to happen. This policy of despair was advocated by some quite sensible people known for their participation in local affairs. It was a failure of nerve, the view that modern life was simply ghastly and that was that.

The Decision to Restore

A contrary view was fortunately widespread. The author of an angry letter to the local press was:

"still cringeing with shame for having taken some overseas visitors to see the statues, unaware of the obscene sight they would present." He was "not prepared to remain silent whilst elected (Council) members are content to ignore the pornography in their back garden".

From another correspondent: "Every one of the marble maidens (is) covered with graffiti, mostly obscene, and they have been daubed with paint in unmentionable places. The pond is full of cans and take-away boxes". From the Chairman of the Richmond upon Thames Tourist Association: "Sir, You are not the only one to receive letters about the disgusting state of the statues....! have also received complaints from visitors....a Council officer (says) that no funds are available."

Among those determined to beat the vandals was Mrs. Elizabeth Bell-Wright, member of the York House Society and doughty former lady Councillor whose intelligence, determination and intolerance of fools were finally instrumental in launching the restoration project. A Charitable Trust was formed, the trustees being representatives of The York House Society (Payan, Doyle - Trust treasurer, Bell-Wright - later Kershaw), The

Twickenham Society (Plummer, Wall, Ellis) and the Richmond upon Thames Council (O'Connor, Emerson). As the recently-elected Chairman of the York House Society I was alarmed to find myself regarded as the natural choice for Chairman of the Trust.

The project had two main parts: the cleaning and restoration of statues, fountain, pond and basins, including provision of a new and stronger pump, and the institution of measures which would protect the site from marauders without making it hideous. The first part would be a pointless waste of money if the second were not successfully accomplished.

The Work of Keith Taylor

The firm of Taylor Pearce Restoration Services, then of Camberwell Green, was commissioned to report on the state of the statues and tender for their cleaning and repair. Keith Taylor, a sculptor by training who was at work on the west face of Lincoln Cathedral, took an enthusiastic interest in the project from the outset and was always ready to discuss what he and his assistants were up to.

He reported that although some of the surface was heavily obscured by a cement or lime wash and almost all the figures had been badly damaged by graffiti, the Carrara marble appeared to be in sound condition. Most of the damage had been done to hands and fingers which, he wrote, was:

"very distracting because of the gestural composition of the lower figures". Of the standing figure and horses he wrote: "The standing figure is very badly damaged by various paint and felt tip markings. Fortunately, some of the graffiti are over the cement wash, which may have prevented the paint from soaking in too deeply." Of the first figure on the left: "Small paint dabs and felt tip marks overall; the nose is an old restoration in resin covered with cement wash; two fingers of the right hand are missing, as are all the toes of the right foot and one toe of the left foot; slight cracking around the base suggests possible ferrous metal fixings to the base."

He recommended water washing with bristle brushes to remove algae and lichen deposits, then solvents to remove heavy surface paint. Poulticing with magnesium silicate clay and solvents would be necessary to remove paint which had penetrated the surface. At this stage the underlying condition of the marble would become clear, and remaining cement wash (the grey sludge referred to) could be removed by using a low pressure stream of compressed air containing aluminium oxide particles. An application of 'masonry biocide' would then retard growth of algae and lichen. To give you an idea of the cost, the estimate for cleaning the figure with horses was £8750, the seated figure on the left £1850.

To restore the damaged sculpture he would remodel details such as fingers on site in plasticine, with subsequent recarving from marble in the workshop. Each detail would then be let into the existing marble and fixed with stainless steel dowels set with resin adhesive.

The work was carried out during 1988, and had to be carefully coordinated with the stages of protection. The new centrifugal pump had a 7.5hp motor capable of raising 300 gallons a minute to a height of 35 feet (Brook, Crampton and Parkinson, Huddersfield). A low level cut-out valve was installed to protect the pump from leaks in basins or pond. The water

level in the pond is maintained by inflow from the river at high tide, regulated by a valve, with topping up from the mains as required.

Cost

The question of cost was crucial. It was estimated that a sum of £55,000 would be needed to pay for cleaning and repair of statues, basins and pond, a new and stronger pump, protection and replanting. The Council would contribute £30,000, the cost of protection, leaving £25,000 to be raised by the Trust. English Heritage contributed the first £10,000 of this, and a further £7,500 raised by the Trust would be matched by the Council.

Protection

For our part we had had to agree with the Council how best to achieve protection. We prowled around, above and behind seeking a compromise between cost, likely effectiveness and aesthetic considerations. Society members might favour ferocious spikes, to be told that the Council dare not face the litigation which would follow (eagerly anticipated) impalements. English Heritage had to be consulted about appearances. Eight foot high railings were installed but almost immediately showed signs of attempts to prize them apart. A wire meshwork was applied to thwart this.

To prevent entry over the rear wall or through the water of the pond rotating spikes of the kind which surmount the walls of Buckingham Palace were installed. The statues were lit by a system triggered by infra-red waves. Later improvements included the use of non-drying paint and installation of notices announcing permanent video-surveillance.

Human deterrence would be provided by the vicar, the Rev. Alun Glyn-Jones who, observing unseen from the lawn of the vicarage, occasionally terrified trespassers with an apparently disembodied, conceivably Divine, injunction to get hence. The Community Police Officer for the area was keenly interested and promised to visit the gardens whenever he could. For an experimental period the riverside gardens would be open only during school hours.

Fundraising

Two students at the Richmond upon Thames Tertiary College, Antony Lyons and Ann Davies, designed art work for our Appeal under the supervision of their Dean of Arts and Head of Graphics. The local business community was largely indifferent, believing the Council should pay the lot as it owned house and gardens, but three firms gave £250 each. The Thames Trust gave £500, The Godinton Trust £250 and the RIBA £200. The York House Society and The Twickenham Society gave £100 each. Several individuals gave £50, Sir Richard Attenborough £100. A major gift of £2000 came from the Tata Foundation, arranged by a local Indian resident and member of the firm, a friend of the York House Society member Mrs Peggy Waltham. There were many small individual donations from residents and visitors. The usual jumble sales and social events brought amounts which never seemed quite appropriate to the effort expended. £750 came from The Metropolitan Public Gardens Association for replanting, a programme later threatened by unusually dry weather.

Finale

At the York House Society's Twelfth Night Ball on January 6th 1989 a cheque for £7500 was presented to the Mayor of Twickenham, Councillor Mrs Alison Cornish, by the chairmen of the Society and of the Twickenham Society and on April 30th she performed the opening ceremony. The sun shone and the Kneller Hall military band played in the gardens in front of a large crowd. It was a wonderful day, the triumphant conclusion not only to hard work and financial anxiety but to an experience of cooperation between the community, led by two local amenity societies, and the Council. Lasting friendships came from tackling a common task, and those of us who had not been involved in a project of this kind had learned not to be discouraged by Jeremiahs crying "What's the use?".

Epilogue

The Hon. Sec. of the Trust was a valiant spirit named Suzanne Hodson, whose grandfather Noel Viner-Brady and his friends had saved York House and formed The York House society in the 1920's. She died of cancer in her early fifties only a few months after work on the statues had been completed, and to perpetuate and honour her memory the Society established an annual prize to be awarded to children of the neighbouring comprehensive school, Orleans Park. This was welcomed enthusiastically by the headmistress, Mrs E Selman and by her head history teacher Mrs Hilary Morris, who became responsible for organising the competition.

This was to be for the best 'Heritage Trail' devised to lead visitors through old Twickenham with its rich history and fine buildings. The standard of work produced by the children has astounded and delighted us year after year. They are learning that they have an inheritance to cherish, not to deface and destroy. By introducing this idea in a practical way at the age of 12-13 years more has been accomplished than by an army of wardens. The statues have not been vandalised for the past five years.

Postscript

Elizabeth Bell-Wright, to whom those who love the statues owe so much and who died recently, was adamant that Sir Ratan Tata's landscape gardener had intended an unimpeded view of the statues. She held the characteristically forceful view that unless two yew trees standing immediately in front of the statues were removed the whole exercise of restoration would have been in vain. They remain.

Envoi

When some of you visited the gardens in 1991 you were addressed by our distinguished local historian Dr T H R Cashmore, and on hearing of the Society from him I joined it without delay. Maureen and I have derived unfailing pleasure from our membership, and in speaking of our dear statues at the Annual Conference I hope I have repaid a little of the debt we owe.

Acknowledgements

This account could not have been written without the generous help of Dick Cashmore, in person, through loaned documents and with the aid of his excellent publications for the Borough of Twickenham Local History Society.

As will be evident from the text, Tony Beckles Willson has played an important part in research on the statues' origins and lent me the relevant documents. Alan Urwin lent me his notes on the origin of the statues and gave me the benefit of his views.

I could not have understood what the restoration process involved without Keith Taylor, who kindly sent me a copy of his report and answered many queries over the telephone.

Throughout the discussions, especially those concerned with protection of the site, the Trustees and I enjoyed the help, advice and cooperation of Tony Connor, Principal Surveyor and David Stabb, Conservation Officer to the Richmond upon Thames Council.

Finally I thank my fellow trustees collectively for their forbearance during many committee meetings, and Derek Plummer, then Chairman of the Twickenham Society, for the innumerable ways in which he helped to see the project through.

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