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THE CLARKSON MEMORIAL, HIGH STREET, WISBECH, CAMBRIDGESHIRE
HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

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ARCHITECTURAL INVESTIGATION

ENGLISH HERITAGE

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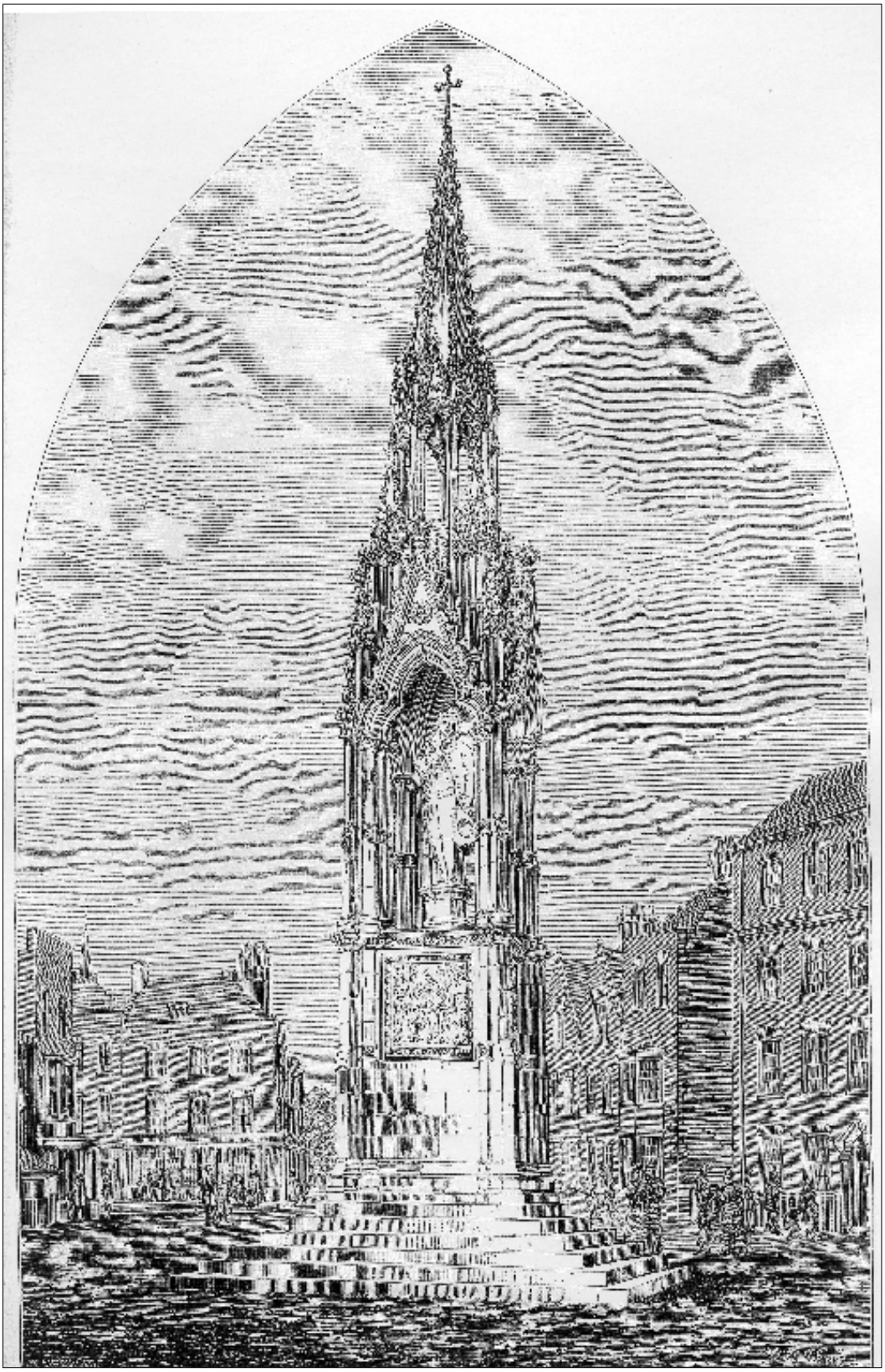
THE CLARKSON MEMORIAL, WISBECH

The Clarkson Memorial, designed by Sir George Gilbert Scott, was erected in 1881 to commemorate the work of the anti-slavery campaigner Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846), who was born in Wisbech. This report has been prepared at the request of Ian Harper, English Heritage, Cambridge in response to a request for funding for works to the memorial in connection with the celebration of the bicentenary of the end of slavery in Britain. It examines the architectural significance of the Memorial within the context of nineteenth century public memorials and within that of the work of Scott.

The Memorial

The Memorial comprises a Gothic canopy with a spire, 68 ft 3inches in height from its apex to the base. The base is square, the spire octagonal with the statue enclosed by trefoil arches. The statue at 7ft is larger than life size and Clarkson is depicted in a flowing Classical robe with a scroll raised in one hand as if the subject were engaged in public oration and the fetters of a slave in the other. Politicians and campaigners were usually depicted in classical dress and the pose too is conventional. The canopy is constructed of red Ancaster stone, the statue of white Ancaster stone.[1] The statue faces eastward, towards the High Street, although Scott's perspective drawing indicates that the original intention was that it should face west towards the iron bridge with which it was directly aligned. [2] The Memorial is surrounded by an area of paving which includes a set of steps leading down, not as might be expected, to a public convenience, but to what was marked on Scott's plan as Mr Exley's wine vaults which were in part located under the paved area.[3]

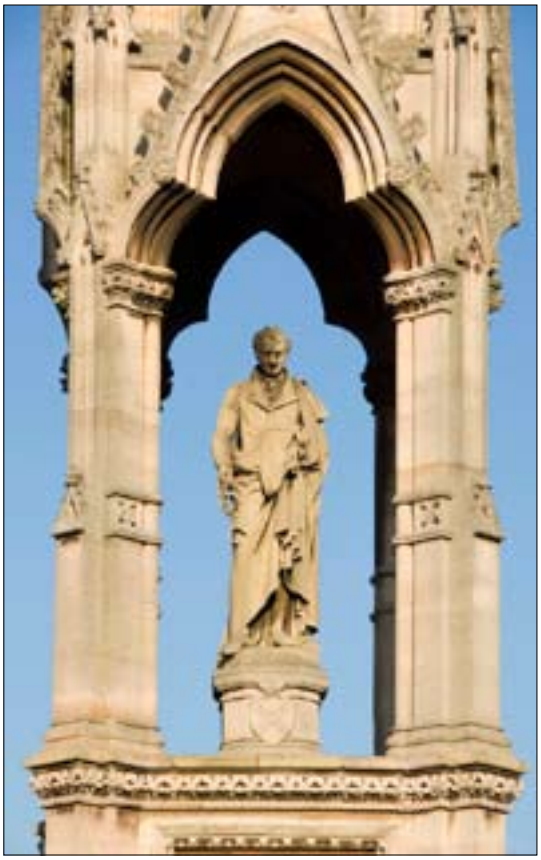
To the side and rear of the memorial are three bas-reliefs, carved in stone from Alton, Staffs., that to the south depicting Granville Sharp (a leading anti-slavery campaigner who arranged for the defence of the slave James Somerset in 1771 and established the principle that a slave once he reached British soil could not be taken by force to be sold abroad), to the north, William Wilberforce and to the west, 'The Suppliant', a slave in bondage, with one knee on the ground and hands lifted up. The latter is based on the jasper cameo or medallion "Am I not a Man and a Brother?", a copy of the emblem of the Society for the Abolition of Slavery, which was executed in 1787 by Josiah Wedgwood for the benefit of the Society, and designed by William Hackwood (1753-1836), one of Wedgwood's modellers.[4] Clarkson had corresponded with Wedgwood over abolition and Wedgwood had given him financial assistance to enable him to continue his work.[5] The carving of 'The Suppliant' is very badly eroded to the extent that most of the detail is now lost.[6]



Perspective by Sir George Gilbert Scott. ***The Builder 9 October 1875***

The Memorial was built by Pattinson Bros. of Ruskington, Sleaford and the contract for their work was for £1440, excluding the statue, bas-reliefs and carving. The total cost of the Memorial was £2035.

The Memorial from the east
© English Heritage DP035706



Detail view
© English Heritage DP035695

Background to the Memorial

Scott was asked to prepare a design for the memorial about 1873 and it was to be one of his last designs. The choice of Scott may have been influenced by the fact that his brother was at that time Vicar of Wisbech.[7] The design was published in 1875 but the project fell into abeyance for some years and it was only after Scott's death in 1878 that it was revived with his son John Oldrid Scott, who took over his father's practice, supervising the memorial's construction. Scott designed three memorials, the Martyrs' Memorial, Oxford (1841-3), the Albert Memorial (1863-72) and the Clarkson Memorial and at the unveiling ceremony in Wisbech on 10 November 1881, John Oldrid said – "it was on a work of very similar kind his father's fame was to a great extent founded – the Martyr's Memorial, at Oxford. It was a matter of some interest, as his earliest work was in a sense a memorial of that kind, and this was one of his very latest. He

considered them both charming specimens of his father's genius, and he found it difficult to say which was the more beautiful".[8]

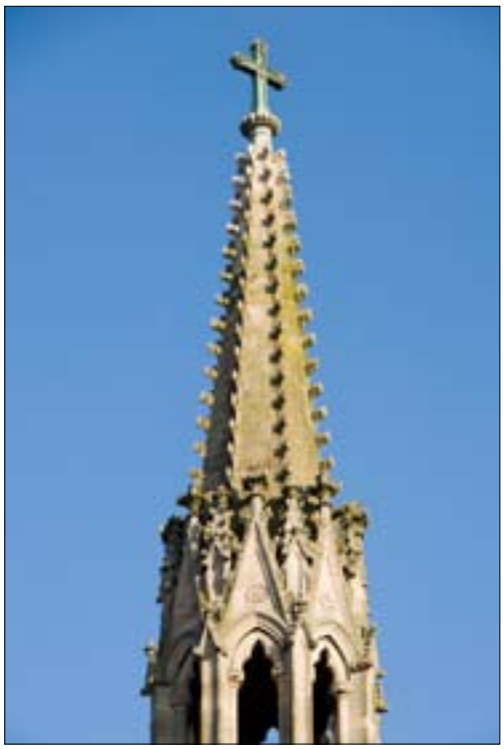
The statue of Thomas Clarkson ***© English Heritage DP035697***

Memorials in nineteenth century England

Prior to the nineteenth century, public memorials fall broadly into two categories. Many were primarily architectural taking the form of columns or obelisks while statuary had become widespread in the eighteenth century. The contribution of the nineteenth century was the combination of architecture with statuary and the application of the Gothic style to the public memorial. Statuary was married with classical architectural forms in the Nelson columns in Trafalgar Square and in Dublin. The problem was how to create a memorial within the increasingly fashionable Gothic idiom. One answer was the revival of the medieval cross, of which the most celebrated examples were the Eleanor crosses but they were also found in the form of preaching crosses as in the Butter Cross at Winchester or at Leighton Buzzard or the market crosses as at Chichester, Salisbury or Malmesbury. [9] A. W. N. Pugin drew attention to crosses in *Contrasts*, where they were seen as exemplars of the noblest aspirations of mankind.

Scott's Memorials

The Clarkson Memorial needs to be considered in the light of Scott's other memorials. Although it was remarked on by contemporaries that it bore some resemblance to the Martyrs' Memorial, it differed from Scott's first memorial in one significant respect. The Martyrs' Memorial is inspired by the three surviving Eleanor crosses (at Waltham Cross, Geddington and Northampton) in its form which was that of a solid body surmounted by a second stage carrying statuary in niches surmounted by a spire. At Wisbech, we have an open cross containing a statue with the cross forming a canopy or ciborium protecting the statue. This arrangement relates more to the form of Scott's Albert Memorial. The distinction is important.



The spire
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Detail showing carving
© English Heritage DP035699

Although in designing the Albert Memorial, Scott argued that "I have not hesitated to adopt in my design the style at once most congenial with my own feelings, and that of the most touching monuments ever erected in this country to a Royal Consort – the exquisite 'Eleanor crosses'", in fact the detailed design owed much more to Italian examples.[10] Three have been identified: the Scaliger Monument, Verona, the Shrine of the Madonna by Andrea Orcagna in Or San Michele, Florence (c.1340) and a ciborium by Arnolfo di Cambio in San Paolo fuori le Mura, Rome (1285).[11] The latter incorporated pointed arches, a triangular pediment and corner pinnacles which were

very similar to those of the Albert Memorial. It has been argued by Stephen Bayley that the idea of the Gothic shrine in the open air originated with an 1816 design for a stage set for the opera *Undine* by Karl Friedrich Schinkel, containing no statue but in form broadly anticipating the Albert Memorial,).[12] Gavin Stamp considers it unlikely that Scott would have seen this although he may have seen engravings of Schinkel's Monument to the Liberation, Berlin (1818-21).[13]

While the inspiration for the form the Albert Memorial took is open to discussion, there is no doubt that the principle of the Gothic canopy was well established in Great Britain by the time Scott prepared his designs. The best known example is perhaps Kemp's Walter Scott Memorial, Edinburgh (1836) but there were several others: a memorial to Lord George Bentinck, Mansfield by T. C. Hine (1849), a memorial to Henry Handley M. P., Sleaford by William Boyle (1850) and Thomas Worthington's Albert Memorial, Manchester (1862-7). Henry Cole, in his opposition to Scott's design, railed against his proposal for an open ciborium type memorial, in his *Memorandum on Crosses and Shrines in England* (1863), arguing that there were no known examples of memorial crosses not rising as solid structures from their bases. He held that the only open crosses were market crosses or preaching crosses and that such designs were quite inappropriate for memorials in the open air. A canopy gave the impression that it protected the statuary beneath it from the elements whereas in practice it did not and an open memorial belonged inside a building and not where it would be exposed to the elements. Despite such strictures, Scott's ideas prevailed and the Albert Memorial was built as intended as an open memorial.[14]

But while the Clarkson Memorial followed the Albert Memorial in its essential form of a canopy over a statue, in the massing of its upper parts, it resembled more closely the design of the Martyrs' Memorial, whose principal characteristic was a pronounced verticality with a smooth transition from base to the top of its spire, its slimness aiding the impression that it soared heavenwards. As previously mentioned, the Martyrs' Monument drew its inspiration directly from the three surviving Eleanor crosses, principally from those at Waltham and Northampton, which had hexagonal bases faced with traceried blind arcading. Above this, the next stage of the Memorial diminished in size and comprised a series of niches containing statues of the martyrs divided by buttressed shafts and surmounted by trefoil arches within steeply pitched gablets, the buttresses continued as crocketed mini-pinnacles. At Wisbech, these small crocketed pinnacles are ingeniously used to draw the eye away from the splayed corners that mark the transition from the square base and canopy enclosing the statue to the octagonal upper stage. This is open in contrast to Oxford but the general proportions and decorative scheme are broadly similar. At Oxford, the Memorial followed the Waltham and Northampton crosses in having a further small stage of canopied blind

traceried arcading above this and topped it with pinnacles that appear to be derived from the triangular cross at Geddington. In contrast, at Wisbech, Scott opted for a much simpler treatment of a crocketed spire which owes much to Worthington's Manchester memorial.

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Scott designed one other memorial, that to the Countess of Loudoun at Ashby-de-la-Zouch, which, like the Clarkson Memorial, was not completed until after his death. Designed in 1877 and unveiled in 1879, it bore far more resemblence to the Martyrs' Memorial, with its inspiration drawn directly from the Eleanor Crosses.

The Statuary and Carving

The statuary, bas-reliefs and carving was executed directly under the supervision of William Brindley of the London firm of Farmer & Brindley, one of the leading specialists in this field.[15] Scott used them elsewhere: they carried out much work on the Albert Memorial, his Government Offices in Whitehall and his major cathedral restorations, in addition to their work for other leading Victorian architects such as Waterhouse who employed them at Manchester Town Hall and the Natural History Museum. Scott called Brindley, “the best carver I have met with and the one who best understands my views”.[16] The work at Wisbech reflects the high standards of the firm. The naturalistic foliage carving on the frieze at the top of the base and on the capitals is of excellent quality as are the naturalistic forms on the surrounds to the bas-reliefs.

Conclusion

The Clarkson Memorial is probably the least known of Scott’s four memorials. The first, the Martyrs’ Memorial, made his reputation; for the Albert Memorial, he received a knighthood. At Wisbech, he successfully blended contrasting elements of the three earlier memorials in one structure, the canopied statue of the Albert Memorial with the Eleanor cross-inspired slim vertical forms of the Martyrs’ Memorial and the Loudon Memorial. To this was added the contribution of Farmer & Brindley, who produced some of the best statuary and architectural carving in the nineteenth century. The result was a Memorial that, in the words of the Rev. W. W. Dickinson, speaking at its unveiling, is “an abiding ornament” to the town of Wisbech.

NOTES

1 The account of the Memorial is based on that given in the Wisbech Advertiser, 9 November 1881.

2 Published in The Builder, 9 October 1875 p. 909. A large copy of the perspective is in the Wisbech and Fenland Museum. No other drawings are known to exist.

3 Ground plan by Scott, dated 10 June 1876, held by the Wisbech and Fenland Museum, which also clearly shows the relationship of the statue to the now demolished iron bridge.

4 For Hackwood, see Ars Ceramica (2001) No. 17.

5 Samuel Smiles, Josiah Wedgwood: his personal history, cited in F. J. Gardiner, History of Wisbech and Neighbourhood during the last fifty years 1848-1898 (Wisbech 1898), p. 280.

6 A contemporary photograph of the bas-relief, as executed, is held by the Wisbech and Fenland Museum.

7 Gardiner, Wisbech (1898), p. 279.

8 Wisbech Chronicle, 19 November 1881.

9 For examples see Aymer Vallance, Old Crosses and Lychgates (London, 1920)

10 Gavin Stamp, 'George Gilbert Scott, the Memorial Competition and the Critics' in C. Brooks (ed.), The Albert Memorial: the Prince Consort national memorial: its history, contexts and conservation (New Haven and London, 2000), p. 102.

11 Stamp (2000), p.120.

12 Stephen Bayley, The Albert Memorial: the monument in its social and architectural context (London, 1981), p. 17.

13 Stamp (2000), p. 120.

14 Bayley (1981), pp. 46-51.

15 Wisbech Advertiser, 9 November 1881.

16 Benedict Read, Victorian Sculpture (New Haven and London, 1982), pp. 240, 265-6.






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