

## THE COLUMN AT SELSLEY : AN 1851 SURVIVOR

Theo Stening

As memories of The Millennium Dome start to fade, it seems timely to recall a predecessor. The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations took place in a light, airy and structurally innovative building too. Established by Royal Commission, and held in 1851 when Britain was prosperous and led the world industrially, it was the first truly international exhibition. Both British and foreign achievements were displayed in equal proportions. Designed in a matter of weeks, built from the cutting of the first turf to the last lick of paint in nine months at a cost of £80,000 raised by voluntary subscriptions from industry and private individuals, visited by over six million people (more than one third of the population) in five months and closing with a solid profit of £186,000 used to create permanent benefits for science and culture, the Great Exhibition was superbly organised and a great success. It was a triumph of its time.

One hundred and fifty years on, a survivor maintains its lonely vigil in a field below All Saints Church, Selsley(1) The thirty feet (9.1 metres) tall monolithic Cornish granite column, with its Ionic capping and substantial square pedestal, stood originally outside the western end of the exhibition. Here it formed part of the Raw Materials, Mining, Quarrying, Metallurgical and Mineral Products Section. It was acquired at the end of the exhibition by the prominent mill-owner and clothier Mr Samuel Stephens Marling, who re-erected it in the grounds of his recently purchased estate, Stanley Park, in 1852. How did it come to be there? This is the story of the column, set in the context of its times.

At first sight, a granite column of such dimensions might seem to be an unusual exhibit. But it was a time when the granite industry, particularly in Cornwall, was thriving. Facilitated by the rapid development of new forms of transport such as canals and railways, which enabled heavy articles to be transported more readily over much greater distances than hitherto, granite was in increasing demand for building, dockworks and the construction of breakwaters. In London, extensive rebuilding of parts of the West End in the first half of the nineteenth century, much of it in a revised classical form, placed heavy demands on the granite quarries. Patriotic fervour, fed by a succession of military and naval successes and a burgeoning Empire, led to increasing demand for statues and other memorials to commemorate national heroes.

Typical was the statue of the Duke of York, of subsequent nursery rhyme fame, erected in London's Waterloo Place in 1834. This fine pink granite Tuscan column, together with its statue, measured 124 feet from base to head, only to be surpassed subsequently by admirers of Lord Nelson. They managed to ensure his Corinthian column of Fogginor granite, erected in 1842, was a clear fifty feet higher than the Duke's, and his personal statue three feet larger! Perhaps it was not surprising, therefore, that the Cheesewring Granite Company was one of the three Cornish suppliers to seek further opportunities for their granite products in the construction of buildings, porticoes and memorials by sending examples to the prestigious Great Exhibition. They may also have responded to the appeal from the Commissioners in September 1850 for exhibits characteristic of particular regions(2).

The shaft of the column was worked in the Cheesewring Quarry, owned by the Duchy of Cornwall, before being sent to London. It was horse-drawn for nearly nine miles to Moorswater, near Liskeard, on the Liskeard and Caradon railway. This had a truck "on eight wheels of very superior construction" for carrying granite (*West Briton*, 20 March 1846). Here

it was transferred to the Liskeard and Looe Union Canal for a six mile journey to Looe, where it was loaded onto a sailing vessel and shipped to London(3). Finally the shaft was unloaded at the Cheesewring granite wharf at Lambeth. The pedestal, cap and base to the column were worked there. The products were then horse-hauled to Hyde Park, assembled and erected.

The descriptive notice at the column's base proudly displayed the feathers of The Prince of Wales, together with information about the Cheesewring Granite Company. Its neighbours included an obelisk, several large naval anchors, a twenty four ton slab of coal and other less pilferable objects!

There is no record of how successful the column was in attracting new orders for the Cheesewring Granite Company, nor indeed what offers were made for what may well have been a 'one off speculative column. Prices could not be displayed during the exhibition(4) but some were priced in the "Exhibition Official Catalogue Advertiser". The column was not one of these(5).

At the end of the Exhibition, items had to be removed. The granite column may have been sold beforehand. Several significant sales had been made during the last few days. Some exhibits which would have involved great cost to move were given to the Commissioners(6). Auctions followed to dispose of the items.

However, Mr Marling was no stranger to the Exhibition. His company, S. S. Marling Ltd., one of the exhibitors, had been awarded a Prize Medal (one of the 2918!) for the attainment of the high standard in production of woollen cloth. His family had paid several visits, and his brother, Thomas Marling, was appointed a juror for the purpose of awarding medals to articles of merit in another class of the Exhibition. It seems possible, therefore, that Mr Marling may have taken early steps to acquire the column in due course.

The removal of the exhibits started immediately after the closure of the Exhibition on 15th October 1851. The large pieces of industrial machinery and other large exhibits, brought in by teams of horses, were taken away similarly. *The Stroud Free Press* (October 31, 1851) contained a report that a huge locomotive, weighing twenty nine tons, had just been dragged off from the Exhibition by the united strength of eighteen horses and deposited at Paddington Station. It seems likely that this is what happened to the column too, which weighed some fifteen-twenty tons. The extension to the line from Paddington through Swindon to Stroud and Stonehouse had opened in 1845.

Perhaps surprisingly, no report has yet been found in local papers describing the arrival of the column in Gloucestershire, nor its erection on the Stanley Park Estate.

It is not known if Mr Marling envisaged an ultimate use for his acquisition, or if it was simply a whim of fancy to have such a significant personal memento of the Exhibition. It was a time when monuments were fashionable. When the column was Grade II Listed in 1953, it was noted that it was said to have been erected in memory of one of his favourite horses. This may well have been true, but no other record of this has been identified in recent years. Could there be some confusion with the obelisk raised by Judge Coxe at Nether Lypiatt Manor to his horse Wag when it died in 1721? Might this have given Mr Marling the germ of an idea?

It has also been said that at one time there was a light at the top of the column, but no documented record nor date of this has yet been found. What might such a light have been? One can conjecture that, if installed soon after the erection of the column, it could have been produced by an inflammable gas or fluid, with or without an incandescent mantle. However, it seems likely that electricity would offer a simpler alternative. Even if an arc light system had been used (a somewhat clumsy and complicated system to install at the top of a column), it is unlikely that this would have been before the 1880s. The Marlings were recognised innovators, so a novel idea such as this may well have appealed to them. Might it have been installed for publicity purposes? People may well have travelled from far around to see such a light which worked without oil or gas, and could be switched on and off(7).

If, indeed, there was such a light, and it was not folklore, where did the power come from? Would a multi-celled battery have sufficed? Stanley Park itself was not electrified until 1934, but both Dudbridge and Ebley Mills used electricity at an early stage. It might have been simpler for the Marlings to have fed power from their own mill at Ebley(8), but Dudbridge Mill was nearer(9). Have any Society members any relevant information on this?

Samuel Stephens Marling died in 1883, aged 73, having been made a baronet in 1882. The Stanley Park Estate was sold in 1952, and is now privately owned. **There is no public access to the monument.** Little else remains of the main participants in this story. The foundations of the Great Exhibition building still lie beneath the grass in Hyde Park. The building itself, in modified form, continued its useful life at Sydenham until destroyed by fire in 1936. The Cheesewring Quarry continued to flourish until the beginning of the twentieth century, producing stone for many projects including the Albert Memorial, and Westminster and Tower Bridges. It struggled through the 1930s, and finally closed in the early 1950s.

The railways did so much nationally to transport exhibits and bring visitors from throughout the country to enjoy the Exhibition, often by excursion trains, giving the majority a first visit to London and an eye-opening experience of a lifetime. The Liskeard and Caradon line closed in 1916. The Liskeard and Looe Canal eventually became a railway from 1860, and still transports passengers and goods, mainly clay. The former Great Western line from Paddington through Stroud continues to service this area.

Despite its advancing years, the column remains a solid reminder of years gone by. Sadly, vegetation is increasingly penetrating its base, causing significant damage. No doubt it has many tales to tell if it could. However, it maintains its stony silence, a lasting memorial to a well-conceived, well-managed and outstandingly successful Victorian enterprise, whose success lives on. Its profits generated lasting benefits to stimulate arts, culture, science and industry as a whole by initiating and facilitating the development of the museums and educational establishments at South Kensington.

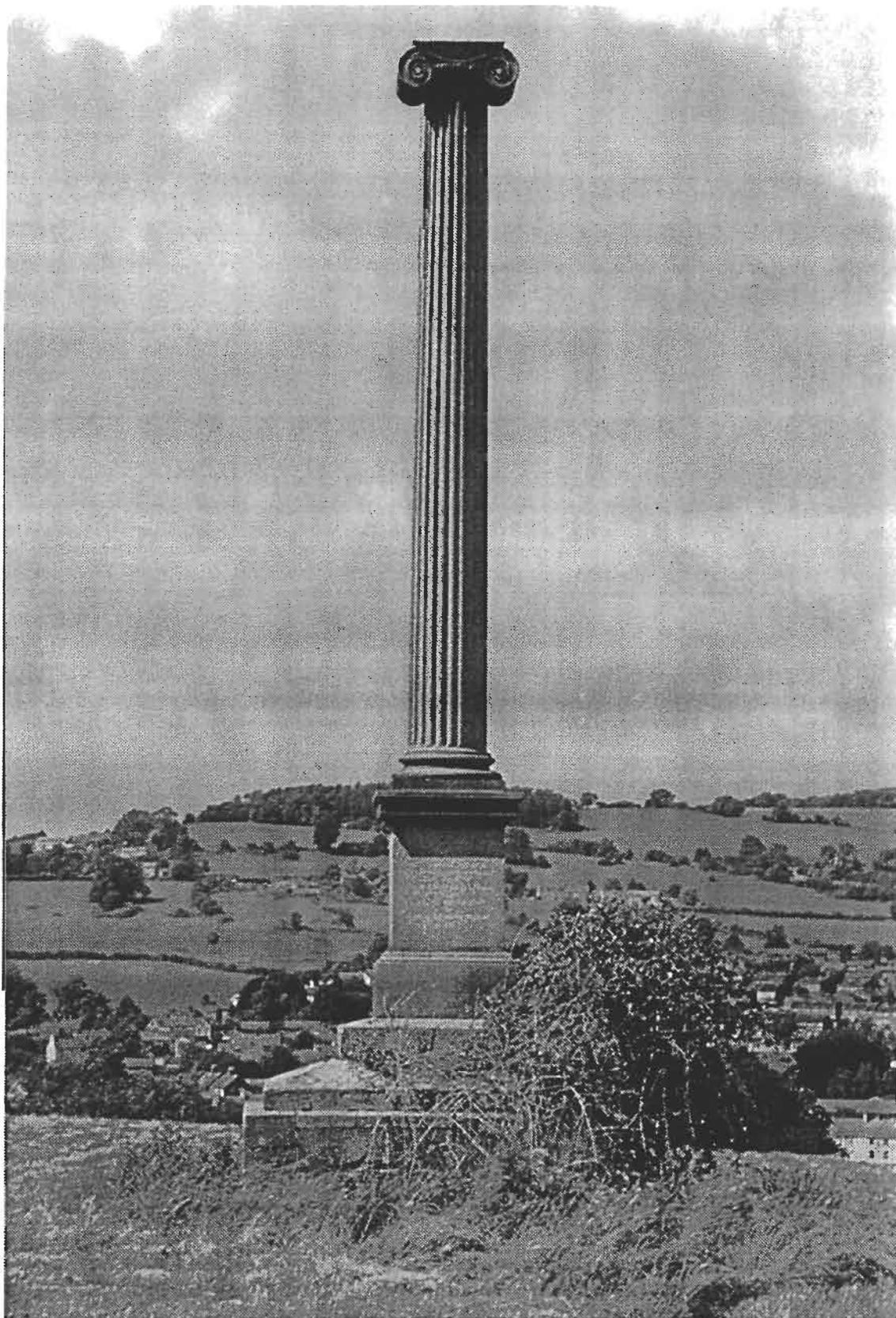
The Commissioners continue to provide substantial contributions to support science, engineering and art, including the provision of scholarships, all resourced by the well invested and well managed funds generated in 1851. What will be said about The Millennium Dome one hundred and fifty years on?

## Acknowledgements

I thank Mr Kenneth Kiss, Curator of the Crystal Palace Museum, London, for background information and encouragement in the early stages of this investigation, Mrs Pat Bowsher, formerly Manager of Tetbury Library, for her personal interest and help in obtaining more books than I dare mention, and Mrs Valerie Phillips, Archivist, the Royal Commission for the Exhibition of 1851, for helpful comments.

## References

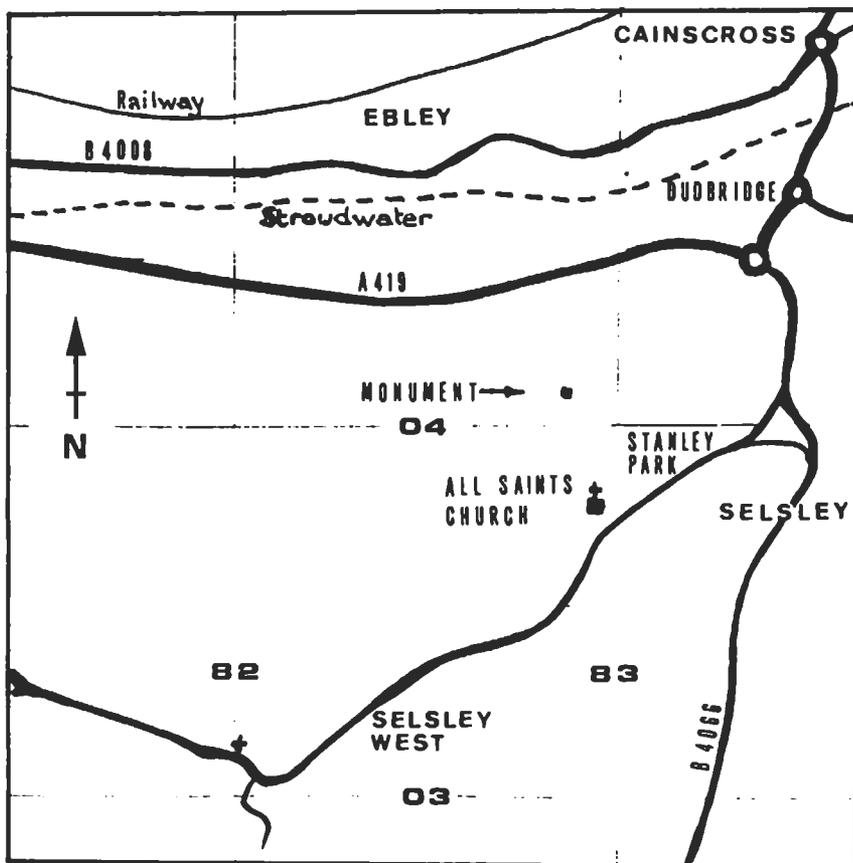
- 1 Grid reference SO 828 041.
- 2 Leapman, M. (2001) *The World for a Shilling*, Headline Press, p.86.
- 3 Dr. P Stanier, personal communication.
- 4 M. Leapman, *loc. cit.*, p. 109.
- 5 V. C. Phillips, personal communication.
- 6 M. Leapman, *loc. cit.*, p. 272.
- 7, 8 L. F. J. Walrond, personal communication.
- 9 Dr. G. Annis, a recollection that this supply source was mentioned by J. Simmons in a GS IA lecture several years ago.



The Cheesewring Column Selsley



Column and Selsley Church (Looking East)



Location Map