

Background Information – HISTORY OF THE MONUMENT

Nelson's Monument in Great Yarmouth is a tribute to the life and achievements of "the Norfolk Hero", Vice-Admiral Lord Nelson. It stands 44 metres (144 feet) high on the Denes area to the south of the town, near the mouth of the River Yare.

In Nelson's time, the South Denes was still an open, grassy area between the beach and the river. This is where fishermen hung out their nets to dry, cattle grazed and public hangings took place. It was also used by the East Norfolk Militia for practising military manoeuvres, and the officers held horse races here. In 1810 the officers laid down a proper race course, and the site became a popular venue for "fashionable personages" to assemble. A few years after Nelson's death, the Royal Naval Hospital was built (its imposing buildings still stand) and was later incorporated into a large military barracks. Today, the area is a rather shabby industrial area with small factories, warehouses and a new power station, so it is not easy to visualise it as it once was. *Right – view by JMW Turner © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge*



Nelson was proud of his Norfolk origins, and the county was certainly proud of him. The idea of raising a monument, to be called the "Norfolk Column" was first put forward in the 1790s after Nelson's great victory at Aboukir Bay. The plan was not carried through at the time, but was revived after his death during his greatest triumph at Trafalgar in October 1805. The first proposal was not for a monument in Yarmouth at all, but on Castle Hill in Norwich. However, it was not until 1814 that a group of Norfolk businessmen finally set up a committee to collect money for the project. It was they who decided that the open spaces of the Yarmouth Denes would be a more appropriate setting. This was an area known to Nelson, rich in military and naval associations, and an excellent site for a sea mark to guide future generations of navigators towards the harbour mouth. They finally chose to site the pillar at the centre of the recently-established officers' race course. Having raised £7000 in subscriptions, they finally met in Thetford to choose from 44 different proposals. They opted for the design of an Ancient Greek column put forward by the prominent London architect William Wilkins, himself a native of Norfolk and architect of, amongst others, the Shire Hall in Norwich, London's National Gallery and Downing College, Cambridge. This was not the only Nelson memorial by Wilkins. He also designed the similar one that stood in Dublin from 1809 until it was destroyed by an IRA group in 1966. Interestingly, his original design for Yarmouth as well as Dublin was for a Greek trireme (an ancient vessel with 3 ranks of oars) to top the monument rather than a figure of Britannia.

Wilkins' design for Dublin, left, shows how it might have looked.

- The foundation stone of the Monument was laid on 15 August, 1817 by the Committee's Chairman, Hon. Col. John Wodehouse. The names of Wodehouse and the other Committee members, are inscribed on the east side of the monument.
- The silver trowel used by Col. Wodehouse *above* may be seen in Time and Tide Museum along with the original model of the Monument that was shown at the opening ceremony.





The Monument took almost two years to build, and was finally completed in 1817, twenty six years before Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square London.. The pillar itself cost £7000, including £892 spent on the figure of Britannia. The monument would have been "within budget", but a further £3000 was needed to strengthen the foundations (the sandy ground being rather unstable), put wooden railings round the site and build an adjacent custodian's house. This was described as "a cottage for a sailor to reside in, and to shew the monument: one who has fought under the banner of the Immortal Hero is intended to be selected". Old photographs show that the "cottage" was quite a substantial house, and its original occupant, James Sharman, also seems to have been a larger than life character *see below*. The cottage later became a beerhouse, but was closed and demolished in the 1920s. Cast iron railings were placed round

the Monument in the 1860s, but taken down in 1939. They have now been replaced by specially cast copies based on photographic evidence.

One apocryphal story often told of the building of the Monument is that the architect leapt to his death from the top on discovering that Britannia was facing the "wrong" way. In fact, it was the Superintendent of Works, Thomas Sutton, who had a heart attack and died at the top of the pillar while inspecting the monument in 1819. Sutton's name is inscribed on the south side of the Monument along with that of Archibald Winton, "Fore-man".

James Sharman

In 1817, James Sharman was appointed "Keeper of the Pillar", and looked after the Monument for 50 years until his death in 1867 at the age of 82. As a 14-year old, Sharman was working as a waiter at the Wrestler's Inn when he was forcibly press-ganged into the navy. He went on to serve on HMS *Victory* at Trafalgar. He later claimed to have helped carry the fatally wounded Nelson below decks, though this may have been his own embellishment in order to gain extra tips from visitors! Sharman was certainly a colourful character. His better documented exploits included a brave rescue of several sailors from the brig *Hammond* which was shipwrecked on the beach near his house in 1827. Charles Dickens read a newspaper report of this. While writing *David Copperfield*, which is partly set in Yarmouth, he visited Sharman, and apparently based the character Ham Peggoty on Sharman. An event that Sharman must have witnessed occurred in 1863, when an acrobat called Charles Marsh climbed up to stand on Britannia's shoulders. Sadly, he missed his footing while climbing down and plunged to his death before the horrified crowd gathered below.

The official opening of the monument was marked by "an elegant ball" for "three hundred and fifty persons of rank and respectability" (but, presumably, no common seamen!). From the start, the Monument attracted considerable attention. John Preston's book *A Picture of Yarmouth* was published the same year and described the Monument as "an emulating object to British seamen, who are daily passing and re-passing the Roads within its view.... It is a structure which, for taste and execution,



eclipses every other piece of modern architecture in the neighbourhood, is truly honourable to the native county of that great hero whose memory it is gratefully intended to perpetuate, and may with propriety be acknowledged at once the pride and justly-boasted ornament of Yarmouth."

When built, the Monument stood on open land mainly used by the military, with the army barracks and Royal Naval Hospital towards the town and a naval fort at the tip of the peninsula near the river mouth. However it was not long before the town of Yarmouth began

to expand outside its historic walls. By mid-Victorian times, with the arrival of the railways (at one time there were three separate stations in the town) and the holidaymakers they brought, streets of terraced houses were encroaching on the Denes.

Picture above of *Main entrance to former Royal Naval Hospital, built 1809.*

Picture below shows the original head of Britannia mounted on top of the monument, now at the Time and Tide Museum.



By the mid-20th century, the Monument was beginning to look a little forlorn, not least since it was now surrounded by offices, warehouses, small factory units and a power station. Smoke from the power station chimney – and from countless other small house chimneys nearby – had impregnated the surface of the stone with carbon, turning it in places almost black in appearance. Britannia and the Caryatids* again needed attention, and in 1982 were replaced by models made of fibreglass round a concrete core.

- A Caryatid is a sculpted female figure serving as an architectural support taking the place of a column or a pillar supporting an entablature on her head. In this case there were several of them holding Britannia aloft.

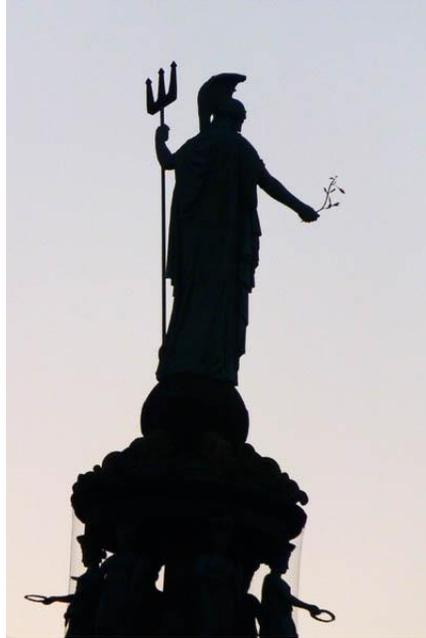
In 2004, the Norfolk Historic Buildings Trust and Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service began a £1 million project to restore and interpret the Monument, which was completed in the Autumn of 2005, just in time for the 200th anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar. The Monument has been cleaned as far as practicable (to remove all the blackening would cause significant damage to the surface), and stonework replaced where necessary. Stone for this was obtained from the recently re-opened original quarries at Cullaloe, and it is thus possible to see what the original colour would have been and where repairs have been effected. Over the years, the land level round the base of the monument had risen, and 600 tons of sand and earth were removed to take it back to the original level. The fine 1860s cast iron railings have been replicated, the surrounding area paved, and information panels (and seats) placed for the benefit of visitors.

Under refurbishment



Other views of the top of the monument showing Britannia holding her spray of and her supporting Caryatids holding their garland wreaths. There are many versions of the nymph Britannia, some with a lion, seated, standing, with a sword, a trident, a shield with and without our national flag amended to

take account of the alliances with Scotland and with Ireland etc, so the spray and the garland wreaths are or a designers choice and in this case with a Roman of Greek overtone; Britannia has been directly associated with Great Britain since the 1st century AD. Some believe it to be an olive branch, held out to our defeated enemies juxtaposed with the large letters of the word "VICTORY" quite nearby and overtly obvious. It's nice to believe that we would do such a thing! Given the near identical height of the HMS Ganges mast at Shotley Gate and this Monument, I wonder whether that was intended and that it was set into the ground at that height by design?



The ghostly figure of Britannia and her Caryatids, almost a silhouette.



Britannia and one of her Caryatids



Britannia with the word VICTORY on the lower plinth stone referring to Nelson's ultimate Victory against the French and her allies.



Britannia now remodelled in fibreglass

Below shows a view from the top of the Monument taken in August 2006.

