



Fig. 1. Duncombe Park, Yorkshire, UK

## MY FAVOURITE BUILDING

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My favourite building had, over a period of some five years in the late nineteen-nineties, become a close but rather enigmatic friend. I say that my favourite building is a building, but one could consider it more as a structure, or even perhaps an ornament. It became my friend because it was one of several buildings which were the subject of a research project I was conducting at that time; I visited it regularly.

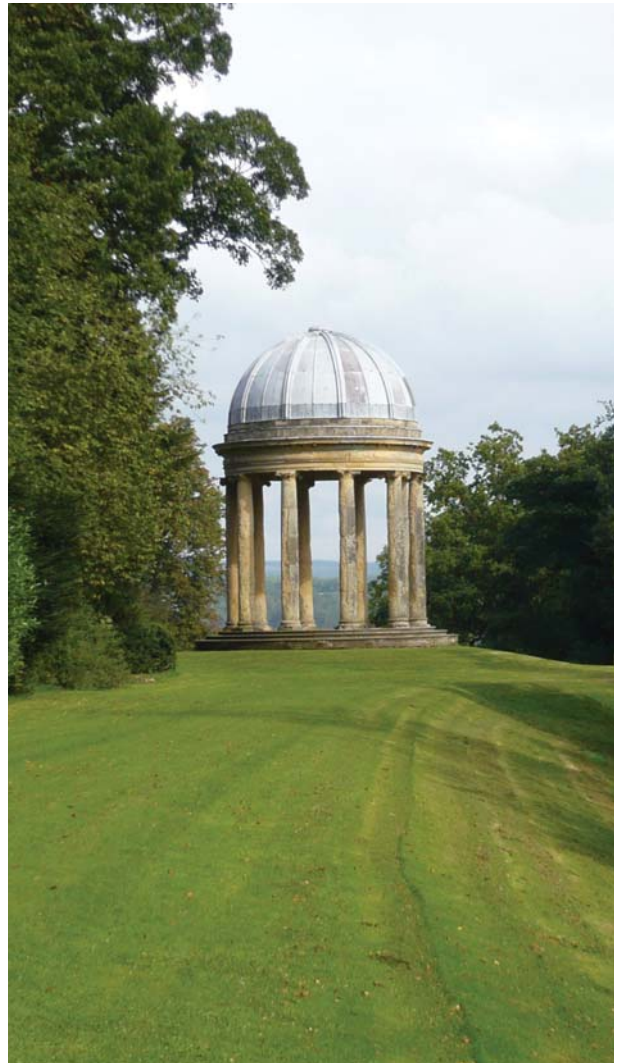
My favourite building can be found close to the North Yorkshire market town of Helmsley. As one crosses the bridge over the river Rye and approaches Helmsley from the south, a turning on the left leads to a broad driveway ascending an incline through open pasture land. Towards the top of this driveway my favourite building can be found situated in an elevated position amongst trees, standing almost as a sentinel to what lies beyond. This is, in my mind, the sentinel of Duncombe Park, an early eighteenth-century designed landscape associated with one of the most important Baroque houses in Northern England. The house was built for Sir Thomas Duncombe in about 1710 and is ascribed to William Wakefield, whose work was influenced by Sir John Vanbrugh. Vanbrugh, the soldier, political prisoner, playwright and renowned amateur architect whose finest works are perhaps Castle Howard and Blenheim Palace, is also credited with the design of my favourite building.

It is built of stone; it is modest in scale; it is elegant in form and it dates from the 1730s. It is an open rotunda comprising ten un-fluted Ionic columns supporting a

frieze and cornice, surmounted by a lead-clad domed roof; it is believed to be based on the design of the Temple of Vesta at Tivoli near Rome. Its importance is that it is a key element in the designed landscape of Duncombe Park, and the site of the house was undoubtedly chosen for its landscape potential. The designed landscape incorporates a curved, turfed, terrace on elevated ground, with contrived views down the steep valley sides to the river Rye below and to the surrounding countryside beyond. The terrace is backed by woodland, so as to isolate it from the house, and its layout and the design of the views is in the tradition of the Picturesque. At each end of the terrace stands a temple on a promontory from which there are also contrived views into the surrounding countryside. At the southern end stands the Tuscan Temple and at the north, my favourite building, the Ionic Temple – an object in a landscape.

The Picturesque in landscape design was inspired by travellers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries making the Grand Tour of Europe, and in the process crossing the Alps and encountering the Apennines where the terror and horror of rough tracks vertiginous precipices, jagged mountains peaks and wild remote countryside had to be endured as part of that experience. But it is not just the picturesque that is at play here, for it is the experience of the sublime which is sought too. That experience is one of fear but without mortal danger which Edmund Burke so eloquently explored in his *Philosophical Enquiry into*

Fig. 2. Domed temple in the gardens of Duncombe Park, Yorkshire.



our ideas of the sublime and the beautiful of 1754. It is the same experience which the guests at Duncombe Park would have experienced on their visits to the terrace and the Ionic Temple from where there are glimpses of the jagged outline of the ruins of Helmsley Castle beyond the woodland trees, and the cascades on the River Rye in the valley far, far, below.

The significance of my favourite building is that it is an object in a landscape which is believed to have been designed with the assistance of Charles Bridgeman. He was a landscape designer considered to have had a pivotal role in the transition from the formal geometric designs of the late 1600s to the freer designs of William Kent, Humphrey Repton and Lancelot (Capability) Brown. So this is an early example of Picturesque/sublime landscape design in England, and is part of a fashion which would eventually permeate many layers of the arts, including music, painting, and literature. It is a fashion of the time that is epitomised in the imagery created in the literature of Horace Walpole, Ann

Radcliffe, Jane Austen and that quintessential English romantic poet William Wordsworth, as well as in those fiery tempestuous paintings of William Turner. These works have, in my view, conditioned the way in which we perceive landscapes, and particularly wild 'natural' landscape, and there is a strong argument to support the view that there is implicit in the Picturesque a perception which is now deeply embedded in British culture.

I mentioned that my favorite building is an enigmatic friend. I say enigmatic because my favourite building raised more questions for my research than answers – but that is the way of research. Perhaps more importantly, it is not known for certain that it was designed by Sir John Vanbrugh, nor that it was modeled on the Temple of Vesta, the date and provenance of which seem to be equally obscure. Nor indeed is it certain that the house was designed by William Wakefield, nor that the landscape design involved the hand of Charles Bridgeman, because in

1879 the House at Duncombe park was destroyed by fire, along with much of the family archive, although the house was subsequently rebuilt to the original design by William Young.

So what insights into the past might my friend conceal, whose stones have long been washed by the tides of humanity, if I may borrow from John Ruskin, and has stood as silent witness to the passage of time and circumstances at Duncombe Park for almost three

centuries? My modest, enigmatic friend; my favourite building.

*First published in the Journal of the Architectural Heritage Society of Scotland 2010*  
*Revision: 20 April 2011*

Received: 25 April 2011  
Published: 31 August 2011