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ELEANOR COADE AT STOWE

Alison Kelly

Stowe is famous as the creation of many of the most eminent English architects, sculptors and garden designers, but one name rarely mentioned is that of Mrs Eleanor Coade.¹ And yet Stowe had a range of Coade objects apparently unrivalled at any other country house, stretching across nearly half a century from the 1770s to at least 1814. Many of the Coade stone objects left Stowe at the sale of 1921, others have been overlooked thanks to Coade stone's similarity to natural, fine-grained limestone, while the poor cataloguing of the 250,000 Stowe documents in the Huntington Library, San Marino, means that individual bills cannot be identified.² Nevertheless, it is possible to give some impression of the range of Coade-stone objects at Stowe.

In 1776 George Nugent-Temple-Grenville, later 1st Marquess of Buckingham, wrote to his uncle 2nd Earl Temple: "I have however seen a lion in artificial stone which I think will answer our purpose, and as the mold need not in this instance be destroyed I think we may have the pair for £100, perhaps this may be the cheapest way."³ In fact the lions only came to £40 but the bill, dated 1778, does not specify the type of lion sent.⁴ The lions on the north portico, now in front of the school sports pavilion, were definitely Coade stone (Fig. 1). One has suffered damage and been damnably restored. The other is in good condition. There is less certainty about those on the south portico. In the *Country Life* illustrations of 1905 and 1914 these appear to be stone, but the sale catalogue of 1921 describes the Medici lions as being of lead.⁵

At about the same time as the work on the house, plaques were added to the stucco corridors and the colonnades on the north front of 1772.⁶ These are now painted, but correspond to Coade designs in her books of etchings and to the plaques on Adam's 20 Portman Square.

Eleanor Coade had a thriving business in armorial plaques. In addition to coats of arms for government buildings, churches, City Companies and firms which had the Royal Appointment, many of the aristocracy liked to have their arms on their property, and among these were the Temple family. Coade stone had a special advantage over natural stone for these pieces. It was the convention in books of armorial engravings to show the "tinctures" by lines and dots — vertical for gules (red), horizontal for azure (blue) and so on. This is extremely difficult to carve in anything less hard than marble, but was easy for Mrs Coade. The lines were inscribed with a stylus in the clay before it was fired, and after firing became permanent. The heraldic motifs could also be made separately in moulds and stuck on with slip (liquid clay) avoiding a great deal of laborious carving. Coade heraldry can be found extensively at Stowe.

The Oxford Gates illustrate the upward progress of the family through the aristocracy. On the back of the gate piers, originally built by Gibbs but moved to their present position in 1761, are the arms of Earl Temple. I think it likely that these were originally on the front, but with the Earl's advancement to the Marquisate in 1784 the obsolete arms were relegated to the back and new Marquess's arms put on the front (Fig. 2). These are dated 1787 and are marked COADE'S LITHODIPYRA a name concocted from the Greek words for stone, twice and fire which Eleanor Coade invented about 1780 and used until her partnership with Sealy in 1799.

Other Coade heraldry is to be seen on the Shepherd's Shelter, a small building not



Fig. 1. Detail of one of the Coade-stone lions at Stowe (Vera Collingwood).

now on Stowe land. This is dated 1793. Outside the immediate estate but also on family territory are the plaque of a Swan and the Marquess of Buckingham's arms on the bridge over the Ouse in Buckingham. The arms are marked Coade & Sealy 1809.⁸

After her partnership with her cousin John Sealy, Mrs Coade opened an exhibition gallery on Westminster Bridge, and in its handbook she gave a lyrical description of a copy she had been allowed to make of a Roman sarcophagus found on the road to Tivoli and bought by the Marquess: "it is impossible to give an adequate description of the exquisite workmanship of this piece of ancient sculpture". The sarcophagus is tiny — less than 3ft long — and must have been made for a baby. Five figures lead a cow to sacrifice and on the end is an inscription

DM
 ANTONIA PACCVVIO F FECIT SUO
 ET: ERENNIO FILIO SUO PI
 ISSIMO IMP. TRAIANO CAE
 SARIS AUGUSTI GERMANI
 CI SERVO DISPENSATORI MON
 TANIANO.

The original seems lost, but the Coade copy reappeared in the hands of a dealer about three years ago. It has a Renaissance-style base which must have been added in the 18th century. On the end is the dedication already quoted, and on the back an inscription saying that it was copied from the Marquess's piece. Originally, there was a cover showing a man lying on a snake.⁹

Vicenzo Valdrè was an Italian architect who worked at Stowe in the late 18th century.

He is credited with the four blocks added to the base of the Cobham Column, and crowned with four lions which are unlike any other pieces in the Coade oeuvre. They are completely Italian in style and hold Baroque shields. Sadly, they were destroyed by lightning in 1952, but enough remained for copies in natural stone to be carved.¹⁰

Valdrè is said also to have designed the Menagerie, now the School Shop. This gracious little building has a guilloche frieze running along the curved wings and across the domed centre. This has now been painted, but I believe it to be of Coade stone. In front of it were two three-figure groups, now gone¹¹ which correspond to those at West Wycombe Park, Buckinghamshire, and I believe were also Coade stone.

Valdrè is also associated with the Buckingham Lodges, which have a great deal of Coade decoration. Colvin, however, says that Valdrè went to Dublin in 1787, and remained there,¹² and two of the Coade pieces have dates of the Coade & Sealy period, 1799-1813, so if the lodges are by Valdrè they must have been designed in absentia.

Several of the plaques on the lodges are the same as those in the stucco corridor of the house — griffins and ornament, shell and foliage and scrolls and honeysuckle — all of which appear among the Coade etchings. There are also delightful finials, based on Roman altars, which are probably chimneys. (Mrs Coade liked such architectural jokes and made chimneys of Classical vases and Gothic finials.) I think it probable that the balusters are Coade stone also. Some paterae are of the normal Coade colour, but several — one marked Coade & Sealy 1805 — are of a brick colour. This must represent a fault in the clay mix, which inadvertently included iron. Over the last 180 years this has oxidised and changed the colour. All the other Coade stone, here and elsewhere, is cream colour.

Practically all the architectural and sculptural work at Stowe was illustrated, either in Seeley's guidebooks or elsewhere, but diligent search has failed to turn up a picture of the Gothic Cross of 1814. It was in a grove of yews near the church, and was mentioned in an 1832 guidebook. Records of it also appear in the workbooks of William Croggon, Mrs Coade's manager at the time, which show that it cost £225.¹³ This was destroyed by falling



Fig. 2. Detail of the Coade-stone coats of arms on the Oxford Gate at Stowe (author).

trees. The brick foundation has very recently been disinterred, and some sections of the base survive.¹⁴

In the sale catalogue of 1848 a number of vases and pedestals are described as being of artificial stone, and, where the descriptions are precise enough, correspond to Coade designs.¹⁵ Though these do not appear in the guidebooks it seems probable that these too were of Coade stone.¹⁶

Few architectural and sculptural pieces were added at Stowe during the Regency period, and many which survived the 1848 sale were dispersed in 1921. However, sufficient remains of Mrs Coade's work there to show that she was a valued supplier of Classical and Gothic pieces from the 1770s to the time of George IV.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Mr George Clarke, the Stowe historian, Mr Anthony Houghton Brown who has discovered many Coade pieces, Mrs Vera Collingwood who has taken me on several splendid Coade hunts and photographed many of the pieces, Mr Michael Bevington, Stowe Archivist, and Mr Frank Thomson, Head Gardener, who disinterred the pieces of the Gothic Cross with Miss Mary Mountain.

NOTES

1. John Martin Robinson, *Temples of Delight* 1990 and Alison Kelly, *Mrs Coade's Stone*, 1990, have what appear to be the first references in print.
2. From 1991, work will begin on these papers and it is hoped that a permanent archivist for them may be appointed.
3. BM Add Mss 57087 f.100. I am grateful to Mrs Nancy Valpy for telling me of this document.
4. The bill for the lions, of January 30, 1778, has now been discovered in the Huntington Library by George Clarke. The lions cost £40; 100ft of deal for cases came to £3 7s 6d; packing, carting and loading came to 18s. Total £44.0s 6d. Huntington Library STG A/C Box 114 Bundle 5a.
5. *Country Life*, January 3, 1914, shows the north portico lions; April 15, 1905, shows the Florentine Lions on the south portico.
6. Information from Mr Anthony Houghton Brown.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Information from Mr George Clarke and Mr Anthony Houghton Brown, who pointed out that the Swan plaque, which can be reached by the public, is damaged; the armorial plaque, which cannot, is in good order.
9. Coade's Gallery, 1799, 29. The original sarcophagus is described in J. Seeley's guidebook to Stowe of 1791, 52.
10. The remains of one are in the possession of Mr Gervase Jackson-Stops.
11. Illustrated in *Country Life*, January 3, 1914; Robinson, *op. cit.*, 145.
12. H.M. Colvin, *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects*, 1978, 848.
13. PRO C111/106, Croggon Account Book December 1814, "Marquis of Buckingham, Stowe, Rich Gothic Monument with pinnacles etc. £210. New plinths to support do. £15: £225; *Stowe a description of the House and Gardens printed and sold by R. Chandler*, 1832, 11: Near the Doric Arch "A covered walk leads to a scene planted entirely with evergreens, in the midst of which stands a GOTHIC CROSS OF ARTIFICIAL STONE". In fact, it is not very near the Doric Arch, being in a thicket close to the church.
14. Shown by Mr Frank Thomson. Four sections of the bottom part survive, three in good condition and the fourth in pieces but repairable. Surprisingly, one is marked Coade & Sealy 1811.
15. Sale Catalogue 1848. Priced and annotated by Henry Rumsey Forster, published by David Bogue. Fleet St. 36th day's sale, 269: Lot 87, A square altar pedestal of artificial stone with rams' heads and festoons, with a basket; Lot 108, A set of four tripod stands of artificial stone; Lot 114, three vases of artificial stone and a tripod; Lot 119, A pair of flower pots (artificial stone). 39th day's sale, 290: Lot 349, A pair of artificial stone vases with masks and festoons; Lot 354, A pair of artificial stone vases and pedestals; Lot 360, A pair of artificial stone vases with festoons and pedestals; Lot 363, A pair of artificial stone vases on pedestals. Prices for these lots ranged from £9 19s 6d to £5 — high figures for the mid-19th century.
16. The last dated pieces by the firm are of 1840. The moulds were sold in 1843.