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Nicholas Revett's Island Temple, West Wycombe Park

Anne Purchas

The Island Temple at West Wycombe is one of several garden temples built for Sir Francis Dashwood, Bt., (1708–81), by Nicholas Revett.¹ (Fig. 1) It is the most intriguing, situated on an island in the lake, with the only possible access to it by boat. The heavily wooded site appears to have governed its design with an unusual semi-circular colonnade to the east front echoing the shore line, while the rear elevation is somewhat truncated and was clearly not intended to be seen. The interior consists of one room with cellars below. It was certainly completed by 1782 when it was described as a theatre,² but building work may have started in 1778.³ A painting by Thomas Daniell, which shows the temple full of activity, with



Fig. 1 The Island Temple, West Wycombe Park. (Photograph: Courtauld Institute of Art)

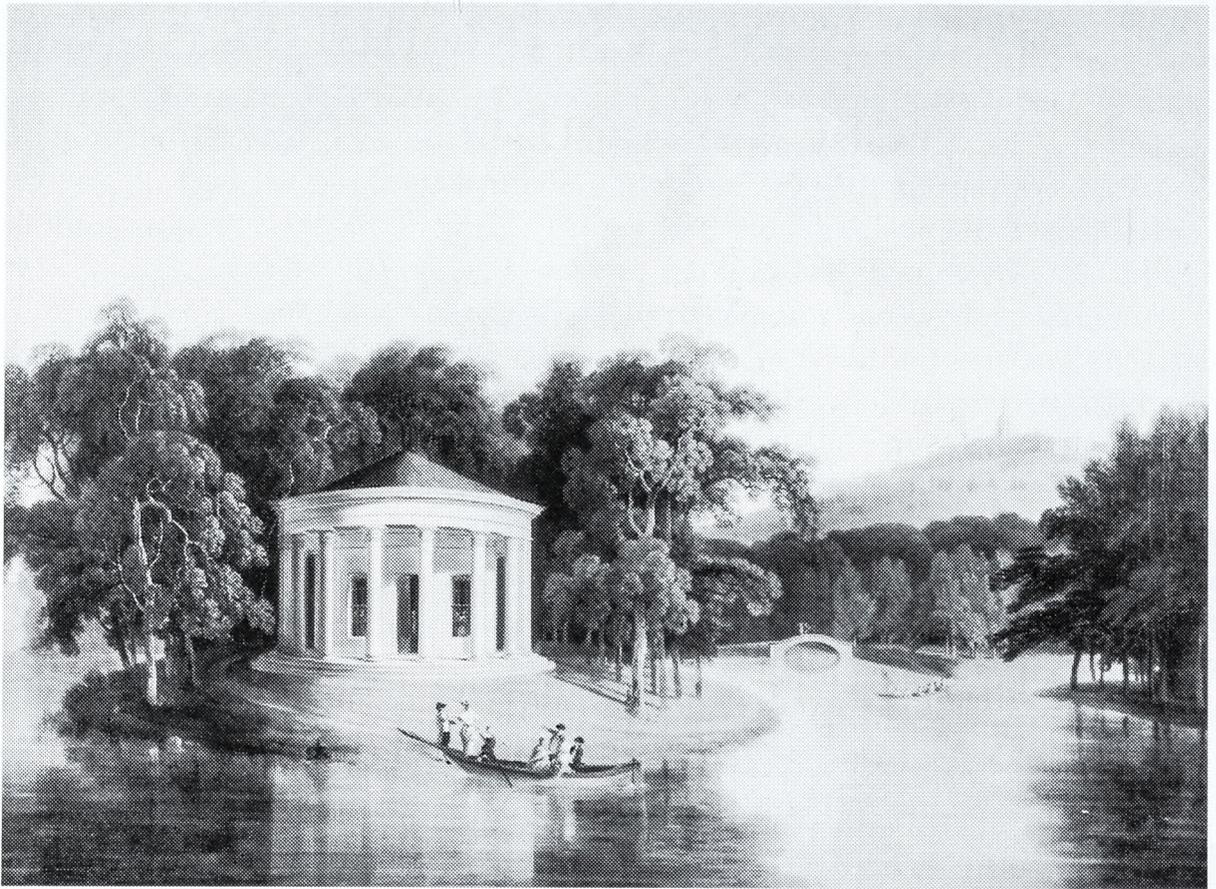


Fig. 2 Thomas Daniell *c.* 1781. The Island Temple, West Wycombe Park. Collection of Sir Francis Dashwood, Bt. (Photograph: Courtauld Institute of Art. Collection of Sir Francis Dashwood, Bt.)

more guests arriving in rowing boats, provides a wonderful image of life at West Wycombe in the eighteenth century. (Fig. 2) It also reveals an important archaeological detail in the capitals of the colonnade which can be seen to have derived from the Tower of the Winds in Athens.⁴ (Fig. 3) Evidence of this detail is to be found in the rather curious necking which remains on the columns, but which seems to have been overlooked as the temple is generally described as having a Doric colonnade.⁵ (Fig. 1)

A drawing by Nicholas Revett in the Bodleian confirms that the original order was indeed taken from the Tower of the Winds which was illustrated in Stuart and Revett's *Antiquities of Athens* 1762.⁶ (Fig. 4) Revett's drawing for the Island Temple clearly depicts the form of the capitals on the internal pilasters while it is less clearly indicated on the column capitals.

Revett was a gentleman architect who was responsible for relatively few executed buildings which were mainly for friends or, as in the case of Dashwood, fellow members of the Dilettanti Society.⁷ Potentially his most influential work was in the measured drawings for the three volumes of *The Antiquities of Athens*⁸ and *The Antiquities of Ionia* 1769 and 1797 which he also edited.⁹ The publications received sponsorship from the Society of Dilettanti¹⁰ of which Sir Francis Dashwood was an active member since its inception in 1732 and to which Stuart and Revett were elected in 1751, the year they announced their proposal for the *Antiquities of Athens*.¹¹ The Society was founded ostensibly to promote a knowledge and understanding of classical antiquity with a view to influencing taste in this country; an aim shared by Stuart and Revett in their desire to make accurate drawings of Greek antiquities available to patrons and architects.

In the event it was the French who published the first illustrated description of Greek architecture. J. D. Leroy's *Les Ruines des plus beaux Monuments de la Grèce* 1758 gave

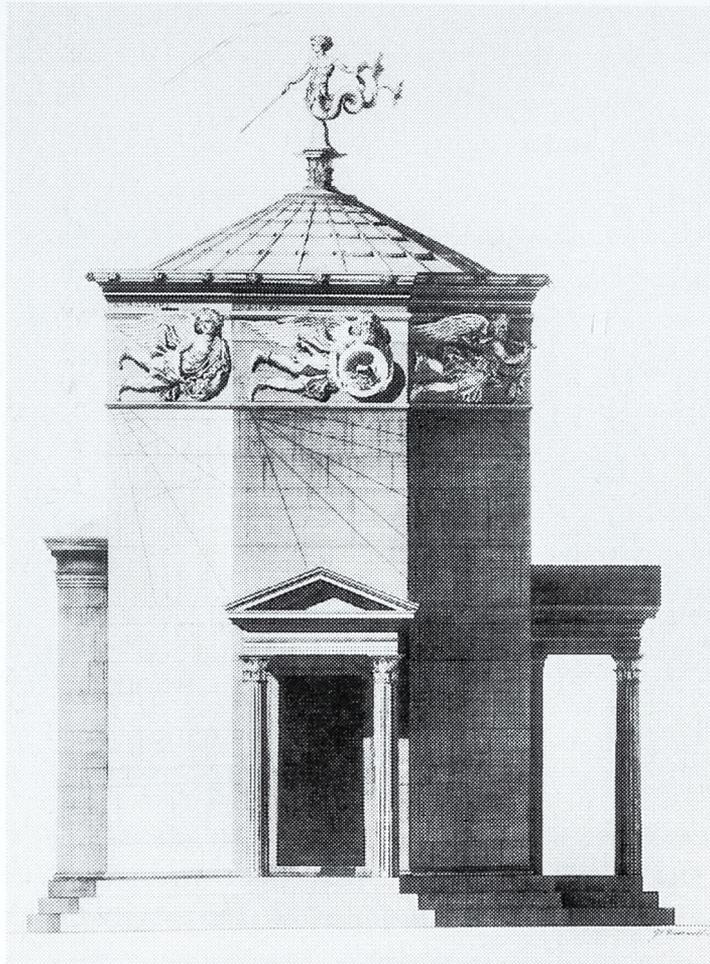


Fig. 3 The Tower of the Winds. Stuart and Revett, *Antiquities of Athens*, vol. 1, 1762, ch. III, pl. III. (Photograph: Courtauld Institute of Art)

engravings of the major monuments with measurements.¹² Although there were numerous inaccuracies, later corrected by Stuart and Revett's more precise work, the engravings were well received and an inspiration to architects. Stuart and Revett's original proposal, announced in 1751, of starting with the Acropolis, had been revised and the first volume of *The Antiquities of Athens* was only published in 1762.¹³ This included the Tower of the Winds as one of the five lesser monuments chosen to illustrate the different Greek orders.

The application of the order of the Tower of the Winds to the Music Temple was entirely in keeping with the revised intention of the publication to provide their subscribers with '... something interesting on the different Grecian modes of decorating Buildings'.¹⁴ The order has been used simply as a decorative feature on the colonnade and the design of the temple bears no resemblance to the Tower of the Winds which would have been inappropriate to its function. An enterprising interpretation of the Tower of the Winds already existed in the park, albeit a very free rendering. (Fig. 5) In 1759, an earlier ice house, the Temple of Winter,¹⁵ was remodelled presumably by one of Dashwood's executant architects.¹⁶ It is composed of flint and stucco, respecting the earlier flint structure, and incorporates the original entrance door from the south front of the house, while retaining the ice house beneath. As a member of the Dilettanti Society this enlightened patron had seen the drawing in 1755 when it was shown to members as part of Stuart and Revett's 'proposals'.¹⁷

Revett's subsequent use of the order on the Island Temple is an affirmation by the draughtsman, now working as architect, of the practical application to be derived from his measured drawings in a neo-classical context.

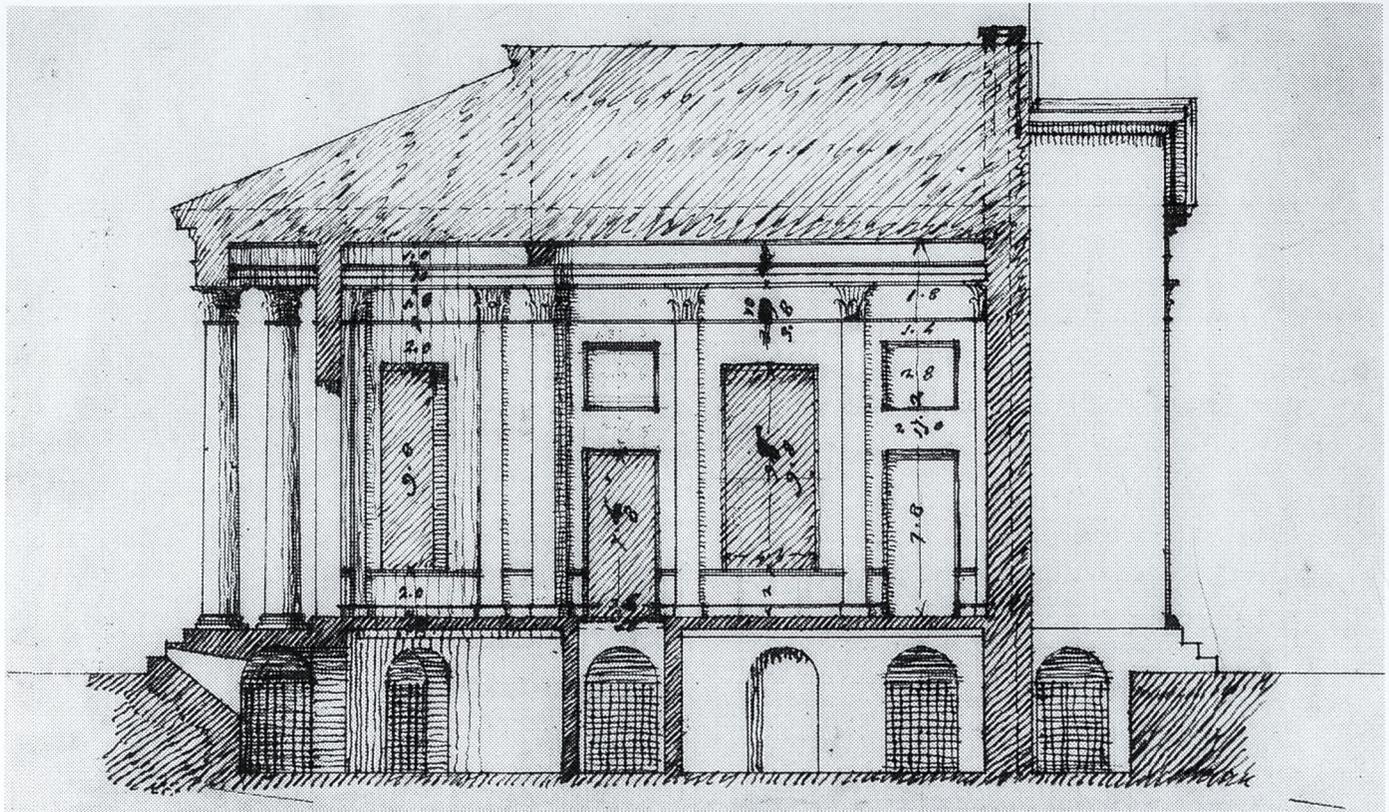


Fig. 4 Nicholas Revett. Section of the Island Temple. The Bodleian Library, Gough Misc. Antiq. Fol. 4, item 35.
 (Photograph: the Bodleian Library Gough Misc. Antiq. Fol. 4, item 35.)

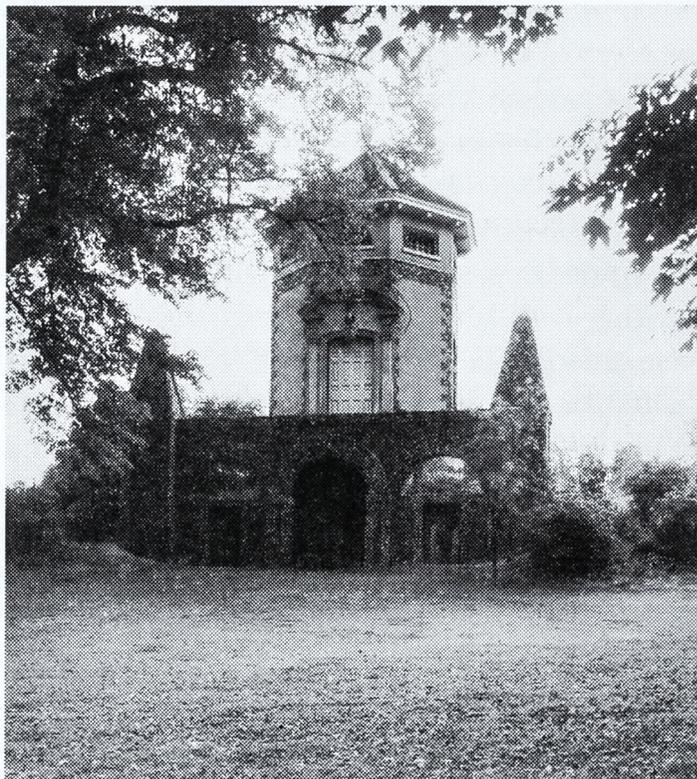


Fig. 5 The Tower of the Winds, West Wycombe Park
 (Photograph: Courtauld Institute of Art)

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the generous help which I have received from John Newman, Howard Colvin and the staff at the Bodleian. Also, Sir Francis Dashwood Bt., and the Bodleian Library for their kind permission to publish photographs.

the enlargement of the structure some yet remain untenanted. Each is calculated to receive five coffins, the price is fifty pounds. Other similar private repositories for the dead were formed when the chapel was erected. To obtain admission it is necessary to remove the pews and the flooring of the chapel. There is also a general receptacle denominated 'the Vestry Vault' wherein on payment of a moderate fee, the remains of frail mortality may securely rest', Heal Coll. A VI, p. 60 (both accounts).

- 29 The new Parish Church of St Pancras, Euston Road (built to replace the old parish church and consecrated in 1822), the Camden Chapel (later All Saints Church, consecrated in 1824) and the Regent Square and Somers Town Chapels (both opened in 1826), see Lee, pp. 44–54.
- 30 St Pancras New Church and the Camden Chapel were thus equipped.
- 31 *The News*, 12 May 1822, quoted in Lee, p. 43.
- 32 *The Morning Chronicle*, 22 June 1822, quoted in Lee, p. 48.
- 33 3 January, 1844. see Langman, vol. 1, p. 70.
- 34 The church is now in occupation by the Rainbow Community. The author would like to thank members of the Community for their courtesy and consideration and for permitting me to inspect the church.

NOTES TO PAGES 103–6

1. For the documentary evidence see: T. S. Rosoman 'The decoration and use of the principal apartments of Chiswick House 1727–70'. *Burlington Magazine*, CXXVII, 1985 pp. 663–77. For the restoration options see: Julius Bryant 'Chiswick House – the inside story. Policies and problems of restoration'. *Apollo*, CXXXVI, 1992 pp. 17–22.
2. Illustrated in John Cornforth 'Chiswick House, London, *Country Life* 16 February 1995 pp. 32–7 fig. 4.
3. Julius Bryant 'Preserving the Mystery: a tercentennial restoration inside Chiswick House' in *Belov'd by Ev'ry Muse* edited by Dana Arnold (Georgian Group 1994) pp. 29–36.

NOTES TO PAGES 107–10

- 1 British Library Add, MSS.21152. A letter from James Dawkins to Josiah Taylor, editor of *The Antiquities of Athens*, Vol. IV, 1830 attributes to Revett 'a very beautiful temple, near the Western Portico, the Temple of Flora, and the Temple in the Island'. Also, Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600–1840*, London, 1978, p. 684.
- 2 *Dashwood Papers*, West Wycombe Park. An

Inventory dated 1782 lists 'A Register Stove on the Theatre on the Island'.

- 3 Bodleian B12/13 and B12/14. Four payments to Nicholas Revett from Messrs. Croft & Co. on behalf of Lord Le Despencer (the title inherited by Dashwood through his mother in 1763), for amounts of £20.0.0d., £30.0.0d., and £50.0.0d. between February 1778 and November 1780.
- 4 James Stuart and Nicholas Revett, *The Antiquities of Athens*, London, 1762, ch. III, pl. III.
- 5 Lesley Lawrence, 'Stuart & Revett; their Literary & Architectural Careers' *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 1938, p. 144 noted the 'ill-defined capitals faintly suggestive of Egyptian ones'.
- 6 *The Bodleian Gough Misc. Ant. Fol.4/35*. Also Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600–1840*, London 1978, p. 684.
- 7 Colvin, op. cit., p. 684.
- 8 Vol. I, 1762, Vol. II 1789, Vol. III 1795.
- 9 Colvin, op. cit., p. 684.
- 10 Society of Dilettanti *Minutes vol. 2*, held at the Society of Antiquaries.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Eileen Harris, *British Architectural Books and Writers 1556–1785*, Cambridge 1990, pp. 289–90.
- 13 Ibid., pp. 441–6. They were obliged to start work in the northern part of the city on monuments of less importance as their movements '... were dictated to a great extent by the location of a Turkish garrison on the southern ridge of the Acropolis'. The political situation continued to hinder Revett's work on the drawings of the Acropolis and they were incomplete on their return to England in 1754. Stuart's decision to revise his text following Le Roy's publication caused further delay.
- 14 Lawrence, op. cit., p. 131.
- 15 Gervase Jackson-Stops, 'The West Wycombe Landscape' *Country Life*, Vol. CLV, p. 1621. Also, Anne Purchas, *A Building History of West Wycombe Park with a Catalogue of Architectural Drawings* (M.A. thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art, 1992) cat. no. 56. Inscribed 'Temple of Winter at the Bottom'.
- 16 Ibid., cat. no. 57. A drawing by Captain Moody for the octagonal roof. Also, Bodleian MS D. D. Dashwood (Bucks) B/12/6/3. An account dated 19th October 1759 to Sir Francis Dashwood, Bart, for £5.0.1½d. for stucco work to the Temple of the Winds from Wm. Parker.
- 17 Harris, op. cit., p. 441. Also, Jackson-Stops loc. cit., p. 1621.

NOTES TO PAGES 111–14

- 1 Published in *Architectural History*, vol. 27, 1984, pp. 163–82.
- 2 See her article in the *Georgian Group Journal* 1993, pp. 78–81.