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THE ICONOGRAPHY OF A NEO-CLASSICAL DOME

An unusual interpretation of the Choragic Monument of Lysicrates at Northwick Park, Gloucestershire

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John Rushout, the second Lord Northwick (1769–1859), began alterations to his ancestral seat, Northwick Park, in 1817,¹ the year after his mother's death.² Since Lord Burlington's improvements of 1730–32, a pair of two storey bows had been added by John Woolfe to the south front in 1778.³ Further works included 'two chimney-pieces by Van Geldar, and other equally appropriate ornaments'⁴ and the grounds were landscaped by William Emes in the style of Lancelot Brown about 1778.⁵ Despite these improvements, John Britton could note: 'it is a curious fact, that notwithstanding these efforts of noble taste, three of the principal apartments were actually destitute of fire-places, so as to leave it in that respect, a most complete *summer* residence.'⁶

The purpose of this account is to discuss the date, authorship and iconography of the principal stair dome at Northwick Park. The main question concerns the inspiration for this most unusual of domes. Physically, the dome sits above the main stair and is an exhilarating *tour de force* of architectural space. In the 1820s, this part of the building was known as the 'Lobby'.⁷ The Lobby is fed by four portals: one from the Hall, two from the Library and Drawing Room and a fourth from the back staircase, which is situated, hard adjacent, to the north of the main stair. A fifth door serves to hide a large corner cupboard and two more doors are false in order to preserve symmetry. The floor is a marble inlay of a bold geometric design. [Fig. 1] Note also the elegant cast-iron banisters and sinuous handrail, which has a

marquetry inlay of delicate execution. All the other mouldings, such as the plaster cornices, are stock mouldings found elsewhere at Northwick Park, and, somewhat later on, at Thirlestaine House, Cheltenham, Lord Northwick's home from 1838.

The second floor landing of the Lobby has four portals accessed from the main stair. The elevation below the dome cornice is complex, with a multitude of features such as circular windows,⁸ statuary niches, portal lobbies, engaged fluted Corinthian columns and an internal window filled with etched glass. [Figs. 2 & 3]

The main stair dome at Northwick Park belongs to either 1828, when the roof was reconstructed,⁹ or 1829^{10/30},¹¹ when the main stair was rebuilt. This conjecture is based on the fact that the dome and stair are stylistically apiece and belong to a remodelling, possibly following a fire,¹² of the central stairwell shaft, which rises from the ground floor to the roof. It is plausible that the dome and stair works could have taken several years to construct; a supposition possibly supported by the following observation from 1835: 'the Stair Casse are at hand and the Colom. the laste named most ready to put up',¹³ and that: 'Ketley will [...] Compleat. the banister of the Stair Caisse'.¹⁴

The stair and dome ensemble were described by the *Art-Union* in September 1846 thus: 'An elegant winding staircase in the inner hall [...] This inner hall occupies the whole centre of the edifice to the roof; it is lighted¹⁵ from a dome constructed with





Left: Fig. 1. The main stair or 'Lobby' in October 1964.
Top: Fig. 2. The second floor of the main stair in October 1964.
Bottom: Fig. 3. The 1828-30 dome and stair in October 1964.
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great skill, and tastefully ornamented with the lotus leaf.¹⁶ [Fig. 3] The only British precedent which comes to mind for the deployment of lotus on a dome is the Brighton Pavilion, Sussex, where lotus leaves are visible under the main dome on the east elevation, like the one at Northwick, with an innermost-band concealing half the leaf. At Brighton the lotus leaf is deployed on the outside, but with exactly the same arrangement of concentric bands. This dates from the remodelling by John Nash in 1818.¹⁷ Although the lotus leaf is an Egyptian¹⁸ motif, it is difficult to find a clear precedent for its use on

the inside of a dome within the European classical canon.¹⁹

The dome at Northwick Park would appear to be one of only two of its kind in the United Kingdom, the other being at Thirlestaine House. The latter was built in 1840, at the same time as the Principal Gallery at Thirlestaine,²⁰ which in turn was based on the 1832–34 Picture Gallery²¹ at Northwick Park. All three structures may be the work of the minor Georgian architect Richard Hulls of Chipping Campden, Gloucestershire (1773–1841). It is evident from Lord Northwick's ledger that he enjoyed a long

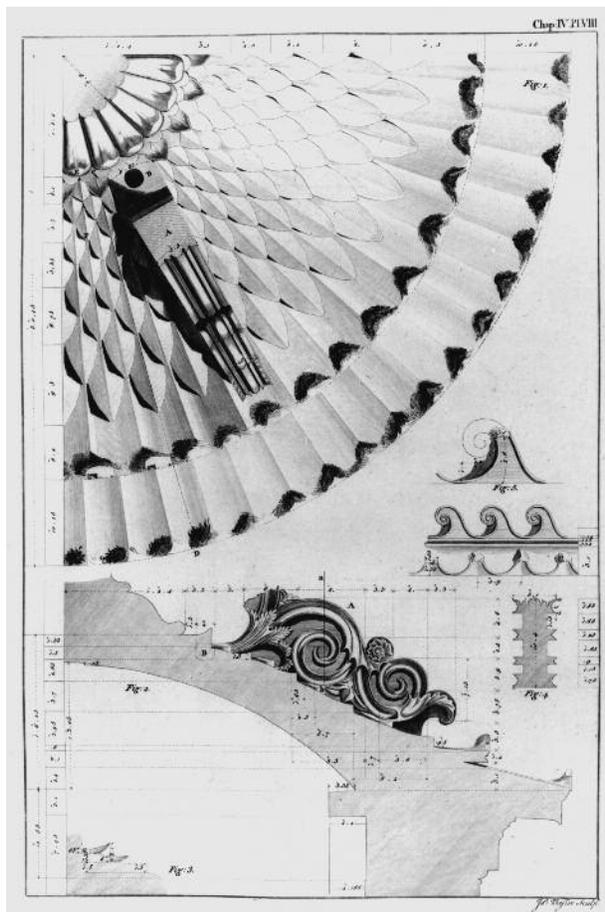


Fig. 4. Nicholas Revett and James Stuart, *The Antiquities of Athens*, vol. one (London, MDCCLXII), plate eight on page thirty-three.

working relationship with Hulls, his regular architect, from 1817 to 1841, when Hulls died.²² Little is known about Hulls, yet, despite his obscurity, he seems to have enjoyed a successful, albeit provincial, practice. However, the inspiration for the domes is likely to have come from Northwick himself; after all, he was something of an amateur architect in his own right, as is suggested by the *Art-Union's* observation of the Northwick Park Picture Gallery: 'The only feature, externally, having any pretensions, is the wing constituting the picture gallery; which is elegantly conceived, and was erected by his present Lordship, we believe from his own design.'²³ Nevertheless, the actual mechanics of building at Northwick Park are likely to be the work of Hulls. On 7 August 1833, Hulls wrote to Lord Northwick about 'the supposed Chimney Piece' for the ongoing Picture Gallery.²⁴ In this letter he suggested, as a form of decoration, that: 'The radius of the circle R [be] fill'd inth about 3 circular ranges of Lotus Leaves with the points strikeing [sic] to the extremity of the circle'. Again, on 8 August 1833, Hulls was suggesting for the fireplace: '3 circles of Leaves diminishing to the center and placed before each other'.²⁵ Such examples of the lotus leaf motif, admittedly only written descriptions and a couple of slight, unsigned sketches to be found amongst the extensive Northwick muniments,²⁶ do not of course prove that Hulls was the architect of the c.1828 dome, but nevertheless suggest that he was at least *au fait* with the motif in question.

A diary entry by an unidentified niece of Lord Northwick, written on Tuesday, 27 August 1829, would appear to unlock the iconography of the Northwick dome: 'dear Uncle Northwick was delighted to see us, & was so kind showed us all his improvements which are Splendid, the Staircase when it is finished will be quite beautiful, the top he said was like the Temple of Demosthines [sic], at Athens'.²⁷

According to *The Antiquities of Athens*, 'the Choragic Monument of Lysicrates, [is] commonly

called the Lanthorn of Demosthenes', and so here we have the apparent inspiration for the Northwick dome – the Choragic Monument of Lysicrates at Athens, erected in 334 BC.²⁸ Lord Northwick's late eighteenth century Grand Tour itinerary²⁹ indicates that he never visited Greece, which was not unusual at that time, and hence one can assume that Northwick never saw the Monument. However, for the amateur architect this was perhaps unnecessary as it had been measured and drawn by Revett and Stuart in the first half of the 1750s, and eventually published in 1762. The publication was instrumental in providing sources for the later Greek Revival in the United Kingdom. *The Antiquities of Athens* describes the Choragic Monument thus:

It is composed of three distinct parts. First, a quadrangular Basement: secondly, a circular Colonnade, the intercolumniations of which were entirely closed up; and thirdly, a *Tholus* or Cupola with the Ornament which is placed on it.³⁰

And of direct relevance to the ornamentation of the c.1828 Northwick Park main stair dome:

The Outside of the Cupola is wrought with much Delicacy; it imitates a Thatch, or Covering of Laurel Leaves; this is like wise edged with a Vitruvian Scroll,³¹ and enriched with Other Ornaments.

In terms of an actual workable reference, Northwick must have referred to plate eight on page thirty-three of *The Antiquities of Athens*, which features, as figure one: 'A quarter of the upper Surface of the Tholus or Cupola [...] – this being a flattened view of the Choragic Monument's laurel leaf dome.'³² [Fig. 4] Did Lord Northwick base his main stair dome on the Choragic Monument's laurel leaf dome because he merely required a fetching pattern or motif, or was there a more profound reference at work? Moreover, it now appears that the actual type of leaf employed on the Northwick dome is in fact a laurel leaf, as opposed to a lotus.

It would also appear that the top landing

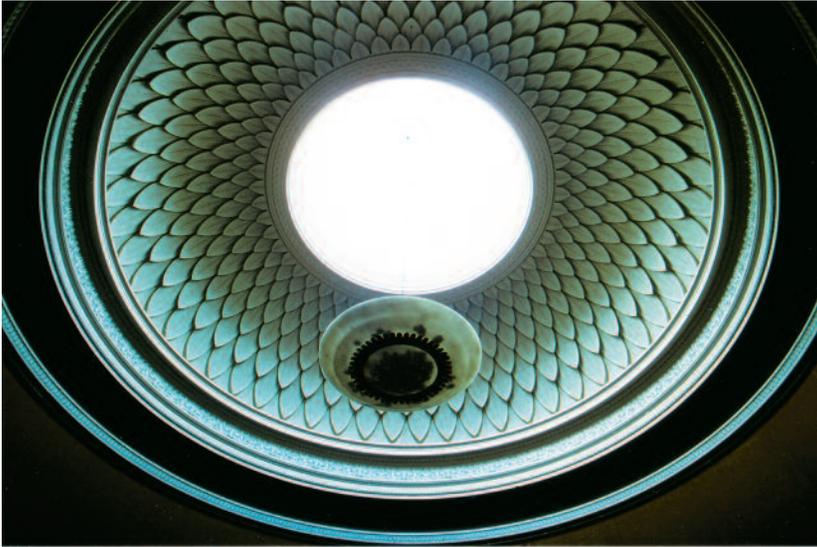


Fig. 5. Thirlestaine House, Cheltenham, in March 1975.
R Paterson slide collection, *Gloucestershire Archives: D3867 IV/17/14970*.

Corinthian columns, just below the dome, are paraphrasing the Choragic Monument's 'circular Colonnade', which happens, incidentally, to be the earliest surviving Greek building with Corinthian columns on the exterior. Inventive variants on the Choragic Monument are not uncommon in the European and North American neo-classical canon, but the treatment found at Northwick Park is unusual as it suggests a form of unravelling and an ungrammatical architectural reversal.

Like the 1840 Principal Gallery, the dome of the rotunda, or more precisely the Circular Ante-Room, at Thirlestaine House appears to be based on the better-known main stair dome at Northwick Park of c.1828–30. [Fig. 5] Both domes have seven concentric bands of lotus leaf. Each leaf on the dome overlaps the other and is defined with a central spine. It may be that the Circular Ante-Room dome at Thirlestaine served as a reminder of ancestral Northwick Park when Lord Northwick was staying at Cheltenham.³³

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

- 1 3 November onwards. Worcestershire County Record Office (hereafter WCRO), 4839/2 Lord Northwick's ledger.
- 2 Henry Icelly, *Blockley through Twelve Centuries: Annals of a Cotswold Parish* (Kineton, 1974), p. 31.
- 3 Treadway Nash, *Collections for the History of Worcestershire* (London, 1799), pp. 99–100.
- 4 'R.B.', *Gentleman's Magazine*, April 1793, p. 298.
- 5 Nicholas Kingsley, *The Country Houses of Gloucestershire 1660–1830* (Chichester, 1992), p. 191.
- 6 John Britton, *The Beauties of England and Wales* (Worcestershire and London, 1801–16), p. 394.
- 7 WCRO, 4221/67 ground plan watermarked 1827.
- 8 Note the unusual incorporation of a compass and clock in figure two.
- 9 Date on inside face of western gable of south range.
- 10 At the bottom of the stair is a geometric, marble-inlaid floor signed and dated '1829' by a Cooke of Worcester. No architectural study of Northwick Park had ever noted this vital piece of dating evidence for the rebuild of the stair. On 2 November 1829, a 'Cook' was paid £100 1s 1d by Lord Northwick. WCRO, 4839/2 Lord Northwick's ledger. This might refer to Richard Barnes Cook, a stone and marble mason, and builder, based at New Road, Worcester, according to J. Pigot, *Worcestershire Directory* (1835), p. 675. The name Cooke is to be found elsewhere in the ledger of Lord Northwick and because of this must not be confused with the painter Edward William Cooke (1811–80), whom Northwick is known to have patronised.
- 11 'Richard Keitley and Thomas Ptery put up these stairs in the year 1830'. Kingsley, p. 192. There is no record of a Thomas Ptery in the ledger of Lord Northwick. The main stair has a complicated history prior to its early nineteenth century rebuild; refer to the Allan Brodie *et al.*, 'Historic Buildings Report: Northwick Park, Blockley' (R.C.H.M. (E), 1990), for its earlier incarnations under Lord Burlington and John Woolfe. The report is unpublished and un-paginated.
- 12 Historic Buildings Report: Northwick Park, Blockley.
- 13 Letter L. Mayland – John Rushout (second Lord Northwick (1769–1859), 22 March 1835. Louis Mayland's (Lord Northwick's Swiss House Steward at Northwick Park) correspondence to Northwick is to be found at WCRO, 4221/5(1) and 67.
- 14 Letter L. Mayland – J. Rushout, 15 September 1835.
- 15 The skylight is prominent on the skyline and so is susceptible to storm damage. On 14 June 1835, Mayland reported to Lord Northwick that: According to information, it appear that the Storm which have unfortunately visite us last Thursday, was the most severely felt at northwick. and Especialy on [...] the Houses; Garden, hott houses, flower Garding and part of the Park it Come from the north East -East, if it has been froen the opposite Side West South West there is no doubt that all the the Peach house, Hott Houses, will would have been Smashed to pieces, but the great Skey light at the Galery passage would have been lesse damaged Which I am Sorry to said I find there is more Glasse brok than I have named Named in my letter. Especialy in the top and particularly the Coloured Glasse and I find the Same in the top of the Great Stair Caisse and also particularly the Colored Glasse. Keitley and Thomas Day have been busy in packing up with piece of Glasse and putty temporary.
Letter L. Mayland – J. Rushout, 14 June 1835. The original spelling and punctuation have been retained. The 'Colored Glasse', probably flashed or stained, is confined to the ribs supporting the skylight. Coloured glass would have lent itself to an ambience reminiscent of the deployment by Sir John Soane, and others, of tinted hues in similar locations. Nevertheless, the present coloured glass is not the original.
- 16 Anonymous, 'Visits to Private Galleries. No. XVI. The Collection of the Right Honourable Lord Northwick, at Northwick Park, Worcestershire', *Art-Union*, (1846), 271–274, (p. 271). The late David Verey described the dome as having 'lotus leaves, arranged like fish-scales', and he attributed the dome to John Woolfe, and erroneously dated it to as early as 1778. David Verey, *Buildings of England: Gloucestershire: The Cotswolds* (Harmondsworth, 1979), p. 124. The 'Historic Buildings Report: Northwick Park, Blockley' seems however to have been more accurate, arguing that: 'The stair and the decoration which used [actually still extant] to exist in the stair hall point to the stair belonging not to 1778, but to 1828'. The pattern of the banisters points towards the early nineteenth century, as opposed to the late eighteenth century. The dome is reproduced in *Buildings of England: Gloucestershire*, pl. 91; Joseph Mordaunt Crook, *The Greek Revival* (London, 1972), pl. 89, and Kingsley, pl. 106.

- 17 Michael Mansbridge, *John Nash A Complete Catalogue* (Oxford, 1991), p. 201.
- 18 Philippa Lewis and Gillian Darley, *Dictionary of Ornament* (London, 1986), p. 191. Of relevance to the domes at Northwick Park and Thirlestaine House, Patrick Conner has reflected:
As an interior feature I suppose the domes have something in common with the ceiling of the Royal Pavilion's [Brighton] Music Room, although the latter's scales are more often described as scallop – or shell-shaped than lotus-shaped. 'Lotus-shaped' is [. . .] a flexible notion, since the lotus/waterlily was esteemed and reproduced by so many different cultures. Possibly its appeal to Nash &c at the Pavilion lay in the very generality of its reference, covering India, China, Egypt and more. In Chinese iconography alone the lotus can look like all manner of different flowers. The Buddha's foreskin was apparently lotus-shaped, although I'm not sure that this leaves us any the wiser. Then again, the overlapping-leaf motif appears on the 'trunks' of the palm-tree columns in the Royal Pavilion's South Drawing Room, and for that matter around the Chinese tea-house at Potsdam. Letter P. Conner – O. Bradbury, 8 June 1999.
- 19 The use of a stylised lotus leaf can be frequently found elsewhere; for instance on the nave column capitals at the Church of Santa Croce, Florence (1294–1442).
- 20 The date on the principal elevation facing the Bath Road, Cheltenham.
- 21 Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600–1840* (New Haven and London, 1995), p. 519.
- 22 WCRO, 4221/20 'Account with The Evesham Bank'; Northwick's ledger from 1819–1852.
- 23 September 1846, p. 271.
- 24 WCRO 4221/5(1) Letter R. Hulls – J. Rushout, 7 August 1833.
- 25 WCRO 4221/5(1) Letter R. Hulls – J. Rushout, 8 August 1833.
- 26 At this point, Northwick, Mayland and Hulls were deliberating over whether to install 'Mr Sylvester's apparatus', which was a hot air system for the Picture Gallery. Letter L. Mayland – J. Rushout, 12 July 1833. It seems that Sylvester's scheme was unusual in that it proposed heating the Gallery from behind a mirror above the fireplace; the actual heat would come out of gaps on either side and above the mirror. In the space between a Rococo-style mirror and the top of an overriding arch, Hulls proposed a lotus leaf screen. In Hulls' plan a very faint outline of lotus leaves can be discerned under the arch above the mirror. There is also an enlarged detail of this proposed pattern amongst the Northwick muniments. It is, however, a very faint sketch and unsigned, but is perhaps by Hulls. WCRO, 4221/27. It is clearly the right date, being watermarked 1833.
- 27 University of London Library, MS 682/2. There are nineteen volumes of such diaries held at the Senate House Library. They are generally tedious but there is some, albeit occasional, useful architectural observation.
- 28 Nicholas Revett and James Stuart, *The Antiquities of Athens*, vol. one (London, MDCCLXII). According to Revett and Stuart, p. 27: 'The Modern Athenians call this Edifice *to Phanari tou Demostheneos*, or the Lanthorn of Demosthenes, and the vulgar Story which says, it was built by that great Orator, for a place of retirement and study, is still as current at Athens as it was in the time of Wheler and Spon; but like many other popular Traditions, it is too absurd to deserve a serious reputation.'
- 29 WCRO, 4221/22 Grand Tour travel itinerary written by Louis Mayland, 20 May 1789–7 September 1800.
- 30 Revett and Stuart, p. 27.
- 31 A Vitruvian Scroll moulding is incorporated within the Northwick Park dome ensemble.
- 32 Revett and Stuart, p. 29.
- 33 The only known contemporary depiction of the Circular Ante-Room at Thirlestaine appears to be a watercolour by Miss Georgiana or Miss Harriet Rushout-Bowles and probably painted in the 1840s. For an illustration of this picture, refer to Oliver Bradbury and Nicholas Penny, 'The picture collecting of Lord Northwick: Part II', *The Burlington Magazine*, no. 1195, October 2002, p. 612.