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THE UMBRELLO AT GREAT SAXHAM, SUFFOLK

Julia Abel-Smith

The purpose of this article is to draw attention to a remarkable survival: the Gothic Umbrello at Great Saxham in Suffolk. Battered but still dignified, it is one of the very few garden buildings constructed of Coade stone. In the catalogue entry for Saxham in *Georgian Arcadia: Architecture for the Park and Garden*,¹ Roger White declares that Umbrellos are 'endangered species'. Thieves removed the domed roof (fig. 1) in the 1960s and now this unusual and enigmatic temple lies surrounded by brambles at the furthest extremity of the park (fig. 2). However, it is largely due to the Coade stone itself that the Saxham Umbrello has survived at all.



Figure 1. The umbrello, showing the original roof.

At the base of six of its eight columns, the Umbrello is stamped in tiny letters 'Coade & Sealy, Lambeth' which dates it between 1799 and 1813 when John Sealy was with the firm. As it did not feature in Isaac Johnson's Estate Survey² of 1801, we may assume that it was built after this. At that time Thomas Mills was Lord of the Manor.

It seems likely that Mills (1749–1834) moved from Norwood to Saxham to be near his close family friend, Colonel Edward Goate of Brent Eleigh Hall near Lavenham who also took a keen interest in architecture. Whilst visiting the Goates in 1787 Mills wrote a lengthy poem³ about Brent Eleigh, and lines like,

The clumps which graceful all their shades arrange,
T'enrich and beautify the Sylvan scene,

reveal an appreciation and enjoyment of his friend's landscaping, the joys of which he himself was to taste at Saxham.

In the church at Great Saxham, Mills's monument reveals that 'in 1795 he purchased the seat and estate in this parish and made it an almost constant residence'. His predecessor was Hutchinson Mure who had not finished rebuilding the hall as he had gone bankrupt. Mills employed Joseph Patience to complete his home⁴ and set about rebuilding the church 'then in a most dilapidated state'.

From all accounts he was a most honourable man, pious, just and well-loved in his village. Perhaps it seems a little incongruous for such a conscientious person to erect an expensive building like the Umbrello purely for pleasure. It is not known in which year it was built but 1805 is a possibility, for it was then that he was High Sheriff of the county of Suffolk and his eldest daughter Susanna married John William Hicks, of Bath and Jamaica, in the newly restored church.

The Umbrello is notably different from the other estate and garden buildings drawn so meticulously by Isaac Johnson (figures 3 and 4). All of these display a well-mannered classicism. The Gothicism of the Umbrello is not just the odd man out, it is a conscious statement of individuality. This, I would suggest, is because the other garden buildings were the creation of Hutchinson Mure. Ironically, however, in his choice of Batty Langley Gothick for the new building Thomas Mills was taking a step back into the 18th century.

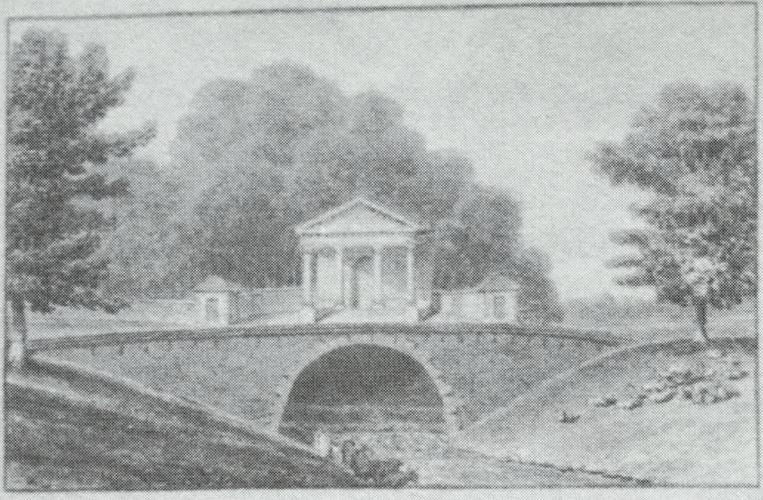
Back in 1741–2 Batty Langley had published *Ancient Architecture Restored and Improved by a Great Variety of Grand and Useful Designs, entirely New in the Gothick Mode for the Ornamenting of Buildings and Gardens* and this was followed in 1747 by a reissue under a different title, *Gothic Architecture Improved by Rules and Proportions*.⁵ Although the majority of his work concerned the classical style, Langley is best known for his Gothick designs which continued to exert their influence for at least half a century after his death in 1751.

The Saxham Umbrello is one of the latest examples of that influence; but perhaps Thomas Mills deliberately chose an outmoded style to give the building a sense of history. He may well have wished to emulate the Gothic Seat at Prior Park, Bath (fig. 5) built by Richard Jones for Ralph Allen only three years after Batty Langley's first Gothick publication, or perhaps Robin Hood's Temple at Halswell, Somerset (fig. 6) with its central canopy of three ogee arches built by Henry Keene for Sir Charles Kemeyes Tynte about 1762. A little later Richard Woods, whose involvement at Wardour ended in 1773, designed a porter's lodge for that estate which was not executed as such but its features, similar to those at Saxham, were incorporated into a Gothic temple in Lady Grove.⁶ All three buildings come from important landscape gardens of the period whose atmosphere Mills wished to recapture at Saxham.

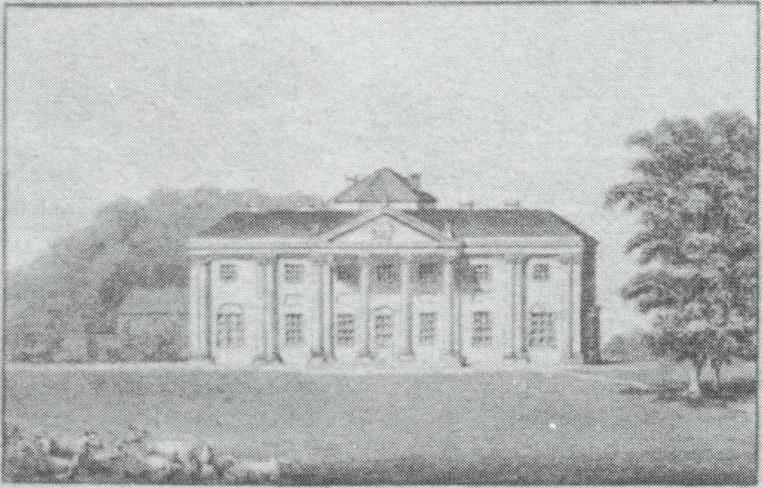
Although it comes at the end of a procession of whimsical Gothick pavilions, the Umbrello takes its features directly from Batty Langley's *Gothic Architecture Improved* in which Plates XLIX – LXII display fourteen choices of umbrells, temples and pavilions. In fact Saxham is a fusion of two of those plates: LVI, 'Gothic Temple', provided the ogee arches,



Figure 2. The Saxham Umbrello.



Temple on the Bridge.
Foundations exist

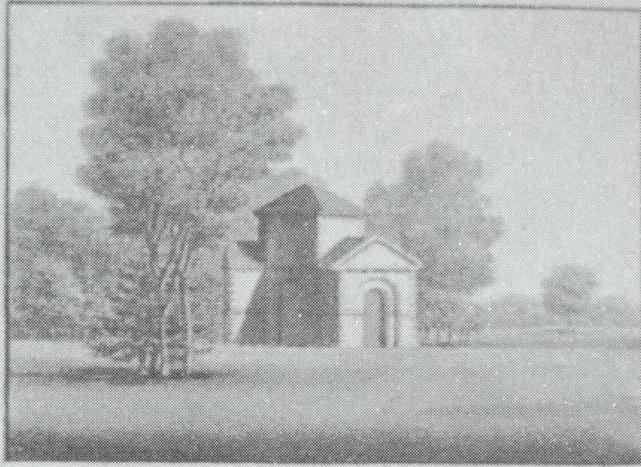


The Hall.



View to the right from the Hall.

Figures 3 and 4. Pages from Isaac Johnson's survey.

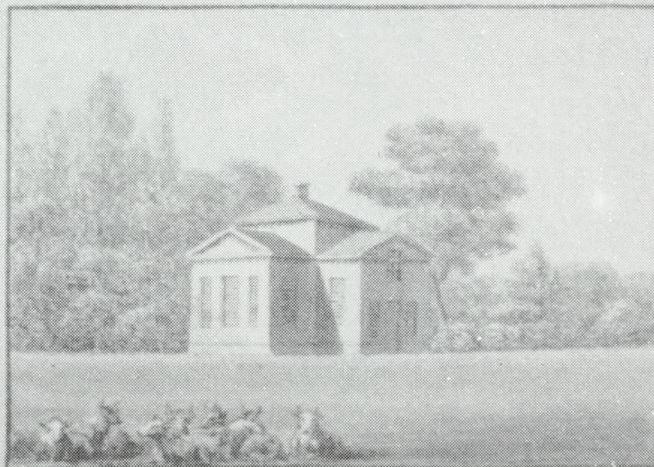


Temple of Dido.



The Lodge.

now Cobb's Hall



THE DAIRY.

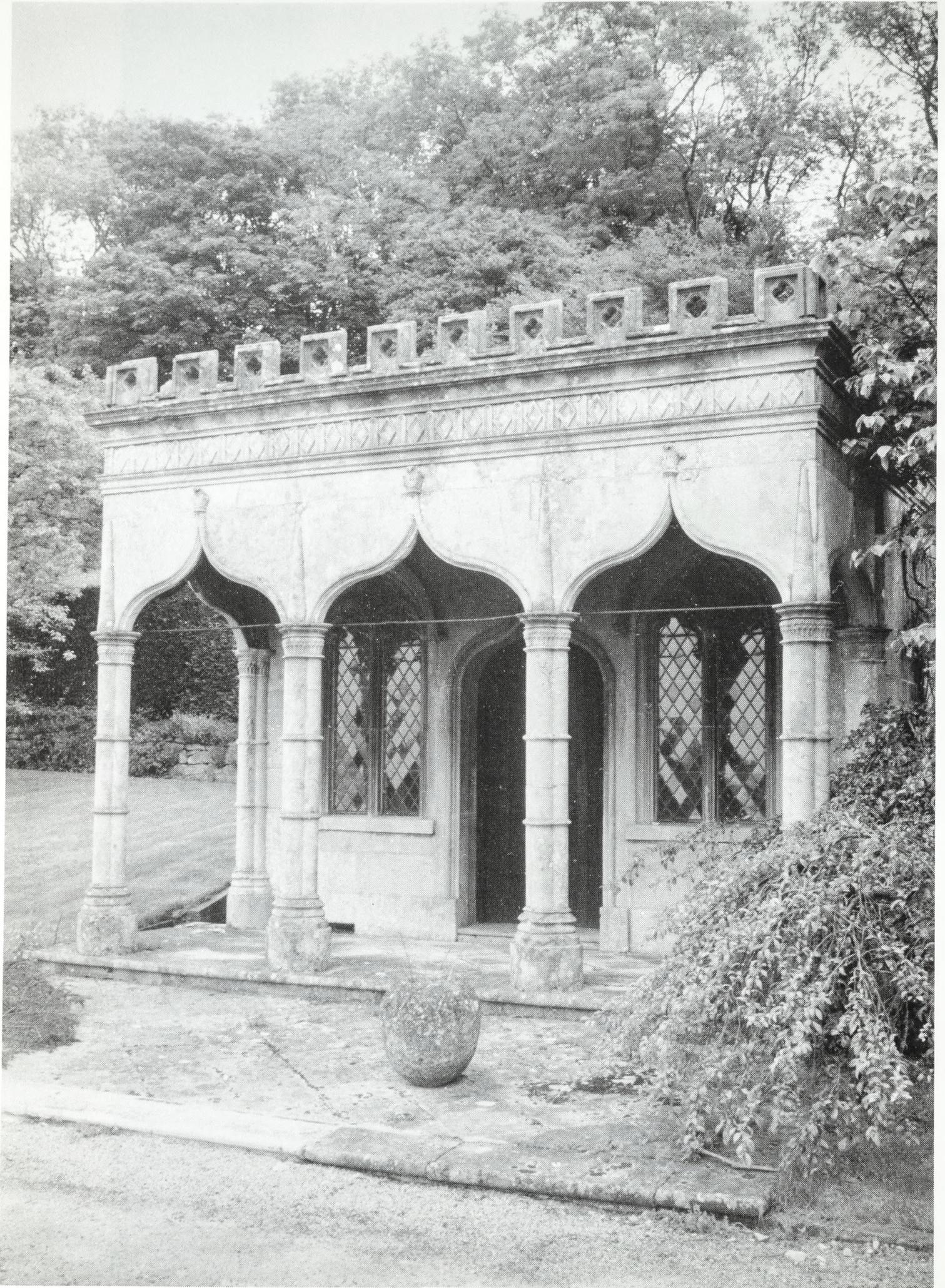


Figure 5. Gothic Seat from Prior Park, Bath.



Figure 6. Robin Hood's Temple, Halswell, Somerset.

croquets and finials whilst Plate LV, 'an octangular Umbrello to terminate a view', inspired the pinnacles on the balustrade.

Indeed the siting of the Umbrello is also pure Batty Langley:⁷

Tis oftentimes necessary to place groves and open wildernesses in such remote parts of gardens, from whence pleasant prospects are taken.

The umbrello was placed well beyond the China Pond on a small rise as an eye-catcher from the pond (fig. 7). It was reached along a wooded path and was placed against a background of trees including a copper beech which provided an excellent foil for its white stone.

This white man-made material – Coade stone – appears to be crucial to the Umbrello's present existence. It remains to this day an excellent advertisement for Mrs Coade's wares. She had set up her factory in Lambeth in 1769, producing tough durable greyish stoneware which compared favourably in price with natural carved stone. The formula was known only to the family and is now lost.

Being a ceramic product, Coade is impervious to heat and is particularly resilient to damp and frost. Mrs Coade's firm, which was taken on by her daughter (also called Mrs Coade), was highly successful but is mostly known for providing decorative plaques, urns and vases, statues and capitals. Indeed, Mrs Coade provided two medallions of the Seasons, the Ionic capitals, two rectangular plaques, and urns for Great Saxham Hall in the late 1790s. However, to find Coade stone used on such a large project as the Umbrello is extremely rare.

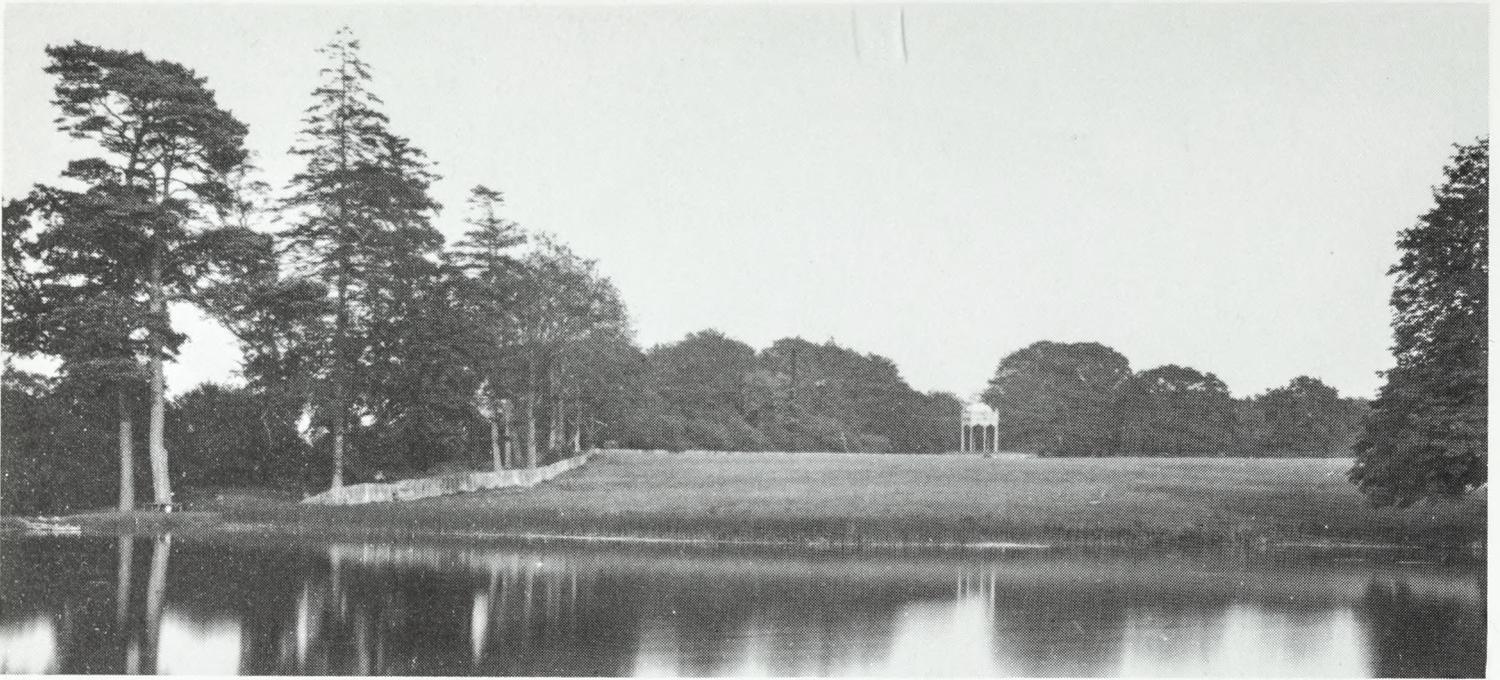


Figure 7. Great Saxham: the Umbrello in the 1920s.

Nevertheless, it does not appear to be unique. In his catalogue entry⁸ for the Gothic Seat (fig. 8) at Ascot Place, Winkfield, Berkshire, Roger White compared its crispness of decoration with the Saxham Umbrello and suggested that the material might be Coade. Despite diligent searching on site no Coade stamp has been found but the firm did not always use this cipher. The authority on Coade, Miss Alison Kelly, believes the Ascot seat is made of the material and this is further substantiated by the mention of Winkfield in the list of sites at the back of the 1799 Coade Exhibition catalogue.

This gazetteer of Coade wares was drawn up from 1769 until 1799, when the Exhibition Gallery opened at Lambeth; thus the Ascot seat is earlier than the Saxham building. The seat is open on three arches whilst the back wall is plastered brick. Saxham is altogether more ambitious, being open on all sides and made only of Coade stone. As far as Coade records are concerned, it falls between two stools.

Coade's *Lithodipyra* (meaning fired twice), which comprised engravings of various models and was published as a folio volume in 1777 and 1778, shows only a tiny fraction of Gothic designs and none relate to Saxham. It was republished as a catalogue with a price-list in 1784. From the Exhibition catalogue in 1799 when John Sealy joined Mrs Coade Junior until his death in 1813 there is a tantalising lacuna, for it was just at this time that the Umbrello was constructed. William Crogan, who joined the firm after Sealy died, obviously cracked down on office administration. The neat record books in the Public Record Office⁹ provide an enthralling insight into Coade practice but cannot shed any light on what must have been a very important commission from Mr Thomas Mills.

Being octagonal, the Umbrello's eight facades are identical, so that once a mould had been made for one face it was then a question of repeating this seven times. The parts above the arches would have been made in two sections and the joins covered by the leafy half-finial. The finials and crockets are interspersed with bunches of grapes, a delightful touch which shows how far from academic and scholarly Gothicism Thomas Mills wished to be.

Miss Kelly has pointed out the importance of the indentations (fig. 9) behind the frieze which at first glance look like pigeon roosting boxes. Coade stone pieces had to be the same

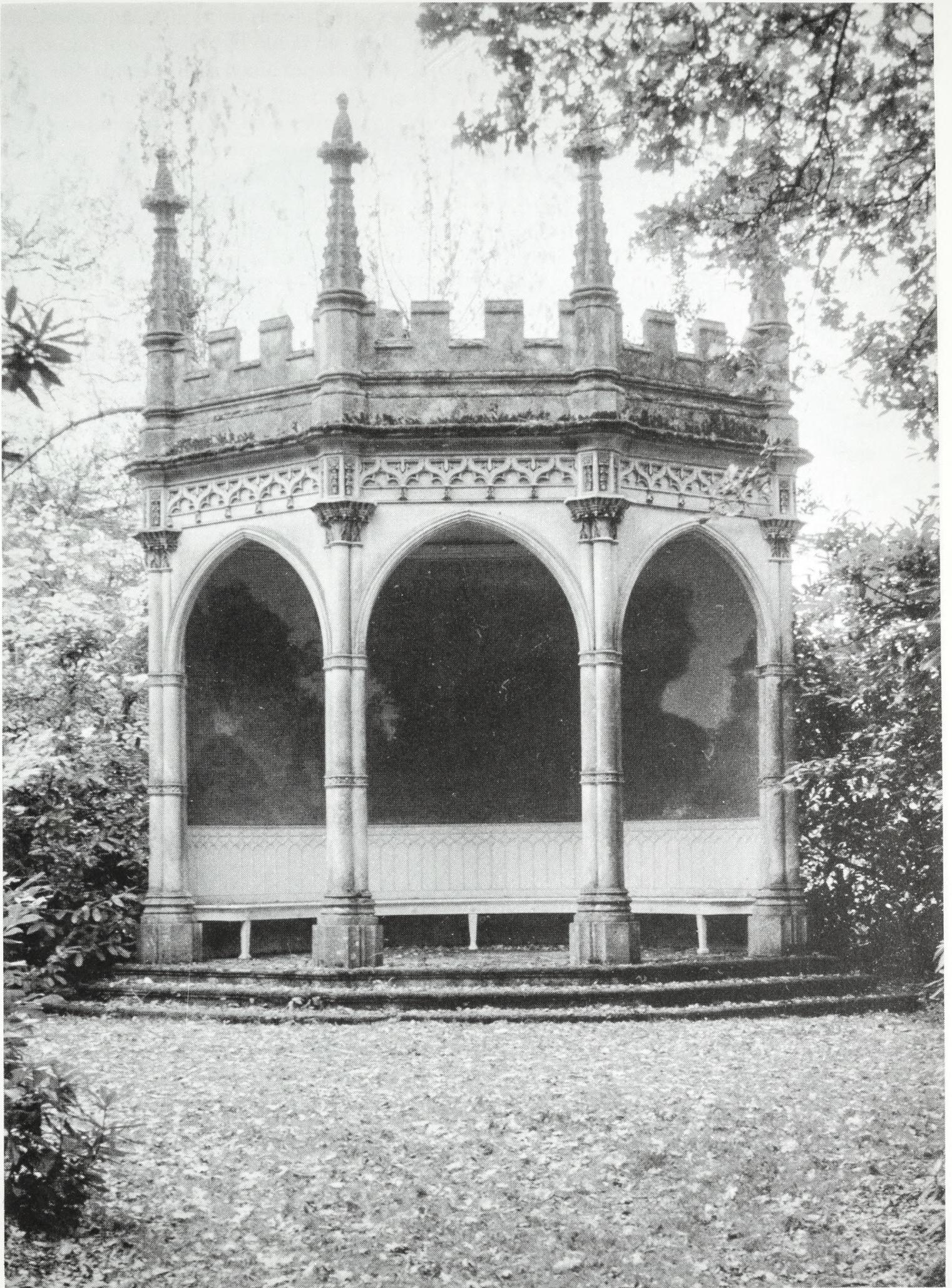


Figure 8. The Seat at Ascot Place.



Figure 9. The Umbrello today.

thickness throughout to prevent cracking and distortion in firing, so that exceptionally thick parts had to be hollowed out at the back. This was done by cutting indentations or wells into the clay with sharp knives while the clay was partially hardened before firing. The indentations on the back of the cornice of the Umbrello have been so neatly cut that the two rows of oblong indentations appear to be a pattern which was intentional. Nothing of the kind would have been necessary if the cornice had been of natural stone.

That the Umbrello is not of natural stone is very lucky, for had this been the case it would surely have gone the way of countless other fragile garden buildings. By great good fortune it escaped being crushed by falling trees in last October's tempest, when Suffolk was especially badly affected. But the question has to be asked: for how much longer will the Umbrello stand proud against further onslaughts from the elements, encroaching undergrowth and enforced neglect?

The author would like to acknowledge the kind help of Roger White and Alison Kelly in preparing this article.

NOTES

1. *Georgian Arcadia: Architecture for the Park and Garden*, The Georgian Group, 1987, no. 214, p. 46.
2. *Field Book of Great Saxham*, Isaac Johnson, 1801, Suffolk Record Office (Ipswich).
3. Manuscript in the possession of Mrs Cousland, descendant from the marriage between Colonel Goate's grandson and Mr Mills' granddaughter.
4. See *Country Life*, November 27, 1986 pp. 1698–1702.
5. *Gothic Architecture Improved by rules and proportions in many grand designs of columns, doors, windows, chimneys pieces, arches, colonades, porticos, umbrellos, Temples and Pavillions*. Batty and Thomas Langley, 1747.
6. See Fiona Cowell's articles on Woods' career in *Garden History* vol. 14, no. 2 and vol. 15, no. 1.
7. *Gothic Architecture Improved*.
8. *Georgian Arcadia*, no. 225, p. 48.
9. Coade Record Books in the Public Record Office, Chancery Lane.