

## THE SHEPHERDS MONUMENT

The Shepherds Monument has been the centre of confusion and mystery for two hundred and fifty years. The mystery of the monument lies both in its history and in the meaning of its undeciphered inscription.

David Watkin, in his 'Athenian Stuart' calls it 'one of the most romantic of English garden buildings', and it unites in one place the romantic and classical aspects of 18th century art. (2)

Thomas Pennant gives a description that suggests that the monument had a particular significance for Thomas Anson:

*“The beautiful monument in the lower end of the garden, does honour to the present age. It was the work of Mr Schemecher, under the direction of the late Mr Anson. The scene is laid in Arcadia. Two lovers, expressed in elegant pastoral figures, appear attentive to an ancient shepherd, who reads to them an inscription on a tomb,*

*ET IN ARCADIA EGO!*

*The moral resulting from this seems to be, that there are no situations in life so delicious, but which death must at length snatch us from. It was placed here by the amiable owner, as a memento of the certainty of that event. Perhaps, also, as a secret memorial of some loss of a tender nature in his early days; for he was wont often to hang over it in affectionate and firm meditation.”*

There is no reason to doubt Pennant's interpretation. His description of Thomas listening to a harp before his death proves to be true.

Clifford's "Historical Description of the Parish of Tixall" quotes Pennant's description and points out that he has "overlooked" the mysterious inscription, saying :

*“The meaning of these letters Mr Anson would never explain and they still remain an enigma to posterity.”*

The monument has been dated by various writers to almost any year between 1748 to 1767. The most often quoted explanation is that it is the work of Thomas Wright, from 1748-50 with additions by James Stuart in about 1763.

The true dating of the monument is absolutely critical for any understanding of its meaning, and may affect our understanding of Shugborough's significance as a whole.

This chapter gives every shred of evidence that is known to exist and suggests two possible answers to the mystery of the dating and some conjectures about the inscription – though it is most likely that the inscription is intended to create an air of mystery which perhaps should not be broken. It is important, though, to put it into a realistic context and to dispose of absurd and unhelpful theories.

The greatest source of confusion is an article in a 1954 *Country Life* by Christopher Hussey in which the author states that the poet Anna Seward wrote a poem inspired by the Shepherds Monument which includes the phrases:

*“Let not the muse inquisitive presume  
With rash interpretation to disclose  
The mystic ciphers that conceal her name.”*

Christopher Hussey confused (inexplicably) a letter from Lady Anson which does indeed enclose a poem by Anna Seward with another long anonymous poem about Shugborough in the Staffordshire Records Office. The long poem describes the estate in detail and is clearly dated 1767, seven years after Lady Anson’s death. This long poem may be by Anna Seward, but there is no evidence for the authorship. The style in no way resembles the bulk of Seward’s verse, being in Miltonic blank verse rather than rhyming couplets.

The rustic columns and “Doric entablature” are certainly the work of James “Athenian” Stuart .

There is an undated drawing by Stuart in the British Museum which exactly matches these very unusual columns which are meant to look unfinished. (3) Stuart is known to have been at Hagley (and probably at Shugborough) with Thomas Anson in 1758 and it is possible that the monument was all his work and that it dates from that year but there is circumstantial evidence for Wright’s involvement earlier than that.

#### THE EVIDENCE - THE EARLIEST MENTION

There are no 18th century pictures of the monument. It is the only one of the monuments with no visual record.

There are, however, a surprisingly large number of literary references.

The earliest known reference which is definitely dated is a letter from William Shenstone, a poet famous for his garden “The Leasowes” which has close links with Shugborough. The letter, to Mr Graves, is dated October 3<sup>rd</sup> 1759 and it particularly deals with inscriptions and mottos.

*“Now you speak of our Arcadias, pray, did you ever see a print or drawing of Poussin's Arcadia? The idea of it is so very pleasing to me, that I had no peace till I had used the inscription on one side of Miss Dolman's urn, " Et in Arcadia Ego." Mr. Mr Anson has the two shepherds with the monument and inscription in alto relievo at Shugborough.*

*“Mr. Dodsley will borrow me a drawing of it from Mr. Spence. See it described, vol. I. page 53. of the Abbe du Bos, " sur la poesie et la peinture.”(7)*

Curiously Abbe du Bos's description of the Poussin picture (quoted in John Gilbert Cooper's "Letters concerning Taste", published by Shenstone's friend John Dodsley in 1757) is inaccurate as it claims that the tomb in the painting is of a Shepherdess whose body can be seen lying on it. This is very strange. Perhaps du Bos based his description on a copy or drawing of Poussin's picture which had added the detail of a corpse on the tomb. The reference from Du Bos may explain why the author of the 1767 poem assumes it to be a shepherdess's tomb, as does William Bagot in a poem. Dated Blithfield April 25<sup>th</sup> 1772.

*"O! co'd you see how Nature pours  
Profuse her verdure & her flowers,  
Her earliest, freshest bloom,  
Embroidering all the hallow'd ground  
With blue-bells, daisies, violets, round  
Your shepherdesses tomb!"*

(Thomas Anson showed this poem to George Hardinge, who confirms it is the work of Bagot in his memoir of Dr Sneyd Davies, author a ponderous memorial to Lord Anson, which also refers to the monument and "reasons finger pointing to the tomb.")

Lady Anson's letter, which includes the poem that really is by Anna Seward, is not dated. The original cataloguer (perhaps Morchard Bishop who worked on the Anson papers in the 1950s) guesses that it dates from 1756 or 1758. The cataloguer's pencilled dates on Lady Anson's letters are sometimes proved wrong by references to datable events. The Swards moved to Lichfield in 1757 so the date is more likely to be 1758 or later. The handwriting is very shaky and suggests a date much later than her neatly written letters of the 1740s. She died in 1760.

Lady Anson writes to Thomas that she had been going through Lichfield, returning to London from Shugborough, when "*Mr Seward, with a smiling bow, stopped the coach and civilly excused himself for not having made a visit to Shugborough since the races.*"

Seward presented Lady Anson with a packet containing some verses.

*"Imagining it to be a copy of those I had been before favoured with a sight of I was in no great haste to open it."*

When Lady Anson did read the verses she took them to be in the writing of Dr Seward's daughter, Anna, who was 16 in 1758, though she wonders if they are actually by her or her father.

The short poem is headed:

*“On an Emblematical Basso Relievo after a famous picture of Nicholas Poussin Representing Shepherds pointing to the following Inscription on a Monument in Arcadia:*

*Et in Arcadia Ego” (1)*

*'The silent Monk, in lonely cell immured,  
From every folly, vice, and care secured,  
Should inward turn calm Meditations Eye,  
And Life employ in studying how to Die. '*

The very dull poem is a meditation on death and has no particular connection with the Poussin picture. Lady Anson writes that the performance must be “*greatly inferior to its subject, as that requites a much more masterly hand to do it justice.*”

This letter does not mention the cipher inscription.

The Shenstone and Lady Anson letters prove that the monument was in existence and being noticed by visitors at least as early as October 1759, and possibly slightly earlier.

If the monument existed in any form earlier there is no record of it of any kind.

There is a reference to the Poussin relief, and its artist, in a letter from Philip Yorke, Lady Anson’s brother, in August 1763:

*“I shd not omit to mention the Bas Relief from Poussin’s Arcadian Picture, the most elegant Piece of modern sculpture I ever beheld & does great honour to Scheemaker’s chisel...” (9)*

This same letter mentions the foundations of the Green House, or Orangery, proving that this large but lost building was being built in 1763 and no earlier.

A DOUBLE DATE?

In 1972 Eileen Harris published a series of articles in *Country Life* about Thomas Wright, and later published a catalogue of his architectural work, in which she deduced that Wright, who was tutor to Lady Anson’s Sister-in-law at Wrest Park, Bedfordshire, had worked at Shugborough in 1748-9, laying out the grounds and adding the library and dining room (then the drawing room) to the house. The rooms were most likely built in 1748 to prepare the house for the newly married Lord and Lady Anson.

Wright is the likely designer of the Mithraic Altar and Root House (for the priest of Mithras) at Wrest Park, built at the same time as he was working at Shugborough. It may be more than a coincidence that the altar also has a cryptic inscription.

Wright published a book of designs for arbours and grottoes in “Universal Architecture” in 1755 and one of these resembles the shape of the rough stone arch in which the relief is placed.

There is also a drawing of an arbour in his 1750 designs for a garden at Badminton which is even more similar to the inner rustic arch of the Shepherds Monument.

Both these designs are for wooden structures, not “rustic” stone, so the actual resemblance is completely superficial.

Another piece of circumstantial evidence is that the cat on the Cat’s Monument is actually looking towards the Shepherds Monument. Clearance in 2007 has revealed a sight line that allows the cat to be seen from the Shepherds Monument. The two structures may have been planned together.

The Cat’s Monument was planned but not yet built in August 1749 when Lady Anson writes to recommend a stone quarry who could make it.

Perhaps the idea of the Shepherds Monument was already in mind in 1749, though a more likely date for its conception is 1750.

Eileen Harris suggested that Stuart’s alterations dated from about 1763 when Lady Grey and Philip Yorke visited, but there is no evidence for this at all.

## LADY ANSON AND POUSSIN

Eileen Harris published an article in Apollo in 2006 showing that Lady Anson had a particular interest in Poussin’s painting “The Shepherds of Arcadia”.

There are two quite different pictures by Poussin of this subject. An earlier one, now at Chatsworth, shows Shepherds finding a tomb, and beneath it river god holding an urn, The later Louvre version, shows shepherds and a philosophical shepherdess next to a tomb in a classical landscape.

In both versions the tomb has the inscription “Et in Arcadia Ego”, meaning “I (death) too am in Arcadia”. Even in this idyllic world you can’t escape death.

In 1747 artist and collector Jonathan Richardson’s collection was sold. Lady Anson bought a drawing of the first version of Poussin’s Shepherds of Arcadia (the Chatsworth version) and a drawing of Dante. (Lady Anson’s sister in law Jemima Grey was reading Dante in Italian in 1748)

The earlier portrait of Lady Anson (as Elizabeth Yorke) at Shugborough (from 1739) shows her as a Shepherdess so the theme of idyllic Shepherdesses was already present.

The Poussin drawing which Lady Anson bought in 1747 may be an original sketch by Poussin himself. It is still in the Earl of Lichfield’s private collection.

In 1748 Hudson painted a portrait of Lady Anson holding the Dante drawing. This is in the saloon at Shugborough. He also painted a copy of this portrait which is identical except that Lady Anson is holding the drawing of Poussin's *Shepherds of Arcadia*. This used to be at her family home, Wimpole, but it was sold to a private owner in 1967.

## LADY ANSON AND POUSSIN

In 1748 Elizabeth Yorke and George Anson were married. Shugborough was rebuilt and the gardens laid out to act as their home for the first few years of their marriage. They had been made immensely wealthy by pure good fortune and the Stoic attitude to chance and vanity may have had a personal significance.

Shenstone's letter makes it clear that Poussin's picture was well known at the time to be a meditation on death.

In August 1750 Lady Anson wrote to Jemima Grey that she was copying '5, 6, 7 or 8 hours a day' 'the Duke of Devonshire's picture', lent to her at her father's London home, Carshalton. This is intriguing and Eileen Harris suggests she was copying the Chatsworth version of the *Shepherds of Arcadia*. This was certainly at Chatsworth after 1761, but it is not known when it was bought. The Duke had a house near Carshalton.

Only a few weeks later she wrote a letter to Thomas Anson (September 1750) which shows that *Shepherds* were in her mind. She had been reading Honore D'Urfe's 17th romance "*Astree*", a copy of which was at Shugborough.

She addresses Thomas as "Gentil Berger" and remembers that since she has left "*les delectables rives de votre belle Lignon*", she has never ceased remembering the happy moments among "*ces Vallons Fleuris, ces Collines ombrageuzes, ces Eux claires et andoyantes, et sur tout ces Bergers et Bergeres so courtois et aimable qu'un le trouve.*"

In another 1750 letter to Jemima Grey Lady Anson refers to sitting for her portrait. This may be the copy of the Hudson portrait in which she is holding the Poussin drawing instead of the Dante.

This is very strong evidence that the Arcadian theme was important in 1750, and the Thomas Wright drawing which most resembles the *Shepherds Monument* is also 1750 (for a garden at Badminton).

It is possible that Lady Anson was copying the Poussin to use as a basis for the monument. It seems highly likely that the Scheemakers relief should have been of the Chatsworth version, but in the end he based it on a print of the 1640 version.

Existing prints (such as those by Bernard Picart) were mirror image, engraved from drawings the right way, printed in reverse. Scheemakers may never have seen the original.

The Chatsworth version was not well known at that time whereas the Louvre version was one of Poussin's most famous pictures. If Scheemakers had to use a print as a basis for his sculpture he would have had to use a print of the Louvre version. Perhaps he was commissioned to copy the Shepherds of Arcadia and no one realised that the end result would not be the same as Lady Anson's drawing. Interestingly Scheemakers had to alter the shape to fit the monument where it appears "portrait" rather than "landscape". The Chatsworth version would have fitted.

## STOICISM

Poussin is usually considered to have been a follower of Stoicism, accepting fate and seeing the world as it is, with detachment. The Shepherds of Arcadia, with their calm acceptance of death, can be seen as an archetypal symbol of Stoic attitudes. The 1730s and 40s saw a very strong revival of interest in Stoicism, specifically in the intellectual circle of the bluestocking writers, beginning with Mrs Montagu.

From 1748 Elizabeth Carter (Thomas Wright's closest and longest lasting woman friend) was working on her English translation of the Stoic philosopher Epictetus. She had been encouraged to write it by Catherine Talbot, another close friend of Wright and one of Wrest Park circle. Talbot was a close friend of Lady Anson, staying long periods with the Ansons at Moor Park.

Thomas Wright had introduced the two ladies, thus having a very important role in the development of the bluestocking circle.

Copies of Carter's translation were circulating in 1750.

James Harris, who helped Elizabeth Carter complete her work, promotes Stoicism very strongly in his "Three Treatises" (1744), a key book and the intellectual background to the Greek Revival. Thomas Anson was closely connected with Harris at least in the 1760s and 1770s, and his first known concert in his St James Square house was a concert in honour of Mrs Montagu in 1769. Elizabeth Carter was present.

(Though Elizabeth Carter's translation of Epictetus is not listed in the Shugborough library catalogue at the time of the sale of house contents the original Greek text was.)

An earlier letter by Shenstone (December 23<sup>rd</sup> 1743) mentions an inscription at Hagley that might be more closely related to the Shepherds Monument:

*"Mr Lyttelton has built a kind of alcove in his park, inscribed "Sedes Contemplationis" near his hermitage. Under the aforesaid inscription is "OMNIA VANITAS", the sides ornamented with sheeps bones, jaws, skulls etc festoon wise. In a niche over it, an owl."*

This does seem very much like a precursor of the Shepherds Monument, in the garden that has closest links to Shugborough.

Lord Lyttelton was a very keen supporter of Elizabeth Carter, wrote a poem in honour of her manuscript verse, and encouraged her to publish her poetry, which she did in 1762. He was also a friend and collaborator with James Harris. There is no doubt that Lyttelton was aware of Carter's work on Stoicism, as was Mrs Montagu, who had also translated Stoic texts and was present when Anson and Stuart were planning Lyttelton's Doric Temple at Hagley.

## THE INSCRIPTION

A very strange book "Hermippus Redivivus" (published in 1744) which was in the Shugborough library and which is a very curious kind of satire on the idea of prolonging life, begins with a passage about the importance of inscriptions:

*"It was the a laudable custom of the Antients, to perpetuate the Memory of all singular Events, and especially such as in any Degree might be useful to Posterity by Inscriptions. These had a peculiar Stile, in which three Things were principally regarded; Succinctness, Elegancy and Clearness."*

Shenstone's garden at the Leasowes, as the letter quoted above shows, was famous for inscriptions, though none as cryptic as this.

The cryptic inscription on the Shepherds Monument shows eight letters separated by dots:

O.U.O.S.V.A.V.V

And below this on opposite sides:

D. M.

Given that the monument has a very clear Stoic meaning the inscription is probably related to the meaning of the picture.

The D M implies that it is a memorial. Diis Manibus, usually abbreviated to D M , dedicated to the shades, is a common inscription on Roman tombstones. There were authentic Roman funerary stones at Shugborough.

If it is a memorial there are no clues to whom it may be dedicated. The 1767 poem implies a lost love, a Shepherdess, but there is no reason to suppose its author knew its origin, or even knew Thomas Anson well.

It could be a memorial to the Ansons' parents. There is no record of their mother's death anywhere. She was alive in 1720, but certainly had died by 1739.(4)

Steve Regimbal, an American lawyer has suggested that the inscription is a Latin translation of “Vanity of vanities, saith the preacher, all is vanity.” Several people have been reminded of this quote by the three Vs on the monument. (5)

He proposed that it is a translation into Latin from English by an English gentleman who does not have access to a Latin bible but wants a cryptic latin inscription, to go with the Roman “DM”

He comes up with:

ORATOR UT OMNIA SUNT VANITAS AIT VANITAS VANITATUM

“Orator” is likely word to come up with for “Preacher”, though the Latin bible has “Ecclesiasticus”, the title of the book it comes from. “Ait” is the formal “spoke” or “declared” which gives extra emphasis in this sentence.

I have confirmed with two classics authorities that this is a correct translation from English into Latin.

The meaning of the phrase and the meaning of the picture fit perfectly. The fact that Hagley had a monument inscribed “Omnia Vanitas” makes this explanation even more likely and reasonable.

The well known biblical quotation matches the mood of the Stoic philosophy which influenced Poussin and which was known to Lord Lyttelton, Mrs Montagu and the Anson circle through Elizabeth Carter’s translation of Epictetus and the works of James Harris.

For example:

*“Let death and exile, and all other things which appear terrible be daily before your eyes, but chiefly death, and you will never entertain any abject thought, nor too eagerly covet anything.”*

After so many years this is the only explanation which fits the letters and which makes sense when the meaning of the monument and its significance to the family are taken into account.

## TWO THEORIES

### **First theory -**

An original version, by Thomas Wright, was built in 1750. This dating is based on the suggested period of Wright’s work at Shugborough, the resemblance to a sketch for an arbour at Badminton from 1750 and one in Universal Architecture in 1755, and on Lady Anson’s interest in Poussin in 1750.

Thomas Wright, soon after his possible work at Shugborough, built several structures at Stoke Park which feature classical inscriptions, some of which are certainly

symbolic and cryptic. The Mithraic altar at Wrest, from 1749, has a cryptic inscription in a kind of ancient cuneiform, helpfully translated into Latin on the other side.

Stuart added the columns and entablature later, either in 1756-8 or as late as 1763-4 when the Greenhouse was built.

Some researchers have suggested that the original monument may have been attached to the kitchen garden wall, as was the Doric Temple, and the alterations by Stuart were added when the wall was removed.

In fact the Kitchen Garden remained in this position, with an entrance through the Doric colonnade, until 1805, after the new walled garden was built by the farm. The orangery stood at one side of the garden, perhaps on the site of a hazy predecessor, a simpler greenhouse.

Though this is a very attractive explanation, bringing Thomas Wright and Stuart together in this most mysterious of monuments, there are problems with it.

There is no sign that the inner “rustic arch” was built separately – the rough patterned stone seems to be all of a piece.

### **Second theory -**

The monument is solely the work of Stuart, dating from 1758 or 1759 when Anna Seward saw it.

Stuart visited Hagley with Thomas Anson in 1758. This date is two or three years before any definitely dated work by Stuart at Shugborough.. The Doric Temple, which also has no definite date or evidence of its design by Stuart, is thought to date from 1760. Lady Anson wrote a rather cryptic note at the end of a letter to Thomas on May 24<sup>th</sup> 1760 (the year is confirmed by a reference to Lord Lyttelton’s newly published “Dialogues of the Dead”)

*“Mr. Stewart desires to be informed of the number & size of your Dorick columns; having made the Drawing of your Portico, which he wants to make the Scale to before he sends it.”*

This is hard to understand. It reads as if Stuart was asking for measurements of columns that already exist. It may have been that the basic design was already sketched but he was asking Thomas for a proposed size to suit his setting before sending a detailed design for the builders. This is mysterious, as the Shugborough temple is almost identical to the Hagley one.

Or was the portico referred to a proposed portico for the house, which did not have one until forty years later.

Was Stuart already working for Anson in 1758?

It is very remarkable indeed that there is strong evidence for the existence of the monument, and its dramatic effect on visitors, immediately after the first known reference to Stuart and Anson being together, visiting Hagley.

Hagley also provided a precedent in the form of an alcove dedicated to OMNIA VANITAS.

The intellectual background of the monument is Stoicism and this was very much in the air in 1758 when Stuart, Mrs Montagu and Lyttelton met at Hagley, when Carter's Epictetus was published and Lyttelton was encouraging Carter to publish her poetry.

There is no trace of the monument before this first recorded meeting of Stuart and Anson.

It seems very odd that Scheemakers would have been involved in 1750 and Stuart much later. After 1758 they were regular partners. It seems more likely that they worked together, at the same time, on this monument and the meeting at Hagley marks the beginning of the Anson and Stuart and Stuart and Scheemakers partnership.

Ingrid Roscoe, who has studied Scheemakers and Stuart's partnership, assumes a date of 1759 and takes the monument to be one of their first projects together.

Stuart's earliest building at Shugborough is usually assumed to be the Doric Temple (1760?) and yet Stuart and Anson are now known to have been at Hagley together in 1758.

There is a resemblance of the inner arch to Wright's designs, though they are for wooden structures not stone. Wright's Arbour designs were published in 1755 and may have had an influence but there is no actual evidence at all for Wright's involvement with this monument, only Eileen Harris's conjecture.

If the monument is entirely Stuart's work it is almost certainly his earliest work at Shugborough and could be seen to be even more significant as the real start of the Greek revival and a structure of enormous symbolic significance.

#### A LOGICAL CONCLUSION AND A PLEASING CONJECTURE

The philosophical background to the monument and Steve Regimbal's explanation of the inscription seem completely convincing, given the evidence for the interest in Poussin, Stoicism and the precedent of the Hagley "Omnia Vanitas" arbour.

Logically the simplest solution that fits all the available evidence is that the Shepherds Monument is a commission from James Stuart and his regular collaborator Scheemakers, that it dates from c1758 and that it marks the climax of a long interest in Poussin and Stoicism in the Anson, Lyttelton, Carter circle.

There may be an influence from Wright's drawings but no evidence that any part was built at an earlier date. Wright is not necessarily far away during this time as he was a long term close friend of Elizabeth Carter.

A purely conjectural third solution that would (possibly) fit all the available evidence is that the idea for the monument came about a year or two before it was built (perhaps as early as 1750-53) and that Wright drew a typical arbour style design. There was clearly a gap between design and execution of other buildings. Lady Anson, in 1749, wrote that she has found a quarry to build the Cat's Monument. Perhaps she had taken a drawing with her.

Wright may have surveyed the grounds in 1747 or 8 and then sent on drawings for buildings rather than visited Shugborough at later dates. He seems to have done this for his Irish projects where Wright-style buildings were built after his return to England.

If the Shepherds Monument was built all of a piece this would explain its very eccentric design. It certainly *looks like* a Wright arbour with added columns and entablature by Stuart. What it could well be is a Wright *drawing* with details added by Stuart in 1758. This would also explain the existing Stuart drawing of the detail of the rustic column. Perhaps Stuart simply sketched alterations directly onto Wright's design and then drew details separately.

It could be that Scheemaker's relief was ordered before Stuart made these alterations. The completion of the monument brought Scheemakers and Stuart together.

Any other suggestions would be very free speculation.

Whatever the truth the Shepherds Monument is an intriguing and important building, linking philosophical and architectural ideas and standing at a turning point in fashion and culture, the very beginning of the Greek revival.

## APPENDICES

### KNOWN REFERENCES TO THE SHEPHERDS MONUMENT

This chart makes the case for a 1758 dating much clearer.

	REFERENCE	OTHER EVENTS
1747		Chinese House? Elizabeth Yorke buys Poussin Drawing
1748		Thomas Wright lays out gardens? Dining Room and Library
1749		Cat's Monument designed
1750		Lady Anson portrait with Poussin drawing?
1751		

1752		Pagoda under construction.
1753		Ansons, Berkeley and Wright(?) at Hagley
1754		
1755		
1756		
1757		
1758	Lady Anson and Anna Seward's poem (?) (or 1759)	Thomas Anson, Mrs Montagu and Stuart at Hagley Publication of Carter's Epictetus
1759	Shenstone describes the monument	
1760		Doric Temple ?
1761		November 1761 – Arch of Hadrian builder's estimate
1762		Publication of Elizabeth Carter's poems
1763	Philip Yorke's journal	Green House foundations
1764	Dr Sneyd Davies's elegy for George Anson	Tower of the Winds begun Lanthorn designed
1765		15 St James Square under construction
1766		
1767	Anonymous poem	
1768		
1769		Thomas's Breakfast in honour of Mrs Montagu
1770		
1771		
1772	William Bagot's poem Thomas Anson shows George Hardinge Bagot's poem	
1773	Death of Thomas Anson	

FOUR RED HERRINGS

These notes are intended to be rigorously factual but the Shepherds Monument has attracted many bizarre theories and some red herrings need to be pinned down.

1)

An often quoted poem beginning “Out your Own Sweet Vale, Alicia, Vanishes Vanity” that is often given as an explanation of the inscription, and often credited to Anna Seward (!), was invented by Margaret, Countess of Lichfield in the early 1950s when she first came to live at Shugborough. In letters to the present writer and Paul Smith she made it clear it was entirely her own idea and has no historical value.

This poem and the idea of a Shepherdess called Alicia has led many researchers on long and time wasting wild goose chases!

2)

There is no connection between Shugborough and an imaginary secret society “The Priory of Sion”. The Priory was invented by a French con man Pierre Plantard, originally as a fanciful charitable organisation in the 1950s, and developed into a fantasy secret society by him and comic actor and surrealist writer Philippe de Chérisey (see [imdb.com](http://imdb.com) entry) after 1964. They added to it an unrelated historical mystery of the treasure of Rennes-le-Chateau. (There was no “treasure”. The local priest, Berenger Sauniere, had become wealthy through selling masses and wealthy patrons. He was a devoted but rather naughty priest, very orthodox and conservative. The treasure story was invented by a 1950s hotel owner.)

The Priory hoax involved Poussin’s picture and was intended to support Plantard’s claim to the Merovingian throne. Plantard was devout catholic. The “bloodline” idea was an invention of writer Richard Leigh who suggested it to fellow authors Michael Baigent and Henry Lincoln while wondering why Plantard and his Priory were so obsessed with genealogies. This idea was rejected as too far fetched by the BBC for a third Chronicle film in 1979 but sadly forced the basis of “The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail.”

“Holy Grail” was suggested to be a code word for the Holy Blood, though throughout the middle ages the two phrases coexisted without any confusion, even at Glastonbury where the “Holy Blood” referred to a relic of Christ’s blood.

It is almost impossible to explain how “The Holy Grail” could be linked back to the Shepherds Monument through all this flim flam.

The full story is on <http://priory-of-sion.com/>

3)

Another red herring is a Latin sentence that is sometimes quoted:

*“Optima Uxoris Optima Sororis Viduus Amantissimus Vovit Virtutibus”*

“Best of wives, Best of sisters, A most loving widower vows virtuously”

This phrase was suggested by archivist Morchard Bishop in letters to Margaret, Countess of Lichfield in the early 1950s, presumably at the same time as she came up with her Alicia poem.

This was entirely Bishop’s invention and has no historic value.

4)

In 2006, in an article in Apollo, Eileen Harris suggested that the motivation for the monument was the death of Prime Minister Henry Pelham in 1754. A version of the Poussin relief appears on a memorial to him at Esher Place. If this were true it would also suggest a date later than the time in which Wright was likely to be connected with Shugborough. The pagoda, the last structure which might be connected with Wright, dates from 1752. However Thomas Anson’s lack of interest in politics would make a memorial to a prime minister seem a surprising addition to his garden. It is also hard to see why the inscription would be a cipher and why the monument should have such a mysterious quality.

There are stronger motives for the Shepherds Monumeny in Lady Anson’s interest in Poussin, the Stoic revival and in Lyttelton’s earlier Arbour.

*Sources:*

*Details of Lady Anson and the Poussin are from “Cracking the Poussin Code” by Eileen Harris, Apollo (on-line) May 2006*

1) Staffordshire Record Office

2) David Watkin: Athenian Stuart, George Allen & Unwin 1982

3) (BM/MSAdd 22-153), illustrated in Dora Wieberson: Sources of Greek Revival Architecture, Zwemmer, 1969 and in Watkin: Athenian Stuart

4) The Woolley Manuscripts

<http://www.andrewspages.dial.pipex.com/matlock/wolley/69.htm>

(5)

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