

A POLITICAL ‘HUMBUG’: DELIAN ANTIQUITIES AT SISSINGHURST CASTLE

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In 1936 the author, politician and garden designer Harold Nicolson bought four, round antique altars and a Corinthian capital from the sale of Shanganagh Castle, Co Wicklow. Nicolson and his wife, Vita Sackville-West, placed these marbles in a garden compartment at Sissinghurst that was intended to evoke the landscape and antiquities of the Cycladic island of Delos. These are among the most important antiquities in the collections of the National Trust, yet their provenance and significance has been obscured by their presumed status as ‘mere’ ornaments to the celebrated gardens at Sissinghurst Castle. This paper traces the provenance of this group of antiquities back to Delos and their discovery by a hero of the Greek War of Independence. Historic context for Vita and Harold’s use of the altars as adornments to their garden will be examined in the context of earlier use of similar Delian altars in earlier garden design – the seventeenth-century ‘garden museum’ at Arundel House, Strand, London, or the eighteenth-century gardens at Wrest Park. Finally, entry of the Sissinghurst altars into British collections will be examined through a political lens and through Nicolson’s philhellenism.

Keywords: Delos; Sissinghurst Castle; Victoria May [Vita] Sackville-West (1892–1962); Harold George Nicolson (1886–1968); Sir George Cockburn (1763–1847); garden history

INTRODUCTION

In 2018 the National Trust undertook a major re-development of a part of the gardens at Sissinghurst Castle that had originally been laid out by Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson just before the outbreak of the Second World War. Named Delos – after the sacred island at the centre of the Cyclades – this garden compartment was inspired by Vita and Harold’s visit to the island on 18 April 1935. A series of photographs taken while the couple were there show familiar monuments such as the Terrace of the Naxian Lions, or the Temple of Apollo. It is also evident that they climbed Mount Cynthus (at least in part) (figs 1–3).¹

Those familiar with the gardens at Sissinghurst might find it odd that Harold and Vita should take inspiration from the waterless and rocky island to create a garden in the Kentish Weald. After all, Sissinghurst is far removed from the Aegean and indeed any other sea. Moreover, the gardens at Sissinghurst are considered a quintessential example of a

1. It is tempting to imagine that the mythical birthplace of Apollo and Artemis would particularly appeal to this unique couple. Harold displayed an ‘apollonian’ rigour both in his writing and also in his approach to laying out the clear axes of the gardens at Sissinghurst Castle. Vita, in the guise of her alter ego Julian, was adept at turning her form from female to male, just as Artemis was adept at turning the hapless Acteon into a stag.



Fig 1. Vita Sackville-West and companion, Athens, from Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson's photographic album of their tour of Greece, 1935. *Photograph*: © National Trust Images.

romantic English garden. However, for both Harold and Vita, the imagery of the classical world informed their writing.² For Harold, the fate of Greece – both ancient and modern – had a particular resonance. Harold, in his role in the Political Intelligence Department, was a staunch champion of Greece during the Paris Peace Conference of 1919–20. Indeed, his admiration of the Greek prime minister, Eleftherios Venizelos, even went so far as to support Greece's doomed Megali Idea strongly stating that 'Greek claims in Asia Minor are justified'.³ Harold's admiration for Greece was articulated in one of his columns written for *The Spectator*:

There is, however, one natural element in Greece which always surprises me with its immutability: the Greek national character. No nation on earth has, within the last half century, endured such terrible calamities. Since 1897 the Greeks have experienced six major wars, four foreign invasions, two civil wars—the first distracting, the second fiercely destructive—all manner of coups d'état and pronunciamientos, several revolts, three serious revolutions, and a succession of economic catastrophes

2. Nagel 2008.

3. Public Record Office, Foreign Office 608/37/92/1/1/4392, minute by Harold Nicolson. See also Nicolson 1933.



Fig 2. One of the Naxian Lions, the Terrace of the Lions, Delos, from Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson's photographic album of their tour of Greece, dated 18 April 1935. *Photograph:* © National Trust Images.

such as would have shattered any weaker breed . . . No, I am certain that I could not really like anybody who did not really like the Greeks.⁴

Greece and the classical tradition entered Vita's writing most notably in two works. The fictional Greek island of Herakleion was the setting for her 1923 novel *Challenge*.⁵ Perhaps more tellingly for our understanding of the Delos Garden at Sissinghurst, Vita's epic poem *Solitude* of 1938 heavily alluded to classical imagery.⁶ In particular, *Solitude* has been interpreted as Vita's attempt to bridge her understanding of a pagan nature with the Christian, English literary tradition through the use of classical allusion. In the following stanzas of the poem, imagery of the English countryside is brought directly into proximity with classical myth:

4. Nicolson 1952.

5. Sackville-West 1923.

6. Nagel 2008.



Fig 3. View of Delos from Mount Cynthus, from Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson's photographic album of their tour of Greece, dated 18 April 1935. Photograph: © National Trust Images.

Life I do love, and still in pain protest [...]

Not as the thrush that with her mottled breast

Scoops for her mottled eggs and cosy nest,

But like a thousand fiery-bound Ixions

Wheeled the extravagant measure of my love [...] ⁷

Although, the Nicolson's visit to Delos would have seen the island and the ruins clothed with spring flowers, this is not the reason why, several years after their visit, they decided to evoke their memories of the island.⁸ Rather, the garden compartment was named after three marble altars and a Corinthian capital that adorned it. Alongside a fourth identical altar, located in the orchard, these antiquities share the same provenance, arriving at Sissinghurst in 1936.

These four cylindrical altars located in the gardens of Sissinghurst are carved from blocks of fine-grained white marble and are each adorned, in high-relief, with *bucrania*, swags of flowers and of foliage from which hang bunches of grapes.⁹ The *bucrania* are

7. Sackville-West 1938.

8. Indeed, another feature of the Sissinghurst garden – the pergola adjoining the Priest's House – is called the Erechtheum. The columns that form this feature are not antique but rather are elements taken from the partially demolished Old Castle.

9. For a discussion of the source of the marble used in antiquity for sculptures and in the construction of temples and monuments on Delos, see Renfrew 1968; Vettor *et al* 2021.



Fig 4. One of the Delian altars, the Delos Garden, Sissinghurst Castle. *Photograph:* © National Trust Images/ Eva Nemeth.

further adorned with pomegranates, bands of ribbons and ears of wheat. All this speaks of the altars' original religious function. The Corinthian capital is also carved from a similar fine-grained white marble. All four altars and the capital show staining and weathering and losses to their original form.¹⁰ They also have carved 'mortices' on their flat, top surfaces – a feature that they share with other similar Delian altars in British collections (see below). These deeply carved 'mortices' may have been used to accommodate the tenons of carved dedicatory stele. Although the altars are certainly the most significant antiquities at Sissinghurst (and among the most significant in the National Trust's holdings), they have not been published before (figs 4 and 5).¹¹

As mentioned, just before the outbreak of the Second World War, the three altars and the Corinthian capital were arranged in the Delos Garden – with the fourth being placed in the orchard. The sole historic photograph of how the area looked shows that the altars were

10. For a discussion about the dating of these altar-types, see Berges 1996; Fraser 1977.

11. There is a very small collection of miscellaneous antiquities at Sissinghurst. The only other large antiquity sited in the garden is a Roman *cinerarium*, with a lid in the shape of a pedimented roof, inscribed: D.M.APAULO ET CON BM MITHRES ET HERMES [NT 803161]. The provenance of this *cinerarium* is not known but it is not associated with the Delian antiquities at Sissinghurst.



Fig 5. Corinthian capital, Sissinghurst Castle. *Photograph:* © National Trust Images/ Charles Thomas.

set along the edge of a path, leading towards the Priest's House (fig 6). Above this a series of low terraces were constructed from the architectural fragments of the Old Castle, which were executed in Kentish sandstone. These terraces evoked the low walls and reused *spolia* that characterise the layout of the archaeological site of Delos (fig 7). As the Old Castle had been sited on a rise in the land, the surrounding agricultural landscape falls gently away and, from the Delos Garden, the effect was 'reminiscent' of the view of the harbour of Delos when seen from the lower slopes of Mount Cynthus (fig 8).¹²

After the War, the Delos Garden, though it retained its name, was remodelled and planted with English springtime flowers. The terraces were removed and the three altars were moved to an upper area of the site, where they were partially obscured by planting. Although they remained in their original compartment, their visual impact was greatly reduced and, rather than forming a central role in the thematic concept of the Delos Garden, they could be easily overlooked as mere garden ornaments of no great import.

12. Unfortunately, the Delos Garden was soon abandoned due to the outbreak of the Second World War as resources were needed elsewhere on the working estate. It is erroneous to suggest that the Delos Garden had been abandoned due to its aesthetic or horticultural failure – the garden simply did not have time to mature and then was not revisited following the end of the War.



Fig 6. View of the Delos Garden, 1942. *Photograph:* © Country Life Images.

The Corinthian capital was relocated to the herb garden adjacent to the celebrated Thyme Lawn.

The fourth altar, which did not form part of the Delos Garden and remained in its original position in the orchard after the War, is distinguished from its companions by being mounted on a much later, saltire cross-shaped plinth in granite (fig 9). In a jocular manner, Vita's family dubbed the orchard altar 'The Humbug'. The reason for this will be explained presently.

BRITISH ANTIQUARIES AND DELOS

David Noy, in his essay 'Dreams inspired by Phoebus: Western visitors to Delos from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century', traces the history of British antiquarianism on Delos over the period of two and a half centuries.¹³ Noy mentions the Sissinghurst altars briefly in his work, but does not single them out as being remarkable.

The cylindrical, drum-like form of the Sissinghurst altars is typical for the island. Similar altars, adorned with garlands and with *bucrania* and carved in the same fine-grained

13. Noy 2011.



Fig 7. View of one of the ancient streets of Delos – note the low surviving walls of the ancient houses – from Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson’s photographic album of their tour of Greece, dated 18 April 1935. *Photograph*: © National Trust Images.

white marble as their Sissinghurst counterparts, may still be seen at the archaeological site. Undoubtedly some may still be *in situ* in their original location; for example, a number of such altars are located around the *Thesmophion* and it would be tempting to think that the imagery of pomegranates and ears of wheat indicates a link to Demeter and Persephone.¹⁴

The presence of such altars in a British collection is also not unique; neither was their display in the gardens of a significant residence.¹⁵ The amassing of antiquities from the island of Delos by British collectors goes back to those *virtuosi* of the court of Charles I, as Noy explains. Agents, working there for British patrons, had been discovering choice works of the classical past since the 1620s. One of the reasons why British antiquaries were particularly drawn to Delos was due to the influence of Sir Thomas Roe (1581–1644). Roe was the British Ambassador to the Sublime Porte, and, although he did not visit the island, his Greek contacts in Constantinople informed him that both Delos and neighbouring Rhenia were rich in antiquities. Moreover, both islands were deserted and thus any removal of antiquities by British *virtuosi* – or their agents – would not be met with the protests of the local Greek population or of the Ottoman authorities. Roe entered into the service of the two greatest collectors of the Stuart Court – George Villiers, Duke of

14. For a discussion on Delian sculpture, see Marcadé 1969. For a discussion of the *Thesmophion* at Delos, see Picard 1952.

15. See also Hepple 2001.



Fig 8. View of one of the ancient streets of Delos, looking towards the Sacred Harbour, from Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson's photographic album of their tour of Greece, dated 18 April 1935. *Photograph*: © National Trust Images.

Buckingham, and Thomas Howard, Earl of Arundel – providing advice to the rival *virtuosi* as to where to search for choice marbles. Notably, Roe suggested that Howard should dispatch his agents to Delos.¹⁶

Delian altars, of the type in the collections at Sissinghurst Castle, were to be found in the celebrated 'garden museum' at Arundel House, the Strand, London – the London home of the Earl of Arundel and his wife Alatheia. There, they were most likely used as plinths for the antique figurative sculptures that were placed in the gardens of that house.¹⁷ Indeed, during excavations of the former site of Arundel House and its gardens in 1972, two such altars, almost identical to the Sissinghurst examples, were found – remnants of the Earl of Arundel's celebrated collection (extraordinarily, one of these altars was soon after reported to have been 'removed' from the site of the dig and its current location is still unknown).¹⁸ Noy also suggests that they may have acted as the pedestals for the collection of antique sculptures displayed in the privy garden at the Palace of Whitehall. A much later watercolour of *The Sculpture Gallery of the Examination Schools, Oxford* (1813), by William Westall, shows Delian altars from the Arundel collections acting as plinths – just as we suppose they did in the Thames-side gardens of Arundel House.¹⁹ Further, five Delos-type altars were acquired in 1817/18 by Amabel [sic], Countess de Grey, and were placed within

16. Noy 2011, 375.

17. For a discussion of the Arundel Marbles, see Haynes 1975.

18. For an account of the 1972 excavations of the site of the former Arundel House, including a description of the Hellenistic antiquities still found in what would have been the area of the garden, see Hammerson and Cook 1975.

19. Noy 2011, 372–92.



Fig 9. 'The Humbug' in the orchard at Sissinghurst Castle. *Photograph*: © National Trust Images/ Charles Thomas.

the Great Garden at Wrest Park. Noy accords this grouping of antiquities considerable attention as, he argues, their provenance connects them to 'all three phases of Delian interest' demonstrated by British antiquaries and collectors that concern him in his essay.²⁰ That is, he speculates that the Wrest Park altars first came to Britain as part of the initial seventeenth-century explorations of the island, to then enter the collections of Richard Topham in the eighteenth century before finally coming to Wrest Park in the first two decades of the nineteenth century.

For Noy, the altars at Sissinghurst were not unique either in terms of their typology or in terms of the history of antiquarianism and collecting in Britain. However, one aspect of the Sissinghurst Altars does, arguably, differentiate them from the Delian antiquities covered by Noy; that is the explicitly *political* use they were put to when they arrived in the British Isles. This makes them unique and – dare one say – more interesting than the altars that were *mere* adornments to Countess de Grey's Great Garden at Wrest Park or that were *mere* plinths for the sculptures that formed part of the Arundel Marbles.

20. *Ibid.*, 390–2.

THE CASTLE SHANGANAGH COLLECTION OF ANTIQUITIES

The four altars and associated Corinthian capital are first recorded in the collections of General Sir George Cockburn (1763–1847) of Shanganagh Castle, Co Wicklow, Ireland.²¹

Cockburn's interest in antiquities would have been piqued when he undertook the Grand Tour of Italy between 1782 and 1783, visiting Pisa, Florence, Rome and Naples.²² His next encounter with the Mediterranean world was occasioned when he was posted to Sicily with the British Army fighting Napoleon. There he found time to also undertake a number of excursions to the classical sites of the island as well as to explore other islands in the area. This tour of the western Mediterranean he later published as *A Voyage to Cadiz and Gibraltar, up the Mediterranean to Sicily and Malta in 1810 and 1811, including a description of Sicily and the Lipari Islands, and an Excursion in Portugal*.²³ Although Cockburn did not travel as far as Delos and the Aegean, his account described with interest the many classical sites of Sicily, such as the temples at Segesta and at Agrinetum. He also described specific antiquities, including statues, sarcophagi etc that he had occasion to view in various Sicilian collections such as the museum at Palermo.²⁴ At Catania he viewed the theatre, baths and amphitheatre as well as the archaeological and numismatic collections in the *museo* of the Palazzo Biscari.²⁵ Writing in his reminiscences of his travels he notes that he:

went to the famous Museum of Prince Biscaris [sic], which is well worth seeing, being a collection of antiquities of all sorts, and arranged with taste, in rooms built for the purpose: There are various Mosaic ancient pavements, a remarkable fine torso, statues, busts, alto-reliefs [sic], and old inscriptions and columns; a fine collection of Etruscan vases.²⁶

Although this description of the collections at the Palazzo Biscari is brief, it might be argued that his experience of viewing them would resonate with him at a later date.

Returning to Ireland, Cockburn settled at Shanganagh and turned his attention to politics; he was described in *The Gentleman's Magazine* 'as a violent reformer and an admirer of Cobbett'.²⁷ In particular, he was a fervent supporter of the 1832 Reform Act. More properly termed The Representation of the People Act, it introduced major changes to the electoral system in England and Wales giving – among other things – representation to cities and extending the franchise to small landowners, tenant farmers, shopkeepers and householders who were able to pay a rent of £10 per annum or more. Cockburn's support of the 1832 Reform Act will have a crucial bearing on our understanding of the role, within his collection, of the four marble altars and Corinthian capital from Delos.

21. There is a lack of consistency in the spelling of General George Cockburn's name, with the entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* giving it as 'Cockburn' whereas other authors – such as L. Purser – give it as 'Cockburne'. The author defers to the *Dictionary*, cf Stephens 2004.

22. Astbury 1996, 2.

23. Cockburn 1815.

24. *Ibid.* A further example of Cockburn's interest in antiquity, this time linked to his military career, is the pamphlet he published speculating on the route Hannibal took when crossing the Alps with his army and elephants.

25. See also Astbury 1996, 5–9.

26. Cockburn 1815, 154.

27. William Cobbett (9 March 1763–18 June 1835), radical journalist, farmer and MP for Oldham.

Cockburn amassed his own collection of various antiquities, such as stele, *cippi*, sarcophagi and ceramics as well as Latin inscriptions.²⁸ It is not clear exactly *when* Cockburn formed this collection, though Louis C Purser, in his 1925 publication of the antiquities at Shanganagh, placed the acquisition of the bulk of the collection in 1805 with additions in the 1820s.²⁹ The inventory of the collection, as compiled by Purser, shows that the General was mainly interested in Roman antiquities that contained epigraphic material and were of a commemorative, funerary nature. Although Purser's interest lay in these collections of inscriptions at Shanganagh, he does mention in passing the four Sissinghurst altars (it is perhaps telling that no mention is made of any classical statuary, even in passing). The exact provenance (and find spots) of the Roman antiquities is not fully recorded; a summary description was given in the catalogue listing the contents of the castle. The antiquities are not properly recorded by Cockburn in his diaries, which Purser had occasion to read.³⁰ However, Purser states that a large number of the antiquities had belonged to 'an excavator called Capranesi, and were carefully copied by the distinguished antiquarians Carlo Fea and Hieronymus Amati'.³¹

Cockburn's antiquities were grouped together and displayed in two areas of Castle Shanganagh.³² The inscriptions, which Purser records as being eighty-seven in number and of a sepulchral character, were fixed to the walls of a passage leading to what had been a bathroom.³³ Cockburn termed this passage his *Piccolo Vaticano* and evidently held great store in this collection (though by the time Purser had undertaken his visit to the castle, the *Piccolo Vaticano* had been turned into a pantry).³⁴ The larger marbles, such as the stele and sarcophagi, which were also of a sepulchral nature, were installed in what Harold Nicolson named the 'Monumental Room' (Purser describes it as the entrance hall).³⁵ In the garden, Purser also listed a number of *cippi*.³⁶

THE DELIAN ANTIQUITIES AND THE REFORM BILL OF 1832

The four marble altars and Corinthian capital form an exception in the Shanganagh collection. They are not inscribed and are of Greek/ Hellenistic origin, which Cockburn recognised at the time (see below). We also have a good idea of their provenance, although not their exact find spot on Delos.³⁷ The four altars (and most probably the historically associated Corinthian capital) were found on Delos by Commodore William Gawen Rowan Hamilton, who was Cockburn's son-in-law (Hamilton was also the great-grandfather of

28. For a full description of the collection of antiquities at Shanganagh Castle, see Cockburn 1815, 1–35. The collection of classical ceramics is described in Purser 1924.

29. Purser 1925, 2–3.

30. *Ibid.*

31. *Ibid.*, 3.

32. The majority of these inscriptions, and some of the other antiquities, would be acquired by University College, Dublin, in 1936. See Astbury 1996, 13.

33. The inscriptions are included in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, where a number are described as *Romae empta a Georgio Cockburne* [sic] *Britanno*.

34. *Ibid.*

35. Nicolson recalls this room, which linked the castle's dining room and ballroom, as smelling 'on the one hand of damp walls and ivy, and on the other hand of peaches and marsala': Nicolson 1943.

36. Purser's catalogue lists the original location of the antiquities (1924).

37. *Ibid.*

Harold Nicolson on his mother's side, hence the future connection to Sissinghurst). Hamilton, who had distinguished himself during the Napoleonic campaigns as a naval officer, would later play an active role during the Greek War of Independence (1821–30) and was active in the seas around the island of Delos. It was Hamilton who presented the four altars to his father-in-law.

Harold Nicolson, in *The Desire to Please: a story of Hamilton Rowan and the United Irishmen*, described the circumstances by which Commodore Hamilton acquired the altars:

The Commodore spent the years from 1820 on in the eastern Mediterranean, winning the title of 'Liberator of Greece' by protecting the Greeks against the Turks and spending much of his private fortune in this cause; and while cruising during all those years among the islands of the Aegean, would from time to time recall the tastes of his father-in-law and send back to Shanganagh, now the fragment of an Ionic column, now some shattered inscriptions from Nauplia or Epidaurus. On one occasion he had found (it may well have been among the deserted stones of Delos) four Greek altars of marble on which were carved rich swags of grape, of pomegranate and myrtle suspended between the heads of bulls. Eventually these altars arrived at Shanganagh in the company of a Corinthian capital of later date.³⁸

Harold Nicolson – a fervent *Hellenophile* – must have delighted in this direct familial link with one of the historic 'Liberators of Greece'.

Nicolson goes on to explain that, when the altars arrived at Shanganagh, 'They were too large to house in the Monumental Room [entrance hall]'. Instead, the four cylindrical altars were treated like the drums of a column. A granite base, in the form of a saltire cross and executed in Wicklow granite, was positioned outside in front of the entrance hall and the altars were erected one on top of the other in the form of a column (fig 10).³⁹ The Corinthian capital surmounted this column; the resulting (ill-proportioned) monument recalled a similar arrangement of classical antiquities that, although not mentioned directly by Cockburn, would have been seen by him on his visit to the Palazzo Biscari in Catania. In one of the 'museum' rooms he would have seen a classical altar: carved in high-relief, supporting the base and drum of a Corinthian column and surmounted by an unrelated Doric capital.⁴⁰

Cockburn had the granite base inscribed with the following when it was first erected:

This Column Erected in July 1832 by Gen. Sir G. Cockburn G.C.H. to Commemorate The Reform Bills passed this year is formed of ancient Greek Marbles (The Granite Base Excepted) Sent to him from the Levant By his Son in Law Captain W.G. Hamilton R.N. C.B.

This inscription is telling in a number of ways. First, it is the earliest written corroboration of the four altars' provenance: who found them and *very* roughly where they came from. Second, the inscription clearly shows that Cockburn, as a collector of antiquities, put

38. Nicolson 1943, 200. Purser (1925, 2) also mentions the column, repeating the story of their acquisition by Hamilton: the column 'is formed of Greek marbles sent to [Sir George Cockburn] from the Levant by his son-in-law, Capt W G Hamilton, R N, C B'.

39. Nicolson 1943. Purser (1925) states that the column 'fronts the hall-door'.

40. See Knox 2021.



Fig 10. Castle Shanganagh with Cockburn's monument to the 1832 Reform Bill visible on the far left of the photograph. *Photograph*: © Irish Architectural Archives.

some store into the fact that the altars and capital were *Greek*. They are prominently described as 'ancient Greek marbles' on the inscription and the granite base is explicitly explained as 'modern'. Third, Cockburn is using these marbles to make a public statement regarding his support of the Reform Bill of 1832. Although located in the private grounds of his home at Shanganagh Castle, any visitor to the house would not fail to notice the striking monument with its dedicatory inscription when arriving at the castle's entrance.

It is this use of the Sissinghurst marbles to create a visible *political* statement that differentiates them from the use or methods of display of other similar Delian antiquities in British antiquarian collections. Although Harold Nicolson's account states that Cockburn was forced to construct the monument due to a lack of space in the Monumental Room at Shanganagh, there might be another reason why these particular marbles were selected to commemorate a reformist and progressive political act – the Reform Bill of 1832.⁴¹

The visual language of classical Greece was redolent of the ideals of democracy and freedom in the British imagination during the first part of the nineteenth century. As Byron, in his poem *The Isles of Greece*, wrote:

The isles of Greece! The isles of Greece
Where burning Sappho loved and sung,
Where grew the arts of war and peace,

41. However limited the reforms might seem to a 21st-century audience.



Fig 11. View of the Priest's House from the Delos Garden at Sissinghurst Castle garden, Kent.
Photograph: © National Trust Images/ Eva Nemeth.

Where Delos rose, and Phoebus sprung!
 [...] I dreamed that Greece might still be free;
 For standing on the Persians grave,
 I could not deem myself a slave.⁴²

In March 1832 the independent kingdom of Greece was established,⁴³ and that same year a hoped for liberty would be sought through the Redemption of the People Act in Britain.

That the Greek Revival in architecture, sculpture and interest in identifiably *Greek* antiquities occurred during the 1820s and 1830s when the clamour for political reform in Britain was heightened is not a mere coincidence. The aligning of 'liberty' with the genius of Greek art and architecture was touched upon by a contemporary: the great architect and collector of antiquities Sir John Soane in his first Royal Academy lecture in 1810 (this lecture was repeated in 1832).⁴⁴ As Soane explained:

Grecian architecture [...] owes its origin and perfection to causes very different from those already spoken of [that of Egypt, India and Persia]. The Greeks were the fathers of science and art. Their climate, their laws, their mode of life, all contributed to gain them a superior rank in the higher walk of intellect.

42. Gordon 1821, 46–7.

43. Following the First Hellenic Republic of 1821 to 1832.

44. Soane 2000, 37–9.

Unlike the autocratic regimes of Egypt and Persia, Greece was governed by opposite political laws – those of democracy and ‘freedom’ – and this, as Soane reasoned, led to the flowering of that particular Greek ‘genius’ in art, architecture, philosophy and law. Indeed, Soane understood that the Greeks lost ‘a great degree their love for the arts’ once they lost their freedoms to Rome, thus neatly aligning their artistry with their political liberties.⁴⁵ It is reasonable to think that Cockburn was aware of this broader association of Greek art and architecture with concepts of liberty and democracy both modern and ancient.⁴⁶ After all, his son-in-law who gave him the marbles was dubbed ‘The Liberator of Greece’. It is arguable, then, that, for Cockburn, the use of genuine ‘Greek marbles’ would have been especially appropriate in the creation of a monument to a Bill intended to reform British politics.⁴⁷

Unfortunately, Cockburn’s hopes for the Reform Bill of 1832 were not realised. Six years after the column with its inscription was raised at Shanganagh a second inscription was added to the base of the column commenting on his disillusionment:

July 1838.

Alas to this date a Hum Bug

It is this second inscription that inspired Vita, Harold and their children to name the altar and base of Cockburn’s monument, located in the orchard at Sissinghurst, ‘The Humbug’ a century or so later.

JOURNEY OF THE DELIAN ANTIQUITIES TO SISSINGHURST

In 1847 General Sir George Cockburn died. He left careful instructions in his will that:

as to all actual fixtures [the Roman inscriptions] in the walls especially the little passage to the bath which I call the *Piccolo Vaticano* I do not intend that they should be

45. As the late Ian Jenkins (senior curator of the Department of Greece and Rome at The British Museum) observed, the prevalence of Greek Revival architecture in London in the immediate wake of the Napoleonic Wars should be understood as a deliberate statement. The Greek Revival Waterloo Churches, Robert Smirke’s Grecian-temple façade of The British Museum, stand in aesthetic opposition to Napoleon’s architectural improvements to Paris – such as the interiors of the Tuileries, the Arc du carrousel or the Arc de triomphe – which all utilise a Roman architectural language. It is as if, in the first decades of the nineteenth century, a conscious choice was made with regard to classicism: British political democracy was better served by the forms of Greek art and architecture while, in opposition, an autocratic imperial France was best served by Roman forms: pers comm, Ian Jenkins, 2009.
46. Sir George Cockburn and Sir John Soane do not appear to have known each other, although it should be noted that both visited the collections of classical antiquities at the Palazzo Biscari – Soane in 1779 and Cockburn in 1815. (I am grateful to Sue Palmer, archivist at Sir John Soane’s Museum, for verifying that Cockburn does not appear in Sir John Soane’s correspondence.) Soane may well have been inspired to create his own museum of classical antiquities by this experience and it is plausible that the columnar, architectural *pasticcio* that he erected in the Monument Court at 13 Lincoln’s Inn Fields was inspired by similar arrangements of antiquities in the museum of the Palazzo Biscari. Could Sir George Cockburn also have been inspired by the very same arrangements of altars and architectural fragments when he visited decades later? It seems quite possible.
47. Unfortunately, as Cockburn’s diaries are silent on the question of his antiquities, the author admits that this theory is based upon supposition.

stirred or removed even if the place were disposed of or sold. They would not in this country bring anything of the price they were collected at by myself chiefly in Rome (dear Rome) and are highly valuable interesting and curious and I would wish to have them preserved entire if possible.⁴⁸

It is clear that the General's wishes were followed and moreover that the other antiquities including the column dedicated to the 1832 Reform Bill remained *in situ*. It was still there when Harold Nicolson, as a young boy, stayed at Shanganagh while visiting his grandmother. It was there also when Louis C Purser visited the castle in order to catalogue the collections of inscriptions and of antique ceramics in the mid-1920s for the Royal Irish Academy, although Purser stated that 'there were five concentric circles of these marbles but the top one is now vacant'. Perhaps Purser is referring to the Corinthian capital, which surmounted the monument in its original form, rather than a fifth altar and that was no longer present when Purser came to view it.⁴⁹

To understand how the altars came to Sissinghurst, let us once more turn to Harold's writing. Given the political use to which the altars were put and their discovery on Delos by one of the 'Liberators of Greece', it is appropriate that their arrival in Kent is related in a work of political biography and the Irish struggle for liberty: the already cited *The Desire to Please: a story of Hamilton Rowan and the United Irishmen*. Here, Nicolson describes how the altars, capital and base found their way to Sissinghurst:

When my grandmother died in 1919 my uncle Gawen, in a moment of impatience, suddenly sold Shanganagh with all its contents. In 1936 it again came into the market, and being anxious to rescue some at least of the memories of my childhood, I crossed to Dublin and attended the sale. I bought the column as it stood and had the altars and the top tier of the base transported to my home at Sissinghurst. Three of the altars and the Corinthian capital were disposed, with some ungainliness, along a garden path. The fourth, with the base and the inscription, was erected in the orchard.⁵⁰

This 'ungainly' garden path that Nicolson referred to was the short-lived Delos Garden compartment that Vita and Harold created just before the outbreak of the Second World War. It has been rejuvenated by the National Trust and is where three of the altars and the Corinthian capital are now sited.⁵¹

48. Reprinted in Purser 1925, 3.

49. No mention of architectural fragments is made by Purser 1925, 2.

50. Nicolson 1943.

51. There is another aspect to the presence of the altars at Sissinghurst that should be mentioned: ancestral lineage. It is recognised that Sissinghurst was acquired by Harold and Vita as – among other considerations – it was a country house (albeit a ruined one) that had been founded by one of Vita's ancestors, Sir John Baker (1488–1558). As a woman, Vita had been precluded from inheriting her beloved ancestral seat of Knole upon her father's death. Sissinghurst would become a 'surrogate Knole'; the Long Library at Sissinghurst contains family portraits and items of furniture from Knole, while the White Garden and Yew Walk evoke the interiors of Knole (the Ballroom and Long Gallery, respectively). The antiquities from Castle Shanganagh not only 'rescued' Harold Nicolson's childhood memories of visits to his grandmother's house in Ireland, as he wrote, but also physically inscribed at least part of *his* lineage (through Hamilton and Cockburn) within Vita's 'surrogate Knole'.

These marbles have undertaken a remarkable pilgrimage and, if shorn of their original religious function and of their secondary political symbolism that they acquired in Ireland, they stand as testament to Vita and Harold's modern political and modernist literary philhellenism. The altars form a sculpture gallery within a seminal twentieth (or even dare one say twenty-first) century garden that was intended to explicitly evoke the antique world (fig 11). They tie Vita and Harold's Delos Garden back to that tradition started by Thomas and Alethea Howard in the gardens at Arundel House and continued by the Countess de Grey at Wrest Park. As with so much of Vita and Harold's life, as expressed through their writing, collecting and gardening, the display of the Delian altars and Corinthian capital at Sissinghurst today is as contemporary as it is traditional.

POSTSCRIPT

The final remark to be made relates to Harold Nicolson's own political involvement with the (now) vexed question of the presence of Greek antiquities in British collections. In 1924, while serving in the Foreign Office, Harold Nicolson submitted a memorandum to the government of Ramsey MacDonald calling for the return of one of the Erechtheion caryatids to Greece to mark the hundredth anniversary of the death of Lord Byron in the Greek War of Independence. Nicolson observed of Lord Elgin's legal argument for removing sculptures from the Athenian Acropolis that 'Even a most free and lavish translation of the Italian tongue cannot twist these words [the Ottoman Firman giving permission to remove already loose architectural elements and inscriptions] into meaning a whole shipload of sculptures, columns and caryatids'. Nicolson's memorandum was not acted upon.

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