

THE RIDDLE OF THE EGYPTIAN CORNER OF NORTHWOOD HOUSE

John Parsloe, assisted by Tim Wander from Northwood House,
describes the House and its intriguing Egyptian features.

Northwood House stands on the slopes above Cowes in the Isle of Wight. It is an imposing and most beautiful Georgian mansion surrounded by and set in its own 22 acres of parkland (*see* photograph 1). It is on the site of an earlier house called Bellevue that was built in 1768. Bellevue was purchased by George Ward, a wealthy London financier and merchant, in 1793. The house was then rebuilt as the first Northwood House and completed by 1813; it was designed by the famous London architect, John Nash, who was a close friend of George Ward.



Northwood House

George Ward made a second fortune by financing the British Government during the Napoleonic wars and, when he died in 1829, his son, George Henry Ward, decided to raze the first Northwood House to its foundations and build the present House, completing it by 1841. Both the first and the second Northwood House retained the overall floor plan and the cellars of the 1768 Bellevue house.

George Henry died in 1849 and his nephew, Dr William George Ward, unexpectedly inherited the estate but had no interest in the House and its then 220 acres of parkland. The entire contents were sold by auction in 1850 over a fifteen day period. Thereafter Northwood House, while remaining in the Ward family, had a succession of tenants and was, successively, a school for young gentlemen, a rope maker's residence, a home for French Benedictine nuns from 1901 to 1906, and a hospital run by the Red Cross during the First World War. Finally, it was gifted in 1929 by a descendant of the family, Henry Joseph Ward, to Cowes Urban District Council. In the Second World War it was again used as a hospital by the Red Cross. After its return to the Cowes Council, it ultimately passed under government reorganisations to the Isle of Wight Unitary Council.

In Council hands, the house suffered the combination of vandalism and neglect so typical of public bodies, although, as Council offices, the overall structure remained intact and for the most part watertight. But happily, in 2010, the House, in a considerable state of disrepair, became the sole responsibility of the independent trustees of a charitable trust. In the last 5 years the Trust, with much voluntary help, has done wonders, restoring the grander rooms and making the House weatherproof and safe for the

public to use and enjoy. The Northwood House Team is now striving to make it a cultural and social centre with a wide range of activities. As in Council days, many marriages, events, parties and even grand balls still take place there today, with all proceeds going directly to the Trust to help it preserve the estate for future generations.



2. Ground Floor of Northwood House. The Egyptian Corner is No. 14 on the Plan.

The saddest legacy of the Council ownership was the destruction of all the archives, both of the Ward family and of the House. A Councillor, perhaps fortunately nameless, ordered the contents of the cellars to be put in a skip, neither knowing nor caring what the contents were. But for this unthinking act, the House's Egyptian Corner would doubtless not be a riddle.

Remarkably Northwood House was not really intended as a place to live in. It was always designed to be a grand house in which to entertain and have splendid balls, and for the successful Victorian family to show off their new wealth and social status (See photograph 2). But the family rarely stayed there and only really used it for ten years. Nevertheless, the family and future tenants did continue to entertain widely and members of the Royal Family were often among the visitors, including Princess Beatrice, Queen Victoria's daughter, who held a series of Grand Royal Balls there between 1891 and 1894.

I drew attention to this House in a letter to Ancient Egypt in 2010, suggesting someone better qualified might wish to research its



3. The statue of Antinous formerly in Northwood House but now in Osborne House

Egyptian connections. Recently, however, I had the good fortune to meet Mr. Chris Buckett, the front of house manager, who introduced me to his colleague, Mr. Tim Wander. Tim is Project Manager and he and Chris act as Tour Guides for the House. Tim has recently written a guide booklet for it and is in some ways now acting as its unofficial historian. He has supplied most of the detail and the excellent photographs for this Article, which it is hoped may tempt others to further research.

It seems likely that George Ward was interested in Egyptiana. He is known to have acquired an imposing marble statue of an Egyptian figure of Antinous. Antinous who was the lover of the Roman emperor Hadrian drowned in the Nile River and was deified by the grief-stricken emperor. The full length statue, that was once in Northwood House, is of grey marble and over 5 foot 6 inches high. The youth is represented standing; he looks straight ahead, wears a royal nemes headdress, and has his left leg thrust forward with a palm tree stump behind his right leg, and a scroll in each hand (*see* photograph 3).

This statue is a copy of an ancient one, excavated at Hadrian's villa at Tivoli during the sixteenth century; the original has been displayed in the Vatican museum since the late eighteenth century. At that time, it proved widely popular among neo-classical artists, and numerous copies were made. This example was probably made in France in the early years of the nineteenth century. It may have been commissioned by Napoleon Bonaparte as a gift to his brother Joseph, King of Naples. In 1806, it was seized by the British naval frigate, *Imperieuse*, from a French vessel en route to Naples. Sold at auction in Gibraltar in 1809, it was acquired by George Ward for the first Northwood House.

The statue was included in the sale of Northwood House's contents in 1850. Many of the items, including statues and paintings, were purchased by Prince Albert for Osborne House, which was completed three years later. Antinous was one of the statues which Albert purchased. It is still in Osborne House today, along with many other items, despite some gentle suggestions that it might be returned.

Antinous's Egyptian attributes suggest an interest in the civilisation but do not explain the Egyptian Corner in Northwood House, although it is possible that Antinous was housed in or near it. It is hard to convey the shock which is felt on entering a severely classical house and seeing this amazingly vivid and unusual feature at the very centre of the huge, 15,000 square foot, floor area. It lies at the end of the front passage of the House where it turns into the main transverse corridor (*see* photographs 4 and 5). It is over 12' 8" (3.85m) high; the column bases are 1' 7" (48cm) square. One side of the 'canopy' is 10' 3" (3.12m) and the other 7' 9" (2.35m) from corner to corner of each base. The roof is a Council replacement of the original which was broken when the glass dome above it was worked on (*see* photograph 6). The roof now consists of a piece of clear glass and a cut-out coloured board with stars letting some light through! The visible paintwork is thought to date from the 1960's when the Corner was restored by the Council. So far as is known the Corner is unique, but its provenance is unknown. Below it lies an intriguing void that is not matched in any part of the expansive cellars that stretch beneath the House and for the most part date back to the original Bellevue House or even further. With its false door, the Corner is perhaps intended to be a representation of a tomb (*see* photograph 4). Northwood House is listed as Grade 2*. The star on the listing status is partly due to the presence of the Corner. It is very surprising that no early reference to the Corner has been found. You would expect it to have excited much comment by those who saw it. But so far nothing has come to light.

What is clear is that the Corner did not start life in Northwood House. It is ill-fitting in its current location, with part of the bases of its columns removed and the remainder wedged somewhat awkwardly against the white Corinthian pillars of the House. Furthermore, all four sides are decorated, indicating that it was intended to be placed in the open and not in a corner where two of its sides could never be seen.

This strongly suggests that the structure was installed after the House was built; otherwise the Corner would have been fitted neatly into the House. This gives an earliest date of 1838 when the rebuilding of that part of the House was completed. It also seems almost certain that it was installed by 1849 when George Henry Ward died. Thereafter the House was tenanted, or in Council possession, and it is unlikely such a structure would have been installed by anyone other than a somewhat eccentric and wealthy owner.



4. View of Corner looking back along entrance passage



5. View of the Corner from the transverse passage showing the false door.

Dating the installation to the period 1838 to 1849 does not of course mean that the structure was made in this time. But the 1840's are in any case quite early for an understanding of hieroglyphs which may explain their peculiar form and that of the other unusual decorations. Champollion's grammar was only published after his death in 1832 and photographs of hieroglyphs and figures were not then available. The creator of the hieroglyphs would have had to rely on drawings and paintings of originals.



6. The roof of the Egyptian Corner showing the replaced centre portion and the hieroglyphs on the bottom of the friezes.

I have only a nodding knowledge of hieroglyphs but have attempted some notes on those found on the bases of the friezes, using Gardiner's sign numbers and reading from right to left on the upper line of the photograph of the roof (*see* photograph 6).

1. Cf. N14, star. There is a reversed moon sign above the star and a small dot above that; but where the star is copied further along the line, above the star, there is I9, basket, (*nb*) which can mean lord. Below the star is a large dot which could be N33, a grain of sand.
2. ?M17, a reed, (*i*)
3. Large comma - if this is Z7, spiral (*w*), Nos. 2 and 3 together could read *iw* (but No.10 seems to be a true Z7).
4. S34, sandal strap, (*Anq*) meaning life
5. I14, snake (*Ddft/ Hftw*)
6. Key like sign - Cf. D36 (*a*) meaning forearm or cup.
7. ?N35, water ripple, (*n*) meaning to/for/in, but one end of the sign is wrongly extended.
8. O1, house, (*pr*) with N25, mountains (*HAst*) which can mean foreign country
9. Possibly a papyrus in flower crossed by F13, ox horns, (*wpr*) meaning open/beginning/brow
10. Z7, spiral (*w*)
11. ?
12. ?
13. ? Hathor - horns round head
14. ?D55, two legs walking
15. R8, banner, (*nTr*) meaning god
16. ? . Like R8 but bent
17. F34, heart, (*ib*)
18. G17, owl (*m*) meaning in/with
19. V28, twisted flax, (*H*); ?=*ptH* (the god Ptah)
20. V30, basket, (*nb*) meaning lord

- 21. ?O51, granary, or O24, pyramid (*mr*)
- 22. ?. Like F32, belly of animal (*Xt*) but sign differs.
- 23. Head of animal. ?F7, head of ram, meaning dignity (*Sfyr*) but horns droop.
- 24. Either repeat of No. 20 with part of No. 1 or repeat of No. 1
- 25-32 Repeat of Nos.2-9.

The other lines have the same signs in a different order except that the repeat of No. 6 at the end of the lower line is different. These signs and the figures of *nut* and the two ladies have been mocked but I am hopeful a more expert reader may be able to make some sense of them. I am not convinced they are gobbledegook. Their creator clearly had some acquaintance with hieroglyphs even if some of his representations are odd. Furthermore, the repainting in 1960 may not have been accurate. It is hoped this will become apparent when those parts that are not easily visible are examined, since they may have the original paint and designs. So far only a green background has been found which may originally have been blue and have faded.

John Parsloe

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Tim Wander is a Senior Project Manager with responsibility for the maintenance, development and restoration of Northwood House. He has a lifelong interest in the early days of wireless, broadcasting and Marconi and has authored many books and papers and continues to act as a historic consultant on these and many other subjects.

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