

HOW MUCH DO YOU KNOW ABOUT THE OBELISK?

When walking down the main path in Colchester

Cemetery, you cannot help but notice an unusual gravestone.

It is well known by most people in Colchester that this was the Obelisk that used to stand in High Street and was subsequently purchased by Charles Wire. It is a mystery as to why he bought it, because at that time his wife, Mary Ann, who was the first to appear on it, was very much alive. There are, however, some other imponderables regarding the Obelisk that you might like to consider.

These include, from where did it originate? Who erected it, when and why? Exactly, when and why was it removed? The answers to some of these

questions are not known, for certain, but when one is in possession of a few facts, we can come to some reasonable conclusions.

It is generally accepted that the Obelisk was constructed by the builder, James Deane (1698 - 1765) who did a great deal of work for Charles Gray (1696 - 1782) and George Wegg (1706 - 1777). They both lived at the top of East Hill, Charles Gray in Holly Trees and George Wegg at East Hill House.

For Charles Gray, James Deane built several structures in the Castle Grounds and these included the west wing of Holly Trees. For George Wegg, he built the gothic folly in the corner of his garden that stretched to the rear of the Minories where it still stands.

James Deane was also an architect and surveyor who drew a plan of Colchester for the Rev. Philip Morant for his book on the history of Colchester, published in 1748. Included on his map are drawings of the structures that he had built by that date and although they are small, they are of a larger scale than in reality. He did not include the large windows on the south side of the Castle that he inserted into Charles Gray's library because this did not happen until 1754/5 and the dome over the staircase until 1760.

In a corner of George Wegg's garden, behind St. James' Church, James Deane has drawn an obelisk on top of a mound but there is no obelisk in High Street. This suggests that in

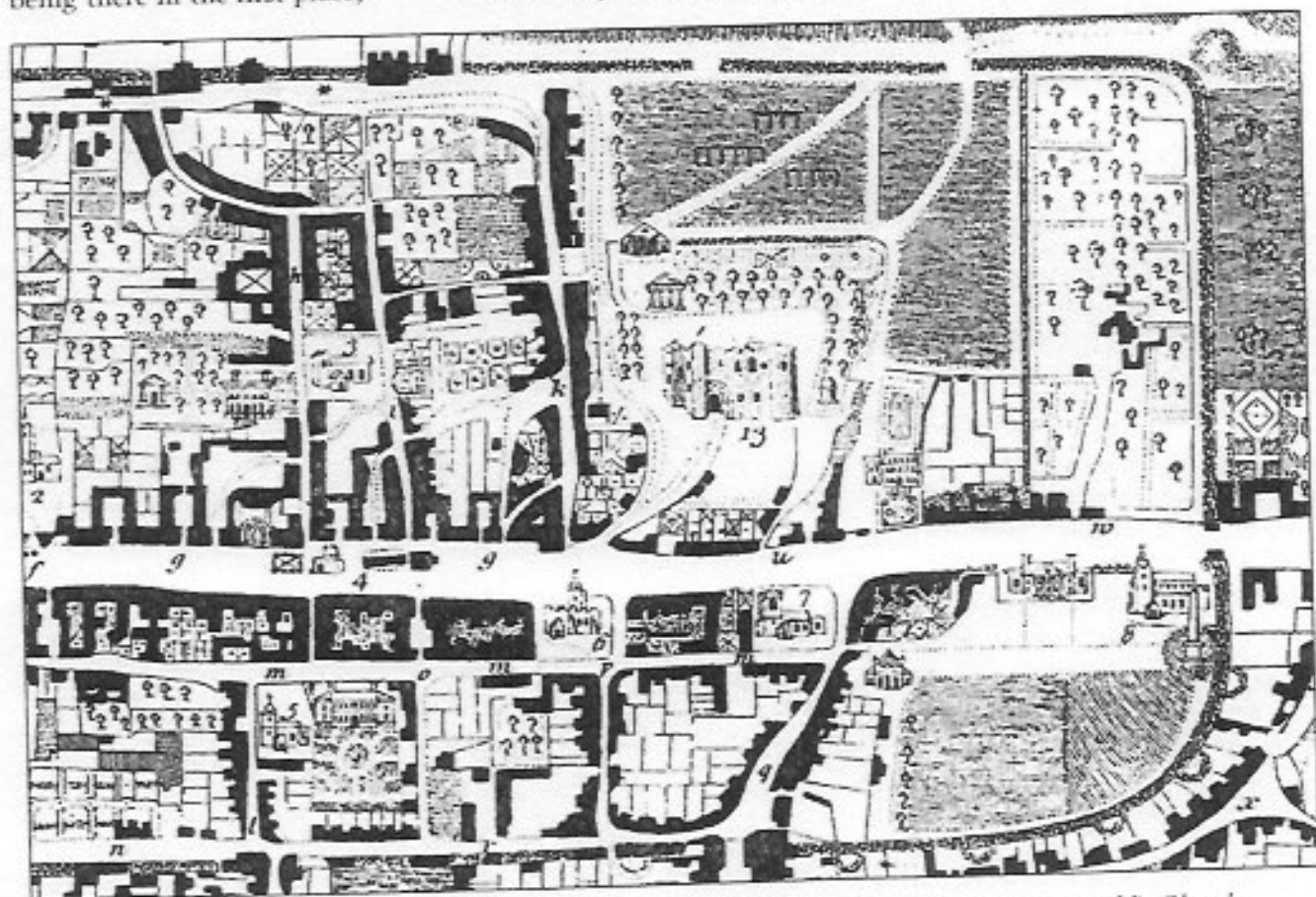
1748 the Obelisk, constructed by James Deane, had not yet been erected in High Street because it was standing in the corner of George Wegg's garden. On later maps, the Obelisk is shown in High Street and the top of the mound in George Wegg's garden is empty. In 1767, it is called a 'mount' and in 1777, it is drawn as an empty mound. On a map of 1876, the 'Site of Obelisk' is shown in High Street and the mound, then in the garden of Mrs. Margaret Round (1806 - 1886), is still present with steps leading up to a flagstaff. Alongside this is an entrance to an 'Ice House' and this clearly was the reason for the mound being there in the first place,

in order to cover the top of the brick-built Ice House. The remains of the Ice House are still there although now no longer accessible.

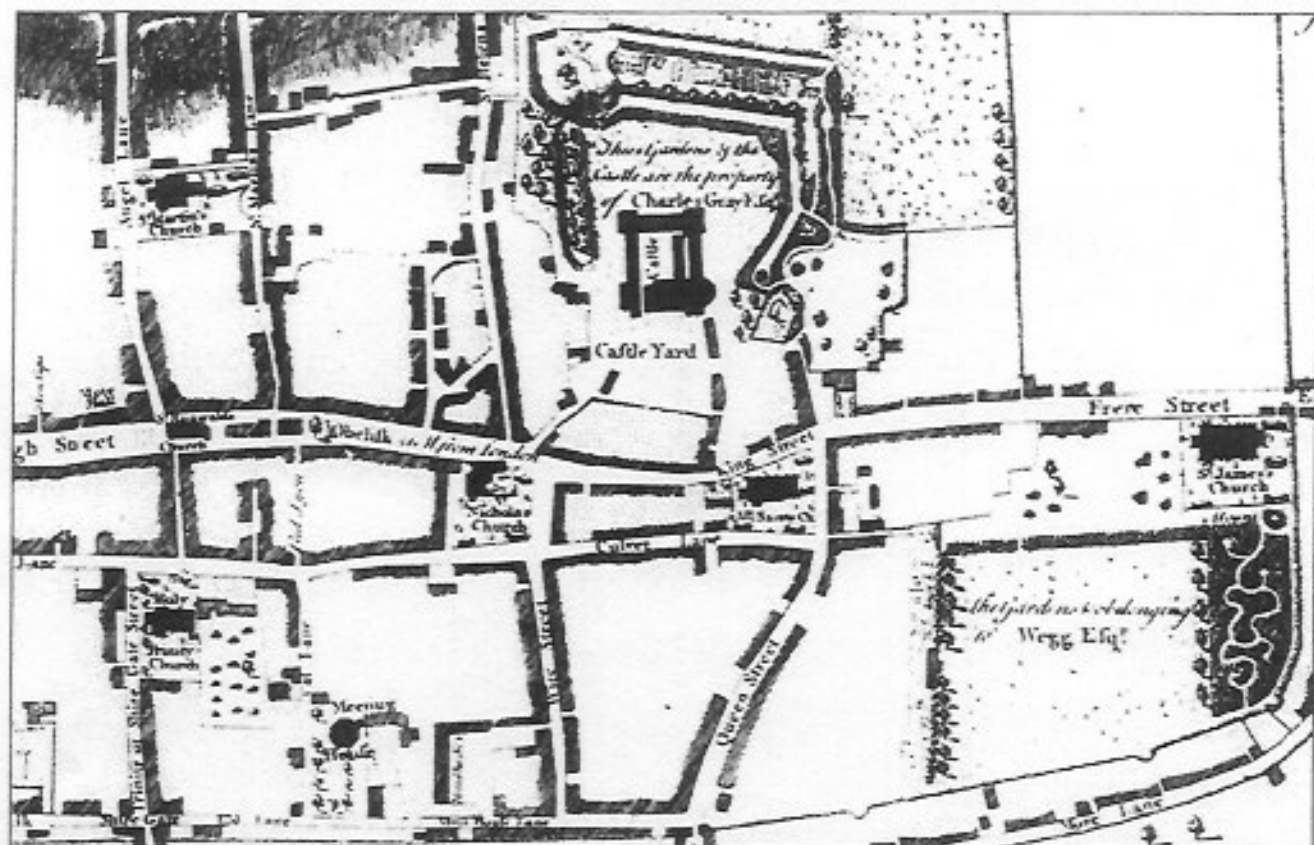
The exact spot in High Street where the Obelisk stood was opposite number 122, 23 feet from the shop front and 9 feet east of the eastern corner of 123 High Street (Mann's Music). Now, approximately, it is the site of a rectangular litter-bin. Close to that spot, there was a property and to the east of it a small piece of land, all owned by Charles Saunders until he died on 8th November 1754, aged 65. In his will of January 1755, he bequeathed the property and the piece of land to his friends, Charles Gray and George Wegg.

In 1755, they gave the property, later numbered 140 and 139 High Street, to the incumbent rector of St. Nicholas Church and its ownership continued with successive rectors until it was demolished in May 1816.

Although Charles Gray had been defeated in the General Election of 1754, he was a turnpike trustee and ideally placed to be responsible for the erection of a milestone on the small piece of land in the High Street, formerly owned by Charles Saunders. He must have asked James Deane to paint the obelisk, as I have suggested from George Wegg's garden, with lettering that showed the distance in miles from various places - 51 from London, 22



The 1748 map shows, in the middle of High Street (ref. 4), the Butter Market, St. Runwald's Church, the two parts of the Shambles but no Obelisk. In the Castle Grounds, there are the three small buildings built by James Deane and the west wing of Holly Trees. Further to the east, on the opposite side of High Street, in the garden of East Hill House, is the gothic folly and to the rear of St. James' Church (ref. 8), is the Obelisk



Harwich, 18 from Ipswich, 61 from Norwich and 71 from Yarmouth and a lamp was added to the top, either then or later. The first reference found for the existence of the Obelisk in High Street is in the *Ipswich Journal* of 29th November 1755 when a shop, that later became number 117 High Street, was reported to be 'near against the Obelisk'.

Therefore, my conjecture is that prior to 1748, James Deane constructed an obelisk for George Wegg and placed it in the corner of his garden, on a mound of earth covering the top of his Ice House, at the back of St. James' churchyard. Then, at the request of Charles Gray and George Wegg, he changed it into a



milepost, sometime between January and November 1755 and re-erected it on the small piece of land in High Street that they had inherited from Charles Saunders.

The Obelisk stood in High Street for 103 years until it was

ABOVE:

The 1767 map shows the Obelisk, in the middle of High Street and the Castle Gardens, the property of Charles Gray. In George Wegg's garden is the empty 'Mount' at the rear of St. James's Church.

LEFT:

Drawing by James Dunthorne, junior, published in 1792. It shows Joseph Mitchel, pie-man, standing by the Obelisk offering his mutton and kidney pies and challenging a boy to toss a coin for him to win a pie. The Obelisk is sited here, in front of the Bear Inn at 125 High Street that shows the sign of a bear and the name of the innkeeper, Thomas Chamberlain.

removed prior to the demolition of Middle Row because it was thought to be cluttering up the street. It was auctioned on 27th January 1858 and purchased by Charles Wire for £3.5s.0d (£3.25) and removed the next day. Charles Wire (1810 - 1888) was a baker, corn merchant and former tea dealer in the parish of St. Botolph at 186 Magdalen Street. He was a cousin of William Wire (1804 - 1857), the antiquarian, watchmaker and letter carrier, by virtue of them both being grandsons of Sampson and Ann (née Waterman) Wire who had married on 20th May 1766 at St. James' Church.

After the death of Charles Wire's wife, Mary Ann on 15th

June 1859, aged 47, the Obelisk was erected for her in Colchester Cemetery, Mersea Road and inscribed as being 'This Ancient Obelisk, removed from the High Street, Colchester'. On the plinth, that was not part of the original Obelisk, appear the names of other members of the Wire family.

It was suggested, soon after its removal, that as the cab fares were calculated from the Obelisk, a marked stone should be laid marking the spot where it had stood. This, however, has still yet to be done, although now this would require moving the litter-bin.

Bruce Neville



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