



The Hovercraft Column Design

James Airy ARIBA

The Hovercraft Column's Design Philosophy

UNVEILING THE HOVERCRAFT CELEBRATORY COLUMN, SOMERLEYTON, SUFFOLK

The Hovercraft Celebratory Column at Somerleyton in Suffolk marks the birthplace of hovercraft, the only form of transport invented by a single man, Christopher Cockerell, and the only one without a precedent in nature. This celebratory column commemorating the invention and the inventor was unveiled on the centenary of Sir Christopher Cockerell's birth, the 4th June 2010, by his daughter Frances Cockerell.

Since ancient times columns and obelisks have been raised throughout the world to commemorate great events and people. Obelisks, such as Cleopatra's Needle, are abstract features, often memorials, whereas freestanding columns are more rare and of a freer design incorporating a feature or statue on top.

The progenitor of celebratory columns is Trajan's Column in Rome of AD114, 115ft tall. In 1671 Sir Christopher Wren and Robert Hooke designed the magnificent 202ft tall Monument commemorating the Fire of London. Perhaps the most famous celebratory column is Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square, 187ft, designed by William Railton and built in 1842 by Sir Morton Peto who also built Somerleyton Hall. However, the grand Nelson Column at Great Yarmouth, designed by William Wilkins predates Trafalgar Square. The most elegant celebratory column is the 145ft Jaipur Column by Sir Edwin Lutyens in Delhi, c.1925. A more recent such column, topped with a gilded galleon, is the Royal Naval Patrol Service Memorial in Bellevue Park, Lowestoft, designed by Frederick Crossley, and unveiled on 7th October 1953 by the Admiral of the Fleet, Sir Rhoderick McGrigor.

The Hovercraft Column at Somerleyton is topped by a bronze replica of the model which was the world's first hovercraft. Christopher Cockerell, used his original model for testing at Somerleyton in June 1956, and for demonstrating to others elsewhere. This 20ft high column is built of a beautiful cream-coloured oolitic limestone from Clipsham in Rutland, with a band of white limestone from Portland in Dorset bearing an inscription hand-cut in fine Roman lettering. The bronze casting appears to hover above the stone. Paving of concentric rings of brick and cobbles, imitative of ripples on the water encircling a hovercraft, will be laid when funds permit.

Lord Somerleyton, chairman of the commissioning group, kindly provided a marvellous site facing the large green in the centre of the delightful 'model' village built by Sir Morton Peto in about 1850 which is described in *Villages of Vision* as being 'still unchanged and remote, it probably remains the most successful functioning Picturesque village' in the country. The recently completed column respects the *genius loci* in its scale and design, and is easily assimilated into its remarkable setting.

Contractors:-

Architect: **James Airy** ARIBA In a varied range of work, he has completed numerous new buildings for Eton College, of which several are on the banks of the River Thames. Another commission was for the refurbishment of the Grade I Listed Provost's Lodge in the Founder's Building built by King Henry VI. More recently he designed the wavetank and laboratory buildings for Wavepower Ltd. *He has donated his input in honour of his late father-in-law, Sir Christopher Cockerell CBE FRS.*

Structural Engineer: **Richard Swift** of SFK Consulting. He has a high reputation for his work on historic and ancient buildings, and in that capacity he has for many years been the Consultant Engineer for Buckingham Palace and Windsor Castle. He is also employed by UNESCO in the saving of pyramids and mosques in Egypt, and by English Heritage and the National Trust. *He has very generously donated his services.*

Stonework: **Wells Cathedral Stonemasons** undertook the major restoration of the magnificent West Front of Wells Cathedral and have worked on many historic ecclesiastical and secular buildings throughout the country including Blenheim Palace and a number of Oxford University colleges, and new buildings. They run a continuing programme of apprenticeships maintaining this skilled traditional trade. *They most kindly donated a significant part of their input.*

Specialist Structural Reinforcement: **Cintec International Ltd** of Newport, South Wales; using their sophisticated patented system of reinforcement, they have saved many ancient and historic structures in remote parts of Egypt and India where working conditions can be dangerous, as well as in Greece, the USA and the UK where they have saved numerous bridges and important buildings from collapse. *They very generously donated the whole of their installation.*

Main Contractor: **MS Oakes Ltd** of Lowestoft have been involved from the beginning of work on the site two and a half years ago laying the deep foundation, right through to the lifting of the bronze and the fixing of it in place on the top of the column. This well respected company undertakes repeat contracts at James Paget Hospital, and has worked at Heveningham Hall. *They have most kindly donated parts of their input.*

Bronze Founder: **Morris Singer Ltd** of Braintree has made the bronze castings of many of the most famous sculptures on the streets of London, including the lions by Sir Edwin Landseer in Trafalgar Square and, more recently, the Battle of Britain Memorial on the Embankment and the statue of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother in the Mall, both by Phillip Jackson.

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4th June 2010