The Landmark Trust

EGYPTIAN HOUSE

History Album

Album compiled by Charlotte Lennox-Boyd

Re-presented in 2016, 2025

The Landmark Trust Shottesbrooke Maidenhead Berkshire SL6 3SW
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BASIC DETAILS:

Listed : **Grade I**

Two original cottages 18th century

Remodelled with Egyptian front 1834-37

Designer unknown, possibly John Lavin

Bought by Landmark: **1968**

Architect for restoration: **Paul Pearn of Pearn and Procter**

Contractor: **R V Rowe Ltd**

Royal Arms painted by: **Charlie Pockett**

Work completed: **1973**

2012 maintenance: **Ian Burgess & Osirion Conservation**

Contents

The Egyptian House

Summary

In 1834 John Lavin, bookseller, of Penzance, bought two cottages in Chapel Street for £396. He proceeded to raise the height of the building and to add to its street front the present remarkable pseudo-Egyptian façade, whose Royal Arms suggest that it was complete for the accession of Queen Victoria in June 1837.

John Lavin sold maps, guides and stationery in the Egyptian House, but his main business was in minerals which he bought, sold and exhibited here. The exotic building must have been intended to emphasise the bizarre and beautiful side of geological specimens, and to draw into the shop visitors to the town. At the time there was a great deal of enthusiasm for the study of minerals and fossils, particularly in Cornwall. Not only were the railways and the fashion for the seaside bringing the beginnings of tourism (Cornwall's principal business today), but because of the mining industry the county was a centre of scientific knowledge and enthusiasm. Cornish miners and engineers were carrying their expertise all over the world. Many of the rare specimens sold by Lavin in Chapel Street were found by Cornish miners while at work in the county, but others were brought back to him by those who came home from overseas. He is supposed to have been guilty of the occasional deception!

John Lavin married Frances Roberts in 1822 and they had two children, Edward and John. John, the younger, emigrated to Australia where he was a biscuit-maker. He died in 1881. Edward ran a stationery, bookbinding and printing business in the Egyptian House beside the mineral shop renting the premises from his father. Perhaps he was not keen on geology, because in 1863 a few years after his father's death, he sold the entire collection of minerals for £2500 to the great Victorian philanthropist, Angela Georgiana, Baroness Burdett-Coutts. With the proceeds he built a large hotel on the esplanade at Penzance, which he called Lavin's Hotel (now the Mount Bay's House Hotel).

Motifs derived from the Egyptian style of architecture (obelisks, pyramids, sphinxes etc) can be found throughout the history of European architecture. The association of so much Egyptian architecture with death meant that it was often used for monuments. With the development of more accurate scholarship, a greater range of forms and ornaments became available to architects especially after the French occupation of Egypt in 1798-9. One of the most prominent English exponents of the style was Thomas Hope (1769-1831) who designed furniture and interiors which were described in scholarly books. But the Egyptian style also appealed to those looking for novelty and publicity, and the Egyptian House would seem to be one such example.

Despite much debate on the subject it has never been proved which architect, if any, was responsible for its design. Peter Frederick Robinson and John Foulston are the names most often mentioned. Robinson, who advised the Prince of Wales on the Chinese furnishings at the Brighton Pavilion, was a pupil of

Holland and was a successful country house architect. He designed an' Egyptian Hall' in Piccadilly, London for a collection of curiosities. Again its purpose was largely advertising for its owner William Bullock. But there is no more than its affinity with the Egyptian House to link the two. John Foulston was closer to hand, practising in Plymouth in a great range of different styles. His 'Classical and Mathematical School', built in the Egyptian style and criticised at the time for being an imitation of Robinson, still stands somewhat altered as the 'Odd Fellows Hall'. Again there is no other evidence to link Foulston to the Egyptian House.

Later history and restoration by the Landmark Trust

The Lavin family continued to own the Egyptian House until 1910, while letting it to a variety of different tenants and shopkeepers. Then, after the death of George Lavin and his mother Georgina, it was sold to William and Fanny Legg (Drapers) of 8 Chapel Street. It was sold by their heirs to the Cornish Stone Company in 1951, who sold it in turn in 1968 to the Landmark Trust, these being the years when we were still supported by the Manifold Trust and could acquire by purchase as a matter of course (no longer the case). At this time it was divided vertically into two flats with two staircases. The shop in No 6 was empty, and the flat above occupied by Mrs Crichton, who had lived there since 1962. Mr Duckham had a millinery shop in No 7, and lived over it as he had since 1960.

Little had been done to the building since the alterations made by John Lavin, and the roof, with its small flaunched peg slates, was in poor condition. The walls - granite for the back and sides, brick chimneys, and brick and stucco for the Egyptian front - were also in a poor state, with the front beginning to come away from the side walls. Much of this was in need of repointing. The front had been repainted at some time in the 1950s, but the plaster itself was cracked, and some of the detail coming loose. Inside there was dry rot in the basement and ground floor, and woodworm throughout.

Work began on the repair of the building in 1970, and its conversion into three flats, each running the whole width of the building, with two shops below. The roof was renewed completely, with a new frame designed to prevent the walls from spreading any further. The back wall had been rendered, and this was stripped off, the stonework made good and repointed. The bow window of the staircase, part of Lavin's remodelling, was repaired, and given an inner skin to make it more draft proof. A new window was made in the north wall of the third floor, to light the bedroom, and the windows in the rear wall on all floors were enlarged, again to give more light.

Inside, the dry rot was eradicated, the floors treated and also strengthened, and new floor made up where the extra, and now unnecessary staircase had been. The remaining staircase was given a curved inner wall, to balance the curve of the window. New kitchens and bathrooms were fitted.

Before doing anything to the front of the building, it was carefully analysed in its existing state. For many years we believed the ornament was made from Coade stone, and maintenance work in 2012, by which time more also was known about Coade stone, revealed that the ornamentation is cast not fired, in what is thought to be a French cement. Paint scrapes were also done in 1973, and it was on the basis of these, and on research into the colours used in the Egyptian revival, that a scheme for painting was drawn up which has been respected since. The windows of the upper floors retained their original sashes and glazing bars, and just needed minor repairs. However the ground floor windows had been altered quite early on - at least by the date of an engraving of c.1859, which shows them with plate glass. Luckily, the mortices were still there in the sashes, and working from these, and from engravings of Robinson's Egyptian Hall, and Foulston's Library, the existing pattern of glazing was worked out. To complete the work, the Royal Arms were repainted, shining out to startle the seagulls in Lavin's showcase front.

George Tressider Hernaman John Lavin (1865-1909) Grandson of John Lavin, he was born after his father had sold the mineral business, but the Egyptian House itself was not sold until after his death. Here he is with his wife Arabella Annie (née Harris, 1879-1945) and his children George and Bella. The photograph must have been taken in 1906, the year Bella was born.

The Egyptian House & the Lavin family

In 1834 John Lavin, bookseller of Penzance, bought two cottages in Chapel Street for £395, and proceeded to raise the height of the building and to add to its street front the present remarkable pseudo-Egyptian façade. The Royal Arms on the building suggest that it was complete before the accession of Queen Victoria in June 1837. John Lavin sold maps, guides and stationery in the Egyptian House, but his main business was in minerals, which he bought and sold and exhibited there. The exotic building must have been intended to emphasise the bizarre and beautiful side of geological specimens, and to draw into the shop visitors to the town. At the time there was a great deal of enthusiasm for the study of minerals and fossils, particularly in Cornwall. Not only were the railways and the fashion for the seaside bringing the beginnings of tourism (Cornwall's principal business today) but because of the mining industry the county was a centre of scientific knowledge and enthusiasm. Cornish miners and engineers were carrying their expertise all over the world. Many of the rare specimens sold by Lavin in Chapel Street were found by Cornish miners while at work in the county, but others were brought back to him by those who came home from overseas. He is supposed to have been guilty of the occasional deception:-

> 'undoubted Lake Superior coppers came to acquire Cornish labels. A rare example of a faked crater pseudomorph, made from sheet lead coated with cassiterite, is among Lavin material in the Natural History Museum.'

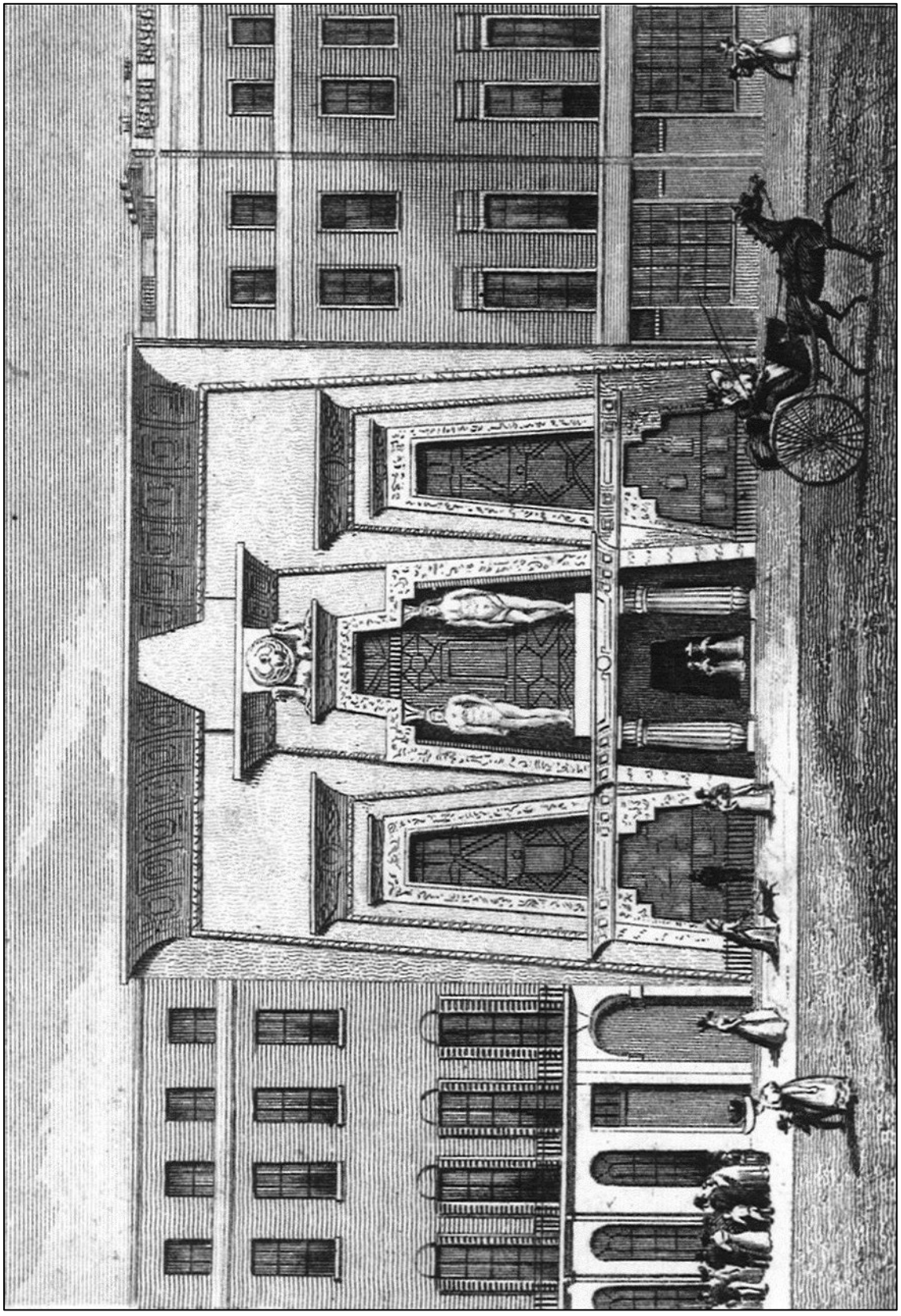
One miner who supplied Lavin with many rarities was James Wall of the Carnyforth, to whom he is supposed to have 'owed half his fortune'. He sold 'instructional cabinets with printed catalogue leaflets as well as individual specimens.'[1]

[1] P G Embrey and R F Symes*: Minerals of Cornwall and Devon* (London and Tucson Arizona 1987)

We do not know where John Lavin was born, or anything about his upbringing. On 5 February 1822 he married Frances Roberts of Paul, and he died in Penzance on 14 November 1856.

Frances died in the Egyptian House on 19 March 1864 aged 61. They had two children, Edward and John. John, the younger, emigrated to Australia, was a biscuit-baker, and died in North Parade, Fort Adelaide, 2 May 1881. Before his father's death, Edward had run a stationery, bookbinding and printing business in the Egyptian House, beside the mineral shop, renting the premises from his father. Perhaps he was not keen on geology, because in 1863, he sold the entire collection of minerals he had inherited for £2,500 to the great Victorian philanthropist, Angela Georgiana, Baroness Burdett-Coutts [2] With the proceeds he built a large hotel in the esplanade at Penzance, which he called Lavin's Hotel (now the Mount's Bay House Hotel). He died there on 21 July 1876. His widow, Georgiana Carbine Tressider Lavin, nee Hernaman, whom he had married at Mylor on 30 April 1854, survived him with two children, George and Fanny aged about 11 and 8. The 1871 Census shows that two of her sisters lived with them in the hotel; after his death she went on running it, perhaps with their help, until at least 1883. She seems to have come from a family with Welsh connections, for she had been born in Swansea, though her elder sister, Patricia had been born in Mylor. Probably because of this when George grew up, he moved to Wales where he farmed and for a time kept the Red Lion Hotel at Caerleon, and where some of his grandchildren, at the time of writing, still live.[3]

[2] It was bought from her estate in 1922 by Sir Charles Russell, from whom it passed to his brother Sir Arthur Russell, who left his collection to the British Museum (Natural History), See Embrey and Syme, op cit, 70
[3] In his will of 1906 he calls himself a 'Licensed Victualler' but his son George's birth certificate in 1904 describes him as 'Retired Farmer'.



P.F. Robinson's Egyptian Hall' in Piccadilly

The Egyptian Style in Architecture

The Egyptian style in architecture is unusual but not ridiculously so. Motifs derived from the architecture of ancient Egypt (obelisks, pyramids, sphinxes) can be found throughout the history of European architecture, and the Hermeticists of the Renaissance and the Freemasons of the seventeenth century both cultivated the study of that mysterious civilisation.

The association of so much Egyptian architecture with death meant that it as often used for monuments. With the development of more accurate scholarship, a greater range of Egyptian forms and ornaments became available to architects, especially after the French occupation of Egypt in 1798-99. In England one of the most prominent exponents of theEgyptian style was Thomas Hope (1769-1831), who designed furniture and interiors which he described in influential books. He was a scholarly connoisseur, but the Egyptian style appealed also to those who wanted novelty and publicity. It seems clear that the builder of the Egyptian House was one of these.

Much ink has been spilt on the question of which architect was responsible for the design of the Egyptian House, but there is no evidence that one was employed at all, far less any proof in favour of a particular candidate. Peter Frederick Robinson (1776-1858), and John Foulston (1772-1842) are the names most often mentioned.

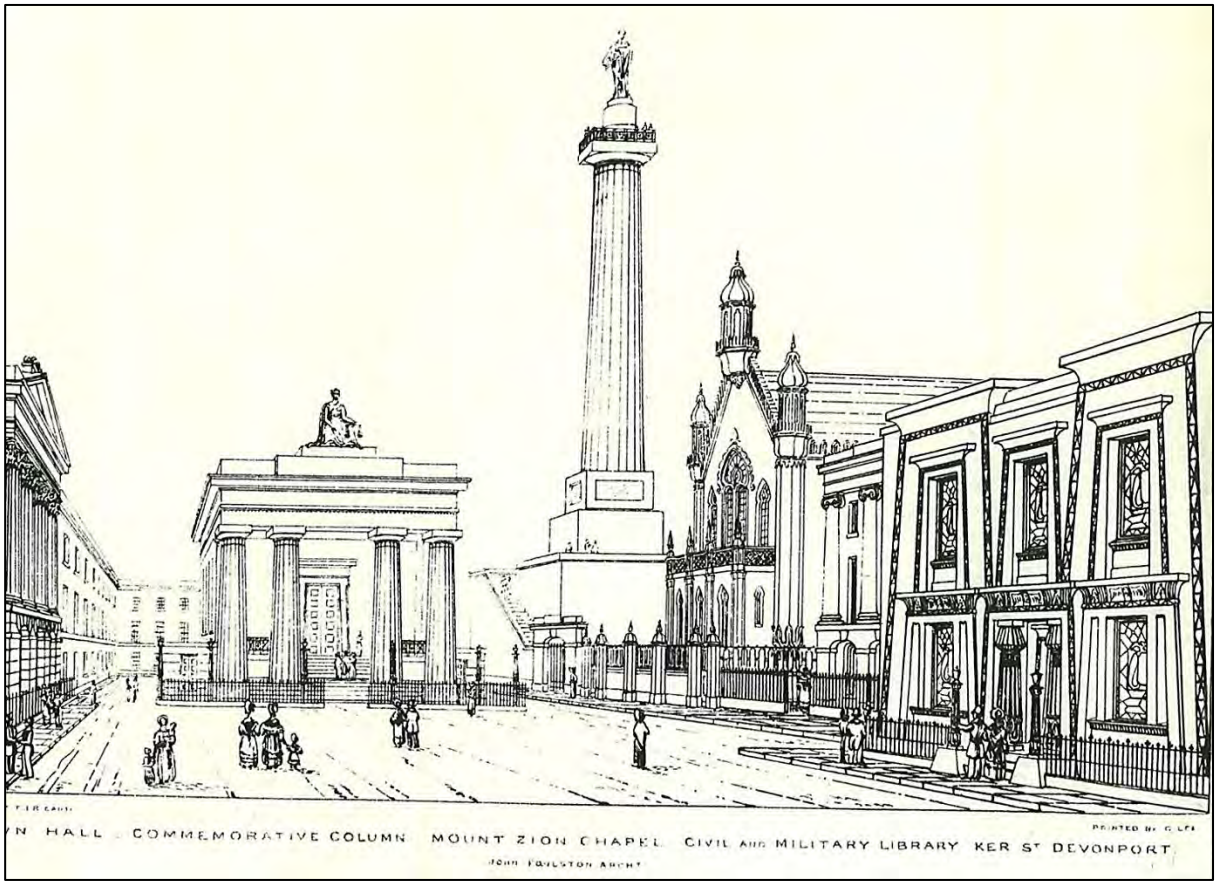
Robinson, who advised the Prince of Wales on the Chinese furnishings of the Brighton Pavilion, and built a Swiss Cottage in Regent's Park, was a pupil of Holland who had a fairly successful career as a country house architect until late in life, he was driven to live, like Beau Brummel, in France out of reach of his creditors. The principal argument in favour of the theory that he designed the Egyptian House is the fact that in 1811-12, he had built at Nos. 170-3 Piccadilly, a building for William Bullock's collection of curiosities.

The front of Robinson's Egyptian Hall on Picadilly, embellished with two colossal nude statues of Isis and Osiris, was depicted in several engravings, and doubtless lured many customers into Bullock's Museum.[4] Professor Carrott described its style as 'Commercial Picturesque' i.e. 'probably erected for advertising purposes to appear novel, picturesque and different'[5]. In 1819 a room in the interior was transformed by J. B. Papworth into a top lit Egyptian hall with Hathor-headed columns supporting a gallery, and there, in 1821 were displayed the antiquities dug up by the great Italian explorer and pioneer archaeologist, G. B. Belzoni, including the sarcophagus of Seti I. This was bought by Sir John Soane and can still be seen in his museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields, whose layout preserves for us some idea of the arrangement of a Regency collection of curiosities. Bullock's, and indeed John Lavin's museums were doubtless more popular versions.

Robinson's Egyptian Hall was unscholarly and flashy, but also influential. Clearly it has affinities with the Egyptian House, but they probably result from no more than that the latter's builder saw and admired a print of the former. John Foulston was closer at hand, whose work is not as well-known as it deserves, since it suffered badly in the Plymouth blitz. A pupil of Thomas Hardwick, he began his career in London, but moved to Plymouth after winning, in 1811, a competition for the design of the Royal Hotel Assembly Room and Theatre. His watercolours of his buildings are in the City Art Gallery. He built in Ker Street Devonport, a curious range of houses including a Greek town hall, some Roman houses, an oriental chapel and an Egyptian library. The latter building which still stands, recently restored though much altered, was built in 1823 and was criticised at the time for its imitation of Robinson, even though its design was more authentic.

[4] These statues were not, as is sometimes stated, of Coade stone (information from Miss Alison Kelly)

[5] James Stevens Curl, *The Egyptian Revival; an Introductory Study of A Recurring Theme in the History of Taste* (London 1982) citing Richard G Carrott *The Egyptian Revival, its Sources, Monuments and Meaning*, 1808-1858 (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 1978), 35.



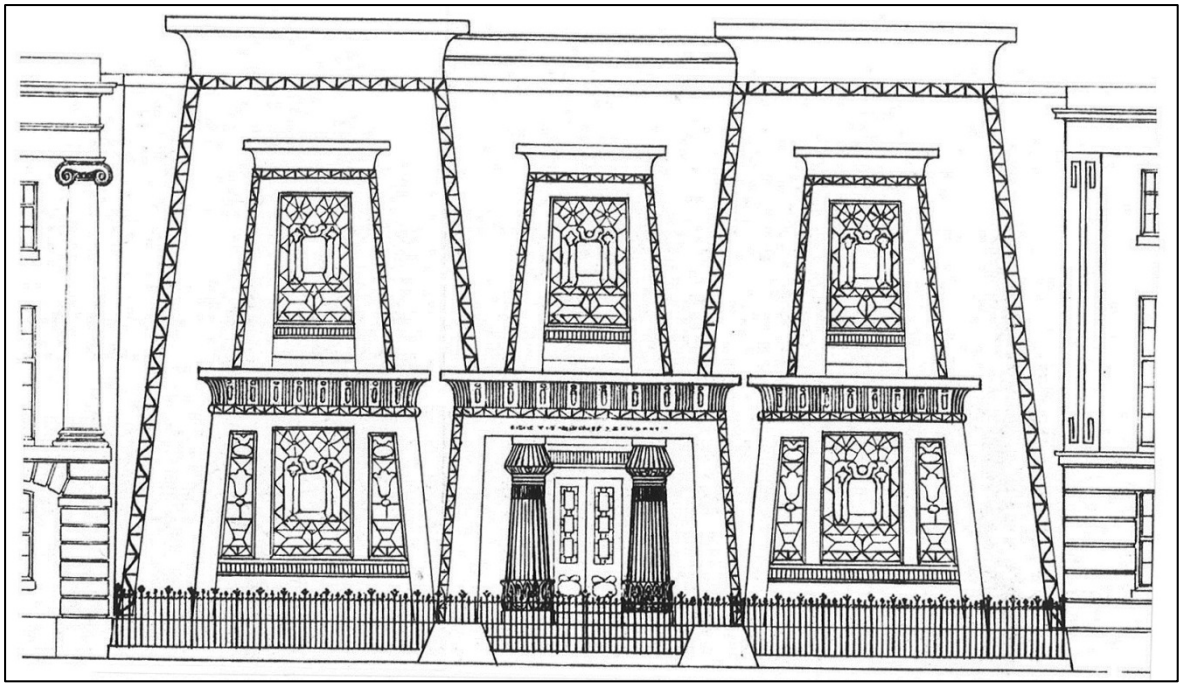
John Foulston, *The Public* Buildings erected in the West of England (London 1838):

> *Notwithstanding the grandeur and exquisite proportions of the Grecian orders, the author has never been insensible to the distinguishing beauties of the other original styles; and it occurred to him that if a series of edifices, exhibiting the various features of the architectural world, were erected in conjunction, and skilfully grouped, a happy result might be obtained.*
>
> *Under this impression, he was induced to try and experiment, (not before attempted) for producing a picturesque effect, by combining, in one view, the Grecian, Egyptian, and a variety of the Oriental, as will be seen in Plate No. 81, the view of Ker Street, Devonport.*
>
> *Should the critic be indisposed o admit the full propriety of thus congregating, withing one view, several buildings of different styles, the author trusts he has preserved himself free from the abomination of having exhibited a combination of styles in the same building.*

According to P.A.S. Pool, Fouston's Egyptian-ate library was built as a Classical and Mathematical School, but was remodelled as a Civic and Military Library to house the mineral collection presented to it by Sir John St Aubyn. The library interior, sadly destroyed, had Egyptian embellishment too. Dr James Stevens Curl describes the Egyptian House as much wilder' than Foulston's work [6]

Still less compelling is the evidence for an attribution for the Penzance Egyptian House to Philip Samtell (born Devonport 1798), a deaf and dumb architect in Truro who wrote in the 1820s for the Cornish Institution on Egyptian Architecture. He built many houses and Baptist chapels in Cornwall, Redruth Methodist church and a savings bank in Truro which is now the Museum. He may have been a pupil of Foulston[7].

[6] Curl, op,cit, 130
[7] Information from Mrs Williams of Truro



An engraving from John Foulston's *Civil and Military Library* and about a hundred years later, in 1942, by which time it had become the 'Odd Fellows Hall'.

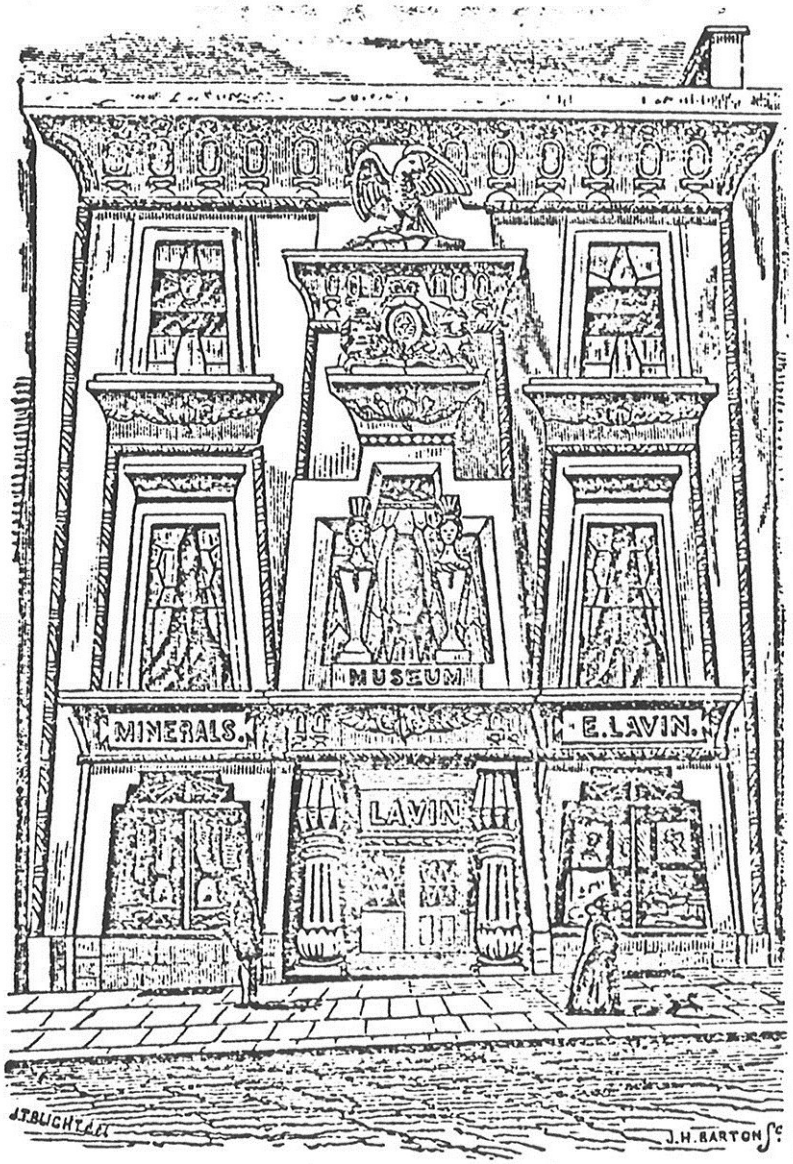
Examples of houses in which Egyptian ornament has been applied to an ordinary late Georgian terraced house. Nos 58-60 Richmond Avenue, Islington, London (NMR photo 1945 and a house in Holloway Street, Exeter, (1988).

Besley's Hand Book Advertiser.

THE Students of Mineralogy and Geology who may desire to obtain Specimens of a regular series of the MINERAL PRODUCTIONS OF CORNWALL, are respectfully requested to send to

Lavin's Museum, Chapel-street, Penzance.

Prompt attention given to all orders from a distance.



ROUTE BOOKS and Maps of Cornwall, Hand and Guide Books of Penzance and Neighbourhood. An extensive and interesting series of VIEWS in Cornwall.

Minerals selected for the instruction of learners, at any price from £2 to £5. Collections arranged and described, as follow:—One Hundred Specimens, neatly fitted in Cabinet, £10; more extensive Collections, and first-rate Specimens, from £20 to £50 and upwards, according to quality and number.

N.B. A Specimen of Carbonate of Iron from Wheal Maudlin Mine, for which £130 have been refused, as well as a great many others, supposed to be unrivalled.

GEOLOGICAL COLLECTIONS.—These comprehend the varieties of the primitive formations of Cornwall, from £1 and upwards, arranged according to their localities.

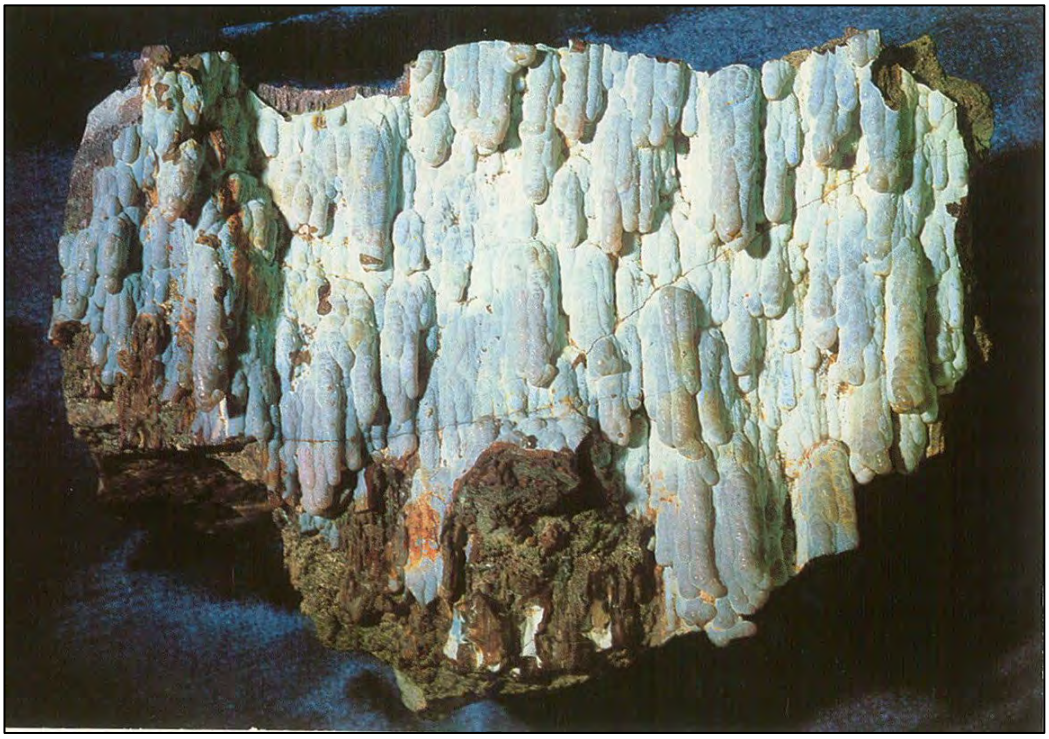
2

An advertisement that appeared in guides and handbooks in the 1850s – the only view we have of the Egyptian House in its original ownership.

Cornish Minerals

Some examples of the type of material sold by John Lavin in the Egyptian House.

Chalcopyrite, from the Camborne – Redruth district



Chalcedony, from the Pednandrea Mine, Redruth

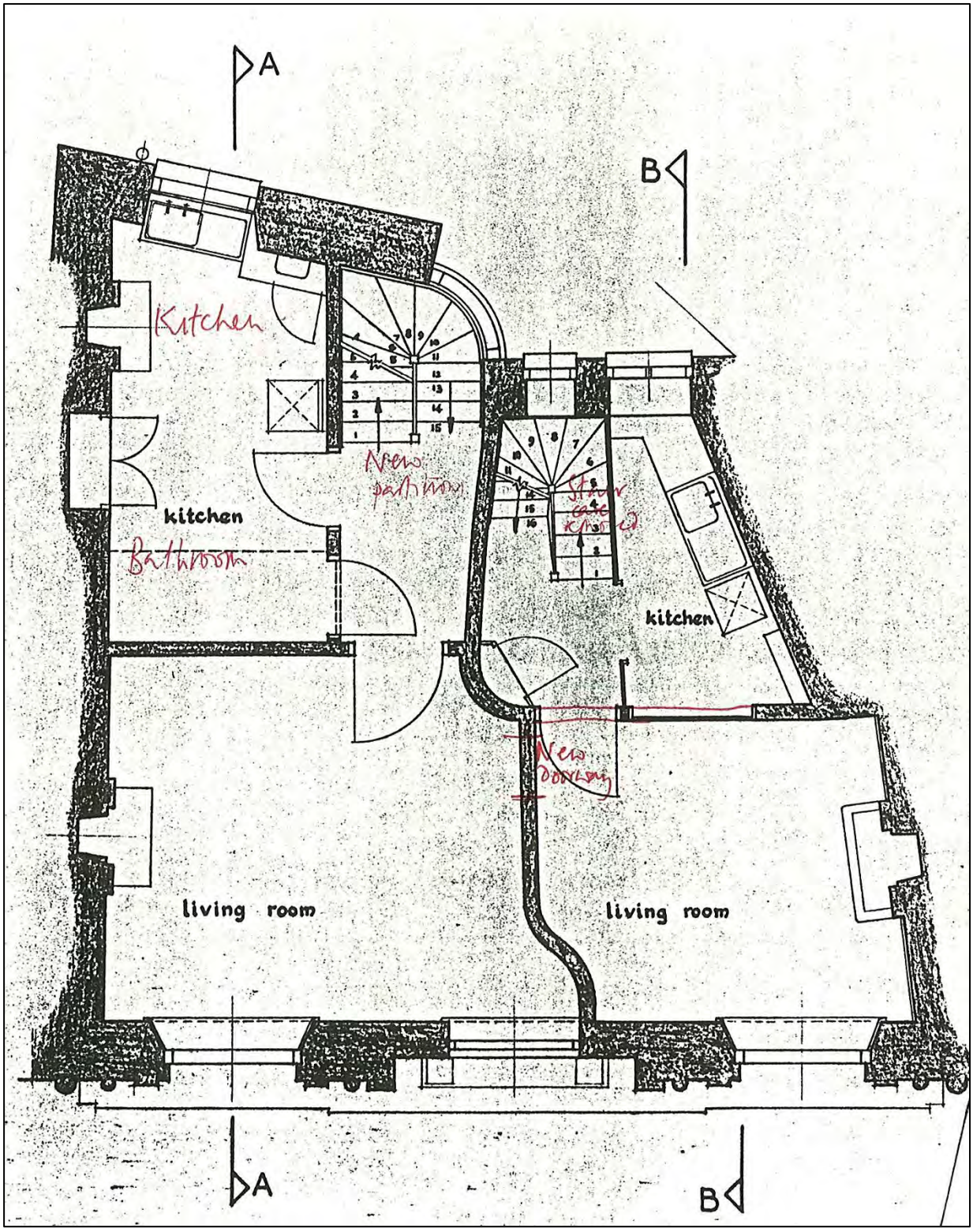
Above, copper from Lake Superior and below, fluorite on quartz, from Menheniot, Cornwall.

The Egyptian House (1939).

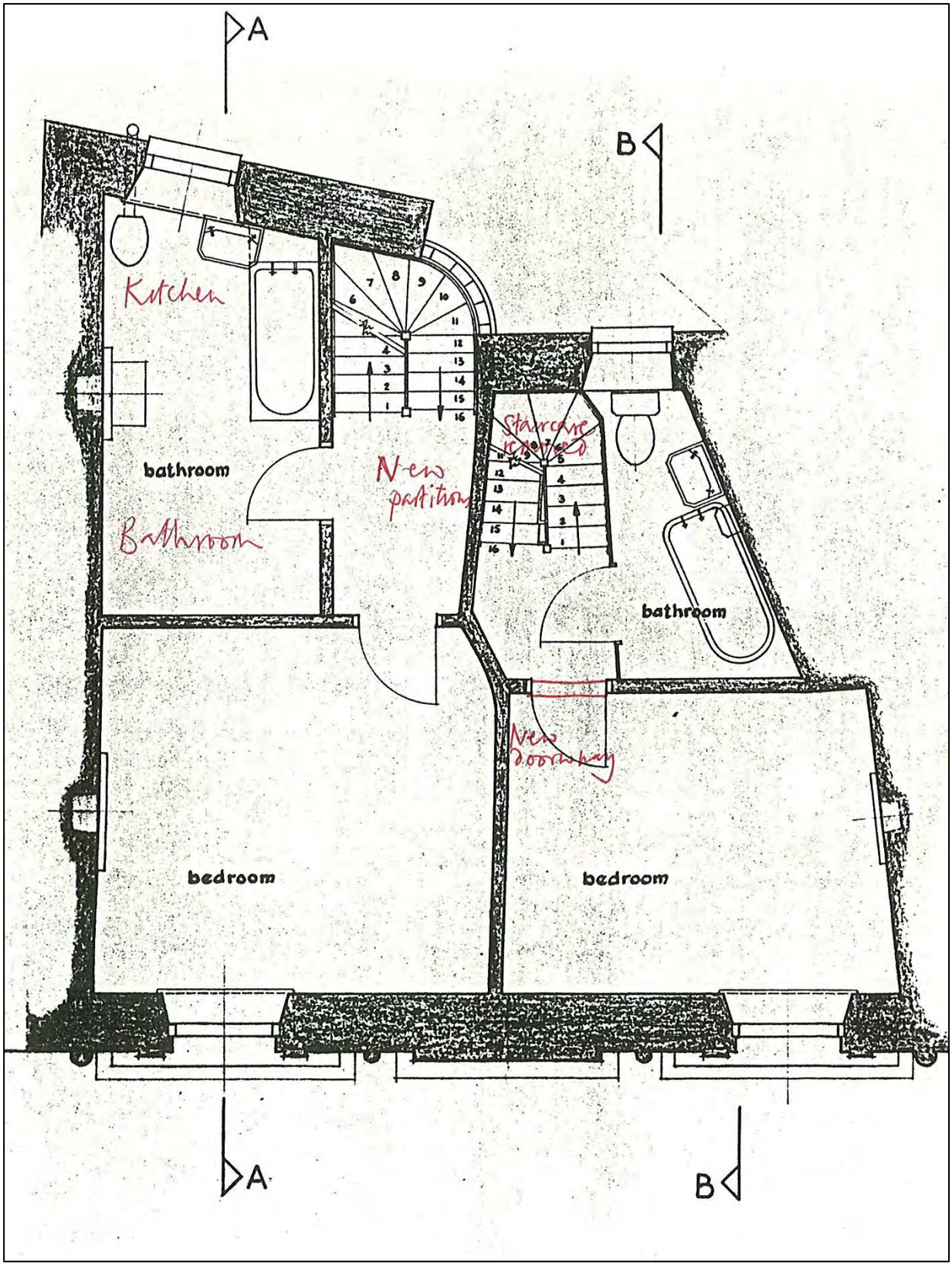
The Egyptian House (1949).

Detail of the Egyptian House (1939).

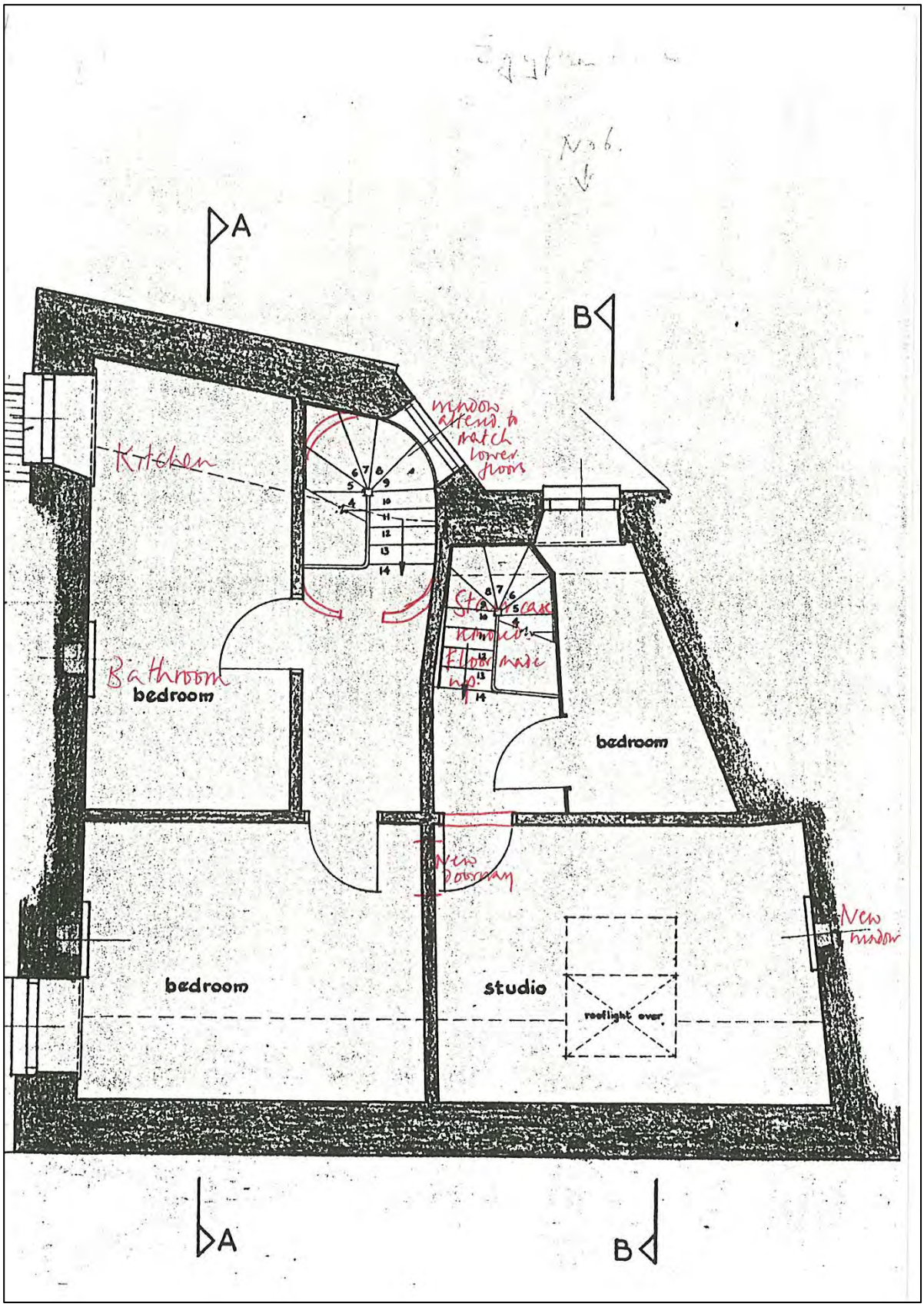
The Egyptian House (October 1966).



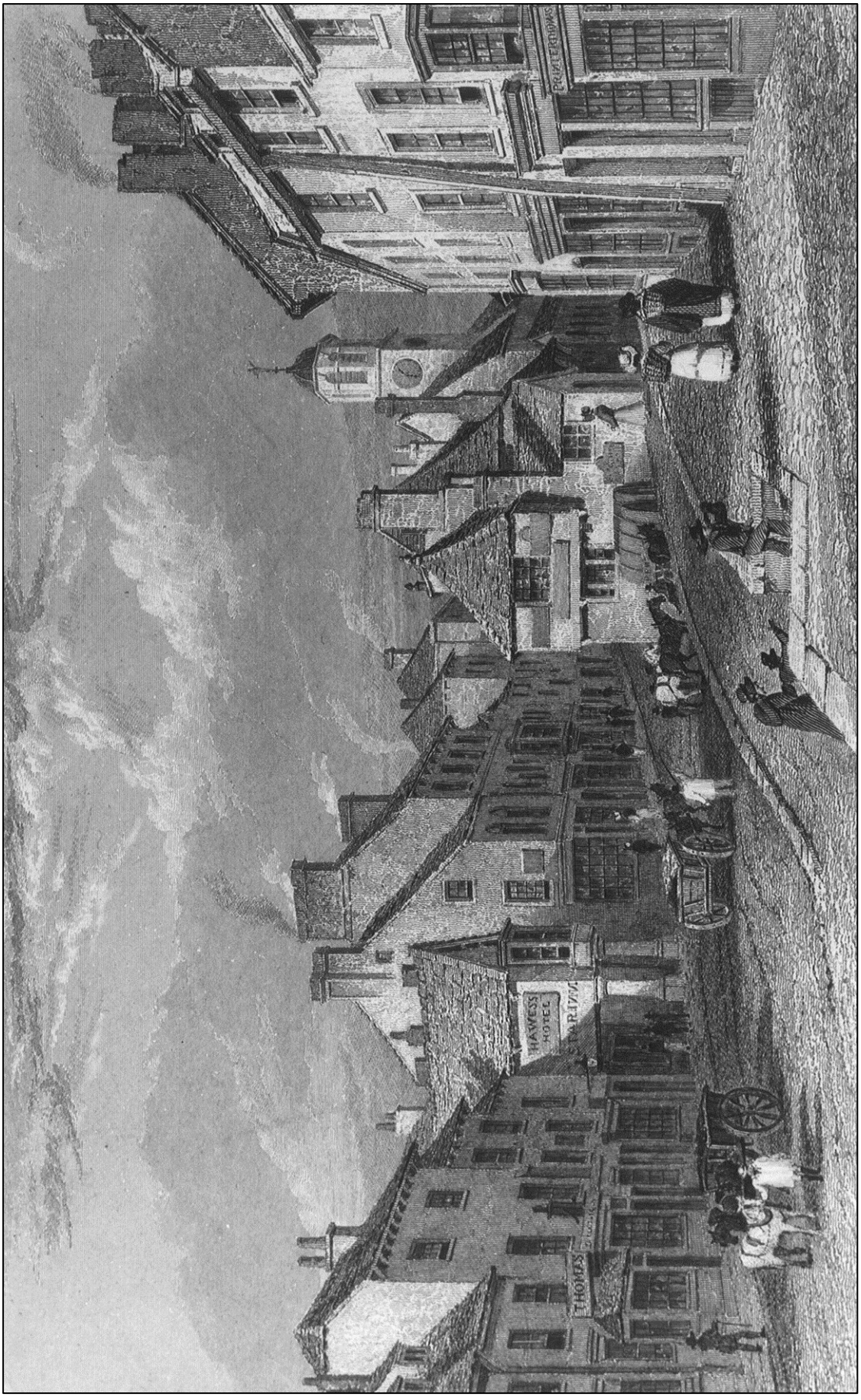
First floor plan



Second floor plan



Top floor plan



Alexandra Terrace, Penzance (c. 1831) in a print by Thomas Allom in *Cornwall Illustrated* (1831)

Victorian Penzance

Murray's Handbook for Devon and Cornwall (1852) describes Penzance from the point of view of the Victorian tourist:

> *'Penzance, a municipal borough containing 9,500 inhab. (Inns: Union Hotel; Western Hotel; Three Tuns). By means of numerous steam-vessels, it has constant communication with Bristol, Plymouth, and London. The Esplanade is one of the very best in the W. of England, and has a delightful view towards the land as well as towards the sea. At one end of it are the Royal Baths. Below the Town Hall are the fish-stalls. A market has been built for their reception in Princess Street, but as the fish-women assert a prescriptive right to this locality, they remain here. The business is entirely conducted by women, who were formally distinguished by a jaunty beaver ht. This however, has been superseded by the bonnet....They bring their fish to market in the cowel – a basket universally used here by the women, and in which they carry great weights. It is supported on the back, and by a band passed around the forehead. Among the curiosities of the market the stranger will remark the conger eel, a fish of formidable appearance – a kind of sea-serpent – which the poorer people cook in their favourite pies. The Royal Geological Society of Cornwall (north Parade) which now ranks among the most distinguished institutions in the kingdom. The Queen is the patron, Prince Albert the vice-patron, and Sir Charles Lemon the president. The Museum for which, however, the accommodation is very inadequate, contains a valuable collection of minerals, principally Cornish, consisting of several thousand specimens. Observe as unusually fine those of calcedony, soldlite, haűyne, petalite, colophronite, vesuvian, carbonate of lead, specular iron, arseniate of iron, the oxide, carbonate, arseniate, and phosphate or copper, native gold from the tin stream-works, arsenical pyrites, uranite, uran ochre, and native nickel. Here also may be seen Mr. Peach's unique collection of Cornish fossils, including the 'Polperro*

Sponges,' as first called ichthyolites; several interesting casts, the bones of a whale taken from the Pentewan stream-works, and a splendid slab of sandstone imprinted with the foot-marks of the chirotherium from Cheshire. Penzance contains another fine collection of minerals, the property of the late Joseph Carne Esq F.R.S. It has also a Nat. Hist and Antiq. Soc., established in 1839, and Agric Soc.; a Cottager's Garden Soc.; and Institute and a Lit Instit., a Public Library; and in the possession of E.H. Rodd Esq, one of the family of Trebartha Hall, near Launceston, and an excellent ornithologist, a museum of native birds, probably the most complete and valuable private collection in the county. Lavin's Museum, Chapel Street is the store of an experienced dealer in Cornish minerals.

On the 23rd and 28th of June a curious custom is observed in this town – the celebration of the Eves of St John and St Peter. At sunset the people assemble in the streets and kindle a number of tar-barrels, erected on the quay and on other conspicuous places, and aid the illumination with blazing torches as long as mopsticks, which they whirl around their heads. Bonfires are also lighted at Mousehole, Newlyn, Marazion and the Mount, and the bay glows with a girdle of flame. Then follows the ancient game of Thread-the-Needle. Lads and lasses join hands, and run furiously through the streets, vociferating 'An eye – an eye – an eye! At length they suddenly stop, and the two last of the string, elevating their clasped hands, form an eye to this enormous needle, through which the thread of populace runs, and thus they continue to repeat the game until weariness dissolves the union.' On the following day the festivities assume a different character, and idling with music on the water (called 'having a pen'orth of sea') succeeds to the riot of the previous evening. With respect to the origin of this curious custom, the summer solstice has been celebrated throughout all ages by the lighting up of fires, and the Penzance festival on the 23rd is doubtless a remnant of that most ancient idolatry, the worship of the sun.

With respect to the climate of Mount's Bay, the following is a comparison of the mean temperature of the seasons in Penzance and London

Seasons	*Penzance*	*London*
Spring	*49.66*	*48.76*
Summer	*60.50*	*62.32*
Autumn	*53.83*	*51.35*
Winter	*44.66*	*39.12*

The mean range of daily temperature for the time of year in Penzance is 6.7' F, in London 11° F. Thus for equability and warmth, the climate of western Cornwall is far superior to that of London.'

(We leave it to the meteorologically curious to compare these temperatures with today's.)

Mid-20thC (?) shopkeeper outside the Egyptian House.

Later History & Restoration

The Lavin family continued to own the Egyptian House until 1910, while letting it to a variety of different tenants and shopkeepers. Then, after the death of George Lavin and his mother Georgina, it was sold to William and Fanny Legg (drapers) of 8 Chapel Street. It was sold by their heirs to the Cornish Stone Company in 1851, who sold it in turn to the Landmark Trust in 1968.

At this time it was divided vertically into two flats with two staircases. The shop in No 6 was empty, and the flat above occupied by Mrs Crichton who had lived there since 1962. Mr Duckham had a millinery shop in No 7, and lived over it as he had since 1960. Little had been done to the building since the alterations made by John Lavin, and the roof, with its small flaunched peg slates, was in poor condition. The walls- granite for the back and sides, brick chimneys, and brick and stucco for the Egyptian front – were also in a poor state, with the front beginning to come away from the side walls, and much need of repointing. The front had been repainted at some time in the '50s, but the plaster itself was cracked, and some of the detail coming loose. Inside there was dry rot in the basement, and ground floor, and woodworm throughout.

(As this was such an early project for Landmark, we have no good work-in-progress photos or indeed much detail on the works carried out.)

Work began on the repair of the building in 1970, and its conversion into three flats, each running the whole width of the building, with two shops below. The roof was renewed completely, with a new frame designed to prevent the walls from spreading any further. The back wall had been rendered, and this was stripped off, the stonework made good and repointed. The bow window of the staircase, part of Lavin's remodelling, was repaired, and given an inner skin to make it more draught-proof. A new window was made in the north wall of the

third floor, to light the bedroom, and the windows in the rear wall on all floors were enlarged, again to give more light.

Inside, the dry rot was eradicated, the floors treated and also strengthened, and new floor made up where the extra, and now unnecessary staircase had been. The remaining staircase was given a curved inner wall, to balance the curve of the window. New kitchens and bathrooms were fitted.

Before doing anything to the front of the building, it was carefully analysed in its existing state. At the time, Landmark thought that the external ornamentation was made from Coade stone, a fired architectural stoneware very popular in the late-Georgian and Regency periods. However, the Coade firm's Lambeth manufactory was in decline by the 1830s and finding it here would have been most unlikely. (The 2012 redecoration of the exterior -¯see below - confirmed once and for all that composition used for the embellishments was not a fired ceramic but a cold-cast, cementitious formulation).

Careful paint analysis was done in the 1970s, and it was on the basis of these, and on research into the colours used in the Egyptian revival, that a scheme for painting was drawn up. Having done all this, the decoration was repaired, and the front repainted. The windows of the upper floors retained their original sashes and glazing bars, and just needed minor repairs. However the ground floor windows had been altered quite early on – at least by the date of the engraving of c 1859, which shows them with plate glass. Luckily, the mortices were still there in the sashes, and working from these, and from engravings of Robinson's Egyptian Hall, and Foulston's Library, the existing pattern of glazing was worked out. To complete the work, the Royal Arms were repainted, shining out to startle the seagulls in Lavin's showcase front.

The Egyptian House given a facelift in 2012

Work in progress during 2012


DIEU.ET.
MON.DROIT.

Sources

Much of the information about the Lavin family was gleaned from John Lavin's great great grandchildren, Mrs P M Roberts of Monmouth, Mr Peter Lavin of Newport, Mrs Maggie Bede of Thoralby, and Mr John Lavin of Woonona and to them I am very grateful.

Apart from those mentioned above, the following books and articles were helpful in preparing these notes or may be of interest to those wishing to pursue the subject:

G C Boase *Collectanea Cornubiensa;A collection of Biographical and Topographical Notes relating to the County of Cornwall*, Truro 1890

Edgar A Rees *Old Penzance,* Penzance 1956

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What have the Egyptians ever done for us?

PHILIP KNOWLING

Egyptian influence in the gardens and follies of Britain

Ancient Egypt has been inspiring the Western world for well over 200 years. Folly builders have long been enamoured of pyramids and obelisks—but the parallels with and connections between this long-lost African civilization and eccentric European architecture are deeper and more complex.

While never as pervasive as Greek or Gothic design, our fascination for things Egyptian has been enduring. There have been two periods when the style became fashionable: the first in the early nineteenth century, after Napoleon took both soldiers and scholars to Egypt (the Battle of the Nile took place in 1798 and the discovery of the Rosetta Stone in 1799); the second in the 1920s, after Carter and Carnarvon discovered the tomb of Tutankhamun (1922). This latter phase was pivotal in the development of Art Deco design.

Architecture

The clean-cut, stylish and imposing lines of ancient Egyptian architecture make a pleasing alternative to Classical Greek and Roman forms. It's remarkable how modern, even futuristic, the buildings of the Pharaohs can look. Curiously, when you travel in Egypt, you see any number of mud-brick, dust-coloured look-out posts perched on hilltops that catch the eye without being eye-catchers. They appeal to the folly hunter and evoke all the emotional reactions that genuine follies generate. But our real interest here is the work of the ancients.

Three main forms have entered our architectural vocabulary: pyramids, obelisks and temples. Of these, obelisks seem to be the most numerous. Many are war memorials, perhaps because they came to us out of the Napoleonic conflicts. Of the rest, some hint at or echo Egyptian design while others are all-out attempts to bring Ancient Egypt to Britain.

The Egyptian pyramids were built during the era of the Old Kingdom, roughly between 2700 BC and 2200 BC. The Great Pyramids at Giza were erected during the Fourth Dynasty. A wander through *Follies, Grottoes and Garden Buildings* (Headley & Meulenkamp, Aurum Press, 1999) reveals Tong, in Shropshire, which has a folly aviary (1842) and a folly pigsty; both, after a fashion, pyramidal.

The pyramid at Blickling, Norfolk, said by Headley & Meulenkamp to be the finest in England, has a base 45 feet square. It just pre-dates the Napoleonic revival, being built in 1794. Mad Jack Fuller's pyramidal mausoleum at Brightling in Sussex (**PICTURE BELOW**) dates from 1811; in terms both of function and form it connects directly to the great pyramids of Egypt.

Mock-Egyptian temples are fewer and further between. Original Egyptian temples were built on a strict plan not dissimilar in some ways to the layout of Western churches; they consisted of rectangular enclosures and courtyards with a shrine at the heart of the complex. The Egyptian House in Penzance, Cornwall (1830) and the Egyptian Library in Devonport, Plymouth (1823)—both built by John Foulston—were inspired by Pharaonic architecture.

Temple Mills, in Leeds, shows that Egypt-mania influenced industrial architecture too. The administration block of 1843 was based on the temples at Edfu, Dendera and Philae. The trapezoid construction, winged solar discs (representing the god Ra) and massive columns with lotus flower capitals make for a mightily impressive building.

The Freemasons' Hall, Boston, Lincolnshire is also in the temple style. Nikolaus Pevsner refers to the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly in 1812—a talking-point when built, it was demolished in 1905. The Egyptian House in Penzance is said to have been a copy.

Egyptian style is not restricted to times of passing fad. Farley Mount, in Hampshire dates from 1735, while the pyramidal structure of Compton Pike is of sixteenth-century origin. James Wyatt's mausoleum at Cobham, Kent dates from 1783. As an aside, Cobham has a bizarre Egyptian connection: the Victorian painter Richard Dadd murdered his father here because the Egyptian god Osiris commanded it...

Egyptian-style gardens are thin on the ground, although Pharaonic elements such as obelisks can be seen across the country. The most famous Egyptian garden in Britain must be at Biddulph Grange, Staffordshire (1842–1869). Here the Egyptian garden boasts pyramidal topiary, sphinxes and Pharaonic gates.

Obelisks

To the ancient Egyptians obelisks represented the rays of the sun turned to stone. They were cut in single, massive blocks to reflect the power and might of their builders. They called them Tekhenu, a word whose derivation is lost. Our word obelisk comes from the Greek Obeliskos, meaning a small cooking spit. The Arabic term is Messalah, meaning a needle.

Egyptian obelisks looted from their desert homeland became metropolitan landmarks as well as garden ornaments; they found their way to Rome, Istanbul, Paris, New York and London. What we know as Cleopatra's Needle in fact belonged to the powerful pharaoh Tuthmosis III. First promised to Britain at the start of the nineteenth century, the obelisk was finally erected on the Embankment in London in 1878.

There are obelisks all over the country, standing as single monuments or within designed landscapes. You'll find them at Hatherleigh, Mamhead and Bicton in Devon, Wellington (in Somerset), Higham (between Gravesend and Rochester), Swarland (dating from 1807) and Lanton (1830), both in Northumberland. The obelisk at Helmingham, Suffolk, has Napoleonic connections: it was a rallying point for local militia. There are garden obelisks at Castle Howard (Vanbrugh, 1714), Blenheim in Oxfordshire and Stourhead (topped by a sun disk ornament).

The Waterloo Monument of 1818 at Great Torrington, Devon, is too broad to be an obelisk and too slender to be a pyramid—whatever it is, it looks recognizably Egyptian.

Egyptian style manifests itself in other forms and in other places. Sphinxes can be found at Oldway Mansion, South Devon, Goodwood House, West Sussex and Biddulph Grange. The Egyptian style was popular in graveyards and cemeteries—take a look around Highgate Cemetery, or see the Earl of Kilmorey's mausoleum in Twickenham (built in 1850 for his mistress).

There's one further connection that, although dubious, deserves mention. Egyptian obelisks, like many British follies, were built without much in the way of foundations.

Culture

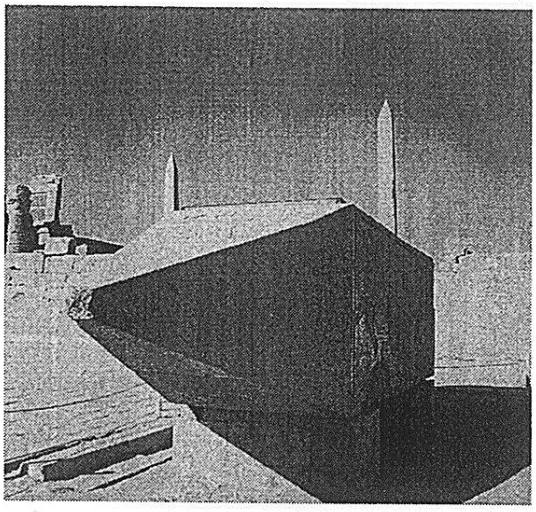
In Pharaonic Egypt the rich built and the poor worked; such was the order of things. One theory suggests that, when there was no work in the fields due to the flooding Nile, men laboured to build temples and tombs. Similarly, follies in this country have been devised to give the workers work on more than one occasion.

It's probably fair to say that Egyptian Pharaohs and British folly-builders have shared certain character traits. No doubt the architecture of kings and gods appealed directly to the well-developed egos of some of our great eccentrics. Mad Jack Fuller may not have seen himself as a living god, but he certainly aspired to architectural immortality.

Egyptian follies

Egypt may have supplied and inspired follies in Britain, but has the country any follies of its own? Well, there's the Manial Palace in Cairo. Here a wealthy prince brought together different strands of Arabic architecture with Rococo excess. One room was brought in its entirety from Damascus. There's a pseudo-Moroccan tower and displays of sometimes macabre curiosities. This may or may not be a folly, but it will certainly appeal to people who love follies.

Several ancient structures in Egypt can nowadays be argued into the category of folly. Abu Simbel, on the shores of Lake Nasser, and the island temple at Philae date back over 3,000 years. They were once holy sites. However, in the 1970s both were moved in mammoth operations coordinated by UNESCO, the cultural arm of the United Nations, because the waters held back by the new Aswan High Dam threatened to drown them forever. Today Abu Simbel has been relocated, built into the face of a false mountain, while Philae was taken down and moved to another island landscaped



to look like the original. Taken out of their holy context and the subject of epic efforts, both sites are now in a sense sham temples, placed for dramatic effect.

Art

The influence of ancient Egypt through art should also be noted. Piranesi brought Egyptian design to Europe in the mid-eighteenth century, advocating its use in things such as chimney-pieces. A Europe-wide Egyptian Revival in the 1920s was reflected in aspects of the Art Deco movement.

The art of the Victorian painter David Roberts (1796–1864) was filled with romantic ruins and exotic remains; he travelled extensively in Egypt and recorded what he saw with both precision and imagination. He achieved fame as an artist largely through his paintings and lithographs of the faded glory of Egypt. No doubt there are sham ruins all over the country inspired by his depiction of these genuine ruins.

In conclusion

Egypt has temples, tombs and monuments built by rich, powerful men who wanted to be remembered; the idea is familiar to anyone with an interest in follies. The scale might be very different, but the results are strikingly similar. More importantly, ancient Egypt has inspired some of our greatest eccentrics and some of our most stylish follies.

Ancient Egyptian architecture was about power and control—the Pharaohs built big to intimidate both their subjects and their enemies. Folly builders have likewise built to impress—though they were usually seeking to outdo neighbouring gentry rather than neighbouring countries.

Egyptian design has a small but significant place in folly history. It has been at times both scorned and celebrated, but it has given us one of our most recognizable ornamentations: the obelisk. What have the Egyptians ever done for us? Quite a lot, actually.

TOP LEFT: **HELMINGHAM OBELISK**
BOTTOM LEFT: **HIGHGATE CEMETERY**
ABOVE: **OBELISKS IN HOME GROUNDS**

BOOK REVIEW

DOBSON ON DOBSON

A Photographic record of works associated with John Dobson (1787–1865).
HARRY G. DOBSON.
Bishop Aukland: The Pentland Press Limited. 2000. xii + 283 pp. £25. ISBN 1-85821-813-6

It is worth setting the scene with a direct quote, that this book is 'basically and essentially a photographic record of the surviving works associated with Newcastle architect John Dobson.' As such it is an excellent catalogue raisonné; as an example of how co-operative owners can be (in this case in the counties of Northumberland, Durham and Cumbria), it is very refreshing. In defining his scope, Harry Dobson has concentrated on those buildings with a substantial connection with the architect; these are then arranged chronologically, in six successive, but seemingly arbitrary periods.

This book makes an excellent companion to the two principal works that have already appeared on the architect (in 1980 and 1987), which whilst being stronger on historical and archive material, lack the wide coverage resulting from Mr Dobson's considerable travels. So what is included? Having just been re-reading *The Destruction of the Country House*, let's start with the vulnerable Axwell Park, near Blaydon. It makes sad viewing, with its boarded-up window frames and smashed panes in the upper storey—yet it survives, unlike so many other country houses needlessly demolished in the last century alone. Despite the fact that Dobson's Hawthorn Tower went in the 1970s, it is illustrated courtesy of other sources. It is only when presented with such a good visual record that one gets to appreciate the extent of John Dobson's work: numerous churches, the two Navigational Beacons on Ross Sands, the prison at Wooler, fish markets, bridges (including the 'New Bridge' at Morpeth, which seems to have been a particular focus of the author), castles, and Newcastle upon Tyne's Central Station. The odd garden temple aside, the Collingwood Monument at Tynemouth is probably the closest thing that we get to a folly.

It is a shame that Harry didn't delve deeper into the 'sources' for Dobson—he clearly has the ability, but possibly that is not his passion. Any favourites? I just love 'the charming little external stair' at Doxford Hall, Northumberland, but I'm not so sure that removal men would be so appreciative. One look in the book and you'll see what I mean.—MGC

EGYPTIAN HALLS, UNION STREET, GLASGOW (1871-1873)

FRONT ELEVATION

Egyptian Halls was described in an advertisement of 1874 as 'the great purchasing emporium of the city for all kind of useful, ornamental and fancy articles and goods of the newest and most varied description'. (Picture reproduced with permission by Dr. Ronald McFadzean.)

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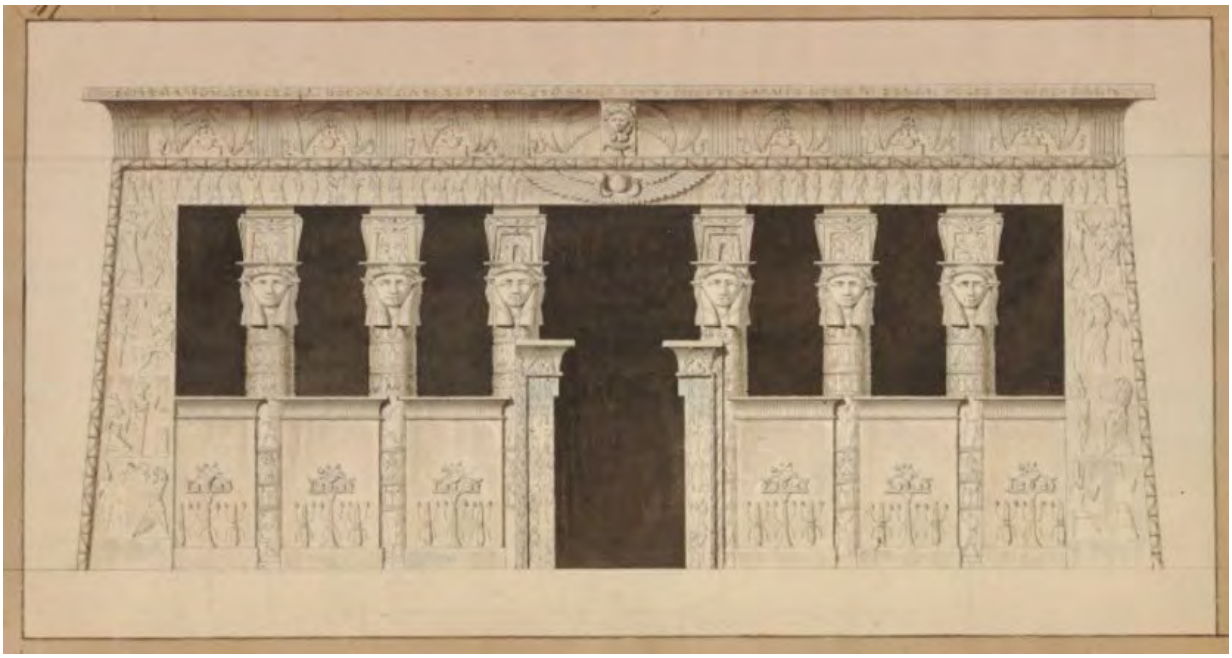
More on Egyptomania

To this day, there is nothing in the country quite like The Egyptian House for wholehearted Egyptiana and gaudiness. As with so much in the Regency period, its origins lie in the Napoleonic Wars. In May 1798, as part of his Mediterranean campaign, Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Egypt, ostensibly to liberate the Egyptians from Ottoman rule but in reality to protect French trade interests and undermine Britain's access to India. He took with him a Commission on the Sciences and the Arts: 167 artists, scholars and scientists as well as the more predictable military engineers and surveyors. Their mission was to record what they found.

The French spent three years in Cairo, and it is a remarkable story. Three months after they landed, Nelson destroyed their fleet in the Bay of Aboukir in so-called Battle of the Nile, leaving Britain in control of the Mediterranean and the French army land-bound. Unperturbed, Napoleon set himself up as absolute ruler in Cairo and campaigns in Syria followed. Beset by plague and guerrilla warfare as well as resistance, the expedition eventually petered out in 1801, when Napoleon decided France needed him more. Such events were of course much in the public eye in Britain too.

Meanwhile the Commission had done its work in the most hostile conditions, and been awed and inspired by the ancient remains it encountered. ‘Since I came to Egypt, fooled by everything, I have been constantly depressed and ill,’ wrote one. ‘Dendera has cured me; what I saw today has repaid me for all my weariness; whatever may happen to me during the rest of this expedition, I shall congratulate myself all my life for having been part of it.’

Among the Commission members was Dominique Vivant Denon, an artist and archaeologist who in 1802 published a two volume set of engravings called *Voyage dans la basse et la haute Egypte* (*Journey in Lower and Upper Egypt*). An extended grand tour was now taking in Turkey or Egypt, and English upper class imagination was seized by the romance of the East.



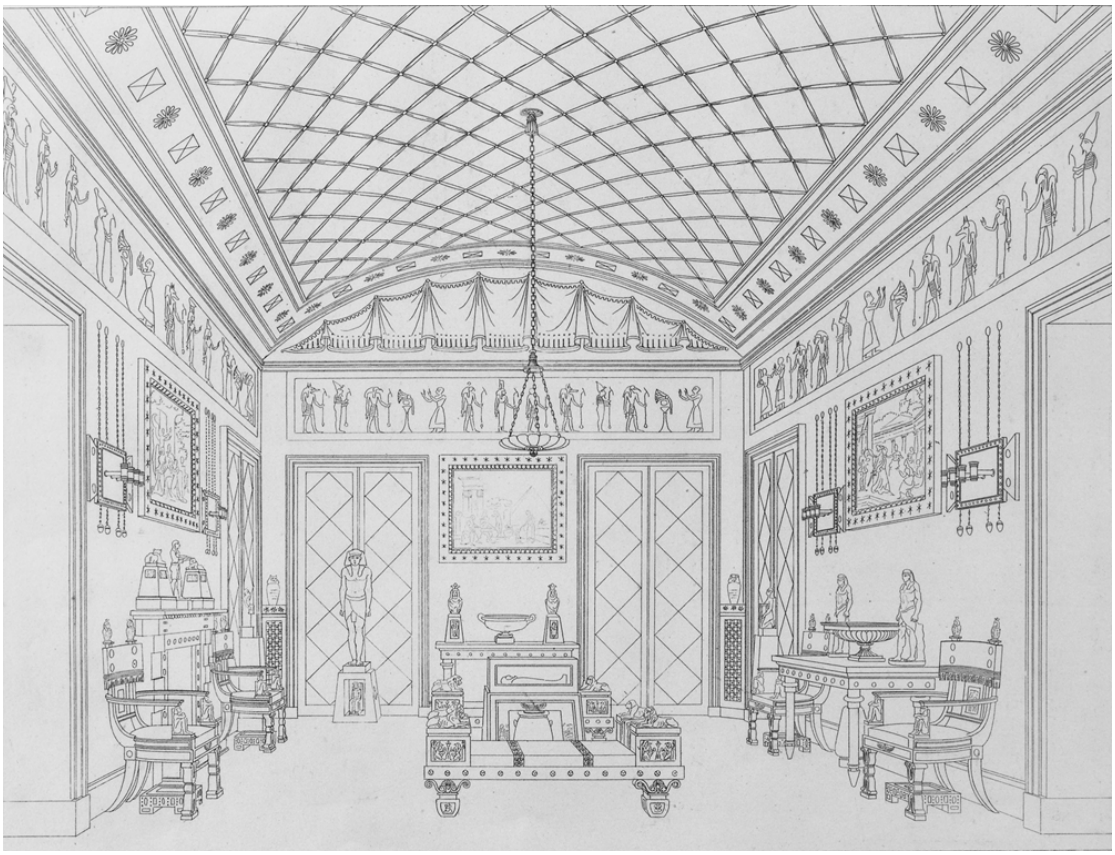
The Temple of Hathor at Dendera, from Dominique-Vivant Denon & Louis-Pierre Baltard, *Voyage dans la Basse et la Haute Egypte*, vol.2, 1802.

French pillaging of Luxor and Karnak made Egyptian objects increasingly desirable amongst the European elite, fuelled indeed by earlier collections of engravings, although none of these reached wide circulation. Denon's work soon became the source book *du jour.* An English edition was published the same year, initially in folio for 21 guineas, but then soon in pocket size for 10s or 14s in colour, 'attainable to all classes' according to the preface.

This passion for the Egyptian among the upper classes initially manifested itself chiefly in interiors. In 1802-6, James Wyatt built a new wing at Goodwood House for the 3rd Duke of Richmond and created a dining room sumptuously decorated in the Egyptian style. This was boarded over a hundred or so years later to please Edward VII, but is now triumphantly restored.

James Wyatt's Egyptian Dining Room at Goodwood House in West Sussex, designed c1805.

In the same years, Thomas Hope, hugely wealthy junior member of a Dutch banking dynasty of Scottish extraction, who had settled in London after an extended, seven- year Grand Tour that had included Egypt, bought a Neoclassical house in Duchess Street and set about remodelling it. He had eclectics taste but one of his rooms was in the Egyptian style, and was included in his *Household Furniture and Interior Decoration* (1807).



A design by Thomas Hope of an Egyptian Room, with a V & A curatorial reconstruction of a similar arrangement.

Hope became an influential arbiter of taste (the phrase ‘interior decoration’ itself is attributed to him) and sphinxes, winged discs of Horus, lotus buds and papyrus columns began to appear on clocks, candlesticks, vases, dinner services, bookends, wallpapers and fabrics as the fashion trickled down from the upper echelons of society.

Examples of designs by Thomas Hope.

However, little inclination was shown to adopt the Egyptian style on the exterior of buildings, until theLiverpudlian impresario William Bullock arrived in London with his Museum of Natural Curiosities and commissioned from architect Peter Frederick Robinson his museum in the Egyptian style at 170 Piccadilly, right opposite Burlington House. Its spectacular frontage was the first major public building in England with an Egyptian exterior.

Bullock's Museum at 170 Piccadilly, designed by Peter Frederick Robinson in 1809.

Its features defined the key elements that would be borrowed and diluted in hundreds of Victorian utility and civic buildings, and funerary monuments and cemeteries (the Ancient Egyptian preoccupation with the afterlife made the style especially appropriate, it was felt).

The alabaster sarcophagus of Seti, left, still in the Sir John Soane Museum in London. The colossal Head of Memnon, soon christened 'The Younger Memnon' is also still in the British Museum. Its twin still lies where it fell at the Ramesseum mortuary temple at Thebes.

The features that instantly allow us to identify something, even vaguely, as 'Egyptian' – the tapering pylons, columns modelled on bundles of papyrus reeds with lotus or palm capitals, the winged solar disc 'guarding' the entrance, the cavetto cornice with battered sides, the monumental supporting figures – all were present on Bullock's Egyptian Hall, an apparent time machine fetched up on one of London's premier streets.

The Museum was an instant hit, but by 1819 Bullock had had enough and sold his collection in an auction that lasted 26 days. The Egyptian Hall was taken over by an Italian strongman, performer and adventurer called Giovanni 'John' Belzoni, newly returned from Egypt. Belzoni's collection was known to include the sarcophagus of Seti I, hollowed out from a single piece of alabaster as big as a bath tub, and the massive head of the Younger Memnon from the Ramisseum at Thebes. His arrival was eagerly anticipated: Shelley's famous poem, *Ozymandias* about the Ramesseum was written for a newspaper competition in these days.

Weakened by dysentery, Belzoni only survived two years and in 1821 he too put his collection up for sale. The British Museum bought the Head of Memnon, and Sir John Soane the sarcophagus of Seti. Soane brought the sarcophagus to his own museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields and held a three day party to which he invited the cream of London society, filling the room and the translucent sarcophagus with oil lamps. Both objects remain highlights of international collections, relics of the heady days of the unprincipled removal of antiquities. Sir John Soane's Museum too is perhaps the closest we can come today to experiencing what a Regency museum of curiosities would have been like, albeit here of the highest order of taste.

By the 1820s, the London vogue for the Egyptian had peaked. When in 1818 Louis XIII presented the Duke of Wellington with the magnificent Sevres Egyptian dinner service, still on display at Apsley House today, there were fears it was out of fashion. The Egyptian Hall became a place where, still more surreally, Laplanders gave sleigh rides up and down the central space. (It

survived as an exhibition space until 1904, when this extraordinary example of Regency *brio* was demolished to make way for bland offices.)

Walking down Piccadilly today, there are only the merest hints of Egyptian in its buildings, and even these are now more likely to belong to twentieth-century Art Deco than Regency influences. In Chapel Street Penzance, however, John Lanvin's Egyptian House will continue to delight and intrigue in all its glory, its future safe in Landmark's care whatever the vagaries of fashion.

Caroline Stanford, 2016