

# Immortal longings

*Knockbreda, Belfast, Northern Ireland*

An outstanding group of late-18th-century mausolea at Knockbreda are being restored by the Follies Trust. John Goodall reports on the last stage in the project

**T**HE church of Knockbreda was erected in 1737 at the expense of Anne, dowager Viscountess of Middleton. It then stood in the shadow of Belvoir Park, a large neo-Classical house that enjoyed fine views over Belfast. The church designer was the Dublin-based architect Richard Castle, most familiar today for his public and country-house work. Here, he created an imposing building with an integrated spire, a form probably adapted from the example of James Gibbs in London.

The setting of the church has changed greatly since the 18th century. After a period of neglect, Belvoir Park was demolished in 1961. In the meantime, the suburbs of Belfast spread to engulf the building, and the ring road of the city now embraces it. Nevertheless, the large graveyard around the church has survived and, with broad views

Credit xxx



**Thomas Greg pictured with his family. He and his partner Waddell Cunningham had global interests. They were the richest merchants in Ireland's only industrial city**



**The Greg Mausoleum in the cemetery. It was probably designed by Roger Mulholland, and its brick core is rendered and detailed with cut stone. It has recently been restored**

over the city, preserves an air of tranquillity.

It was undoubtedly because of its slight detachment from Belfast that Knockbreda began to attract the burials of prosperous city families in the late 18th century. Among the earliest monuments raised here were four unusually large and impressive mausolea. One has since been razed to the ground and it is not known when or by whom it was erected. The remaining three, however, are in the process of rescue and restoration.

Large-scale Georgian mausolea are a relative rarity in the British Isles, although they are more common in Ireland than in England. The reasons are not far to seek. Not only did the practice of parish-church burial have the authority and prestige of long tradition, but the gentry effectively controlled these interiors, and so could easily command space within them.

It was only, therefore, when a rich family

did not for some reason want—or have access to—the church that a mausoleum might instead be erected. Such unusual circumstances probably applied at Knockbreda. Here, the burial interests of the patronal family—no doubt eager to reserve the church exclusively for its deceased members—conflicted with those of prosperous merchants from Belfast.

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**‘The graveyard has survived the spread of Belfast and preserves an air of tranquillity’**

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There is no explicit evidence for such a conflict, but the arrangement of funerary monuments powerfully implies it. The family is memorialised in the church, but the two largest of the mausolea were erected by leading figures in the industrialisation of Belfast, Waddell Cunningham (died 1797) and Thomas Greg (died 1796). The third and smaller mausoleum was built by John Rainey (died 1782), a descendant of a Plantation family that had diversified its interests and entered into linen production.

All the mausolea are square in plan and built of brick with stucco cladding and delicate stone detailing. The recent discovery of the will of Cunningham has provided the first evidence for attributing at least one of the designs. This directs the executors to ‘lay out two hundred pounds in erecting a family vault and burying



**A view of Belvoir Park, with Knockbreda church to the left, by Jonathan Fisher, dated 1766. The house and its demesne stood on the outskirts of Belfast, but the house was demolished in 1961 and the landscape has been overtaken by the spread of Belfast**

place in Newtown Breda churchyard under the direction of Roger Mulholland’.

Mulholland trained in architecture at Dublin and became an important figure in the 18th-century development of Belfast. He may have also been a close friend of Cunningham: Mulholland was a founder member of Belfast First Volunteer Company—which Cunningham captained—and he named one of his sons Waddell.

It is possible that Mulholland designed the other mausolea. If not, they were probably the creation of another local builder using published plates from architectural publications. Prof Curl has suggested a connection with engravings in Sir William Chambers’ volume, *A Treatise on Civil Architecture* (1759). Mulholland himself gave a copy of *Vitruvius Britannicus*, a survey of English architecture, to the Belfast Reading Society.

By 1990, all three surviving mausolea were in a parlous condition, suffering from the growth of heavy vegetation and water penetration, and were placed on the Buildings at Risk Register. The Follies Trust, however, determined in 2007 to take

on the challenge of restoring them. By 2008, there were sufficient funds only to restore the Greg and Rainey mausolea. This operation was overseen by the Dungannon conservation practice McCollum Building Surveying at a cost of £95,000, and has received two commendations, one from the Georgian Group (2009) and the other from the RICS Northern Ireland (2010).

Since the completion of this work, the trust—under the chairmanship of Primrose Wilson—has returned to the task of raising the £115,000 necessary to conserve the Cunningham Mausoleum. Several bodies have generously supported the work, including the Ulster Garden Villages Trust Ltd and the Pilgrim Trust. Although not all the money has been raised, sufficient funds were forthcoming for the scaffolding to be erected in May. Work to the project is in the process of completion. If all goes well, the future of this remarkable group of mausolea will have been secured. 🐦

*The Follies Trust has published a booklet on the project entitled ‘Knockbreda: Its Monuments & People’ (2009). Copies are available from [www.follies-trust.org](http://www.follies-trust.org)*



**The Cunningham Mausoleum, which is currently in the process of restoration**