

LORD HILL'S COLUMN, SHREWSBURY

THE REVEREND RICHARD HAYES



It is a rare event for someone to have a monument erected in their honour during their lifetime, but if one knows anything about Rowland Hill, then one understands why the people of Shropshire were quick to recognise their distinguished son.

Rowland Hill was born in 1772 at Prees in North Shropshire, close to the ancestral home of the Hill family at Hawkstone. One of 16 children of John Hill, younger brother of Sir Richard Hill MP who inherited the Hawkstone estate in 1783, Rowland was schooled in Chester from 1780-89, where he was noted for his kind nature. In the year of the commencement of the French Revolution, Rowland rejected his parents' plan to be trained as a lawyer, stating his desire to be a soldier. It turned out to be a momentous decision, for he rose quickly through the ranks and became an officer trusted by the highest in the land, for the Duke of Wellington declared 'I always know where to find him.'

He distinguished himself in the Peninsular War, notably at Arroyo dos Molinos, after which the Prince Regent created him Sir Rowland Hill, Knight of the Bath. Wellington had written to Lord Liverpool praising Hill's 'meritorious... and very distinguished' service, stating that 'he is beloved by the whole army'. The kind Chester schoolboy had become the kindly general, concerned for his soldiers' welfare. They knew it, and had coined for him, as early as 1808 on the retreat to Corunna, the nickname 'Daddy Hill'.



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from Wellington's main army. Heavily outnumbered, and having to cope with the withdrawal of a regiment from his centre under the command of a newly-arrived officer acting without orders, Hill drove back Soult's army just as Wellington rode up exclaiming 'Hill, the day is your own'. The battle is not recorded on the plinth of the column as others were, perhaps because Wellington made little of it in despatches and it came to be overlooked. On 17 December, utterly unaware of this battle, the Editor of the *Shrewsbury Chronicle* wrote urging his readers 'to proclaim its joy (at the current progress of the war) in some public manner...not by illuminations and fireworks...but by some act which will remain permanent'. By the end of the lengthy challenge to the townspeople of Shrewsbury the editor was into his stride:

It is suggested therefore, that by erecting a COLUMN, or some other Building, DEVOTED to General Sir ROWLAND HILL, we may ... by a SUITABLE INSCRIPTION enumerate some of the GREAT TRANSACTIONS OF THE PRESENT DAY – the expulsion of invaders – the restoration of millions of inhabitants to national independence – and the march into France of triumphant British Soldiers, conducted by a SALOPIAN CHIEFTAIN.

To start the ball rolling, the editor announced that with immediate effect donations ('even a sixpence') could be made at the printers' works.

By 24 December 'subscriptions... already amount to several hundred pounds', and a week later a committee was formed, and early in 1814 a column was adopted as the appropriate form for the memorial of the services of the man who had then reached the rank of Lieutenant-General.

The Haycocks were a family of architects resident in Shrewsbury, and it happened that Edward Haycock (1792-1870) had just returned from London where he had trained under Jeffrey Wyatt, later Wyatville, the architect of Windsor Castle as we know it. Aged 22, Haycock received the commission to design the column. The design of the plinth was revised by Thomas Harrison of Chester, but the beautifully-proportioned column was Haycock's work, executed in Grinshill ashlar quarried about seven miles from Shrewsbury and carried by horse and cart by local farmers free of charge as their contribution to help keep costs down.

In April 1814 peace was restored and in June of that year Hill returned to a hero's welcome in his native county, fêted in towns and villages. The money collected by the year's end enabled construction work to be commenced on 27 December.



It was in December 1813 that at St Pierre d'Irube in southern France, Hill won the most difficult of the battles he fought independently of support



The Chronicle had published on 11 November 1814 details of subscriptions to date:

Present Subscriptions	£3949
Probable Expence	£4035
Also to be paid for when funds were available were	
Statue	£500
Four Lions for Pedestal	£200
Iron Railing, Curb Stone &c.	£500
Stone Stair-case and Railing	£300
	£1500

The contractor was to be John Simpson, who had collaborated so often on canal engineering projects with Thomas Telford, but on 15 June, three days before the Battle of Waterloo, (18 June 1815), Simpson died. In Shrewsbury, the column committee members, already worried about the political situation, had to appoint another contractor. They chose John Simpson's Scottish nephew, John Straphen, also resident in Shrewsbury and assisting Telford in minor ways with the up-grading of the Holyhead Road.

It is easy to imagine the relief of the committee on receiving a letter from John Straphen dated 14 September 1816:

Gentlemen,
I propose erecting within the Columna handsome Stone Staircase...Cast Iron Balusters and Rail, complete, free of all expence. Your accepting the same as my Donation, towards building the Column, will oblige, Gentlemen,
Your humble Servant,
JOHN STRAPHEN.

In that same month the statue of Lord Hill, modelled by Joseph Panzetta in Coade stone, after exhibition at Coade and Seeley's Manufactory in Lambeth,

was placed on the Column. Possibly the largest single statue ever made at the Coade Manufactory, cast in 13 sections, at 17ft 6ins it stands in excellent proportion on top of a column of the Greek Doric order 15ft in diameter and 133ft in height. It cost £315, less than expected but a significant sum for one statue.

John Straphen's cantilevered spiral staircase of 172 steps was constructed during 1817. The deceptively straightforward reference to 'Cast Iron Balusters and Rail' in Straphen's letter to the committee, offering his donation, conceals a remarkable detail that must have exercised the mind of Straphen and his ironmaster not a little. Each of the 172 balusters carries on its stem a circular medallion on which are cast a letter or letters in upper and lower case spelling out the following message:

This staircase was the gift of John Straphen, the builder, as his donation towards erecting this Column. The first stone of the foundation was laid December 27th, 1814, and completed June 18th, 1816, the anniversary of the glorious battle of Waterloo.

Those climbing the stairs, though maybe a mite breathless, are rewarded with superb views over Shrewsbury and the surrounding country – views which were accessible to visitors by late 1817, when, in a final effort to complete its task, the committee raised the sum required to build the lodge, which would be demolished c.1963, in which a retired soldier, selected by Lord Hill, was to live as Keeper of the Column. Sgt Thomas Davies was appointed in September 1817 and arrived with his wife to take up residence in October.

It is well known that contemporary architects preferred Eleanor Coade's stone to natural stone because of its durability. Where it was sheltered Coade stone did retain its definition, but in the case of Lord Hill's statue it has been completely exposed to the elements, and there is the possibility that the process of firing the 13 different sections of the statue for four days each at a consistent temperature of 1,150 degrees centigrade taxed the skill of the most professional fireman. The fireman would have been regarded as one of the most important workers in the factory, having to be awake night and day to control the coal-fired kilns. Today, control and maintenance of a consistent temperature is much easier to achieve, and that is our hope for the work that lies before us in Shrewsbury.

The image of me inspecting the damage on the head of the statue of Lord Hill dates from 2013 when Shropshire Council, the owner of the Column, undertook the latest of many repair works to the statue of a temporary nature. The thinking now is that to prevent the recurrence of expenditure on frequent ongoing maintenance on a statue which over the past 60 or more years has been repaired in many different ways using incorrect materials, it will be more prudent to make a faithful replica of the statue in Coade stone, fired at the correct temperature, that will stand the effects of all weathers in its exposed position for many years to come.

Potential costs for this project have been estimated at £500,000, to include the taking down of the existing statue, and the making and raising of a new statue. The work is achievable. The pressure will be to raise the necessary funds. The Friends of Lord Hill's Column will do what they can to support the Council in any future fund-raising appeal, and will warmly welcome any advice and support that interested parties can give. The Friends are dedicated to making known the history and unique features of the Column and I will be grateful for any support that members of the Folly Fellowship can offer.



Richard Hayes is Shropshire born and bred. He read Theology at King's College London and served in parishes in Dartford, South Kensington, Ruislip, Ealing and the City (St Mary Woolnoth and St Edmund the King, Lombard Street). Retiring to Shrewsbury he continues to enjoy serving as required in local churches, and has chaired the Friends of Shrewsbury Museum and Art Gallery and latterly the Friends of Lord Hill's Column.

He has greatly appreciated his good fortune in having architecturally interesting churches to care for, and now in promoting awareness of the importance of the column.