

Lord Nelson and his lasting legacy in London

Part 2. The creation of Trafalgar Square

by Peter Stone

Following the grand funeral of Lord Nelson in 1806 after his death at the Battle of Trafalgar – the first state funeral ever held for a commoner – London was otherwise quite slow to honour the national hero. The wealthy Lloyds underwriter, John Julius Angerstein, opened a subscription fund to create a lasting memorial but the sum raised was insufficient for anything suitable and the idea was put aside for some years.



Nelson's Column in Montreal, Canada, erected in memory of his death at Trafalgar, pre-dated that in London by over thirty years. The one that today stands at Place Jaques Cartier is a copy of the original, which is preserved in a museum in the city to prevent further decay.

Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square was certainly not the first of its kind. Various towns make claim to having erected the first monument in Nelson's honour, including Castletownend in County Cork and Glasgow, both in the year of his death. Two years later a tall Doric column topped by a statue was raised in the centre of Dublin, pre-dating that in London by several decades. Dublin's Nelson's Pillar was demolished in 1966, so the oldest remaining column is, ironically, the one erected in the Francophile city of Montreal, Canada, erected in 1809. The merchants of Norfolk were justifiably proud of their local hero and had proposed a monument as early as the 1790s. They finally set up a fund-raising committee in 1814 and held a competition for a design. The winning entry was for yet another column, by locally-born architect William Wilkins, designer of the Dublin column.

The space we now call Trafalgar Square was not created at one moment in time but took centuries to evolve and has been a road junction for hundreds of years. Where the nearby River Thames makes a sudden sharp bend to the east the area on the north bank had acquired the name Charing, most likely during the Saxon period, from the Anglo-Saxon word *cerr*, meaning bend in the river. Ancient maps show a junction of three roads: the Strand (meaning "water edge"), leading along the riverside eastwards to London; Whitehall, south to Westminster; and Cockspur Street (where fighting-cock owners could buy spurs for their birds) which curved off westwards as it still does today. In the 1290s the grief-stricken Edward I erected one of twelve crosses at the junction in memory of his recently deceased wife Eleanor and the place became known as Charing Cross. The Eleanor Cross was demolished by the Puritans in 1647 during the English Civil War. After the Restoration it was replaced by an equestrian statue of Charles I, which is still in place, looking down Whitehall towards the location where he was beheaded. It is these days the point at which all distances from London are measured.

By the 18th century the junction at Charing Cross had become one of the busiest places in an expanding London. St.Martin's-in-the-Fields church had stood on the north-east side since the early 13th century when it really was surrounded by fields. The crumbling old medieval structure was replaced in the 1720s by the magnificent James Gibbs building we know today. The area along the north side of the large space at Charing Cross had been royal property since the Middle Ages. From the 14th century it was used to keep the royal hawks during moulting (or 'mew' time) and the place became known as the King's (or Royal) Mews. Later, the royal horses were kept there, which is why 'mews' transformed into a word meaning stables. In the 1730s, magnificent new stables were created by William Kent for George II. From the early 17th century the Dukes of Northumberland kept their London residence at the south-east corner of Charing Cross, between the Strand and Whitehall. In 1712 the young Scottish goldsmith Andrew Drummond set up his banking business on the south side, where Drummond's Bank remains today as a branch of the Royal Bank of Scotland.



The space at Charing Cross that would later be renamed Trafalgar Square, is shown in this picture from the 1750s. Ahead, along the northern side, is the Royal Mews (stables), which was replaced by the National Gallery in the 1830s. At the time of this engraving St.Martin's-in-the-Fields church on the right was hidden behind a row of houses. Engraving from author's collection.

In the years after Nelson's death John Nash was creating the grand processional route of Portland Place and Regent Street, from Regent's Park to Pall Mall. The Commissioners of HM Woods, Forests and Land Revenues further requested that he make a plan for land along the route owned by the Crown. An Act of Parliament was passed in 1826 for the 'Charing Cross Improvements'. It was Nash's vision that the large space that began as a mere junction should become a formalised square, surrounded on each side by grand and prestigious buildings. To that end leases were granted to the Union Club (a gentlemen's club originally formed in 1800 to celebrate the creation of the new Union flag that included the cross of St.Patrick) and the Royal College of Physicians. They jointly created a prestigious new property designed by Sir Robert Smirke (who also created the British Museum building) that formed the western side of the square.

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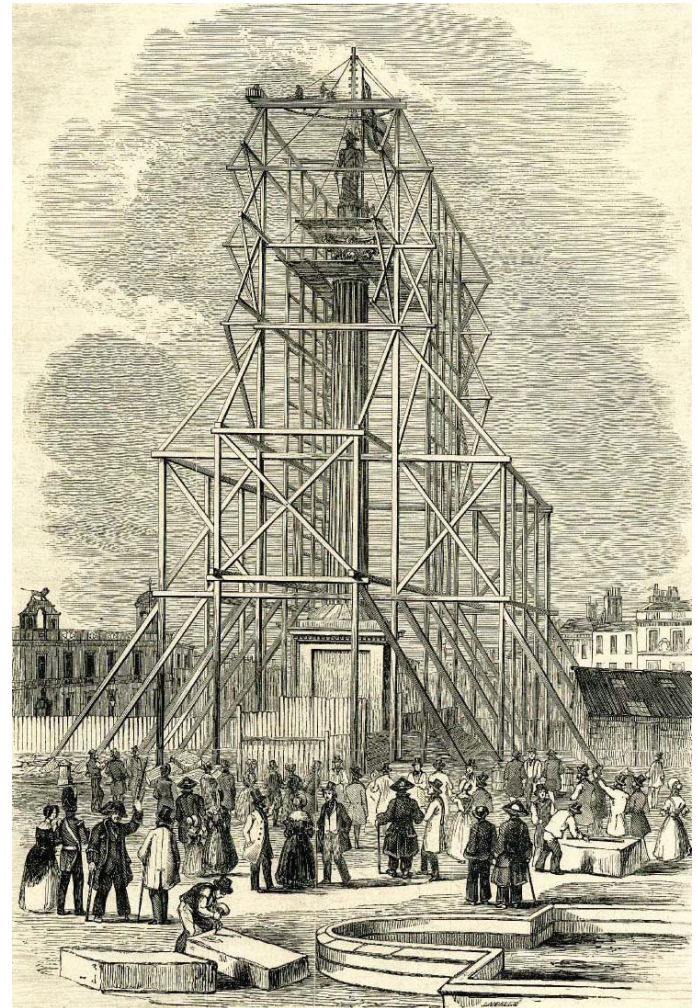
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The architect George Ledwell Taylor developed apartment housing which he called 'flats' on the eastern side of the space in 1830 (on the block between the Strand and Duncannon Street, where South Africa House now stands). As the square did not yet have a name he was unable to furnish his tenants with an address. It was generally assumed it would be titled after the new King so according to Taylor in his biography he went to visit William IV at St. James's Palace to settle the matter. On arrival Sir Thomas Hardy – captain of HMS Victory during the Battle of Trafalgar and in whose arms Nelson had died – was ahead of him. As a young prince William had served alongside Nelson in the navy where they became good friends. Taylor showed the King his plans for the housing development, on which William wrote his decision: "Trafalgar Square".

By that time there were at least two art galleries in the London area. William Hogarth and his associates produced a small collection at the Foundling Hospital in the mid-18th century and the Dulwich Picture Gallery, purpose-built by Sir John Soane to house a homeless collection of the exiled King of Poland, had opened in 1817. However there was as yet no national collection in a major gallery open to the public in central London, as was enjoyed by the people of Paris at the Louvre. That began to change when a small but fine collection of paintings was purchased by the government upon the death of the afore-mentioned John Julius Angerstein. It was initially displayed at his former home in Pall Mall but as additional works were added a larger gallery was required. In 1830 William Wilkins – the same architect who had earlier created the monument to Nelson at Great Yarmouth, as well as University College London – wrote to the trustees of the national collection, proposing to create a purpose-built art gallery on the site of the old Royal Mews at Charing Cross. His idea was accepted by the government and the new National Gallery was built along the north side of Trafalgar Square, initially also housing the Royal Academy.

Over thirty years after his death the Nelson Memorial Committee was formed, chaired by Admiral Sir George Cockburn and Sir Thomas Hardy with the aim of erecting a statue or monument to Nelson somewhere in London. They enlisted the financial help of a number of prominent people, including Prime Minister Lord Melbourne and the Duke of Wellington, and it was agreed that Trafalgar Square would be the most suitable site. The earlier fund created by Angerstein almost thirty years earlier had been left, accruing interest at a good rate, and formed the basis of the new fund. Further money was raised by subscription, including five hundred pounds from Queen Victoria. A competition was held for a suitable scheme, with around one hundred and forty submissions from eminent artists, which were displayed at the former home of John Nash in Regent Street.

The winning design for the Nelson memorial was that of William Railton. The completed column may seem tall but Railton's original design stood over thirty feet higher and was reduced in subsequent revisions. Stone for the Corinthian column was brought by boat around the coast and up the Thames from Foggin Tor in Devon. A



Nelson's Column is under construction in this picture by Ebenezer Landells dated 16th November 1843, probably drawn for a contemporary newspaper. Note the scaffolding system being used, which was newly devised at the time and of great interest to engineers.

This is one of five thousand prints and drawings from the Crace Collection at the British Museum that have recently been catalogued by Anna Maude, with financial assistance from the London Topographical Society.

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steam-powered crane was used for lifting the pieces. The work was undertaken by the firm of Grissell & Peto, who were simultaneously employed on the new Houses of Parliament. The volutes and acanthus leaves at the top of the column are made from bronze, cast at Woolwich.

The stone statue of Nelson that was to top the great column was sculpted by the competition's runner-up, Edward Hodges Baily. He had planned to create the figure from one piece of sandstone from the Duke of Buccleugh's quarry near Edinburgh but it proved to be of too great a weight to transport and lift into place so it was finally made in three pieces: two for the body and another for the plinth on which it sits atop the column. The legend is that a group of workers ate dinner up on the plinth immediately before the sculpture was hoisted on top of it. Such was the great weight of the statue that it

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took two days to raise: one day for the lower half and another for the upper part. The main column and statue were finally in place in November 1843.

The formalised square, finally completed in the summer of 1844, was laid out around the column by Charles Barry who was also then working on the new Palace of Westminster. For the fountains a well was dug in Orange Street, behind the National Gallery, with a steam-powered beam-engine circulating the water.

The money raised by the Nelson Memorial Committee had been used on the main column and statue, with nothing remaining to complete a number of details from Railton's design. They were therefore forced to hand the project over to the government, who in turn looked for ways to cut the cost.

Railton's plan to use the four sides of the column's plinth to celebrate Nelson's greatest victories – the Battles of Cape St. Vincent, Copenhagen, Nile and Trafalgar – with large bronze reliefs went ahead, sculpted by four different artists. They were each completed and set in place at various times between 1849 and 1851. During that time Musgrave Lewthwaite Watson, designer of the Cape St. Vincent relief died of a heart attack and his work was completed by William Frederick Woodington, sculptor of the Nile moulding. The owners of the foundry responsible for casting Trafalgar were sentenced and jailed for fraud when it was discovered they had adulterated the bronze with cast iron and plaster and used false weights to cost out the materials.

The four huge bronze lions on granite plinths that guard the column at its base proved to be problematic. The budget was set at three thousand pounds but after six years of wrangling the sculptor withdrew because he believed they could not be made for that price. A second artist delivered lions of stone but they were rejected and now reside near Bradford. The commission then went to the talented but unreliable Sir Edwin Landseer, famous for his portraits in oils of animals, which was a surprising decision as he had never previously sculpted. Landseer based the work on the cast of a statue from Turin and the corpse of a lion that died at London Zoo. The government failed in its objective of cutting the cost: Landseer's fee alone was six thousand pounds and a further eleven thousand was spent on the labour and materials, a total of almost six times the original budget. Landseer's lions were unveiled in early 1867.

Over sixty years after Nelson's death and almost thirty years after the decision to create a monument William Railton's original vision

for a monument was fulfilled, albeit with minor alterations and with much increased costs. It was the government who agreed to fund those additional costs but in the 19th century Trafalgar Square, with its towering column, was no doubt considered a good investment in order to show foreign visitors that Britain reigned supreme, with London as the capital of a vast Empire.

The square has seen many notable events since its creation, both of celebration and protest. The first political demonstration was by the Chartists in 1848, objecting to the ongoing imposition of income tax (which had originally been introduced as a temporary measure) as well as in support of the new French republic. Protests have occasionally descended into battles between demonstrators and police, notably on 'Bloody Sunday' in 1887 and the Poll Tax demonstrations of the 1990s. Trafalgar Square was where those in London – both residents and service-personnel – rushed to celebrate the ending of the Second World War and since 1947 Norway has provided it with an annual gift of a large Christmas tree.

In the years since the laying out of Trafalgar Square it has seen a number of changes. The creation of Northumberland Avenue from the square down to the new Victoria Embankment required the destruction of the old, Jacobean Northumberland House. At the end of the 19th century a new processional route was proposed from Buckingham Palace to Trafalgar Square, and thus the Mall came into being. The architect Sir Aston Webb cleverly disguised the awkward angle at which the Mall leaves the square by creating the grand Admiralty Arch entranceway. The Canadian government took over the lease on the Union Club building and had it converted as their High Commission in 1925, expanding into to the neighbouring Royal College of Physicians in 1998. The South African High Commission building replaced the previous Morley's Hotel on the opposite east side in 1932. The National Gallery has been extended several times and Charles Barry's original fountains were replaced after the Second World War, complete with electric pumps. What is certainly most fortunate is that Adolf Hitler's plan never came to fruition: after achieving the successful invasion of Britain that Napoleon Bonaparte failed to accomplish Nelson's Column would be moved to Berlin.

For further information about the development of Trafalgar Square I recommend Jean Hood's book *Trafalgar Square – A Visual History of London's Landmark Through Time* (Batsford Publishing).

About Peter Stone

Peter Stone has lived all his life in London, with a special interest in the capital's development. He has studied London's history from its Roman origins onwards and is currently engrossed in the early Georgian period. He is on Twitter as @LondonStone.