

Dr Johnson's summerhouse

Shaun Traynor

Streatham Place, the grand country house of the brewer Henry Thrale and his wife Hester, became for a time in the mid to late 18th century a setting for some very distinguished literary and artistic company. To this house, then sitting amid extensive grounds in the countryside south of London, came leading figures of the day: Edmund Burke, David Garrick, Sir Joshua Reynolds (who was to paint the Thrales), Oliver Goldsmith and – most significantly – Dr Johnson.

In the grounds was a secluded summerhouse and there Dr Johnson would sit to read and compose. So regular were his sojourns that the summerhouse became known as Dr Johnson's summerhouse.

The good doctor was loved and cherished by the Thrales and especially by their daughter Susannah, who grew up in great awe of him. But when – as happens – the good times came to an end, when Henry Thrale died, when Hester remarried, when, in 1825, the house was eventually sold, the summerhouse became neglected and its association with Dr Johnson was in danger of being forgotten.

Fortunately, Susannah, now a grown woman living in her own house and keen to relive happy childhood memories, had the summerhouse transported to her own garden at Ashgrove, in Knockholt, Kent.

So the years passed. After Susannah's own passing, the house changed ownership but a plaque was cut and placed under the thatch. It bore an inscription which sums up the mutual affection shared between the Thrales and Dr Johnson:

'This summerhouse which stood in Thrale's garden at Streatham and was much used by Dr Johnson, was brought here by Miss Susannah Thrale, an unmarried daughter, after she settled at Ashgrove in 1826. She erected it on rising ground in the very centre of the grove making all paths lead to it, and making the grove a kind of shrine to Dr Johnson's memory.'

Even after this act of piety, the summerhouse again became neglected. So it was fortuitous that in 1962 a local man, a Mr Wells, discovered the house in its dilapidated state and, feeling empathy with its history, purchased it and gave it as gift to the London County Council for exhibition to the public.

The summerhouse was restored by the (then) GLC and re-erected at Kenwood House where it was formally 'opened' in September 1968 by Mrs Harriet Sebag-Montefiore – to great relief and happiness.

So it sat in its genteel magnificence – rather as the good doctor himself must have sat within it. Then the cruellest of Cruel Fate took a hand. On a night in March 1991 it completely burnt down, leaving only the concrete slab of its base.

End of story? Well no, there is an even further – and again romantic – twist to the tale. A London based artist, Alan Byrne, who had often sat in the summerhouse at Kenwood, decided to do something about it: he decided to rebuild it, at his own expense, in his own garden.

Being a practical man, he embraced the challenge professionally, obtaining from Kenwood photocopies of photographs of the summerhouse as it had been restored. His intention was to realise a perfect reconstruction but there was one essential, immediate, local modification – thatch was out of the question in Byrne's part of North London. So instead, he meticulously zaxed slates into the shape of scallop shells and formed them into the roof. For the intricate matrix of woodwork which made up the interior seating, walls and ceiling, he used coppiced sweet chestnut, as used for fencing in the Royal Parks.

The work took the artist 650 hours over two and a half years. The end result is, apart from the roof, a near exact replica of the Thrale eighteenth century summerhouse and it now stands securely (surely this time!) in a private garden in Islington.



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