



Cleo's Needle in London is flanked by two bronze sphinxes bearing the inscription 'The good/ beautiful god, Men- Kheper-Ra, given life.'

# EGYPT IN ENGLAND

The influence of Italian, French and ancient Greek architecture in England is well documented, but while the Egyptian style remains an exotic oddity, you're never too far away from a building or monument inspired by the land of the Pharaohs

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**T**hink of ancient Egypt, and what springs to mind? Temples, tombs, pyramids, obelisks and sphinxes, for a start. Hardly what you would expect to find in England's proverbial green and pleasant land, and yet here they all are. What is more, we have been building them for over 200 years. But these are not simply copies of the Egyptian originals; they are temples of trade and industry, pharaonic picture palaces and pumping stations, mills as well as mausoleums. They are Egypt – but in England, and many can still be seen today.

England's links to ancient Egypt go back nearly 2,000 years, to when the Romans introduced the cult of the goddess Isis to Britain, and built a temple to her somewhere in London. Biblical links and pilgrimage sites in Egypt meant that there was always some awareness of ancient Egypt, and particularly its greatest

surviving monuments, the pyramids, but for centuries only a handful of Europeans travelled there. During the Renaissance, newly discovered writings from the Classical world, and the excavation of Egyptian antiquities brought to Italy in Roman times, sparked a fresh interest in the land of the Pharaohs and its reputation for occult wisdom.

With the Enlightenment, aristocrats and wealthy landowners travelled to Rome as part of their Grand Tour, and a spell in the city was also considered part of the professional training of any aspiring architect. There they saw the first-century BC pyramidal tomb of Caius Cestius, and genuine Egyptian obelisks, first brought to Rome by emperors and re-erected by popes in the Renaissance, as well as Egyptian statues and sphinxes, or the sometimes less than accurate Roman copies of them, excavated from sites in Italy. One example of a building probably inspired by this is the pyramidal mausoleum at

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Blickling Park in Norfolk, which was designed by Joseph Bonomi in 1794 to house the remains of the Second Earl of Buckinghamshire.

Then came the watershed, the event that changed everything. In 1798 Napoleon invaded Egypt, taking with him not just his troops, but a small army of scholars and scientists, charged with recording everything they could about ancient and modern Egypt. It took nearly 20 years to publish the full results of their work, however, and it was one of their number, the canny Vivant Denon, who was first to market with his own book describing and illustrating the surviving monuments of ancient Egypt. Denon's book, which praised ancient Egyptian architecture as the equal of ancient Greek, was rapidly translated into English in a variety of editions, which helped to make it accessible to a wide audience.

The first building known to have been inspired by Denon's work was the Egyptian Hall at Stowe House in Buckinghamshire, a carriage entrance built in 1803, and recently restored, but the most influential was the distinctive Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly, designed by the architect Peter Frederic Robinson, and built in 1812 to house the commercial museum of William Bullock. Like other architects after him who were to use the Egyptian style, Robinson employed a selection of iconic features to

create an Egyptian appearance, such as the overhanging moulding along the roof known as a cavetto cornice, half round mouldings to create the distinctive inward sloping shape of Egyptian temple pylons, columns based on the papyrus or lotus plant or palm leaves, and decorative details including winged solar disks. During the Regency period, the Egyptian style was highly fashionable, for furnishings and interiors as well as building exteriors. It was exotic, and also associated with British military victories over the French.

The Egyptian Hall was demolished in 1905, but had inspired two other buildings which still survive. They were the Civil and Military Library in Devonport, designed by John Foulston in 1823 as part of a collection of buildings in different architectural styles, and the Egyptian House in Penzance, whose designer is unknown, but which was built in 1834 to house the geological and mineral specimens business of John Lavin. Although there were a number of unrealised proposals over the years for grandiose Egyptian style public monuments, the two most popular uses of the style were for commercial and funerary architecture. It has seldom been used for private residences, but an exception to this, Richmond Avenue in London's Islington, has a rare example of traditional terraced

**From bottom left:**  
Façade of Freemasons' Hall, Boston, Lincolnshire; the Hobart mausoleum at Blickling Park, Norfolk

## The two most popular uses of Egyptian style were for commercial and funerary architecture





houses built in 1841 but decorated with obelisks and sphinxes, probably to commemorate recent British military action against Egypt. Just as rare were uses of the style for a synagogue in Canterbury in 1847, and for a Masonic hall in Boston in 1860. The latter was also decorated with a readable dedicatory inscription in hieroglyphs, one of only a handful anywhere in England.

In 1801, the local representative of the Ottoman Empire, which at that time ruled Egypt, had, when requested, given one of the two ancient Egyptian obelisks at Alexandria to the British, who intended to transport it to England to act as a memorial to the victories against the French on sea and land of Admiral Nelson and General Abercromby. Obelisks were potent symbols of both ancient Egypt and imperial power, having been set up by pharaohs and subsequently transported by caesars. It was to be over 70 years before Cleopatra's Needle finally came to London, however, because of a combination of concerns over cost, the condition of the obelisk, and political sensitivity about effectively granting recognition to the increasingly independent Ottoman viceroy in Egypt by accepting the gift. When it did arrive, in 1877, the so-called 'Battle of the Sites' over where it should go said much about how Egypt could represent both positive and negative values. It could be seen as the massive and inspiring architecture of the civilisation that invented building in dressed stone, and of the land which sheltered the Holy Family, but also as a heavy and overpowering symbol of pagan tyranny, the Egypt of Moses and the Exodus.



**From top:** Undercliffe Cemetery, Bradford, West Yorkshire; the Egyptian House, Penzance, Cornwall

## NO LIFE LIKE THE AFTERLIFE

Where to see the great burial tombs of ancient Egypt across Britain's green acres

For centuries, the normal place of burial in England was in a local parish churchyard. With the explosive growth of cities during the Industrial Revolution, however, this system was overloaded to the point of collapse. The solution was to create huge garden cemeteries, in all but a few cases initially run by private companies. Their buildings were designed to impress potential customers, who were also allowed to choose their own style of monument.

Because so many of the surviving monuments of ancient Egypt are tombs and temples, which had stood for thousands of years, and it was renowned as a culture which used mummification to help ensure an eternal afterlife, the Egyptian style was a natural choice for monuments and cemetery buildings. They were not numerous, and there was opposition to them from some quarters as pagan and unsuitable for a Christian country, but those that were built were both impressive and expensive. There are examples of Egyptian-style cemetery buildings at Highgate and Abney Park cemeteries in London, and the General Cemetery in Sheffield.

Many Egyptian-style monuments were built in granite, a stone associated with Egyptian obelisks and statues, and although some are similar enough to suggest that they were adapted from standard designs, most are elaborate custom designs. Kensal Green Cemetery in London has some superb examples, and there are other individual monuments as far afield as Anfield Cemetery in Merseyside and Undercliffe Cemetery in Bradford.



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## Egyptian style has never really been accepted by the architectural establishment

**From top left:** The Carlton Cinema in Islington, London was opened in 1930 and is an eye-catching feature of the Essex Road; Cleopatra's Needle on the Victoria Embankment

The Industrial Revolution saw the rise of the factory, and the scale of these buildings may have been what encouraged a link between them and the massive temples of ancient Egypt. In 1840 James Combe, who worked as an engineer for the mill owner John Marshall, designed a vast single storey linen mill in a simple Egyptian style. In 1842 more elaborate offices in the same style, but based on genuine examples of Egyptian temples, were designed by Joseph Bonomi Junior, who had worked in Egypt as an artist and draughtsman for archaeological expeditions. In 1928 another huge factory, at the time the largest under one roof and a pioneer in the use of reinforced concrete, was built on the Hampstead Road in north-west London as a cigarette factory for Carreras Ltd, and once again the Egyptian style was chosen. Hundreds of cinemas were built between the wars, in the golden age of the picture palace, and a few had Egyptian exteriors or interiors, sometimes both. Most have been lost, but the Carlton cinema in Islington and the Pyramid at Sale still survive.

Just as factories got bigger, so did shops, and the 20th century saw a lavish refurbishment of the interior of Harrods in 1991-2 by its then owner, Egyptian born Mohammed al Fayed, with a two-level Egyptian Hall and Egyptian escalator, both created by his director

of design, William Mitchell. Also in London was a DIY superstore for Sainsbury's in the Warwick Road, designed in the late 1980s by Ian Pollard, which had a carved stone frieze of Egyptian gods and goddesses running the entire length of one outside wall.

Unlike the Classical, Graeco-Roman style of architecture, which has been used here widely and for major public buildings like the British Museum, the Egyptian style has always been an exotic rarity, and one which the architectural establishment has never really seemed to approve of. Egyptian buildings are not common, and can be accused of being showy, but they are highly recognisable and popular, and we have been building them for over 200 years. The interesting questions are how long it will be before there is another, and what sort of building it will be. While we wait, go and see our existing collection. Wherever you live, you won't be that far from one.

*Chris Elliott is the author of *Egypt in England*, published by English Heritage, priced £25. ■*

