The Stinchcombe Connection:

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How Stinchcombe lost the Tyndale Monument



View of the Tyndale Monument on Nibley Knoll looking toward Drakestone Point Stinchcombe

Monumental Loss

As most people know, the Tyndale monument stands on Nibley Knoll, above the village of North Nibley. You can read about ***William Tyndale*** and the ***Tyndale family*** in earlier articles on this website.

It is a little-known fact that Stinchcombe Hill was the preferred location for the monument at one stage. This article draws on contemporary newspapers to tell how our local beauty spot came to miss out on this honour. The various locations mentioned are indicated on the map below.



Monumental Rivalry

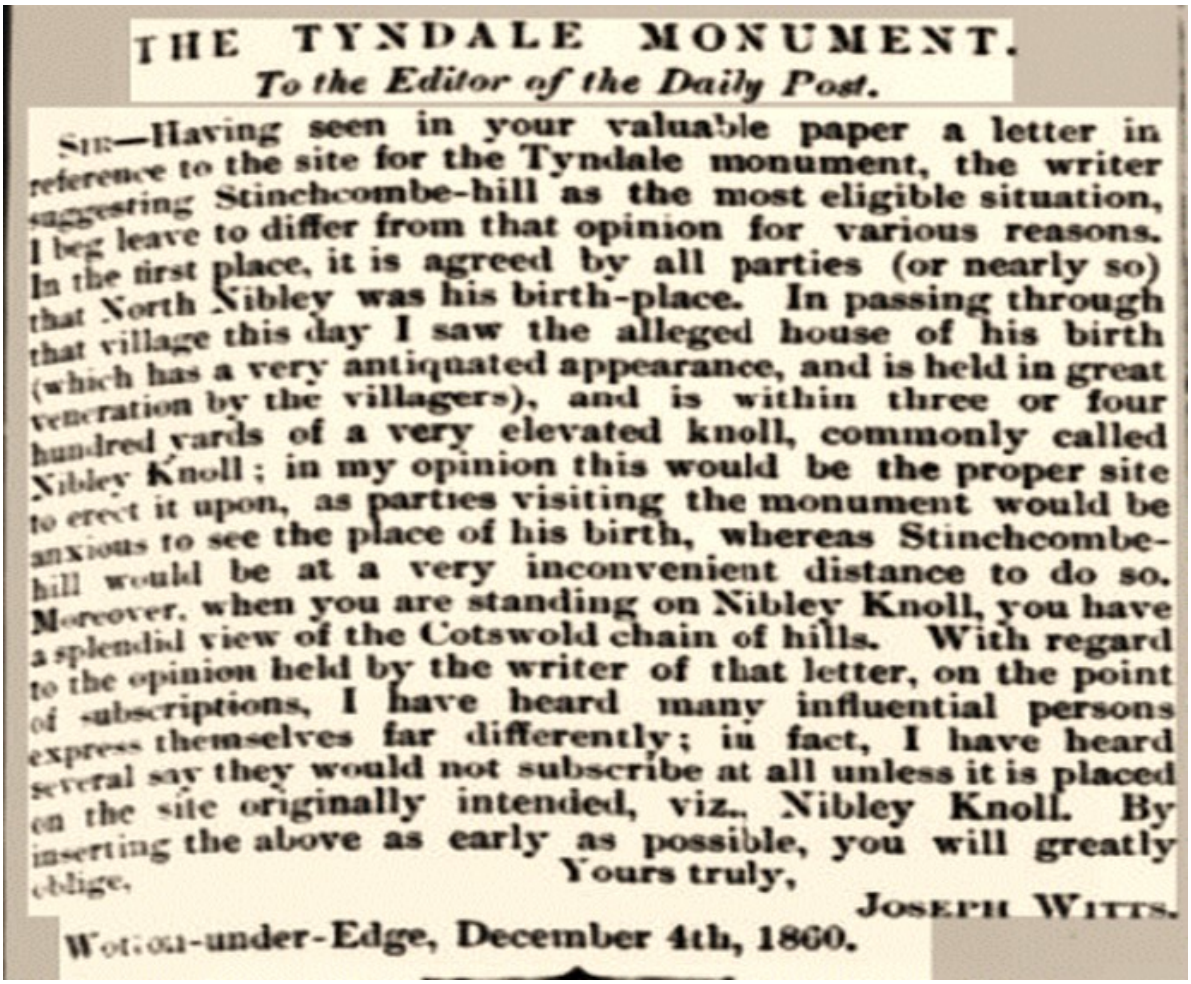
The original idea, conceived around 1860, seems to have been for a monument in North Nibley. A Committee was set up, ***Lord Fitzhardinge*** offered a site on Nibley Knoll and fundraising began.

Everything might have reached a speedy conclusion except that some subscribers began to promote Stinchcombe Hill as a rival site. They included some big names like the ***3rd Earl of Ducie*** and the ***Reverend Sir George Prevost***. The latter offered an elevated location about 300 yards north of the Drakestone as an alternative location. Lord Fitzhardinge continued to favour Nibley Knoll.

Long letters written under pseudonyms such as “Alpha” and “Vallicola” appeared in the local press arguing the advantages and disadvantages of each site. Stinchcombe Hill was accepted

as being higher and more prominent, however, some thought this necessitated a larger, more expensive monument. Others considered that the Drakestone was the obvious location on Stinchcombe Hill and were not impressed with the proposed site. The proximity of the Stinchcombe Hill rifle range was another disadvantage in terms of public safety. On the matter of access, some felt that Nibley Knoll was more convenient as a decent road came quite close. Others considered that the long, narrow road onto Stinchcombe Hill was preferrable to having to walk the last stretch onto Nibley Knoll.

Whether North Nibley or Stinchcombe had the stronger claim to be the birthplace of William Tyndale was an important consideration for many – as an example see the letter of Joseph Witts below. At least he was brave enough to use his real name! The birthplace question is a matter still unresolved to this day but is outside the remit of this short article.



THE TYNDALE MONUMENT.

To the Editor of the Daily Post.

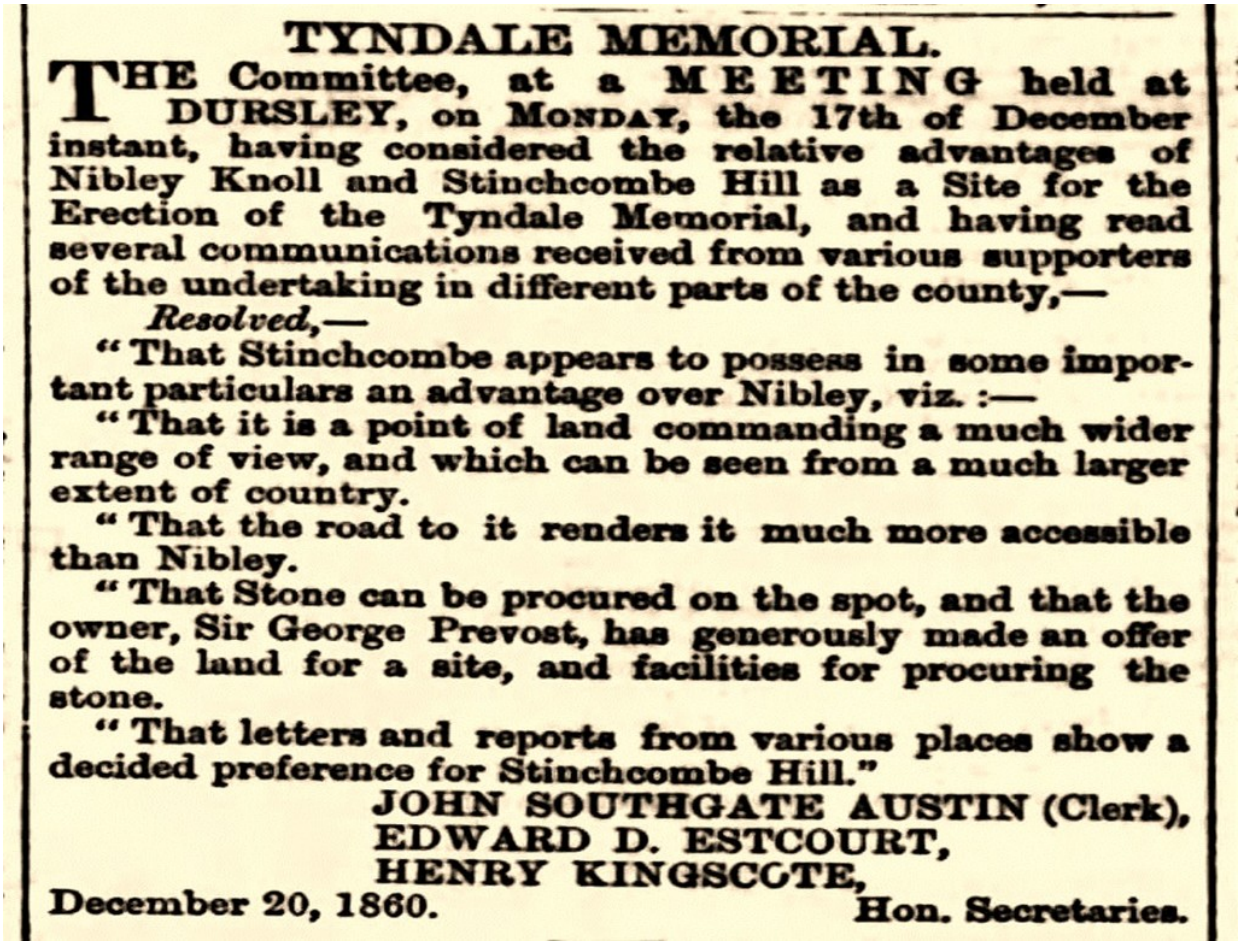
SIR—Having seen in your valuable paper a letter in reference to the site for the Tyndale monument, the writer suggesting Stinchcombe-hill as the most eligible situation, I beg leave to differ from that opinion for various reasons. In the first place, it is agreed by all parties (or nearly so) that North Nibley was his birth-place. In passing through that village this day I saw the alleged house of his birth (which has a very antiquated appearance, and is held in great veneration by the villagers), and is within three or four hundred yards of a very elevated knoll, commonly called Nibley Knoll; in my opinion this would be the proper site to erect it upon, as parties visiting the monument would be anxious to see the place of his birth, whereas Stinchcombe-hill would be at a very inconvenient distance to do so. Moreover, when you are standing on Nibley Knoll, you have a splendid view of the Cotswold chain of hills. With regard to the opinion held by the writer of that letter, on the point of subscriptions, I have heard many influential persons express themselves far differently; in fact, I have heard several say they would not subscribe at all unless it is placed on the site originally intended, viz., Nibley Knoll. By inserting the above as early as possible, you will greatly oblige.

Yours truly,

JOSEPH WITTS.

Wotton-under-Edge, December 4th, 1860.

On 17th December 1860, the Committee met in Dursley. They resolved that Stinchcombe Hill was the preferred site, for the reasons set out in the newspaper item below. As is the way of these things that did not end the arguments!



TYNDALE MEMORIAL.

THE Committee, at a MEETING held at DURSLEY, on MONDAY, the 17th of December instant, having considered the relative advantages of Nibley Knoll and Stinchcombe Hill as a Site for the Erection of the Tyndale Memorial, and having read several communications received from various supporters of the undertaking in different parts of the county,—

Resolved,—

"That Stinchcombe appears to possess in some important particulars an advantage over Nibley, viz. :—

"That it is a point of land commanding a much wider range of view, and which can be seen from a much larger extent of country.

"That the road to it renders it much more accessible than Nibley.

"That Stone can be procured on the spot, and that the owner, Sir George Prevost, has generously made an offer of the land for a site, and facilities for procuring the stone.

"That letters and reports from various places show a decided preference for Stinchcombe Hill."

JOHN SOUTHGATE AUSTIN (Clerk),
EDWARD D. ESTCOURT,
HENRY KINGSCOTE,
December 20, 1860. Hon. Secretaries.

In February 1861, the Committee had a further meeting at the Town Hall in Dursley and yet again decided in favour of Stinchcombe Hill, as reported in the Stroud Journal. One would have thought that was pretty conclusive, but there is another twist in the tale.

Monumental Ambition

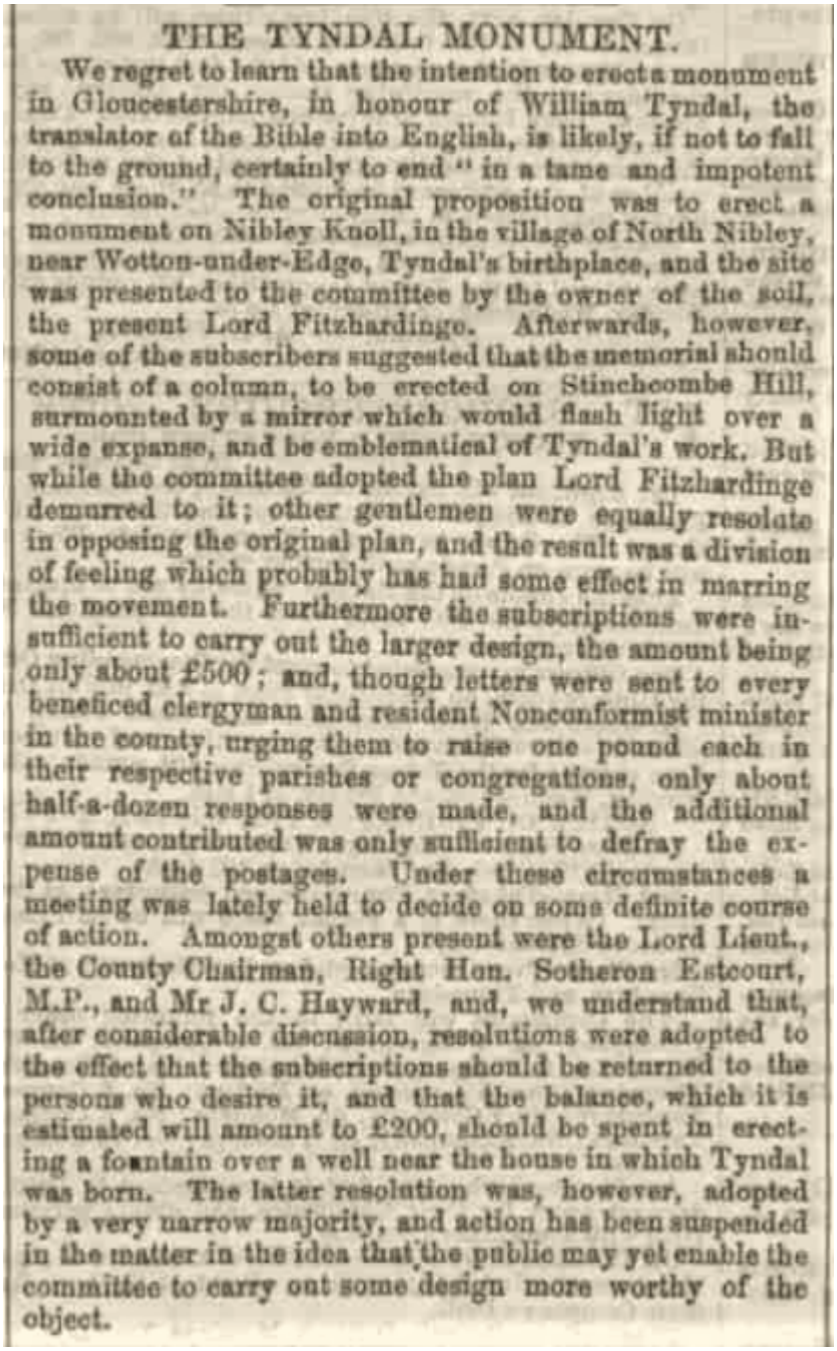
As well as being a peer, the 3rd Earl of Ducie was Captain of the Yeomen of the Guard and Lord Lieutenant of Gloucestershire. A few years earlier he had had Tortworth Court built for him, designed by the architect eventually to be responsible for the monument.

Unfortunately, Ducie's intial ideas for the Tyndale monument were grandiose to say the least. Even in the 21st century they would probably be considered over-ambitious. He wanted an obelisk topped by a parabolic mirror that would reflect the sun's rays far and wide. His concept, sub-titled "a curious proposal" was reported in many newspapers in Britain and abroad. The excerpt below comes from the Falkirk Herald of December 27th, 1860.

> *THE TYNDALE MONUMENT — CURIOUS PROPOSAL.*
>
> *— Earl Ducie proposes that the column to be erected to the memory of Tyndale should be surmounted by a parabolic reflector or mirror of some kind which might be so constructed as to reflect the sun's rays through a large angle, and be visible at a great distance, across the Severn, and up and down the line of the Midland Railway. "This reflector would" it is said "have a beautiful effect during many hours of the morning and evening in summer, and throughout the whole period of sunshine on a winter's day, and would strikingly illustrate the great event of Tyndale's life which it is proposed to commemorate." — Builder*

Less than Monumental Fundraising

Fundraising was hampered by the disagreements about the site of the monument. By December 1861, as reported in this cutting from the Morning Post, only £500 had been received in subscriptions. This was nothing like enough to execute the Earl of Ducie's groundbreaking scheme. A mail drop to every parish and congregation in the county had a very poor response. As mentioned below, there was a real risk of the project being downsized to a drinking fountain!



THE TYNDAL MONUMENT.

We regret to learn that the intention to erect a monument in Gloucestershire, in honour of William Tyndal, the translator of the Bible into English, is likely, if not to fall to the ground, certainly to end "in a tame and impotent conclusion." The original proposition was to erect a monument on Nibley Knoll, in the village of North Nibley, near Wotton-under-Edge, Tyndal's birthplace, and the site was presented to the committee by the owner of the soil, the present Lord Fitzhardinge. Afterwards, however, some of the subscribers suggested that the memorial should consist of a column, to be erected on Stinchcombe Hill, surmounted by a mirror which would flash light over a wide expanse, and be emblematical of Tyndal's work. But while the committee adopted the plan Lord Fitzhardinge demurred to it; other gentlemen were equally resolute in opposing the original plan, and the result was a division of feeling which probably has had some effect in marring the movement. Furthermore the subscriptions were insufficient to carry out the larger design, the amount being only about £500; and, though letters were sent to every beneficed clergyman and resident Nonconformist minister in the county, urging them to raise one pound each in their respective parishes or congregations, only about half-a-dozen responses were made, and the additional amount contributed was only sufficient to defray the expense of the postages. Under these circumstances a meeting was lately held to decide on some definite course of action. Amongst others present were the Lord Lieut., the County Chairman, Right Hon. Sotheron Estcourt, M.P., and Mr J. C. Hayward, and, we understand that, after considerable discussion, resolutions were adopted to the effect that the subscriptions should be returned to the persons who desire it, and that the balance, which it is estimated will amount to £200, should be spent in erecting a fountain over a well near the house in which Tyndal was born. The latter resolution was, however, adopted by a very narrow majority, and action has been suspended in the matter in the idea that the public may yet enable the committee to carry out some design more worthy of the object.

Monumental Effort

The fading prospect of having any sort of monument truly worthy of William Tyndale seems to have focussed minds. The Committee made its final decision on 10th January 1862, as reported in the following excerpt from the Bristol Times. The North Nibley faction had won the day, mainly because the Stinchcombe Hill scheme was simply too expensive. The Tyndale Monument was to be built on Nibley Knoll, as originally proposed.

> *To the Editor of the Bristol Times and Felix Farley's Journal, Sir, – We desire to thank you for having opened the columns of your journal on several occasions to ourselves and others advocating the erection of some suitable memorial to Wm. Tyndale. We now wish to call attention to the definite resolution passed at a meeting of the committee held in Wotton-under-edge, on the 10th Inst. That resolution determines Nibley Knoll (the site originally offered to the committee by Lord Fitzhardinge) as that which under all the circumstances is the best. The height and magnitude of Stinchcombe Hill, admirably suited as it is no doubt is for such an object, would have necessitated a proportionate erection, in order that an effect might be produced throughout the surrounding vale and district. Nor do the contributions already placed at the disposal of the committee warrant them in thinking that the very large sum which so lofty a shaft would cost, could be readily raised. Added to this, Stinchcombe having been set apart as a rifle shooting ground, free access to the memorial must have been refused to the public on many days.*

With the site at last finalised and seemingly sufficient funds raised for this more modest project, the foundation stone was laid by Lord Berkeley on 29th May 1863.

Monumental Catastrophe

Alas, just a few months later, various newspapers reported serious problems with the partly built structure. The cutting below comes from the Cardiff Gazette of 23rd October 1863. It sounds as though a few corners had been cut to accomplish the project with the funds available.

THE TYNDALE MEMORIAL.—We regret to state that this structure has now attained a height of about 60 feet, but that, about 20 feet above the surface of the soil, the stone has given way, causing a long rent, which has so weakened the building that the entire structure must be taken down. Various causes are assigned as to the origin of the accident, but the most correct opinion appears to be that which attributes it to the mixture of the hard stone from Box, with the soft sandstone of the locality, causing the latter, from the immense weight, to give way under the pressure. The stones with which the column is built are too small for the purpose, and they have been put together with mortar which has no binding quality. Cracking has begun, and the tower must be taken down. In other words, the money of the subscribers, £800, which has been spent upon it, is lost. We hope, however, that this will not prove an end to the project

Only one day after readers in Cardiff learnt of the structural issues, the Stroud Journal carried the short item below reporting that that the unfinished monument had indeed collapsed.

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THE TYNDALE MONUMENT.—We are informed that on Friday the Tyndale monument on Nibley Knoll fell down a mass of ruins. As before stated, the building of it was so defective that it was not expected to stand; and now, it seems, a speedy crash has come, and the whole of the money subscribed is lost within a few months of the erection.—*Stroud Journal.*

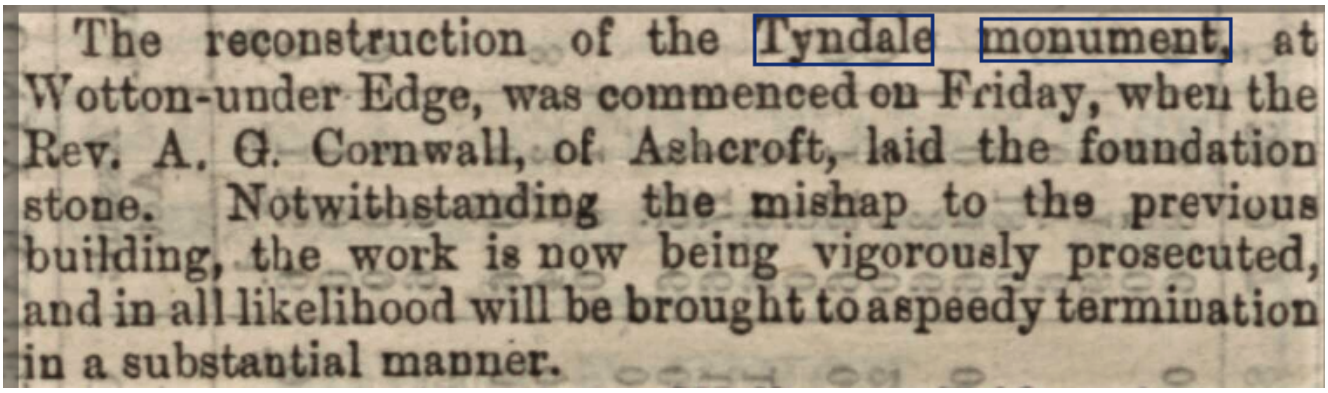
Monumental rebuild

By July 1864, "Agricola" was writing to the Daily Post criticising a clergyman who had said the project should never have been started. He suggested that there should be a fresh appeal for subscriptions. Although not much reported in the

press, this is what must have happened and with considerable success.

The Gloucester Chronicle noted in March 1865 that the Committee had awarded a contract to Messrs. Whitfield builders of Wotton-under-Edge for the construction of the monument. The architect was Samuel Sanders Teulon, who had designed Tortworth Court for the Earl of Ducie and many parish churches, including several in Gloucestershire. His design for the monument has been described as the synthesis of an obelisk with a Venetian campanile. The identities of the architect and builder for the ill-fated first attempt are not known.

In July 1865 a new foundation stone was laid and reconstruction continued apace, as this cutting from the Bath Chronicle reveals. This time the stone was taken from the Hampton quarry near Stroud. Presumably there were other changes in the design and construction methods but the newspapers did not interest themselves in such matters.


The reconstruction of the Tyndale monument, at Wotton-under Edge, was commenced on Friday, when the Rev. A. G. Cornwall, of Ashcroft, laid the foundation stone. Notwithstanding the mishap to the previous building, the work is now being vigorously prosecuted, and in all likelihood will be brought to a speedy termination in a substantial manner.

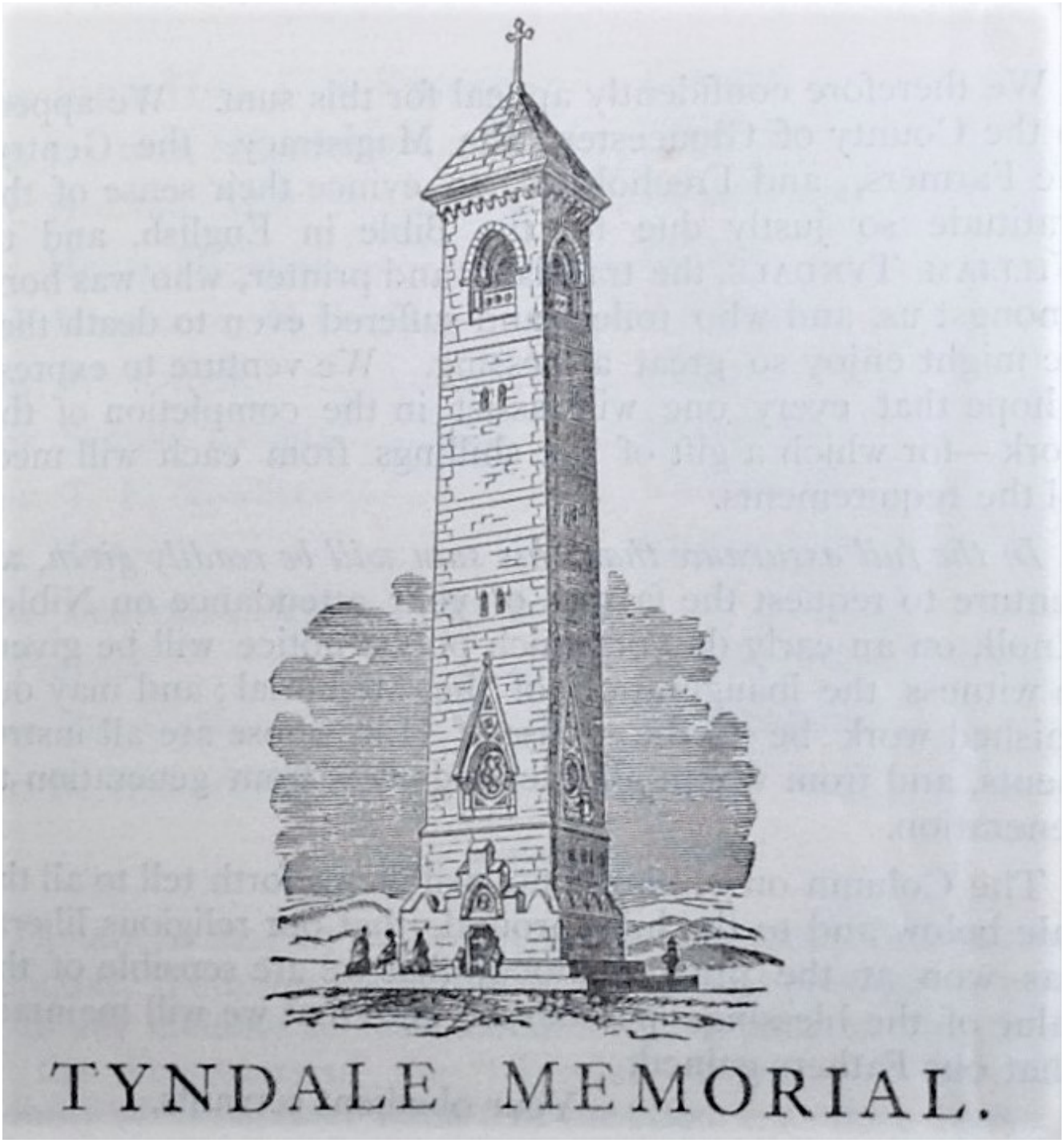
The Opening

The inauguration of the monument was on 6th November 1866, with the ceremony performed by our old friend the Earl of Ducie. There was a procession from the White Hart up the steep hill to the monument, with everyone getting in each other's way. The Wotton-under-Edge Oddfellows in their colourful regalia were singled out for mention. The Oddfellows were one of the earliest fraternal societies and had lodges all over

the country. Possibly they had been active in raising funds for the monument?

The press reported the ceremony and speeches in great detail, along with discussion of Tyndale’s life and where exactly in North Nibley he was supposed to have been born. Those who believed him to have been born elsewhere had to grin and bear it.

The cost of the monument was stated to be £1,550, which corresponds to about £218,000 in 2022, according to one online calculator. The funds were still £300 short on the day of the inauguration. The newspaper descriptions mention that four sculptures representing different stages of Tyndale’s life were to be added at the cardinals (corners?). These do not appear to be present, possibly due to the shortfall in subscriptions.



Not quite the end of the story



Old brick base at Lanterns on Stinchcombe Hill, photographed with the kind permission of Mr & Mrs Sumners

An interesting footnote to this article concerns the base pictured above, which stands within the garden of Lanterns, a private house near the south-west corner of Stinchcombe Hill golf course. Part of the present day house was once a ballroom built for the Purnells of Stancombe Park. There are also references to a pavilion, which may have been a separate structure.

Lanterns has been owned for some 60 years by Mr and Mrs Sumners. They were informed by David Evans, a well-known local historian and former teacher at Rednock School, that the base was an abandoned attempt at building a monument to Tyndale. Apparently the ground conditions proved to be unsuitable. So convinced was Mr Evans that he brought pupils to view it as part of their history lesson.

Whatever evidence he had for his beliefs, we have been unable to rediscover it. Sadly, Mr Evans' state of health makes it impossible to ask him directly. He may have been right,

although the location would not be ideal if the objective was visibility. The base is much smaller than that of the eventual monument built on Nibley Knoll, suggesting that a lower structure was intended.

Could there be other explanations for these remains – part of a larger building, the base of another monument or folly, a bandstand, something to do with the previous use of this land as a deer park? There is definitely scope for more research.