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Mr Tulk's table: from Marble Hill to Bondi and back

Every reader at the State Library of Victoria knows 'Mr Tulk', at least from his silhouette that forms the logo of the eponymous cafe at the La Trobe St entrance in Melbourne. While the Library challenges every passer-by with its slogan 'What's your story?', few may be aware of Mr Tulk's own tale, before his appointment as the institution's first chief librarian in March 1854. Readers (and diners) may be surprised to learn that the childhood home in England of Augustus Henry Tulk (1810–73), Marble Hill in Twickenham, has been a museum since 1966, and that the search by the museum's curators to recover the lost historic contents of the house has led to Woollahra and Bondi in Sydney. A magnificent carved and marble-topped pier table, taken to Australia by Mr Tulk, is now permanently back in the room in Twickenham for which it was designed. Research towards its recovery has shed light on the literary, artistic and even mystical circle of Romanticism's avant-garde that frequented the family home where Mr Tulk grew up.¹

Marble Hill was built between 1724 and 1729 for Henrietta Howard, daughter of Sir Henry Hobart, 4th Baronet. Known from 1731 by her title, Countess of Suffolk, the wife of Sir Charles Hotham was mistress to the Prince of Wales (from 1728, King George II) for nearly 15 years from 1718. Her home was built as an investment, in readiness for her inevitable fall from favour and retirement from court. Set beside the Thames at Twickenham, just outside central London, Marble Hill enjoys an Arcadian setting, as idyllic even

as the sylvan riverbank bordering Melbourne's Alexandra Gardens. Since 1986 Marble Hill has been in the care of English Heritage, a government body that is responsible for 416 historic monuments and houses, from Stonehenge to Hadrian's Wall.

This perfect Palladian villa was created by one of Henrietta Howard's many admirers, Henry Herbert, 9th Earl of Pembroke. The 'architect earl' was assisted by the Palladian architect Colen Campbell, the master builder Roger Morris and by the King's master carver, James Richards. The villa is set in gardens designed by the King's gardener, Charles Bridgeman, and by the poet Alexander Pope.² The vision they shared of Howard's new home was of the villas designed by Andrea Palladio along the Brenta Canal between Venice and Vicenza. As the finishing touch to their project, Marble Hill's Great Room was furnished with a bespoke pair of pier tables, facing a matching pair of console tables, all designed by William Kent, and with a unique set of *capricci* (architectural fantasies) painted in Rome, comprising four landscapes painted as over-doors and an overmantel showing classical buildings and sculptures, all signed and dated 1738 by Giovanni Paolo Panini. Even before her retirement to Twickenham, the perfect white villa was celebrated as the centre of Howard's literary circle: the 'Twickenham set', including Pope, Jonathan Swift, John Gay and, later, Horace Walpole.

Before her death in 1767, Howard made careful provision to keep her house, its contents and riverside gardens of 66.5 acres intact for future generations and secure from claims by her estranged husband and son. Her nephew, John Hobart, 2nd Earl of Buckinghamshire, inherited first and, on his death in 1793, Marble Hill passed to Howard's great niece and ward, Harriet Hotham. Unfortunately, following her death in 1816, Howard's descendants chose to break the entail on her will. In 1824 the contents were removed and the house and estate were sold. Hotham had preferred to live in a smaller, picturesque cottage on the estate, close to the river with a view of Richmond Hill, and so, for most of her life, Marble Hill was leased to tenants. The last private tenant was Charles Augustus Tulk (1786–1849).

The Tulk family came from the West Country and made their fortune in the City of London as wine merchants. They invested in property in central London and, from the 18th century, owned Leicester Square and the land around it on three sides. Charles Augustus Tulk was born in Richmond, Surrey, and was educated at Westminster School where he was elected a King's Scholar in 1801; five years later he matriculated at Trinity College, Cambridge. In 1807 (aged 21) he married Susannah Hart, the daughter of a London merchant. Tulk rented Marble Hill from around 1812 until 1817. The couple's first child,



‘Marble Hall [sic], Twickenham. The Seat of Charles Augustus Tulk’, engraving, 1815.
Image courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum

Augustus Henry (‘Mr Tulk’), would have been around two years old when they moved in. Announcements in the *Gentleman’s Magazine* between 1813 and 1817 of the birth and death of children of ‘Charles Augustus Tulk, esq., of Marble Hill, Twickenham’, confirm the family’s social standing and that this was their primary residence.³ Their youngest daughter, Sophia, born in 1824, wrote her recollections of family life.⁴ Tulk may have been drawn to Marble Hill by its literary associations. In 1815 an engraving of the house, captioned ‘The seat of Charles Augustus Tulk’, appeared in *Beauties of England and Wales* by J Britton and EA Brayley. The accompanying text describes Twickenham where ‘learning, wit and poetical genius have rendered the neighbourhood classic ground’. The account of Marble Hill is followed by descriptions of two nearby homes of past men of letters, Alexander Pope’s villa and Horace Walpole’s Strawberry Hill.⁵

Charles Tulk entered parliament in 1820, but had no career of note; he achieved prominence as a promoter of the mystical theologian Emanuel Swedenborg.⁶ In 1783 his father was a founder member of the Theosophical Society, which was established to promote the work of Swedenborg, and

Charles became president of the Swedenborgian Society. Charles was a friend of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and of Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Coleridge described Tulk as ‘a Gentleman of Fortune, a man of more than ordinary Talent, and more than gentlemanly Erudition, and what is best, a thoroughly good man and serious Christian’. Coleridge’s opinion of Charles’s wife, Susannah, is rather less circumspect; the poet found her simply ‘the loveliest woman in countenance, manners and nature that I have ever seen’.⁷

To scholars today, Tulk is best known as an early patron of the artist-poet William Blake.⁸ He collected his work from at least 1816 and, in 1818, he introduced Coleridge to Blake’s art and poetry; five or six years later he introduced the poets in person. Tulk was one of the principal subscribers to the 1839 edition of Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, 12 copies of which he had printed for friends in 1843. Tulk also owned several of Blake’s hand-coloured relief etchings. According to Tulk’s daughter Caroline, Blake and his wife ‘were rescued from destitution’ by her father.⁹ Tulk owed his introduction to Blake to the sculptor John Flaxman, whom his father had known in Rome (Flaxman arranged for his friend Giovanni Giuseppe Caputi to cut a sardonyx cameo relief of Swedenborg for the elder Tulk). Flaxman and Blake shared the Tulk family’s pursuit of a religious philosophy of rational mysticism.¹⁰ In 1810 Tulk and Flaxman formed a London society for publishing Swedenborg’s writings. In 1817, at Tulk’s home, he examined with Flaxman the skull of Swedenborg, which had been disinterred at the Swedish Church in London prior to its return to Sweden.¹¹ The Tulk family later donated three plaster relief sculptures by Flaxman to the Kensington Chapel.¹² In 1816, presumably at Marble Hill, Flaxman drew individual portraits of Tulk and of his wife (University College, London). He also sketched a group portrait of his sister, Maria Denham, with Tulk’s boys, and another of Mrs Tulk with her two sons. These are the earliest known portraits of Melbourne’s first chief librarian.

Augustus Henry Tulk was seven in 1817 when the family left Marble Hill for a new villa, St John’s Lodge, Regent’s Park, which had been designed and built for them. In 1843 or 1844, Charles Augustus Tulk moved from 19 Duke Street, Westminster, to a country house, Totteridge Park, Hertfordshire, taking with him at least one of the architectural tables from Marble Hill. Following his death in 1849 the auction of ‘the Valuable & Interesting Assemblage’ removed from Totteridge Park was held at Messrs Bullock’s Rooms in High Holborn, London on 10 January 1850. It included ‘Designs of Flaxman, executed expressly for his Friend the late Mr. Tulk’ (lots 46–63). The table, lot 141, was described as ‘A pedestal of oak, formed of scrolls, intermixed with a peacock, festoons of flowers and shells, all elaborately



The table on display today in the Great Room at Marble Hill. Photographs © Historic England Photo Library

carved, 2 ft. 9 high, 4 ft. 4 wide, formerly belonging to the Countess of Suffolk, of the time of George the Second'. Either it failed to sell, and so passed to Tulk's son, or he purchased it.

Augustus Henry Tulk was the eldest of 12 children, seven of whom survived their father. His mother died in 1824, when he was 14. He was educated at Winchester College and Heidelberg. In order to establish Augustus and two of his brothers in business, their father mortgaged the Leicester Square estate but, less than four years later, Augustus was declared bankrupt. Thereafter his father paid him an allowance of £200 a year. Independently wealthy, like his father and grandfather, he travelled in Europe. By the time he reached the age of 44 his health was declining and he was advised to seek a drier climate. In response, he bought a brigantine, the *General Guyon*¹³ and, with his wife, sailed from London to Australia. They set off in March and arrived in Melbourne on 13 July 1854. Seeking to profit from the Australian gold rush he had laden his ship with mining equipment, including a quartz-cutting machine, and other goods for the goldfields. There must have been some space left on board for the table from Marble Hill. After an abortive attempt in business, on 5 May 1856, Tulk was appointed chief librarian of the Melbourne Public Library, responsible for the new cultural complex on Swanston St that would grow into the State Library, the National Gallery of Victoria and Melbourne Museum. Tulk oversaw the library, with these wider interests, for 17 years until his death, aged 63, at home in St Kilda.

My pursuit of Marble Hill's lost pier table, through the footsteps of the Tulk family, from Twickenham to Melbourne, began soon after my appointment as curator responsible for Marble Hill in 1983. The five missing paintings by Giovanni Paolo Panini were rediscovered in Philadelphia and the south of France, and reinstated between 1986 and 1988. In the drawers of previous curators' files lay a fading Polaroid snap, attached to a letter reporting a table in an antique shop in Woollahra, Australia. The provenance rested on a page from Bullock's auction that had remained with it, with lot 141 annotated 'from Marble Hill'.¹⁴ Despite the poor quality of the Polaroid, the table seemed plausible as the escapee: the carving clearly matched the decorative mouldings running around Marble Hill's Great Room and overall it followed a known design by William Kent that Alexander Pope had used to illustrate a poem. The most distinctive feature, the central peacock, was the only difference and this proved puzzling. Architectural furniture associated with Kent usually features eagles, not peacocks. Once one realises that eagles are the emblem of Jupiter, however, then the peacock is welcome, as the emblem of Juno, which is wholly appropriate to the home of the retired royal mistress (a conceit



The table arrives back at Marble Hill, 1987. Photograph © Historic England Photo Library

probably suggested by Pope, as Henrietta Howard's admirer). Unfortunately, letters to Woollahra enquiring about the table went unanswered.

In the distant dark ages before the internet (and even before fax machines), intercontinental research depended more on professional contacts. At Australia House in London, the enterprising librarian welcomed the challenge of tracking down the antique dealer at her new address. Eventually the good news came through – Mrs Palmer was still in business, the client to whom she had sold the table still had it, in Bondi, and was willing to sell it back to Marble Hill. New photographs and dimensions were secured and soon confirmed, as hoped, that the table matched the room. To establish period authenticity and the table's condition Edmund Capon, then director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales (formerly a curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London) kindly inspected it *in situ*. The purchase was successfully negotiated by English Heritage, a grant was secured from the National Art Collections Fund and the chairman of English Heritage, Lord Montagu of Beaulieu, convinced his friend Lord King, chairman of British Airways, to fly it home to Marble Hill.

Since that time no other furniture, or objects, from Marble Hill have surfaced in Australia. On moving to the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A),



John Flaxman, 'Portrait of Mrs Charles Augustus Tulk with her sons Augustus and Edward', 1816, pen and ink and wash. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

I found the collection included 11 of Blake's etchings that had belonged to John Augustus Tulk of Ruxbury, Chertsey, in Surrey. The Tulk Bequest of 314 items was selected by the V&A from his home on his death in 1956.¹⁵ Some of the furniture, porcelain, glass, silver, sculpture, jewellery and paintings had been inherited from his grandfather, John Augustus Tulk (1814–73), the younger brother of Augustus Henry Tulk. It seems most likely that the Blake etchings belonged to Charles Augustus Tulk, particularly given their subject matter – the two early illuminated books *There is No Natural Religion* and *All Religions are One* (both 1788–95). These may have been items that Mr Tulk chose not to take to Australia. Perhaps, however, there was room in the hold of that brigantine for more furniture from Marble Hill. Should any readers (or any of Mr Tulk's diners) have any leads, they may like to contact me at the V&A.