

Obelisk

A 1.7 metre-high steel sculpture by Alan Wilson

It was commissioned by Warings in about 2000

Located at the roundabout at Bracknell Gate and Western Road



What is an obelisk?

Obelisks are one of the most widely recognized types of public monuments.

An obelisk is a very tall, tapering, four-sided stone pillar, which is capped with a pyramid-like shape at the top.

The word obelisk comes from an Ancient Greek term *obeliskos*, which means small, pointed pillar.

When and where did obelisks originate?

Obelisks were a prominent feature of Ancient Egyptian architecture: they were placed in pairs at the entrance of temples, where they were thought to offer protection.

The earliest obelisk still in its original position is in Heliopolis, in the Nile Delta in Egypt; it dates from sometime between 1971 and 1926 BC.

What did they symbolize?

Obelisks symbolized the sun god Ra. More than this, it was thought that an obelisk was a petrified ray of the sacred sun, and that an aspect of the god Ra lived within it.

Where can obelisks be found today?

There are a great many prominent stone obelisks located in many parts of the world, dating from all periods of history. Famous examples include an obelisk at the Place de la Concorde in Paris and the Vatican Obelisk in Rome.

In the UK, the best known example is Cleopatra's Needle, on the Victoria Embankment in London. It is one of three Ancient Egyptian obelisks that were re-located to London, Paris and New York in the nineteenth century.

Why is London's Ancient Greek obelisk known as Cleopatra's Needle?

Long before the obelisk arrived in London, the popular name for obelisks was Cleopatra's Needles. A 'needle' is a largely outdated term for a variety of pointed objects (e.g. The Needles, a row of chalk stacks in the sea off the Isle of Wight), and Cleopatra (of *Antony and Cleopatra* fame) has been strongly connected with Egypt in the public imagination. The London obelisk actually predates Queen Cleopatra VII of Egypt (to give this historical figure her full name) by more than a thousand years.

What makes Bracknell's obelisk different?

Many of us will have smiled when we first heard about Cleopatra's Needle in London, because we now only generally associate needles with sewing. Alan Wilson, the sculptor, seems to have taken the humour of the name a stage further. There's a hole at the top of his obelisk that goes from one side to another – like a sewing needle.

Also, rather than being made in stone, the Bracknell obelisk is made of steel – again, like a sewing needle.

There's another aspect to it, too, when you consider that the production of steel involves heating iron at a temperature of approximately 1,370°C (2,500°F). This steel obelisk could be seen as a present-day embodiment of a ray of the sun, in that it's created with intense heat and glints with the rays of the sun.

Also, as the artist explains: 'The hole in the top is mirror polished and meant to function as a sundial, if the obelisk was correctly aligned... which I don't think it is! The obelisk itself casts the shadow and the angled hole would line up with the sun to form a circle of light on the ground, which should have appropriate markings to tell the time'. This idea was, however, abandoned when the original location was shifted from outside Warrings to the middle of a busy roundabout.

Information about the sculptor

Alan Wilson is based at the Sculpture Workshop in Henley-on-Thames. He makes sculptures for public spaces and corporate offices and his work can be found in private collections. As well as creating steel sculptures and fountains in simple and sleek modern designs, he also creates highly realistic sculptures of people and animals.