6.15

Figure 6.15 Nelson's Column, Trafalgar Square, London

6.16

Figure 6.16 Detail of base, Wren's Column, London, illustrating its vast scale

Trajan's Column is probably the most notable of the monumental columns erected by the Romans. According to Adshead (1911b): 'A particularly beautiful feature of this column is the festoon of bay leaves which is wreathed around its pedestal, and upon which rest four eagles at the corners.' The siting of the column in a small enclosed courtyard off the main Basilica of Trajan increased the dramatic effect of this highly decorative column. Columns similar in form to that of the Trajan Column were erected in cities throughout the Roman Empire though most have been destroyed or have disappeared.

Important columns of the Roman monumental type have been erected in European cities until comparatively modern times. Of these the Doric column designed by a pupil of Blondel for Place Vendôme, Paris, is an outstanding example erected in 1810 to commemorate victories by Napoleon (Figure 6.14). Similar columns for the Duke of Wellington were erected at the southern end of Nash's composition for Regent Street, London and a particularly fine example was located in Liverpool amongst the great civic buildings of the nineteenth century. Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square, London is another column of this type, a particularly popular decorative feature of the city for Londoners (Figure 6.15). Possibly the finest column in Britain, however, is the great Doric shaft designed by Wren in about 1671 to commemorate the Fire of London. Though badly sited, its elegant detailing and sheer size, 174 ft (53 m) as against Trajan's column at 115 ft (35 m) or the Vendôme column at 116 ft (35.5 m), establishes the preeminence of this monument (Figure 6.16).

In addition to using monumental columns the Romans adorned public places with columns of a smaller type. The Rostral Column is closer to the tradition of the Greek monumental column and closer to a scale which would be acceptable today. The unadorned severity of some of the more gigantic of the Roman type columns which appeared in European cities in the last century diminished their power as aesthetic decorative statements. It was not until the neo-Greek revival that the monumental column took on new possibilities with a greater freedom of decorative treatment, when the column shaft was fluted, banded, rusticated and festooned with garlands repeating a style common to Hellenic Greece. Columns and pedestals of small scale are more adaptable for the smaller public spaces and suitable to commemorate the lives of mere mortals, the scientists, teachers and clerics rather than the heroic figures of the semi-deity. Many fine examples of small scale pedestals ornament the town squares of countries like Portugal and Spain celebrating the useful lives of valued citizens.

Figure 6.17 Obelisk, Southport

OBELISKS

The origin of the obelisk is undoubtedly Egyptian. Its popularity as a special decorative element in the city is attested by the way in which other peoples have, from time to time, raided Egypt for this particular treasure. More than forty Egyptian obelisks have survived though few remain in their original location: twelve were transported to Rome, five to Britain, one to New York, one to Paris and several are in Istanbul. The form of the obelisk has been copied for its use in many towns and villages in Britain and in mainland Europe (Figure 6.17). Only the smaller of these copies however, use the monolith in true Egyptian style which is made of a single piece of stone.

The obelisk with its vertical emphasis has no horizontal directional quality, it can therefore be used to mark the centre of an axis or the crossing point of two or more axes. It does not however form a stop or point of termination to a vista. The obelisk, as in St Peter's Square, Rome and in the Place de la Concorde, Paris, can be made to form the hub of a great place. Unlike the monumental column which frequently stands alone, the obelisk is used to support a larger conception or design. Probably the most notable example of the use of the obelisk in city planning is the work carried out by the architect Domenico Fontana under the instructions of Pope Sixtus V. Between the years 1585 and 1590 the medieval city of Rome was transformed. The technique Pope Sixtus V used to create order out of the chaos of the medieval city was the long vista. Using wide, straight roads he connected the seven main churches, the holy shrines which had to be visited by pilgrims in the course of the day. Incorporating the work of previous Popes he developed a whole new communication network of major access routes through the city (Figure 6.18). At the termination of his great vistas, in this communication network, obelisks were raised and around these, and other important nodes along the route, squares were later to develop. As Rasmussen (1969) states: 'In this way, the obelisks became gigantic