

The Jerwood Sculpture Park at Witley Court

The flagship event of English Heritage's 'Year of Public Sculpture' in 2000 was the opening of the Jerwood Sculpture Park at Witley Court. The Jerwood Foundation's Curator for the park, Rosemary Barnett, describes its unique qualities.



Above: *In Memoriam II*, by Elisabeth Frink, 1981. Bronze. Below: The inaugural exhibition at Witley Court in 2000 was devoted to the sculpture of Elisabeth Frink

Witley Court was one of the most spectacular country houses of Victorian England. It is now a ruin, partly due to a fire in 1937 and subsequent stripping, but because of the very high standard of architecture, the remaining skeleton is still impressive. The Jacobean core of the house was extended in the early eighteenth century, and around 1806 John Nash added massive porticoes. Samuel Whitfield Daukes clad the brick house with Portland stone and transformed it into an Italianate style palace for one of the world's richest men, William Humble Ward, later the 1st Earl of Dudley, whose fortune came from an industrial empire in the nearby 'Black Country'. This splendid home was then set off by William Andrews Nesfield's pleasure gardens. The pinnacle is his *Perseus and Andromeda* fountain,

reputed to be the largest in Europe, carved to Nesfield's designs by James Forsyth and T. Raymond Smith between 1857 and 1860. To the east of the court a second and slightly smaller fountain was positioned, known as the *Flora* fountain, also designed by Nesfield. Inside, Lord Dudley had an international collection of mainly marble sculptures, including work by Neoclassical artists such as John Flaxman.

The Jerwood Foundation was established in 1977 by the late John Jerwood and is dedicated to the imaginative support of the arts,

education and our heritage in the widest sense. The Foundation felt that if it could enhance a heritage site with a sculpture park it would be a creative achievement, something quite different from the Yorkshire Sculpture Park and Sculpture at Goodwood. English Heritage had taken on the custody of Witley Court in 1984, and it seemed an obvious partnership for the Jerwood Foundation to explore, especially as there was no sculpture park in the West Midlands.

Surrounded by stunning unspoilt countryside, ten miles from Worcester, Witley Court has magnificent trees, ancient rhododendrons, a lake and interesting gradients. Supported by a substantial grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the grounds are being sensitively restored by English Heritage, enhancing all that is splendid about nature without imposing too much of man's will. This and the ruins of a once great mansion make an ideal backdrop for twentieth- and twenty-first-century sculpture.

Witley Court symbolised the elite of British society during the Victorian era. This was a time when man felt himself to be all powerful, controlling the destinies of lesser creatures and lesser man; even nature seemed to be at his disposal. The attitude of this period echoes similar times in history, usually before a great collapse of power and change, such as Classical Greece, the Roman Empire and the fading of the Renaissance. The sculptures in all these periods depict man as perfect and god-like. During the twentieth century an amazing change took place.





Crusader, by Harry Everington, 1992. Bronze

31 July 2000. With the help of West Midlands Arts there was also the first in a series of exhibitions by new and young sculptors (under thirty of years of age or within five years of graduating) from the West Midlands. This year there was a small temporary exhibition of work by Michael Ayrton. In 2004 the Royal Society of British Sculptors will hold their centenary exhibition at the park. There are also plans for a Jerwood Sculpture Prize, similar to the Jerwood Painting Prize, which is the largest single prize for painting in the United Kingdom. It is hoped that the first prize winner will be unveiled at Witley during the summer of 2002. Together these will achieve the vision of Alan Grieve, Chairman of the Jerwood Foundation, 'to create in the Midlands a unique stage for public sculpture which will attract visitors from all over the world'.

Man became far more aware of his own frailty and his dependence on nature, the universe and a supreme power. This realisation is apparent in much of the sculpture of this period and becomes even more evident when pieces are located at Witley.

All the works chosen by the Jerwood Foundation for the site use the traditional language of shape, form and mass. This is a universal language, much like music. It is, therefore, not necessary to have booklets and long explanations for the sculptures, just a few moments of silent communication.

To date, the permanent collection consists of seven works: *Standing Figure* by Kenneth Armitage, *Oracle* by Michael Ayrton, *Crusader* by Harry Everington, *Walking Man* by Elisabeth Frink, *Widow Woman* by Ronald Rae, *Bond* by Alan Thornhill, and *Cloaked Figure IX* by Lynn Chadwick (on loan for five years until spring 2006). Depending on suitable sites being available, the permanent collection of work by nationally known and established sculptors will gradually grow to no more than thirty sculptures, including site-specific work.

It is hoped that every year there will be an exhibition of the work of one of the sculptors in the permanent collections, enabling a better understanding of their sculpture. The Frink and the Armitage were the first sculptures purchased, and it was therefore an inspiring opportunity to have a Frink exhibition to open the park on

None of the work is for sale, it is simply there to surprise, delight and perhaps give a glimpse of universal wisdom.

Rosemary Barnett
Director
Frink School of Sculpture

The architecture of Witley Court provides the perfect setting for the sculpture of Elisabeth Frink

