



NEWSLETTER

Supporting the Mercer Art Gallery by assisting in the acquisition & exhibition of works of art for the benefit of the public

A Message from Judith Thomas

In the Autumn Newsletter last year we were busy saying a fond farewell to the Head of Cultural Services for the Harrogate District, otherwise known as Jane Sellers, who left to continue her career as a Consultant and to bring to the Mercer the brilliant William Powell Frith Exhibition in 2019, which has seen record attendances throughout the summer.

In the Spring Newsletter we welcomed three new committee members who have brought wisdom, youth and fresh vitality to the Friends.

After over 30 years involvement with the Mercer Art Gallery, Alan Ritchie our Treasurer and John Wilks a Trustee have decided to retire at this AGM. I hope, like London buses, retirements don't come in threes.

John Wilks was a member of the Appeal Committee set up to raise the funds to convert the Promenade Room into an Art Gallery, acting as its Secretary and continued in that role until 1996 following the formation of the Development Trust. John has lived in Harrogate all his life and his local contacts were invaluable.

He has always encouraged and supported the aims and ideals of the Friends. His thoughtfulness, consideration and sound advice have been greatly valued and appreciated.

It is quite impossible to record the amount of work and dedication that Alan has brought to his job or the admiration we all feel for his long tenure as our Treasurer. Words are rather inadequate to convey the great debt the Trust owes to him.

I first met Alan at a Dance when, in conversation over dinner, I told him about my new voluntary job to raise the funds to convert the Old Promenade Room into a new Art Gallery for the Harrogate District.



Alan Ritchie 2019.

Alan casually mentioned that not only was he very interested in art but he was an accountant too so before he could draw breath, I said we were looking for a Treasurer to work with the Appeal and that was how it all began.

Alan has carefully and meticulously guided us through the Appeal and on to the forming of the Harrogate Arts and Mercer Gallery Development Trust, known as the Friends of the Mercer Art Gallery.

I could not have done my own job without the support and back-up he has given to me and the committee and I have always rested in the sure knowledge that the financial side of our affairs was in the most capable hands.

Alan and his wife Christine have been expert sellers of raffle tickets at all our events and Christine's delicious canapés a feature of our parties. Perhaps she can be persuaded to carry on?

Alan's sound advice and careful consideration of the health and welfare of the Trust will not be completely lost. The committee have invited him to become a Custodian Trustee, which he has gladly accepted.

Friends Visit: The Yorkshire Sculpture Park

We left Harrogate on a dreary June morning but our spirits were soon lifted by the warm welcome we received from the staff of the Hepworth Gallery and the provision of coffee and pastries. We then divided into two groups each with a guide to tour the exhibition of sculpture by five international artists. Many of the pieces we were privileged to see have never been shown in the UK before.

We then proceeded to the Sculpture Park for a pleasant lunch before being introduced to the work of David Smith, an eminent American sculptor of the twentieth century and a ground breaking artist. Again a rare opportunity to see such a comprehensive collection rarely seen outside the USA. We then relaxed with tea and scones in the new Weston cafe.

Although the rain was still pouring down we could not wander the park but were able to see some of the Damian Hirst exhibits in situ as the cafe affords a vista across the landscape. A truly stimulating day.

written by Judith Jarvis



Nottingham Visit

There stood our trusty steed, next to Trinity Church, with driver, Tony ready to ferry 27 Friends (average age reduced dramatically by 30-year-old Isabelle Spencer) on their day-trip to Nottingham. As recent surgery kept Chairman Judith homebound, the party was led by Social Committee Chairman Julie Goldsmith ably assisted by Andrew Sloane.

Djanogly Gallery – *Homage to the Bauhaus*

The German art school known as The Bauhaus opened its doors in 1919. Its main proponents were artists/teachers Josef Albers and Moholy-Nagy whose unique synthesis of art and technology would flourish beyond its abrupt closure in 1933 by the Nazis creating an enduring legacy with a global diaspora.

Enthusiastic curator Neil Walker led our group round the galleries, focussing on particular works such as Albers' famous "Homage to the Square", one of a series of repetitive square pictures, Moholy-Nagy's "Fotogramm", and Max Bill's "Horizontal-diagonal-simultan-quadrant" whose 'abstract methods share the distillation of painterly complexity with something more direct'.



After a light lunch with wine, a brief trip took us to **Nottingham Contemporary** (short-listed for the Art Fund Museum of the Year), where British artist **Elizabeth Price** uses video installations 'to animate archives, exhume social histories and tell compelling gothic tales', evidenced by Turner Prize-winning **Kohl** video that 'speaks of ghostly presences emerging from abandoned coal mines ... projections standing for data centres, flooded mine shafts, carboniferous swamps, ink wells, blackened lungs'. Then to Price's **Felt Tip**, 'an immersive projection that explores significant changes in the workplace'. The work features an eccentric collection of men's neckties which the artist through a female narrator deems 'symbols of masculine executive authority' overlain by images of a shaft of a coal mine, the belly of a woman, the store of a museum. Talk about the multi-layering of images!

And talk about England's hidden gem, saving the best till last, reminiscent of the parable when Jesus surprises his guests by bringing out the vintage claret after vin ordinaire – **Southwell Minster, its Chapter House, the Archbishop of York's Palace**, where Cardinal Wolsey spent his final summer trying to appease Henry VIII over his failure to obtain the king a divorce from Catherine of Aragon.

But the gem supreme, 'The miracle of the Southwell carvings, an inexhaustible delight' (Pevsner), the 800-year-old exquisite, the extraordinary, naturalistic fluid carvings of plants, animals and green men in the Chapter House, described by Hilary Mantel as 'so subtle as if stone has burst into florid life'; 'One of the Glories of Europe' (Radio 4), had to be 'The Leaves of Southwell' as they're known. Oft-over-used expression this, I know, but the word 'awesome' sprang to mind.

Culturally replete though we were, as soon as Tony's trusty chariot could speed from rocky trot to a regular canter when she gained the motorway, Andrew's steady hands were able to satisfy the group's more corporal tastes by pouring wine for the hard-worked thirsty members, a task much appreciated.

As Parish magazines are apt to end: Good Time was had by All.

written by Charles Spencer

Dundee Trip

On September 26th, 41 of us set out by coach on the annual Mercer Friends three-day outing to pastures unexplored, in this case two rarely visited grand houses in Scottish Border country and Scotland's fourth-largest city, Dundee.

After a comfort break and coffee stop at the Black Bull in Moulton we travelled North, passing the Angel of the North (which is now partially obscured by fast growing trees – will these be removed or will the impact of the Angel be lost?) and crossing the Tweed at Coldstream, to our first "attraction" – a private visit to Mellerstain House.

Mellertstain was constructed in two phases separated by some 45 years: unusually the two wings, designed by William Adam, were built first in around 1725 and these were then connected to the main house, designed by William's son Robert and finished in 1778. It is thought that this is the only remaining complete house designed by Robert Adam and has been described as his masterpiece. Following lunch - at this point I should add that throughout the three days we ate and drank (thank you team!) particularly well - we were given a comprehensive tour of the house.



We marvelled at the interior decoration, preserved in the original Adam colours, and the very fine plasterwork on walls and ceilings. The main rooms house an outstanding collection of fine art, including of particular interest to us from Harrogate, a Frith (although yours truly did not find it). We were also able to admire the gardens, laid out somewhat in the style of Capability Brown but actually created in 1910.

We departed thinking how fortunate it was that this house had been so well preserved over the three centuries, negotiated once more the entrance gate, which seemed to be about six inches wider than the coach (well done Tony!), and set sail for Dundee. This journey gave us a chance to compare the differing architecture of the three Forth bridges – the ultra-modern new road bridge opened in 2017, the old road bridge dating from 1994 and the rail bridge, the world's first major steel structure, dating from 1890. These contrasted strongly with the two Tay bridges, the road bridge, which we crossed, opened in 1966 and the rail bridge, which famously collapsed in 1879 (memorably commemorated in his inimitable poetic style by Dundee native William McGonagall) and was replaced by the existing structure in 1887.

Almost 12 hours after leaving Harrogate we finally arrived at the Hotel Indigo, where we were most comfortably accommodated for two days.

Our first visit on the second day was to the MacManus Gallery in central Dundee. I suspect that this art gallery and museum was an eye-opener for us all. The building itself is in the gothic revival style, designed by Gilbert Scott and intended as a memorial to Prince Albert. The main art gallery is an outstanding space containing an impressive collection of paintings, ancient and modern, but there are five other galleries devoted to aspects of life in Dundee, and I, for one, was particularly taken by an exhibition celebrating in fine art, photographs and objects Dundee's history as a whaling port and a base for polar exploration. Two hours was not long enough to do this gallery justice and a repeat visit is called for.

Our second stop was at the V&A Dundee. This, the first V&A museum outside London, was designed by the Japanese architect Kengo Kuma and was opened almost exactly a year ago. The impressive design was inspired by the eastern cliffs of Scotland and not (as was emphasised by Peter, our excellent tour guide) intended to mimic a ship. The interior

is as eye-catching as the outside and the open plan design on two levels provides a flexible and interesting backdrop to the exhibitions. Unfortunately, notwithstanding a complete original Charles Rennie Mackintosh room, the permanent display of Scottish design history is not particularly absorbing, and one hopes that future temporary exhibitions will lift the interest level. Currently it's rather like a very ornate frame surrounding a rather dull picture. However, lunch was excellent!



Following the V&A, we went on to the Verdant Works, which is a former jute mill restored as a museum dedicated to the textile industry in Dundee. The production of textiles directly employed half the working population at the end of the nineteenth century and Dundee supplied most of the world's consumption of jute products. In the twentieth century, however, as with the cotton industry in England, the production of jute products transferred to the Far East where labour costs were much lower. And, as with the English cotton towns, at its height Dundee was a city of two unequal halves – one world populated by mill workers living in squalor and another of wealthy jute barons with their mansions and estates. Inevitably we consumed tea and Dundee cake before everything was explained to us by our guides as they took us through the museum, which housed a fascinating working collection of the machines involved in transforming the raw jute into woven cloth.



On day three we set off bright and early for Marchmont House in the Borders not far from Mellerstain. This Palladian house was completed in 1750 but major changes

were made at the start of the twentieth century to enlarge and refurbish it. Inheritance tax issues led eventually to it becoming institutionalised as a Sue Ryder care home, but when it became surplus to their requirements it was bought privately and has undergone a six year programme to restore the interiors to their original eighteenth century glory with the addition of appropriate modern facilities, including outstanding guest accommodation. There is a large collection of furniture, pictures, statuary and tapestries from the sixteenth to twentieth centuries, together with an increasing number of modern pieces, including notably on the roof a Gormley figure and in one of the rooms a maquette of the Angel of the North. It was interesting to compare Mellerstain with Marchmont – both of the same period, in the same area and on the same scale, but one handed down through the generations of “old money”, the other a very recent rescue and revival with “new money” – and each an outstanding example of the Scottish Borders country house.



After an excellent lunch in these imposing surroundings we boarded the coach for the journey home, stopping again at the Black Bull for tea and scones (and a gentle discussion as to whether one puts the cream or the strawberry jam on first).

This was my first taste of a Mercer Friends trip and I sincerely hope it won't be my last. Judith, and particularly Julie and Andrew, should be congratulated for faultless organisation and calmness personified throughout – although doubtless there was on occasion some energetic paddling beneath the surface!

Finally, a word of thanks to Tony Broome of Britannia Travel, our driver. He is shortly retiring, and this was his last trip for us (unless he can be persuaded out of retirement). I understand he has driven Mercer Friends impeccably on many outings over the years – he will be missed.

written by Jon Pierce

The Friends Summer Party at Stockeld



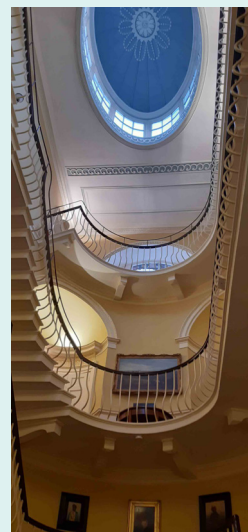
We are grateful to our kind hosts, Peter and Susie Grant, for allowing us to hold our Summer Party in their beautiful family home at Stockeld Park.

In August over 70 of us gathered in the wonderful Georgian Mansion. The house was built in 1763 by the celebrated architect, James Paine, who also designed Nostell Priory and the stables and famous bridge at Chatsworth.



The mansion house itself is constructed of stone in the style of a Palladian villa and features an impressive cantilevered staircase, which many of us marvelled at during the party!

Thanks to the committee for supplying the lovely array of canapés. To Andrew, Alice and Paula for running the raffle and sourcing the array of great prizes and to the young Ogdens for their super serving.



Our New Secretary



Tom King was born and went to school in Northern Ireland. After university he qualified as a solicitor and ran a high street general practice in Yorkshire for 31 years before taking up a compliance and governance role in education. Tom is married to Eleanor; they have four grown up daughters who were brought up in Harrogate and (thus far) two grandchildren.

As he is very much of the view that the Mercer Gallery is a jewel in the crown of the cultural life of our beautiful town. Tom was delighted to be asked to become involved with the work of the Friends.

Open Exhibition

More than 150 artworks comprising paintings, prints, textiles and ceramics have been selected for this years exhibition from 600 entries.

Professional artist, Neil Bolton from Ripon scooped the coveted first prize in the Harrogate Open with a large scale figurative oil painting called *Untitled*.

The Open Exhibition 2019 will be on permanent display at the gallery until January 11, 2020 and art lovers can now vote for their favourite artwork for the People's Choice award, the results of which will be announced in December.



*Judith Thomas with Neil Bolton
Winning entry, 'Untitled'*



*Balbinder Broadbent with
2nd Prize piece 'Motion'*

Dates for your diary

Christmas Party : 4th December 2019 at the Mercer Gallery

Thursday January 30th (evening) :

To coincide with **Turner: Northern Exposure** a touring exhibition following in the footsteps of JMW Turner's own tour of northern England in 1797, a talk by the curator David Hill. David is a Turner expert, author and emeritus professor at the University of Leeds.

Thursday March 5th (evening) : Diamonds: Brilliant Diplomacy.

A presentation by Jack Ogden, President of the Society of Jewellery Historians, which was first given at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. A light hearted overview of the history of the diamond, its trade and development and its historic role in diplomatic relations.

Tuesday April 28th (all day visit) : Doddington Hall and the Portland Collection.

Enjoy a private guided tour of enchanting Doddington Hall, an Elizabethan prodigy house, home to the President of the Historic Houses Association just outside Lincoln. After lunch in the restaurant we then move on to Welbeck Abbey for a private tour of the Portland Collection housed in a RIBA award winning gallery and showcasing fine and decorative art from the collection of the Cavendish-Bentick family.