

Northumberland visit

Undaunted by a drizzly start to the day, thirty-six Friends of the Mercer Art Gallery set off for a two day adventure into deepest Northumberland. The weather improved and we arrived at the first port of call, Auckland Castle, where coffee was served with some delicious biscuits. Our guided tour introduced us to the seat of the only Prince Bishops in England for over a thousand years. These privileged men, whose many portraits we viewed, enjoyed a lifestyle which could have scarcely been imagined by the other inhabitants of the area.

After a wonderful lunch we departed for Woodhorn Mining Museum at Ashington which was a very different experience from Auckland Castle. Here, with the help of a guide, we experienced the dreadful living and working conditions of the coalminers and their families but also learnt how some of the miners used the little leisure time they had, to become artists. The small exhibition of Pitman paintings not only gave us an emotional insight into their working conditions, houses and families but also brought home to us the strong bond between all the miners. This bond was further demonstrated by the artefacts such as banners which were used in parades and galas. The paintings showing the miners' lifestyle were in stark contrast to those of the Prince Bishops.

The tired but happy group then departed for an overnight stay at Linden House hotel, where an agreeable dinner and just a few drinks were enjoyed.

The next morning in good weather we proceeded to Chillingham Castle a 12th century stronghold which became a fully fortified castle in 1344. Here some of the party went on a guided tour of the castle whilst the more hardy, or foolhardy, of us took a long uphill walk to see the very rare white, wild Chillingham cattle, the only wild cattle in the world. Standing at a safe distance from these beautiful creatures we learnt, from the very knowledgeable young ranger who looks after them about their history and way of life. We were all astounded to hear that there is no human intervention in the herd. They live, give birth and die totally as they would have done centuries ago.

The guided tour of the castle, complete with dungeons and torture chambers gave a true insight to its history and we marvelled at the different styles of rooms and in the attic a museum full of strange artefacts.

As usual we were all ready for lunch which was taken at the Percy Arms at Chatton, suitably refreshed our final visit was to Wallington Hall, Morpeth which was once again a complete contrast to our morning destination of Chillingham Castle. In the hall we were privileged to see Pre-Raphaelite paintings, an original nursery, beautiful needlework panels, a fabulous china collection and many treasures. The hall was so fascinating we had little time to explore the beautiful grounds, woods and walled garden... another time maybe? Still far from home and getting hungry, we stopped at the Black Bull at Moulton for a superb meal and many discussions of the places we had visited.

The whole visit proved to be exceptional, so well organised, extremely interesting, certainly full of surprising contrasts, but most of all in very good company. **Linda Halpern**



Top left Bishop Auckland Castle, above the dining room and one of the attic rooms in Chillingham Castle filled with dolls' houses, trikes and all sorts of paraphernalia. Lower left is the restored walled garden at Chillingham. Photographs by Ann Joslin

The Friends of the Mercer Art Gallery Newsletter

Friends Forever: A celebratory start to the year.....

**25 Years of the Friends of the Mercer Art Gallery**

'In 1805 when the drinking of Harrogate's spa waters was at its peak two eminent doctors raised the money by public subscription to build these indoor Promenade Rooms so that visitors could exercise on wet days. Later the Cheltenham Spa Rooms were built and this building became a theatre, with stars such as Oscar Wilde and Lily Langtry performing here. Then it became the Town Hall, eventually replaced by the Council Offices in Crescent Gardens, and finally and ignominiously it became the Rates Office, until the Poll Tax meant that it was again too small for purpose. At this time Harrogate Borough Council realised that the Art Gallery in the Library in Victoria Avenue was totally inadequate for our substantial art collections and the Promenade Rooms destiny was to become the Mercer Art Gallery.'

The building was in appalling condition, with water leaking through the skylights and plaster falling off the walls. The Council agreed to convert the basement of the Old Town Hall into a storage area equipped to museum standards and to fund the management of the building for the future, but there was no money for the rest of the gallery. Terence and Gavin Mercer gave £50,000 in memory of their father the painter Sidney Agnew Mercer to prime an appeal and I became the Honorary Appeal Director. From 1989 to 1992 our events raised the money to create the present gallery.

The launch event was an unforgettable candlelit banquet in the derelict building and in 1991 the Earl of Harewood opened the Mercer Art Gallery.

But the excitement of the gallery's opening was not sufficient to guarantee its future. The Appeal Fund was transformed into the Friends of the Mercer to raise money for high quality exhibitions and acquisitions worthy of the new gallery.

This year 2017 celebrates our 25th anniversary. From its inception the wonderful hard work of the Trustees and the generosity and enthusiasm of the Friends have raised £300,000 to support major exhibitions, to help fund the purchase of works of art for the collections and to ensure that the Mercer Art Gallery in Harrogate remains pre-eminent in the field of art in the north of England.'

Judith Thomas DL MBE Chair of the Friends of the Mercer Art Gallery



Ray Lonsdale

It was hard to imagine when invited to hear a talk entitled 'Man of Steel' that we would meet such a gentle and unassuming man. His major steel sculptures have great strength and drama and yet display a sensitivity which belies the unyielding material he works with and they are often enhanced by a poem he has written to appear alongside his most monumental works. Ray's strong northern roots and empathy with the County Durham way of life of hardship in the mines and at sea are magnificently expressed in his sculptures.

We were all spellbound by this talk and it generated great excitement that we will be able to see some of Ray's major works on our trip to Seaham and Sunderland with a special visit to his fabrication workshop on our way home, a treat in store. **Judith Thomas**



The Friends of the Mercer Art Gallery Diary Dates:

24th May 2017 Outing to Seaham and Sunderland

26th July 2017 Visit to Hull, City of Culture

18th August 2017 Summer Party at Ronnie Duncan's House, Weston, Otley

19th - 21st September 2017 Three day visit to Birmingham

The Chandeliers

On entering the Mercer Art Gallery you cannot fail to notice the three stunning chandeliers which hang majestically down the centre of the main gallery. These imposing chandeliers were donated by the Friends in 2002 with the help of a bequest by a Miss Margaret Rose the daughter of the artist and engineer David Rose who lived and worked in Nidderdale.

The donor had requested the money be spent on the gallery and it was considered fitting to replace the existing ceiling fans with the chandeliers to try to recreate the buildings promenade history as a glamorous venue for balls and concerts. As well as their aesthetic beauty they also contribute to the ambience necessary to show the exhibited art work in the best light.

It is really wonderful to think these thoughtful purchases live for future generations.

B Jefferson



Karen Southworth

I am very happy to be working again at Harrogate Museums and Arts as one half of the job-shared post of Access and Learning Manager. It's actually my third incarnation here – I spent some years in the 1990s working as Visual Arts Officer and then a three year spell as Curator of Art until my daughter Ruby came along in 2003. Since then I've been blessed with the arrival of my son Edward too, and I've been working as a freelance arts project manager for other museums in Yorkshire.

In my current role, alongside Diane Saxon, I enjoy programming the events and activities for Harrogate Museums and Arts. We are trying out lots of exciting ideas to attract new visitors to the Mercer, the Royal Pump Room Museum and Knaresborough Castle, and we're developing contacts with community groups across the District. It's a busy job and there's never a dull moment!



Gallery shop discount for Mercer Friends

We're currently exploring lots of ideas for ways to enhance your membership of the Friends. One of the first new features is an exclusive discount in the Mercer Gallery Shop on a selected range of items. The discount of 10% applies to specific publications and craft pieces that have been commissioned for the Gallery.

The discount can be used to purchase any of the books from our 'Access All Areas' series, which explore different parts of Harrogate's collections including fine art, sculpture, costume, jewellery, ceramic antiquities and more. They include specially commissioned essays from specialists in each field and splendid photography.

The discount also applies to craft and design pieces by eight top regional artists, commissioned for our recent project 'Inspired by Harrogate'. We have stunning jewellery ranges designed by **Cari-Jane Hakes** and **Alice Clarke**, striking ceramics by **Matthew Wilcock**, winner of the BBC's first Great Pottery Throw Down, quirky etched glass bottles by **Andy Poplar** and tiny, exquisite shoes made by textile artist **Serena Partridge**. Printmakers **Clare Caulfield** and **Ian Mitchell** have made exclusive special edition prints and the highly regarded potter **Anna Lambert** has produced plates featuring Yorkshire's Capability Brown landscapes.

Look out for news of further new benefits of your Friends membership coming on stream over the next few months.

A talk by Malcolm Neesam on Harrogate's connection with the Russian Imperial family

Malcolm Neesam explained to the Friends the connections between Harrogate and the Russian Imperial family. The talk was so well attended that we had to change the venue of the Mercer Art Gallery for the Pump Room Museum whose lovely architecture enhanced the evening. The Spas fame resulted in an international, regal and aristocratic clientele. The Czarina, whilst still Princess Alix of Hesse, suffered from sciatica and in 1894, whilst staying in England, decided to take a course of sulphur bath treatments in Harrogate before her marriage to the Czarevitch. Her accommodation was in Cathcart House at the junction of Raglan Street and West Park, overlooking the Stray. The house was run on the boarding principle by Mr and Mrs Allen. Mrs Allen had recently given birth to twins. Princess Alix requested that she be the god mother and that they be christened Nicholas and Alexandra. After Princess Alix went back to Russia she married Czar Nicholas II. Thereafter the new Czarina sent gifts to the twins every year until 1917. Princess Marie of Greece who had married the Grand Duke George of Russia had two daughters, Princesses Nina and Xenia who both suffered health problems. The Czarina recommended that they visit Harrogate to improve their health, which they did on several occasions. The Grand Duchess was the sister of Prince Andrew of Greece who was the Duke of Edinburgh's father. The Dowager Czarina Marie was also a frequent visitor with her sister, Queen Alexandra. The Grand Duchess George and her daughters were here in the summer of 1914 when the Great War commenced. She was advised by her husband to remain here and did so. She responded to the needs of the time by opening and running several nursing homes in Harrogate for wounded servicemen. Malcolm showed many interesting pictures from the period as the Grand Duchess was a keen early photographer and several photographs show her clutching her Box - Brownie camera. The Grand Duchess installed a memorial on the Stray adjacent to Wetherby Road to record those servicemen who had died in her hospitals. Her husband was executed by the Bolsheviks after which she retired to Italy and subsequently back to her native Greece where she died in 1940. Malcolm shared with us the story of the Crystal Egg, which was presented by the Czar to his Czarina shortly after their marriage. It contains a series of miniature pictures of places enjoyed by the Czarina, including one described as 'the palace at Coburg'. This has now been identified as Cathcart House and the adjacent United Reformed Church in Harrogate following enquiries from the Museum in Richmond, Virginia, USA who is its custodian. Since the lecture was delivered one of the christening gifts and other memorabilia have come up for auction. The Friends of the Mercer Art Gallery joined with the Friends of the Museums to provide funds to bid for the items. With subsequent assistance from the Art Fund and the Victoria and Albert Purchase Fund the items were purchased. It is hoped that they will be available for display at an early date. **Richard Thomas**



On the left
local
historian
Malcolm
Neesam

To the right
images of
the items
purchased
with the
help of The
Friends of
the Mercer
Art Gallery



William Powell Frith (1819 – 1909)

The Mercer Art Gallery currently has a well-recognised collection of paintings by the artist William Powell Frith who was born at Aldfield near Harrogate and spent his early years in the town. So with this in mind the Friends were very pleased to help with the purchase of a further two paintings alongside the Art Fund, Arts Council of England, Victoria and Albert Purchase Grant and the Mercer Art Gallery Acquisitions Donations Fund, 2016.

The two pictures are portraits of a maidservant, from his household, who appear in many of his paintings. Servants as a subject matter were rare figures in Victorian art and although his outstanding paintings bring to life this particular period of history they do not necessarily capture the reality and hardship suffered by the servant classes. Frith, a well-known artist who chronicled the Victorian era depicting images of contemporary life.

Sherry Sir?

This fine portrait is one of Frith's best known works and was very well received. The title was allocated to the painting when the engraving of the picture was published by the Lloyd's Brothers and as a result of this the sherry company Williams and Humbert used the picture on their sherry bottle labels and registered it as their trade mark.

Did you ring Sir?

This beautiful portrait is closely associated with, Sherry Sir? As both paintings are of special significance to the Mercer Art Gallery's existing collection. They are linked not only by the female subject but through the association with Frith's major work, Many Happy Returns of the Day, painted in 1856 depicting a middle class Victorian family.



Sherry Sir?
Oil on canvas, feigned oval, 1853



Did you ring Sir?
Oil on canvas, feigned oval, 1853



Study for The Private View 1881, 1882 Oil on canvas (above)

Purchased at Christie's, London, through Hazlitt, Gooden & Fox, supported by the Art Fund, the V&A Purchase Grant Fund and the Friends of the Mercer Art Gallery, with further donations from Hazlitt, Gooden & Fox, the Mercer Art Gallery and Harrogate Borough Council, 2008.



A Portrait of Annie Gambart 1851 (above) Oil on canvas
Purchased from the Christopher Wood Gallery, London, with contributions from the Art Fund, the Heritage Lottery Fund, V&A Purchase Grant Fund and the Friends of the Mercer Art Gallery, Harrogate, 2006



Isabelle Frith Reading, 1845
Oil on board (above)
Purchased with the support of the Art Fund, V&A and the Friends of the Mercer Art Gallery, 2015.

The exhibition 'Friends Forever' at the Mercer Art Gallery, Swan Road, Harrogate runs until 4th June 2017