

## **An Opportunity Missed?**

Recently, a local man treated one of Chard's modern landmarks to an industrial facelift. While the townspeople went about their daily business Simon Preston applied his skill with a high-pressure washer and removed 10 years of grime and slime from the castings and their brickwork pedestal. The results were remarkable and the compliments he has received are in keeping with the quality of his work. But his labour could not alter the fact that when the opportunity arose in 1991 for a stunning and innovative sculpture to be created, the powers that be opted for, well, just what *is* it?

It would appear that many who walk past are still not clear on that subject. "A monstrosity, that's what it is!" was one gentleman's reply to my enquiry. After further probing I happened upon a lady with a more constructive answer. "It's got something to do with industry, I think. This one might represent all the layers of industry and that one represents, um, a ball with lots of children's hands on it and that one is just a rock. Maybe it's a mixture of business and pleasure. I don't really know actually. Sorry!"

Close but no cigar.

In fact the monument was sculpted in 1991 by Neville Gabe as part of the redesign of Chard's town centre. His brief was to create a sculpture reflecting the 'character and history of Chard' and in response he gave the town three boulders. Boulder One is essentially a rock showing nature's erosion just as everything will over time. The second is a sphere decorated with castings of hands (each one attached to a resident of Chard) and mechanical forms and reflects Chard's industrial heritage. The third boulder is a technical and geometric suggestion that Chard is the home of many enterprises. The overall effect is emphasised having been cast by Cerdic Foundries, a Chard based company.

At the time there were murmurings and protestations about expense and for months after its erection it was the subject of much derision. Unpopular as it was it became as much a part of our conversation as the weather ("Ooh, what awful weather, Mavis. I see the boulders are still there...") and even found it's way into the CATS pantomime that year through some rather audacious adlibbing. But the fact remains; an opportunity was missed by the people of Chard. Instead of an object of ridicule and bemusement we could have constructed a monument that would entertain and amuse for generations. Rather than tucking it away on a street corner where few people rest we should have raised it in the centre of the town. It should have stood proud, a centrepiece for all to observe.

Fortunately, it is not too late. It's never too late to right a wrong! Certainly this year is not a major anniversary for the town but with the *Chard 1000* celebrations 234 years ahead of us I suspect few of us will see them. The

Guildhall is under reconstruction and if that is not reason enough why don't we just celebrate life for the sake of it. Let's build a statue!

A site is easy. There are two obvious choices. Firstly, the area outside Woolworth could be utilised and would compliment Stringfellow's aeroplane further along. Alternatively, there is a large roundabout outside the building formerly known as The Victoria Hotel. What better way to welcome visitors to our town?

As for the theme of the structure it makes perfect sense to delve into our history again. Judge Jeffrey's noose is perhaps too oppressive and whilst the culmination of the Pitchfork Rebellion in 1685 is a superb subject for film or text I have my suspicions that a 12 foot pitchfork with the Duke of Monmouth impaled upon it may not be quite what the town council is looking for. Which leads us to one of Chard's most interesting and significant characters: James Gillingham.

In 1863 Gillingham felt sorry for a poor Chardian who had rather foolishly blown his entire arm off while firing a celebratory canon. Charitably he constructed an artificial limb for the casualty and set a precedence that has ultimately aided millions worldwide. In the process his work in Chard was regarded as the pioneering operation internationally for 3 generations

So let us pay this man his due. Now is the time to commission a suitable monument in respect of his innovation. We do not need anything ostentatious but a bronze replica just 5 metres in length and reaching out to the people of Chard would be a fitting memorial for a man who really did give a citizen of Chard a helping hand.

In years to come, no resident or visitor to our historic town would ever question the significance of the monument. There would be no doubt over what it signifies and it would make a perfect platform for the presentations at future carnivals and awards ceremonies. Furthermore, the unveiling would almost certainly present Chard with the opportunity to entertain a monarch again after more than 300 years.

In a pre-emptive strike against my critics and the cynical few, where is the law stating a monument cannot be exciting or different? The *Angel of the North* has become a landmark that welcomes long-distance drivers home and is a talking point for those who drive past it.

Is it a silly notion? Perhaps, but was it particularly sensible of Chares to build a giant statue on a Greek island? Accusations of absurdity didn't prevent the Greek sculptor from building the Colossus of Rhodes. Twelve years in the making and 110 feet tall (160 with platform) he also stood naked wearing only a spiked crown.

I'm not proposing anything as radical. I do not suggest we invite Damien Hurst to sculpt it. I will even concede that it is not the norm for a town like Chard. But it *would* be fun, something far too many people have forgotten that they have a right to. It would stand as a reminder to smile – an action too many people no longer have time for. Eat, drink and be merry! For tomorrow we may try something completely different...

**Word Count: 1031**