

SETTLEMENT SCULPTURES – Cherwell District Council



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Presenter notes

Slide 1

The Settlement Sculptures commission came through an s106 Public Art contribution of £90K for a sizable development of 600 new dwellings around the Hanwell View area on the outskirts of Banbury.

The discovery of the remains of a deserted Medieval village, unearthed in a preliminary archaeological survey, alongside evidence of some even earlier inhabitations, revealed a long history of settlements on that hillside and effectively prevented any further building on that part of the development. A challenge for the developers certainly but an inspirational gift for the Public Art, which found its natural home in this large expanse of unintended green space with a small local area of play tucked into one corner.

The initial Artists brief called for artists working in wood or stone to create artworks that would reference the hidden medieval ruins, preferably incorporating seating or a viewing platform in the construction and aim to help the residents and passing public to better appreciate the landscape and locality of the place.

Phil Bews and Diane Gorvin won the commission with a standout design concept offering layers of meaning and insight to the local characteristics and heritage of the area in captivating and authentic fashion.

Still currently only halfway through the full installation process, the artwork has already had a great impact to the site, adding value in bringing together past and present cultural relevance and helping to celebrate the significance of the hidden history and bringing it alive.

Slide 2

This Hidden Jewel is tucked away on a new development of Hanwell view, the latest in a long history of settlements on the side of a hill overlooking Banbury town. The Settlement Sculptures hold a seemingly empty field and provides depth and meaning to the place. Through the public art, layers of meaning are revealed to create a unique and evocative atmosphere, that solidly connects to the land, nature, character and culture of the place.

The horse is the central focal feature, referencing the important role the animals played in medieval times for farming, transport and battle. Banbury was noted for its Horse trade with documented Horse Fairs taking place as early as the 12th century and The Horse Fair is an established part of the old town street names.

The 3 cruck arches reference medieval architecture still evident in some of the older buildings in town and are linked thematically through a range of artistic devices and imagery. Each arch is characterized by a carved oak finial at the apex with cast bronze mask, and partially clad in recycled copper representing different historical eras: a medieval widow, an 18th century farmer figure, Farmer Salmon, and the May Day child representing more contemporary times.

The design of the public art work began before any occupation so the artists created a website where the concept, process and progress of the work could be shared with its intended community.

I recommend viewing <https://www.settlementsculptures.co.uk/> to fully appreciate the breadth and scale of the quality research and range artisan skills deployed as 5 slides and 8 minutes just can't do it proper justice.

Slide 3

Time is the defining feature and often represents a key challenge in realising Public Art. In this case the 4m high cruck arches relied on sourcing oak branches of sufficient size, girth and appropriate curvature to use. The trees themselves will have taken a couple of centuries to grow, the artists took decades to develop their practice, and it took a couple of years and 2 violent storms to provide the artists' opportunity to source the right oak to build and carve the sculptures which collectively capture millenniums of human history associated with the site.

The Horse was installed first in 2019 followed by the 1st cruck arch in 2020, in effect marking that crucial time of the covid pandemic between lockdown stages. A carved plague rat runs up the underside of the inner arch (just visible in the bottom right of the 4th image here) is a possible indication of why the medieval village was initially deserted all those years ago.

The archaeological sensitivity of the site meant the installation of a concrete base had to be kept minimal safe depth. All 4 sculptures are raised off the ground via stainless steel brackets to protect the wood from direct contact with the earth.

A serious illness affected the lead artist and skilled woodcarver Phillip Bews which disrupted the production schedule and installation of the final pieces. Arch 2 is complete and ready to install imminently while arch 3's design was simply adapted to involve less woodcarving elements and more cast bronze features from partner artist, Diane Gorvin to help address that all too human challenge. The whole commission was contracted with staged payments but working on unique bespoke installation may require some accommodations and flexibility.

Slide 4

Cherwell's Local Cultural Education Partnership strives to promote the benefits of quality arts education in schools and sustain a growing network of schools, arts organisations & artists. The pandemic hugely impacted the arts sector and gave rise to the idea of using public artwork to enable new ways of learning and experiencing the arts despite the restrictions in place.

Secondary school teacher Sharon Brookes and Kirsten Black, an artist working in a primary school, developed downloadable Schemes of Learning for Arts Award activity engaging all the Key Stages of education by using the Settlement Sculptures as an accessible resource for schools.

The multiple fine details and symbolism used in the work provide a wealth of starting points for discovery and exploration: of art, social history and local culture. The range of topics include for example: the widowed women's status and role in medieval times as producers of Ale, Cheese and Cakes for which Banbury is well-renowned. The addition of bronze cast shoes in the arches reflect the ancient custom of secreting a shoe into new buildings for good luck and protection. The rural heritage of the area, with the wool trade, the cattle market and the Horse Fair all represented as important features of local life. The connection to modern day custom and celebrations like the hobby Horse festival. Even the positional orientation is carved on each arch etc.

5 local schools and over 600 children have already engaged through outdoor learning programme, which included online interviews with the artists themselves.

Slide 5

Ensuring people know about and are equipped to fully understand the public artwork's purpose and meaning was helped enormously by the Settlement Sculptures website so the artists' research and process could be readily shared to the benefit of all residents and visitors to the area. A promotional leaflet was also designed and distributed throughout the new neighbourhoods to promote the artwork and its dedicated website.

The Settlement Sculptures will further connect to established circular fringe walks around Banbury and become a part of the leisure trails network throughout the emerging country park. The Walking App 'Go Jauntly' already features a public art trail around Banbury's town centre with more arts trails planned to encompass all the new Public Art featured in the expanding new builds around the town borders.

Already a point of pride for residents on the development with its unique contribution to the public realm, Settlement Sculptures are also extending their reach and impact through educational links for the growing generation who can now have more personal direct memories and understanding of what it represents.

Made from traditional organic materials and processes with a low impact installation method, the artwork relates well to the natural environment and even incorporates habitats for bats and birds into the design. This Public Artwork public completely transforms an otherwise featureless space and creates a newly charged atmosphere with its presence.

<https://www.codaworx.com/projects/settlement-sculptures/>

