

Frink's 'Martyrs'

Back in the 1980s, Elisabeth Frink was commissioned to sculpt a memorial to the Dorset Martyrs on the site where the old gallows once stood in Dorchester. Margaret Somerville writes on the story behind Frink's larger than life creation



The late Dame Elisabeth Frink came to live in Dorset with her husband, Alex Csáky in the mid 1970s. In an interview with the art critic, Bryan Robertson, she admitted that: 'Living in the country means being near the elements, the climate and the changes of season - it is a constant source of ideas.' She may have added another source, that of the people and the history of the county. Themes in her work at this time were animal sculpture, standing or running figures in the landscape, 'thugs' and saints. In the 1960s she had been one of the entrants in the sculpture competition, 'Monument to an Unknown Political Prisoner', and for many years she had been a supporter of Amnesty International. Single or group figure studies of the 1970s often had as their subject the political prisoner or a religious icon. Such were the 'Tribute' series, Protomartyr, St Edmund - for Bury St Edmunds Cathedral, and a rare female figure, Walking Madonna - for Salisbury Cathedral.

In the early 1980s, funding for a sculpture commission for Dorchester was sought through the Arts' Council's 'Art for Public Places Scheme'. This came about through collaboration with members of the Council of the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society and the Catholic community in Dorset, in particular from the Convent of St Genevieve in South Walks, Dorchester. For many years one of the nuns there had campaigned for a memorial to those executed

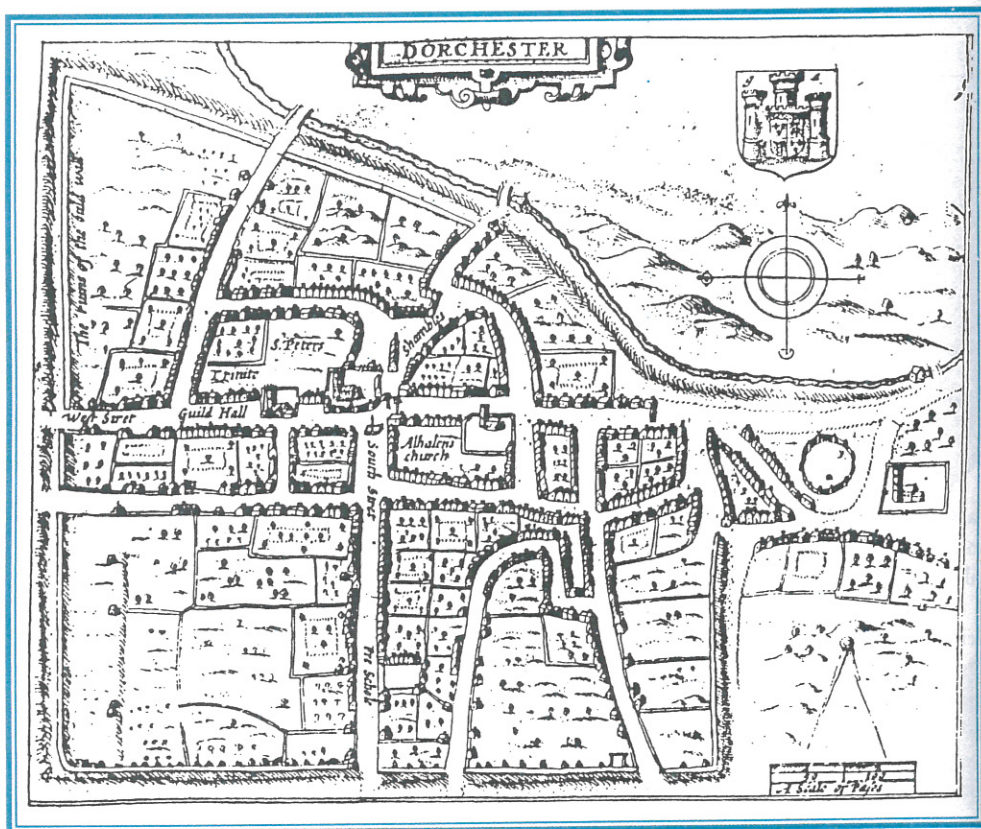
for their beliefs, to be situated at the place where the old gallows once stood at the edge of the walled town by Icen Way. Elisabeth Frink accepted this commission.

The personal significance of the memorial could not have been lost on Frink. Her brutal soldier and thug figures, symbols of oppression and male dominance, were tempered now by more ambiguous images of man's vulnerability, his suffering as victim, and stoicism in the face of adversity. The brief for Dorchester was for a memorial to all those who had 'For Conscience Sake' been executed at Gallows Hill. Frink had been brought up a Catholic and educated in a convent. She was familiar with the Church's history in England during the troubled years of the 16th and 17th centuries. She was also impressed by the present day fighting spirit of the Church in many parts of the world, particularly the political intervention of priests and nuns in Central America.

By 1983, maquettes for the Dorset Martyrs commission were exhibited at the Dorset County Museum, but it was not until 1986 that the final installation of three standing bronze figures was completed at the site on the corner of Icen Way and South Walks.

Frink had long been an admirer of August Rodin, as her preoccupation with surface texture and tension shows. Rodin's monumental 'Burghers of Calais' could have provided a

*Above: the Frink sculpture of the Dorset Martyrs
Below: map of Dorchester by John Speed, 1610, showing the location of the gallows on lower right-hand wall*



motif when she set her larger than life 'Martyrs' together as a group in a public place. A more seminal influence for her, however, was the work of Alberto Giacometti whose attenuated figures and personal iconography find a parallel in much of Frink's early work.

On the site in Dorchester, on a raised walkway at the cusp of a leafy avenue of trees, the three bronze figures stand within a circle, solitary and introspective; they are placed in triangular formation, looking inward. If you come across them by accident, you are at once engaged in intimacy with each quiet figure and you are touched by the physical beauty of the bronze where textures show cloth and parts are darkly patinated; the intensity of the open space creates a charge between each figure which is conveyed by the subtle interchange of gesture and arm movement. These figures are not particular or identified; nonetheless the one which is cowed and gowned bears an almost malevolent authority as if here was the Hangman or Death itself. Yet the covered head and heavy forward gait reminds us of that life-affirming image, 'Walking Madonna' in the grounds of Salisbury Cathedral. Frink plays with ambiguity, not allowing us easy judgement. By comparison, the other two figures are identifiable as victims, of all creeds and all ages, stoicism etched upon unworldly faces. This is a powerful monument to man's mortality and to the enduring spirit which values above all, altruism, courage and fortitude.

Who were they whose death we mourn at Gallows Hill? The earliest recorded executions of note were those of Catholic recusants during the reign of Elizabeth I. The changes brought about by the Reformation in England were slow in affecting the West Country. From Hampshire to Cornwall people still held fast to the old religion. This was particularly true of Dorset, where wealthy land-owning families such as the Arundells of Wardour and especially their cousins, the Arundells of Chideock, remained true to the Catholic faith. By the 1580s Chideock Castle had become a refuge for recusants returning from the continent through Lyme Regis. One of the greatest of these was the Jesuit priest, John Cornelius.

Cornelius was born in Bodmin of Irish descent. He was adopted into Sir John Arundell's household, educated by him at Exeter College, Oxford, sent to a seminary in Rheims and then to the English College in Rome. He was ordained in 1584 and became Chaplain to the Arundells at Chideock Castle. Although protected by Sir John's daughter, Dorothy, he was arrested at the castle, together with two servants, John Carey and Patrick Salmon, and Thomas Bosgrave, a member of the Arundell family, and taken to Dorchester Gaol. He and his three companions were tried at the Assizes in Dorchester. Cornelius was indicted for High Treason, for rebellion against the Queen, for performing the functions of a priest and other acts against the state. His companions were charged with having concealed and assisted him. They were executed on the 4 July 1594.

On the day of execution, Cornelius was

taken from the gaol which stood near the corner of High East Street and Gaol Lane, now called Icen Way. He was strapped to a wooden hurdle and drawn up the hill to the gallows above the town. His companions were executed first, each professing his faith before hundreds of eager spectators. The gallows was made of two uprights and a crossbeam connecting them, with enough space between for a two-wheeled cart to pass through and enough room for multiple hangings. The drop was short so that the prisoner fell to the ground still alive and was then disembowelled by the executioner. Finally his limbs were dismembered and his head stuck on a pike, or thrown to a ribald crowd.

At the time of his trial, John Cornelius was held in high esteem as a pious priest, so that no one could be found to quarter him alive, not even for money. His manner of death has been described in detail: 'he was permitted to pray aloud, then hung long and was cut down dead to be disembowelled. The head was nailed to the gallows and not set on the pinnacle of St Peter's Church as had been planned; perhaps the people's resentment was feared... so the ghastly trophy was taken, 15 days after the

execution, and the people were pacified.'

Almost a century after the death of John Cornelius, in the year 1685, 74 prisoners were condemned to die on the gallows, some at the same site, sent there by the infamous Judge Jeffreys who had been appointed by the catholic James II to punish those involved in the Monmouth Rebellion.

It was shortly after this event, in about the year 1703, that the old gallows was finally removed from the top of Icen Way to a new site in Maumbury Ring by the Weymouth Road.

Further Reading

Elisabeth Frink. *Sculpture: Catalogue Raisonné*. 1984

Catalogue to the Exhibition: Elisabeth Frink. Prints and Drawing. Chesil Gallery, Chiswell, Portland. July 1987

Rachel Lloyd. *Dorset Elizabethans*. 1967

Filleul. *Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Proceedings Vol XXXII*, 1911.

Tyburn c1590. A copy of a contemporary engraving kindly supplied by the Jesuit Church, Farm Street, London

