

The Harlow Art Trust was founded in 1953 by Maurice Ash (1917-2003), described as a farmer, writer and administrator in his obituary. He was the grandson of the building contractor Gilbert Ash and was then farming near Bishop's Stortford and reading about Ebenezer Howard and garden cities, a follower of Wittgenstein and a believer that planning should not be left to commercial devices nor wholly imposed from the political centre. He turned up at the development corporation's offices unannounced with the proposal that a charitable trust be set up to buy art for the town. He had already invited his friend Philip Hendy, then director of the National Gallery, to be its chairman, and was presumably already associated with Frederick Gibberd, the town's architect-planner from 1947 to 1980, who gets the chief credit today. But Ash was also chairman of the council and an executive of the Town and Country Planning Association; and of the Green Alliance, and a trustee of Dartington Hall, through his marriage to Ruth Elmhirst. The proposal was not entirely out of the blue, moreover, for Gibberd had already persuaded the corporation to commission Mary Spencer Watson in 1952 to make *Chiron* for The Stow as a way of commemorating the Coronation, and the early residents of the town had enjoyed the novelty of watching the work being finished on site. Moreover, Harlow had also been one of the few authorities, along with Manchester and the London County Council, willing to take on works of art salvaged from the South Bank exhibition of the Festival of Britain by the Arts Council. It secured Barbara Hepworth's large sculpture in Irish bluestone, *Contrapuntal Forms*, originally created to stand close to the Dome of Discovery, and three murals – *Boats* by Alan Sorrell, *1851* by Leonard Manasseh and the vast *The Englishman's Home* by John Piper.¹ Armed with Ash's initial gift of £250 and Hendy's contacts, the Trust – with Frederick Gibberd as a driving force – chose to concentrate on open-air sculpture as the best way of bringing art to the greatest number of people. A small group of trustees were appointed, including Patricia Fox-Edwards from the district council, to whom it fell as the least busy member of the group to research the work of young sculptors and visit degree shows. From these early introductions to artists such as Elisabeth Frink and Ralph Brown grew a lifelong association with the trust and with sculpture. Gibberd and Fox-Edwards married in 1972 and settled in Marsh Lane, Harlow.

The first works were sited amidst the housing of Mark Hall, including *Contrapuntal Forms*, installed in Glebelands, and Willi Soukop's *Donkey*. In 1954 the Trust approached Henry Moore, who lived at Perry Green across the Hertfordshire border, to produce a sculpture for the town. Moore proposed a family group 'on human and classical lines' as appropriate to the new town, and the result was a monumental piece. *Family Group* was first sited near the church of St Mary-at-Latton, but the soft Hadene stone produced vulnerable to atmospheric pollution and weathering and was relocated indoors, for a long time to the Playhouse Theatre, and it is now in the new civic centre. Fox-Edwards then saw a work by Ralph Brown at the ICA Gallery and in 1956 bought *Sheep-Shearer* for a site next to the common room in Ladyshot before commissioning him to design a piece for the Market Square. The result was *Meat Porters*, cast in 1959, which saw a move away from siting pieces in the housing areas towards their concentration in neighbourhood centres and The High where more people would see them. With the help of the Contemporary Arts Society, the Trust bought F. E. McWilliams's *Portrait Figure* of Elisabeth Frink from the LCC's sculpture show of 1957.

Subsequently, the Water Gardens became the centrepiece of the Trust's activities. Hendry negotiated the purchase by the development corporation in 1956 of a copy of Rodin's *Eve*, which was first sited in the Broad Walk, and secured *Bronze Cross* from his friend Henry Moore in 1963; their vertical emphasis was particularly important in the gardens' original manifestation. The outstanding piece, however, is Elisabeth Frink's *Boar*. Today the works in the rebuilt water gardens relate closely to the works in the adjoining Gibberd Gallery, part of the civic centre and based

¹ *The Englishman's Home* (from the Homes and Gardens Pavilion) was installed at the technical college in 1961 but was removed in 1992 when the college was remodeled and later demolished. It was exhibited in London in 2011-12 and in 2013 but was then on the market.

around Gibberd's own collection of English Art. John Graham, Gibberd's partner in his private practice, who ran the Harlow office, recounted that Gibberd intended that the centre of Harlow should become home to 'the finest works of art, as it is in Florence and other splendid cities' (John Graham in conversation, 11 February 2010).