



Romsey & District Society

Romsey Charter Celebrations 2007

Design Brief for a Work of Art

The Romsey & District Society (R&DS) would like to commemorate the 400th anniversary of the granting of Romsey's Charter in 2007, by commissioning a work of art to be placed in the recently renovated Church Place, between Church Road and the North Garth of the Abbey. What we want is a work that suggests the essential spirit of Romsey and this design brief is intended to give artists considerable freedom in how they interpret that.

Romsey is a market town of about 18,000 inhabitants on the River Test. Its origins were closely linked to that river – and so has been its prosperity.

There are traces of Roman and Saxon activity, including iron-smelting and founding. However the more definitive origin of the town was the establishment of a major Benedictine nunnery in the tenth century. The town's first Abbey was built for the nuns: 2007 also celebrates the 1100th anniversary of its foundation. The town really started as a settlement to serve the nunnery, but soon developed a life of its own. Meanwhile the nunnery itself flourished, under the benevolent leadership of some remarkable Abbesses, right up to its Dissolution by Henry VIII in 1539 – the present great Abbey Church on the same site, dating from the 12th century, was then purchased by the town. After that the Broadlands estate started to become prominent as the major landowner and employer.

The Test and its many 'braids' that flow through the town have powered Romsey for a thousand years: The Domesday Book records three corn mills here, and from the 14th century this availability of water power also enabled cloth-finishing (fulling and dyeing) to become established. Later there were also paper-mills, sawmills, tanneries, a chalk mill and a flax mill, with at one time over a dozen working mills in the town. Eels were another important economic resource; there is a salmon leap at Sadlers Mill; and the Test now offers some of the finest trout fishing in England. Many local people would be attracted to a work that somehow reflects or interprets Romsey's relationship with its river.

In the coaching era services to travellers and their horses flourished here, and in Victorian times boat-building and brewing (notably Strong & Co's large brewery in the centre of the town) were the largest employers outside agriculture. Today Romsey is both a market town and a sought-after place to live for those who work in Southampton, Winchester or local electronics laboratories.

People associated with Romsey through the ages, apart from the Abbesses, include: Sir William Petty, polymath, one of the founders of the Royal Society in the 17th century; Lord Palmerston, Prime Minister 1855-65 and owner of Broadlands; Florence Nightingale, who was a neighbour of Palmerston; Revd Berthon, who for over 30 years in the 19th century combined the role of Vicar with founding and running a town centre boat-building company employing over 100 people; and Lord Mountbatten, who married the heiress of Broadlands and became its very active owner for forty years.