

Cobbett sculptor must first raise £100,000

10.6.04 FH

By Michael Wylie-Harris

A FARNHAM sculptor who wants to create and install a life-size bronze statue of William Cobbett in Gostrey Meadow has said she needs to raise £100,000 for the project.

Sheila Mitchell is an internationally recognised sculptor who lives in Puttenham.

A fellow of the Royal British sculptors, Associate of the Royal College of Art and former president of the Society of Portrait Sculptors, Sheila Mitchell was born in Farnham.

Her grandfather, a chairman of the former Farnham Urban District Council, gave money in the early twentieth-century for the purchase of Gostrey Meadow - something that has given her an affinity with the town and a particular link with Gostrey Meadow.

She first exhibited in the Royal Academy of Art when she was 18 and has since completed more than 300 bronzes, with life-size works at home and abroad. Her many formal portrait commissions have included such people as the Duchess of Kent and Sebastian Coe.

She is eager that Farnham commemorates William Cobbett, as she feels that his enormous contribution to society in the late 1700s and early 1800s has been relatively overlooked by British historiography.

Arguably the most influen-



A scale model of the statue that Sheila Mitchell hopes to create for Gostrey Meadow.

tial person Farnham has ever produced, Cobbett is generally remembered for his book *Rural Rides*.

As a political journalist and, later, MP, he gained a reputation for exposing government corruption that earned him the nickname the Poor Man's Friend.

Cobbett was so influential in his time that it is said that Napoleon had his latest papers read to him every morning in the bath, thumping the side in anger.

The statue will depict

Cobbett life-size, as a bronze figure on horseback, with his dog running alongside. It will be placed on a plinth and have lighting set in the ground around it to illuminate it at night.

On top of the plinth, Sheila Mitchell envisages the sculpture reaching around 15-foot tall when finished.

She will have to raise around £100,000 before she can begin work on the project.

"I'd like to start work on the statue next year, but I can't do a thing until I know I have the

money for the bronze cast," she said.

"It's a sort of dream project of mine - I've always wanted to do it. I've done a few horses now, so I know I'm capable."

She added: "William Cobbett really was one of our best. He was a self-educated man who became incredibly influential in fighting for the rights of the poor and exposing cruelty and corruption in the armed forces. He needs remembering properly by Farnham."

Sheila Mitchell is appealing to the William Cobbett Society, which maintains Cobbett's grave in St Andrew's churchyard, for funding for the project.

She has also appealed to the William Cobbett Society in America, where Cobbett lived for some time and where there is an avid and loyal following of Cobbett enthusiasts.

The project has been given a provisional go-ahead by Waverley Borough Council, subject to planning permission, which will be applied for by the Farnham Public Art Trust, which is supporting the sculptor with the processes involved in the funding and siting of the project.

Julie Maskery, of Waverley Borough Council, was keen to express the council's support for the project: "It will be an excellent piece of art, and really good for the town and its people - providing it is given planning permission and the artist is able to raise the necessary funds."

Fundraising, not funding

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Sir, - The Farnham Public Art Trust is delighted that Waverley has given the go-ahead, subject to planning permission, to place a life-sized bronze statue of Farnham's most famous son William Cobbett, mounted on his horse, in Gostrey Meadow (your report *Herald*, May 28).

We are pleased to be supporting this proposal by Sheila Mitchell, the internationally recognised sculptor, and we believe that Farnham is very fortunate that such a distinguished artist has initiated this important project, because of her family connections with our town.

We should however point out that contrary to your report, the Farnham Public Art Trust will not be funding this major work as we do not have the resources to do so, but we will shortly be submitting a planning application on behalf of the artist. If permission is granted, we will support and participate in a committee which will raise funds on a national and international basis.

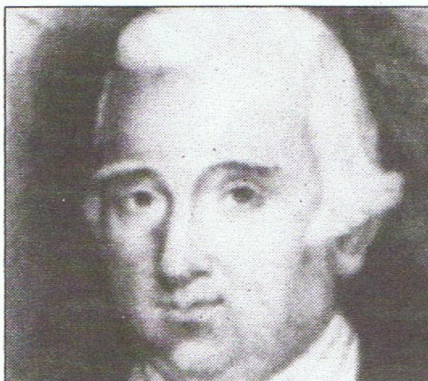
It is hoped to display a model of the proposed statue which Sheila has produced in various public buildings in the town, and she has kindly agreed to talk about the project at the Farnham Public Art Trust's annual open meeting, to be held in the Garden Gallery of the Museum of Farnham on Saturday, September 25 at 11 am.

Dennis Pratt, Treasurer, Farnham Public Art Trust, Menin Wav. Farnham

PROFILE

William Cobbett

Farnham's most famous son



A STATUE of William Cobbett on his horse, by the distinguished local sculptor Sheila Mitchell, is planned for Gostrey Meadow in Farnham as a fitting permanent memorial to the town's most famous son.

The great political writer, parliamentarian and author of *Rural Rides* was renowned for his strong views and forthright language. But what sort of man was he?

William Cobbett always knew his own mind and was not afraid to speak it. As a young soldier in Nova Scotia one bitterly cold morning he saw a young girl scrubbing out a washing tub in the snow. "That's the girl for me," he declared.

He was 21 and she was only 13, but marry her he did when she was old enough and they had a long and happy marriage, for at heart he was a family man.

Cobbett was born at the Jolly Farmer (now renamed the William Cobbett) at the foot of Firgrove Hill, where his father was farmer and innkeeper. A happy and healthy boy with a sense of adventure, he spent many hours playing and exploring in the area around the Waverley Abbey ruins and Mother Ludlam's Cave. But he also worked hard, scaring the birds from his father's crops and as a garden boy at Farnham Castle.

He was only 14 when he set out to walk from Farnham to Kew Gardens, where he was determined to get a job. With sixpence-halfpenny in his pocket, he spent threepence on a midday meal of bread and cheese. Then he lost a halfpenny.

Later in the day he spent his remaining threepence not on an evening meal but on a copy of Swift's *Tale of a Tub*, which he found in a bookshop in Richmond. He slept the night, hungry, under a haystack but the next day Kew gave him a job. His father eventually fetched him home, but he was soon off again, this time to Portsmouth to try, unsuccessfully, to go to sea. Then it was off to London to spend time in a boring job in a lawyer's office, from which he escaped by joining the army.

Sent with his regiment to Nova Scotia, he proved a model soldier and in a year was a sergeant-major, spending his spare time writing – and building up a lasting contempt for his officers, whom he believed were lazy, inefficient, and corrupt in that they illegally kept back money intended for the men's rations. As soon as he was back in England and out of the army he set about exposing the scandal. It was the start of his long career as a political writer and scourge of authority and the aristocracy – a par-

ticularly remarkable career for a man who had taught himself to read and write as a boy.

Cobbett was certainly nothing if not ingenious. He went to France to learn French and then he and his young wife left for America, where he set up as a teacher of English to French immigrants in Philadelphia. In his seven years in America he also earned a living as a bookseller, publisher, and writer of political pamphlets, gaining a reputation which preceded him on his return to England.

The great William Pitt's government was deeply involved in war with France and was in political trouble. To give it what would nowadays be called "spin", Cobbett was invited to edit a government daily newspaper. He refused, preferring to be a free agent and setting up his own publication, his *Political Register*, most of the contents of which he wrote himself. It was an instant and lasting success, running from 1802 until after his death.

It was in 1802 that he also launched *Cobbett's Parliamentary Debates* to report on parliament; this was later taken over by Luke Hansard and is still the official report on proceedings at Westminster. But it was not all a story of success. In 1810 he was convicted of seditious

libel, fined £1,000 and jailed for two years. In 1820 he went bankrupt.

But it would have taken more than all that misfortune to keep

Cobbett down. In 1805 he had begun farming at Botley in Hampshire; as a farmer's son he was always interested in the life of the countryside, especially the hardships of the working people, and it was to see life all over the country at first hand that in 1821 he began his famous series of *Rural Rides*, travelling on horseback the length and breadth of Great Britain and as far afield as Ireland, and reporting his findings in his *Political Register*.

Most of his rides, in his 60s, covered as much as 40 miles a day in all weathers, along bad roads and unmade lanes. His reports of the rides ran to many thousands of words; gathered together in book form years later they became a standard work of English literature. Cobbett was a great observer, a trenchant yet often sympathetic writer, truculent, indignant, and never mincing his words. Yet he himself became a member of the establishment towards the end – after two unsuccessful candidatures he was elected MP for Oldham in 1832, only three years before his death.

Cobbett never forgot Farnham though he did not live here after his boyhood, and he is buried in the churchyard at the ancient parish church.

Philip Green

He was the scourge of authority and the aristocracy