



WINDS OF CHANGE: Blowing Head by Mark Fuller was carved from wood taken from the London Plane Trees brought down in the storm of October 1987. All the sculptures were removed in 2004

FRESH AIR: Head and Hands by Georgina Wright – facing the Blowing Head

Pictures by kind permission of Margaret Wilson

Playing field has had fair its share of dispute and drama

Way We Were



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AT FIRST sight, Millers' Field car park (off the Causeway) looks a rather boring backwater of suburban Canterbury – parked cars beside a grassy rectangle with three shaped flower beds. The triangular plot is bounded by the River Stour,

the mill race for Dean's Mill (now the retirement home Dean's Mill Court) and the Causeway.

The plot was bought in 1877 by the Canterbury painter Thomas Sidney Cooper (famous for his paintings of cows and sheep). It formed part of a package of land which included Abbot's Mill and Dean's Mill. Thomas had no real interest in any of these – the mills were not doing well commercially, but had been owned by his father-in-law William Cannon.



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William died in 1875, and Thomas, by this time wealthy and famous, felt it would help his mother-in-law if he took them off her hands. The purchase later proved problematic.

After heavy rains in 1882 the Stour rose and threatened properties in North Lane with flooding, so Thomas agreed to remove the wall to Millers' Field to release the floodwater and protect these homes.

Compensate

The understanding was that the City Corporation would rebuild the wall and compensate Thomas for his help. Once the water levels had receded, the City reneged on the agreement, leading to acrimonious exchanges in the local press.

Thomas died in 1902, and ownership of Millers' Field passed to Frank Hooker, Alderman and Honorary Freeman of the city who gave his name in 1956 to the first co-educational secondary school 'The Frank Hooker School'. The name was not to last – by 1988 the connotations of 'hooker' left female staff and pupils uncomfortable, and the school name was changed to Canterbury High School. Frank died in 1988 and left Millers' Field to the city as a playing field 'for the children of North Lane'. I leave readers to judge whether this remit is quite met by a car park and three flower plots.

Abnormal weather has also driven more recent developments. The extraordinary winds of October 1987 led to the loss of major trees on the Millers' Field site, and to



OUT OF THE WATER: Fish by Sarah Lankester – perhaps a reference to weather forecaster Michael Fish?

a decision to replace three large London Plane trees with modern sculptures. The result was striking works by young artists, each making use of wood from the fallen trees: *Blowing Head* by Mark Fuller, *Head and Hands* by Georgina Wright, and *Fish* by Sarah Lankester.

Apparently the striking *Blowing Head* was positioned to be blowing into the face of the *Head and Hands*. The *Fish* reference may or may not have been a pointer to Michael Fish, the weather forecaster who failed to spot the storm which blew the trees down in the first place.

The sculptures were not treated with preservatives on the grounds that their decay was a



SCULPTURES ARE NO MORE: They were removed in 2004 after becoming too dangerous

part of the artistic experience. By 2004 they were deemed dangerous and removed – hence the three shaped flower beds we see today.

The lesson from this story is that apparently boring sites may hide histories that are well worth pursuing.