

Dante comes to Midhurst

Well-known local sculptor Philip Jackson is donating a full-size bronze sculpture of the Italian poet Dante Alighieri to the people of Midhurst. A site has been located at South Pond and a planning application has been submitted. In 2018, The Midhurst Society approached local sculptor Philip Jackson with an audacious request. Would Philip be willing to lend one of his fibreglass models to be displayed in town, as both a tourist attraction and a cultural icon for residents? Sadly, Philip informed The Society that the idea wasn't practical. The models were fragile, [...]

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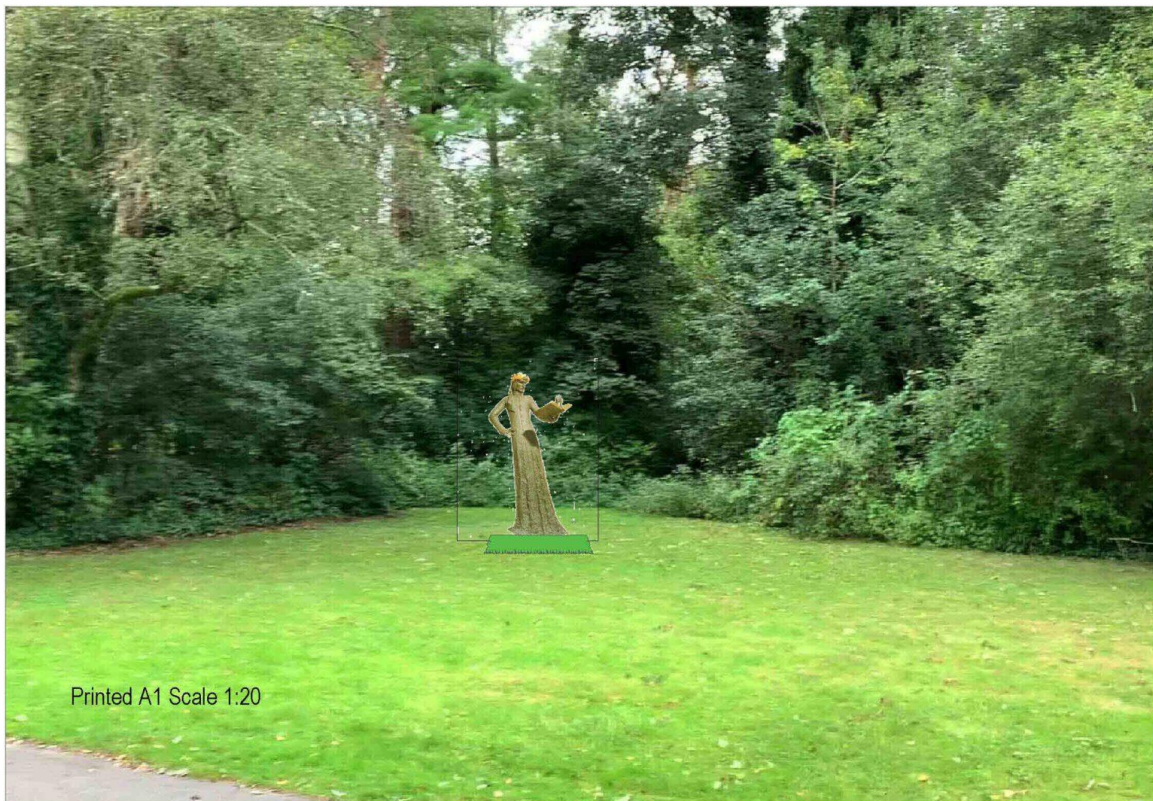


Photo montage showing Dante in his chosen spot at South Pond, near to the pedestrian bridge
© The Midhurst Society

In 2018, The Midhurst Society approached local sculptor Philip Jackson with an audacious request. Would Philip be willing to lend one of his fibreglass models to be displayed in town, as both a tourist attraction and a cultural icon for residents?

Sadly, Philip informed The Society that the idea wasn't practical. The models were fragile, and would be easily damaged in a public place. However, Philip and his wife Jean had lived in the area for thirty years, and for some time they had been wondering how to show their appreciation of their adopted home. They offered a full-sized bronze sculpture to the town.



*Philip Jackson
in his garden at Cocking
© Harvey Tordoff*

The offer was conveyed to Midhurst Town Council, who received it with stunned enthusiasm. All that had to be decided was a suitable location, and as the idea had originated with The Society, they were given the task of scouting possible sites and seeking the co-operation of landowners. Fast-forward five years, and after numerous disappointments, a site was identified near South Pond, and a planning application was submitted to South Downs National Park Authority. As the land is owned by Chichester District Council, both bodies will be involved in considering the application on its merits.

The statue will depict the thirteenth-century poet and philosopher Dante Alighieri, standing with an open book – Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Three figures stand proud on the pages – Dante himself, and his two companions in his search for Paradise: Virgil and Beatrice.

You might wonder at the choice of subject, but there is a connection. Dante's tomb is a famous landmark in Ravenna, where he had lived for many years, and Ravenna is twinned with Chichester. However, the main reason is that Philip is paying tribute to Dante's influence on art, religion, and language, and on his own studio figures, many of which are distinctly Italian in style.

Not only did Dante provide the Catholic Church with its first vision of Hell and Purgatory, and Italians with their own language, he also influenced other writers through the centuries, from Chaucer and Shakespeare to Blake, Yeats, and Eliot. And to gauge his relevance today, you only have to perform a search on Google or YouTube.

Philip Jackson should need no introduction to the people of Midhurst. His Italian figures are on display every year when his Cocking garden opens for charity. And his public commissions can be found throughout England, in Parliament Square (Mahatma Gandhi); Windsor Park (Queen Elizabeth II on horseback); Pall Mall (George VI and Elizabeth, the Queen Mother); Green Park (RAF Bomber Command); Wembley Stadium (Bobby Moore); and Chichester Cathedral (St Richard). His work can also be found in many other countries.

It is believed that this will be the first sculpture of Dante in the UK. Midhurst is honoured and privileged to be chosen for his home. Perhaps his search for Paradise is over. When *The Times* selected Midhurst as one of the UK's best places to live (in 2018) the following phrase was quoted: "Midhurst is a little piece of English Paradise."

Details can be found at <https://planningpublicaccess.southdowns.gov.uk/online-applications/>

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