

Torn Triptych
by Ezra Bailey

Asthall Manor in Oxfordshire was home to the Mitford family between 1919 and 1926 and is one of the houses on which Nancy's fictional Alconleigh was based. On 10 June, its present owner, Rosie Pearson, will open her garden to the public for 'on form', an exhibition of contemporary stone sculpture. It's now 16 years since its inaugural show, and 'on form' has become Europe's biggest exhibi-



Asthall Manor

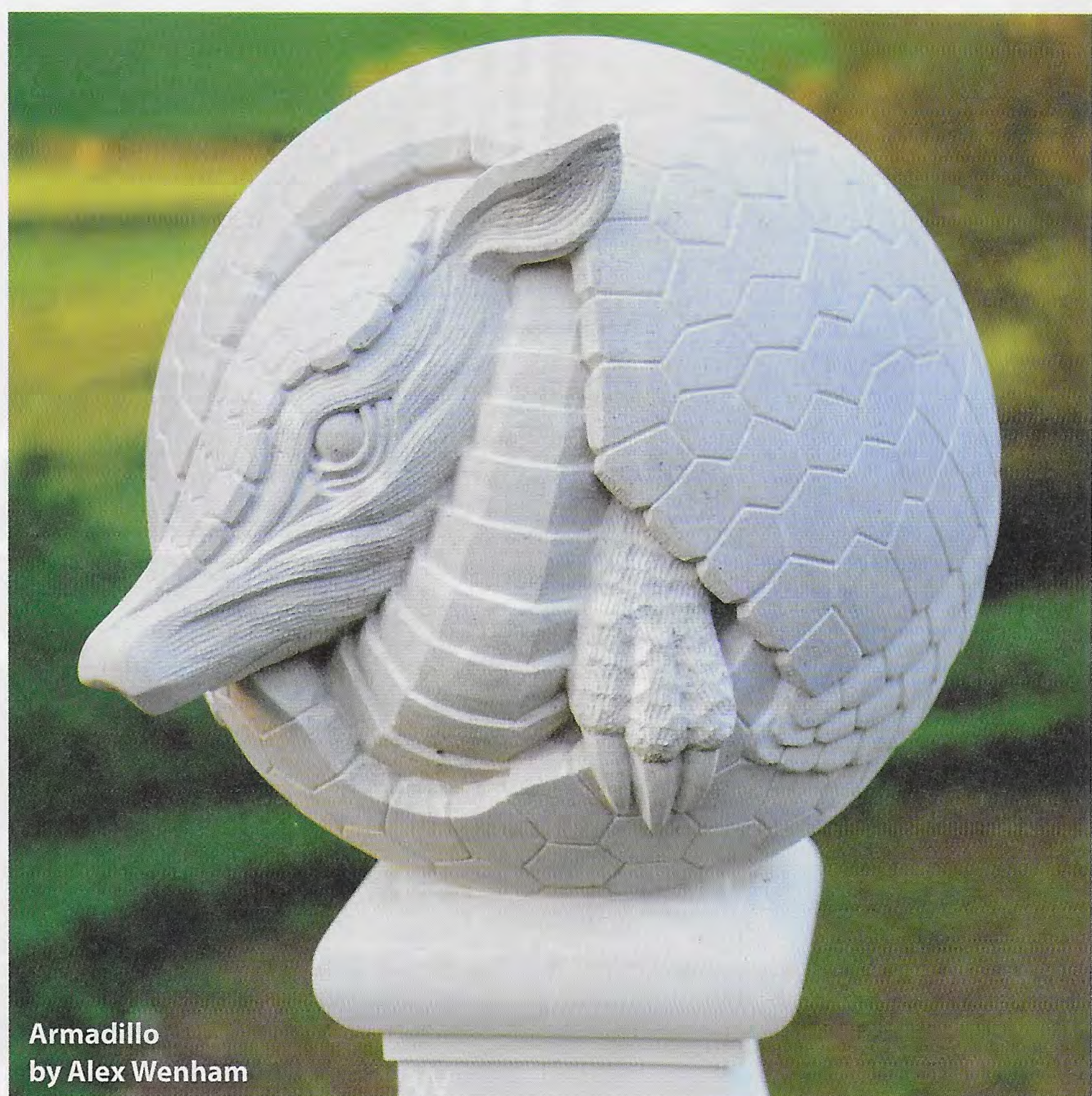
IN *the* MANOR *of the* MITFORDS

Formerly the home of aristocrats, Asthall Manor now plays host to the finest in contemporary sculpture. Charlotte Metcalf explores

tion of contemporary stonework and the only British show to focus solely on stone. More than 400 works by 40 sculptors will be on display.

Exhibitors include Helaine Blumenfeld, Bridget McCrum, Peter Randall-Page, Dominic Welch and Rosie's long-term boyfriend, Anthony Turner, whom she met when they were at Marlborough College together. There will also be work that Rosie and curator Anna Greenacre discovered on a recent trip to Pietrasanta - by John Greer, Vanessa Paschakarnis and Erika Anfinson - and pieces by the 'on form' bursary winner for younger sculptors, Emma Elliott, and by Alison Munby, who worked in the 'on form' office and was inspired to take a carving workshop with Peter Randall-Page.

Rosie first moved into Asthall Manor with her two daughters in 1997 when she left ▶



Armadillo
by Alex Wenham



Singer of Tales by John Isherwood (pictured) and the ballroom, furnished by Lorforads (top)



Pool House, and Allegro (left) by Helaine Blumenfeld

Stretch by Mark Stonestreet



What's Happened, by Guy Stevens

Jamaica and her husband to return to England. The house was in a state of almost irreversible dilapidation, but Rosie loved the fact that its features hadn't been buried under 'lots of ugly luxurious 1950s or 60s fixtures and fittings.' She began restoring it and creating a ravishingly beautiful garden with Julian and Isabel Bannerman, which is now the setting for 'on form'.

Rosie's taste, as a collector and champion of contemporary sculpture, initially alienated some of her neighbours and diehard Mitford fans, for whom Asthall Manor was a shrine. Her boyfriend, Anthony, sculpted two earthy, reddish-brown pieces for the house's gateposts and they became symbols for all that was wrong about modernisation and contemporary art. 'There was uproar in the Cotswolds!' Rosie laughs. 'Even Radio Oxford turned up to bang on about them. But they're meant to be mysterious and welcoming. I like to think of them as "plumpkin", vaguely of a vegetable nature. They are what you want them to be.'

'Why does everything have to be so defined? Why do people have to ask, "What is it?" Why can't art be about a state of thought or a feeling? People accept abstract painting but still seem to struggle with abstract sculpture. Sometimes they can't see the difference between sculpture and a statue and wonder what they're supposed to think. But we hate the idea of anyone being "supposed" to think anything here.'

Far from wishing to be didactic, Rosie believes that sculpture simply brings joy. It's her passionate love of it and desire to share that enthusiasm that has infused 'on form' with the happy, relaxed atmosphere that has people returning year after year. It helps that Asthall Manor is situated in one of the most beautiful valleys in England, with views down to the River Windrush. Sculpture stands under the willows at the river's edge, amongst the tall daisies, poppies and cornflowers in meadows, under a weeping ash, in secret shady dells and in dappled wooded glens. It's also in the more

formal gardens and smaller pieces that are on display in the house and ballroom, as well as in the pool house (which will house Mad Hatter Books) and the Potting Shed Café, where AA Gill's favourite chef, Fiona Cullinane, will cook. Other happenings include William Sieghart operating his Poetry Pharmacy from a gypsy caravan, concerts, music from Mexican duo, Las Hermanas Garcia, drama performances, workshops (including ones for children), talks and guided themed walks.

Rosie's vision is to create a sense of magical infinity. 'We don't have a path or trail,' she says. 'And we certainly don't have events that people have to sit down for. Events should enhance the sculpture, not distract from it because we want the exhibition to flow like water. We encourage wandering and discovery. Someone said to me, "The longer I spend here, the more I feel I'll never see all of it," and a child told me about dreaming that the sculptures come alive at night. This is exactly what we want. We have a positive "Please DO Touch" policy here - children definitely included - and I want everyone to sit on Erika Anfinson's marble sofa.'

Such is the popularity and success of 'on form' that the once-notorious gateposts are now accepted, even held in affection, by their detractors. 'Anthony is all forgiven and I'd like to think the village is proud of him,' she says. After all, the gateposts have become something that identifies us.'

'It's very hard to identify and define exactly what we do, but ultimately the exhibition is to do with nourishment, life and optimism,' concludes Rosie. 'I want the sculpture to ground people and connect them to the landscape, and for people to react viscerally in their guts and bones to it. I never knew that art could be so heart-warming and I want "on form" to inspire happiness and joy.' ■

◆ 'on form' 2018 runs from Sunday 10 June until Sunday 8 July. For more information, visit www.onformsculpture.co.uk