

## OPINION



## GRAY MATTER

**CHRIS GRAY**  
gets comfy  
during a visit to  
Asthall Manor

**T**hat our county is one of scarcely paralleled beauty was borne in upon me this week in journeys first through the Chilterns beech woods around Stoke Row and then on the two subsequent nights farther along the chalk escarpment to the Wormsley estate where Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire elide.

Can either leafy landscape compare, though, with what is seen in a progress west towards Gloucestershire? Viewed from the A40, the Windrush valley is simply sensational, and if you turn down towards the river you find Cotswold scenery at its best.

Happy memories for me here involve a pint of beer at The Swan in Swinbrook and a short sunny walk towards Asthall for a picnic at the bend of the stream.

It was here 30 years ago that I taught our beloved dog Holly how to swim, steadily drawing her into deeper water until – hey presto! – she was going alone.

During our waterside sojourns we would cast envious glances in the direction of Asthall Manor, the 17th-century mansion that was home to the remarkable Mitford sisters from 1919-26.

Its beauty is such that one can readily understand the resentment the girls felt when Lord Redesdale decided to up-sticks with the family to a new property in Swinbrook. 'Farve' was ever an odd cove.

For the past 20 years, Asthall Manor has been the home of sometime journalist (and always philanthropist) Rosie Pearson and her family, her arrival signalled not long afterwards by the appearance of two splendid gatepost finials by the sculptor Anthony Turner.

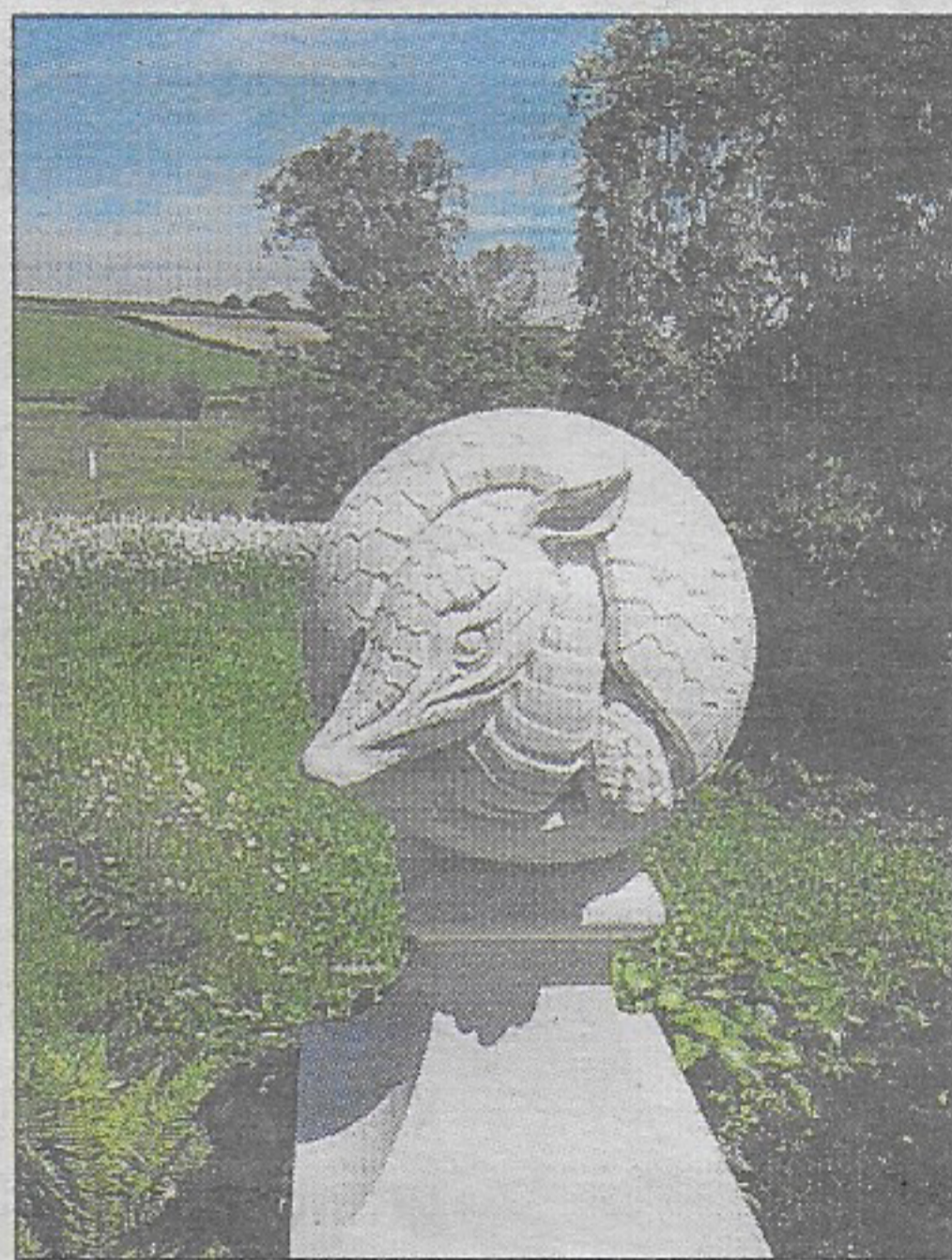
The stir these created led Rosie to consider how rewarding it could be to have the manor's lovely gardens – as refashioned for her by designers Isabel and Julia Bannerman – filled by striking works in stone.

Thus was born the exhibition *on form*, first held in 2002 and biennially since, growing bigger and more popular every time, with record attendances this year.

In the first year, there were 56 works by 10 artists. This year there are 384 sculptures around the gardens and other exhibition locations, which include adjoining St Nicholas Church, the river meadow and the elegant ballroom created in the days of the Mitfords.



Alison Munby exhibits Giant Woodlouse at on form 2018, taking place at Asthall Manor till July 8



They are the work of 40 artists from nine countries.

Among them – and exhibiting here for the first time – is Alison Munby, an old friend of mine.

She joined the *on form* team five years ago, working in the office for Rosie and her co-curator Anna Greenacre. Having nursed an ambition to try her hand at sculpting, she seized the chance during the 2014 show at a workshop held by exhibitor Guy Stevens. The next year, she was sponsored by *on form* to attend the Dartmoor Arts Project run by Peter Randall-Page and David Brampton-Greene.

That Alison has a natural gift is evident from the eight works she has in the show.

The biggest of these is *Giant*



*Woodlouse* which can be seen in the main picture. I am delighted to say this has already been sold, though of course it remains on display.

It was carved from Kilkenny limestone, a material that gives off a pronounced bad-egg smell while being worked on, as a result of its sulphur content. There was only so much of this that Alison could bear, so for occasional relief she turned to carving *Selection of small birds* in chrysocolla.

Her carving of *Snail*, which is in the ballroom, is from a chunk of clunch limestone given to her by the sculptor Michael Black whose mark has been left on Oxford in the shape of the Emperors' heads outside the Sheldonian and the barley sugar columns at the porch

of the University Church.

Other local exhibitors at *on form 2018* include Alex Wenham, whose delightful *Armadillo finial 1* can be seen above, and Jordi Raga Frances who has two site-specific pieces in the meadow paying homage to the lovely Windrush.

It might seem from the third photograph that I am breaking *on form's* 'please touch but don't climb or sit on' rule. In fact, an exception is made for Erika Anfinson's squishy looking *Sofa*, which is actually made of very hard Carrara marble.

*On form* continues till July 8. It is open from 11am to 6pm Wednesday to Sunday. Don't miss Fiona Cullinane's delicious vegetarian food in the Potting Shed.