David Wynne

Prolific sculptor whose dynamic work, from Guy the Gorilla to Fred Perry, adorns many public spaces

A sightseeing tour of London might involve many of David Wynne’s dynamic public sculptures, such as Boy with a Dolphin (1974) in Chelsea, which shows a child suspended in mid-air being propelled along by a dolphin as he hangs on to the animal’s fin with one hand. His 1984 bronze statue of Fred Perry greets visitors at the entrance to the All England Club. Every year, before a roof was built over Centre Court, Wynne’s dripping wet bronze Perry gracefully playing a volley was appreciated by millions as it became a stock image on TV screens when rain stopped play. Last year the statue provided a poignant backdrop for a picture of Andy Murray celebrating his Wimbledon victory — the first Briton to do so since Perry. The self-taught Wynne was often sneered at by the artistic cognoscenti for his lack of art school training and refusal to pander to Modernist abstraction, but his instinctive feel for movement and obsessive research made him a favourite with the royal family.

His first study of the Queen in the mid-Seventies started inauspiciously as he turned up to sculpt her head for the relief that would be used as the profile on the Silver Jubilee medal. “Whose van is that parked in my space?” she demanded. Wynne timorously owned up to having borrowed it.

He suspended a sitting with the Queen so that she could watch racing and offered to move it at once. His second encounter with the Queen involved a trip to the Tower of London, but luckily for Wynne not through Traitor’s Gate, after his earlier indiscretion. He asked the constable of the tower if he could borrow the Edward I crown, worn by the Queen for her coronation, for a bust that would ultimately be called Traitor’s Gate, after his earlier indiscretion. Wynne put her at ease, “Ma’am?” he asked. “I don’t mean it in any way.” She replied, “Yes, I have, but I hope you don’t smoke.” Wynne put her at ease. “Not in a ladies’ drawing room and, more particularly, not if you’re young and healthy.” The he Queen rejoined. “Ah, I’m glad!” A previous portraitist had chain-smoked up to the model’s waving. “Why didn’t you ask him to stop?” asked Wynne. “I thought it would spoil his concentration,” she replied.

Wynne proved himself equally adept at charming the Beatles and introduced the Fab Four to the Indian guru Maharishi Mahesh Yogi — a meeting which inspired the Beatles, and popular music in general, into a new paradigm.

Having persuaded their manager Brian Epstein to let him sculpt their heads, Wynne turned up at their hotel in Paris in January 1964. He battled through thousands of screaming girls to get through the door, only to be accosted by an alluring young woman. “Give me five minutes with the Beatles and you can do anything you want for the rest of the day in my bed,” she promised. Wynne declined, telling her he was married. When he finally gained entry to the hotel suite, the band knew nothing about the sculpting assignment and John Lennon was complaining about the smell of the clay that Wynne had ordered to have put in the bathroom.

Wynne’s ability to speak French rescued his commission. “They wanted steaks. I summoned a decent breakfast and our friendship began.” The Stowe-educated sculptor became a mentor to the young and naive working-class Liverpudlians, whom he helped to introduce to the high life. He was closest of all to George Harrison, who once gave him a huge piece of marble as a birthday present and told Wynne's son: “Your father’s a great man. He told me about the Maharishi and meditation. He did me a great favour.”

The showcasing of renaissance sculpture in Kenneth Clark’s landmark 1969 BBC series Civilisation was a boon to young sculptors. Wynne was flooded with commissions in public places, such as The Danzers (1971) at Cadogan Square Gardens, Girl with a Dolphin (1973) near Tower Bridge, and Embracing Lovers (1973) at the Guildhall — his subjects often daringly cantilevered over the plinth.

He enjoyed mixing in glamorous circles. His friend Count Rossi once gave a dinner for him in St Moritz and said “Of all the women in Europe whom you would like to sit next to?” When Wynne arrived for dinner, he found a smiling Audrey Hepburn sitting in the seat next to his.

He was appointed OBE in 1994 after his 90th birthday. Critics rounded on him in the high est regard. When the torrent of eloquence ceased, Powell turned a piercing eye on Sir Donald and said, “Thank you. And, might I ask, what line of business might you be in?”

Richard Needham writes: Donald Sinden (obituary, Sept 13) once told me of a meeting he had with Enoch Powell in the 1970s. He told Powell in long and extravagant terms that he had always been in the highest regard. When the torrent of eloquence ceased, Powell turned a piercing eye on Sir Donald and said, “Thank you. And, might I ask, what line of business might you be in?”

Wynne's instinctive feel for movement is exemplified by Boy with a Dolphin, above, which would find a home in Chelsea

Obituaries

Register