

Gladstone Park

Fred Kormis Memorial

Background

As part of the HLF funded Restoration of Gladstone Park in Brent, North London, we have been restoring the Fred Kormis Memorial. The memorial is dedicated to prisoners of war and the victims of concentration camps in the Second World War and is especially poignant as Fred Kormis (the Sculptor) was himself held prisoner of war.

The figures

The fibre glass figures were in urgent need of attention when the project began on site in October 2003 as they had been neglected, allowing their steel armatures to corrode severely. The surfaces of the figures required extensive cleaning as they had been painted matt black following an incident when they were sprayed with bright yellow graffiti. This resulted in a very somber appearance and also meant that much of the definition of the figures was lost greatly reducing their impact.

Vandalism

The sculptures were further vandalised on Christmas day 2003 when their heads were smashed by a person or group using a wooden paving mallet, badly damaging one of the figures and decapitating all of the others. We searched the surrounding undergrowth and managed to find the faces of all but one of the heads and other bits and pieces which could be painstakingly pieced back together by our conservators, unfortunately one head could not be found.



The setting

Fred Kormis had wanted the figures to have a architectural setting within a building that had been bombed during WWII, this was never achieved however and they were sited in Gladstone Park. The staging and concrete wall are typical of the time and have been repaired, cleaned and repainted and the perimeter railings have been removed and replaced. The planting scheme had been allowed to over mature over the years with a coniferous hedge at the rear which had turned into an impenetrable wall of vegetation. This has been removed and a new mixed hedge has been planted as a backdrop with a birch grove set further back on the existing bank. All of the planting in the foreground has been renewed with the conifers being removed and replaced with low level planting and more visually penetrable magnolias. New sightlines have been opened up to the memorial from a nearby residential road, which will hopefully make it less susceptible to future attacks.



Conservation

Specialist conservators Holden Conservation, based in west London have been working for the past few months to rebuild the figures which were taken off site earlier in the year. The figures were initially split open so that the internal armatures could be removed and replaced in stainless steel and the foam filler which was accelerating their deterioration has been replaced.

Chemical analysis was carried out on the surface of the sculptures and the composition of the original 'gel coat' surface finish was ascertained allowing the conservators to accurately replicate the original bronze finish. To reconstruct the missing head, the conservators used archives at the Imperial War Museum which included an original maquette of the sculptures.

The transformation of the figures has been incredible and the increase in definition of details means that the forms of the figures and the expressions in their gaunt faces can once again be experienced, evoking some quite harrowing feelings as no doubt the sculptor intended.



Re-siting

The sculptures will be re-sited in their original positions in time for a memorial service on the 12th September 2004.