

HIDDEN GEMS AND FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

ULSTER HISTORY CIRCLE



MORRIS HARDING (1874-1964) | Sculptor

Morris Harding was born in Stevenage, Hertfordshire on 29th April 1874. His early education was at the local grammar school, eventually going up to Cambridge University but leaving prematurely to join the merchant navy for a time, satisfying his innate longing for the sea.

He subsequently trained as a painter and sculptor in the studio of his uncle, Harry Bates, A.R.A. who was a leading figure in the nineteenth century New Sculpture movement. Harding was a member of the Royal Society of British Sculptors and the Society of Animal Painters. He was most active in the arts community from about 1912 until 1958. While working in London, one of Morris Harding's first major commissions in 1914 was a series of relief panels for Mappin Terrace in London Zoo, depicting polar bears. Harding also worked on a number of important war memorials on which animals featured and he was commissioned to execute a major work for the Memorial Chapel at Rugby School in 1922. The eminent architect of this project was Sir Charles Nicholson who also became consultant to the Cathedral Church of St. Anne, Belfast at a crucial stage in its construction.

In 1925 Harding was invited by Nicholson to work on his designs for many of the capitals and corbels in the nave of St. Anne's. Along with other carvings and the bronze soldier on top of the memorial lectern to the fallen of the 36th (Ulster) Division, this body of work became the major undertaking of his career for much of the next 23 years. Other commissions in Northern Ireland followed; the font in St. Peter's Church, Antrim Road, the Royal Arms on Telephone House, Cromac Street, Belfast and those on Government House, Hillsborough. He also carved the tomb of the 7th Marquess of Londonderry in the grounds of Mountstewart.

Harding shared Rosamond Praeger's Studio in Holywood for a time, carving the base for her landmark sculpture, Johnny the Jig. He eventually chose to settle in Holywood where he had his own studio in Church Road. He became President of the Royal Ulster Academy in 1947, was awarded the O.B.E. in 1950, and an honorary Master of Arts degree from Queen's University in 1958. He died at his home on 15th January 1964 in his 90th year.

His considerable contribution to the built heritage of the United Kingdom has been largely forgotten today and sadly, his remains lie in an unmarked grave in Holywood's New Cemetery.

Location of plaque: 104 Church Road, Holywood, Co. Down

[The Ulster History Circle erects blue plaques in public places throughout the province to commemorate people who have made a significant contribution to the community locally, regionally or in the wider world. Not all are well known and many have been forgotten in the place where they were born or worked.]