

## The stone bomb

**Patrick Wright**

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*In response to the horrors of imperial air warfare in Ethiopia, Burma, and India in the 1930s, the sculptor Eric Benfield and the socialist-feminist Sylvia Pankhurst turned political passion into art with a unique Anti-Air War Memorial. The cultural archaeologist Patrick Wright visits the London suburb where it is located, and retrieves the fascinating story of a public monument for peace.*

Woodford Green, Essex, is not the easiest place in which to seek out a largely forgotten work of public sculpture. Driving north out of London, one can hardly miss the huge bronze figure of the constituency's most famous MP, Winston Churchill, but it takes an act of faith to slow down just opposite Hill's Garage, pull onto the pavement and head into the thicket of chestnut and overgrown hedge separating the roaring High Road from a row of modern suburban houses that want nothing to do with it.

Yet a modest public monument is to be found there crowded out by shrubs, wind-gusted litter and even a red plastic bucket, presumably kept in this little visited place by a local resident who has yet to acquire a proper garden shed. Surrounded by iron railings, its plinth rises up to form a pyramid on which a stone bomb is mounted as if falling vertically from the air – the nose of the bomb set in the apex of the pyramid. The bomb is a small, harmless-looking object, no more than eighteen inches long, with weathered fins. It was, however, notorious in its time.

On 5 May 1936 the inauguration of this peculiar monument was announced in an Essex-based publication entitled *New Times and Ethiopia News*. "In these days of ever threatening war, the necessity of effective and ceaseless opposition cannot be over-emphasised", wrote the Countess of Warwick (a former mistress of Edward VII): "The powers of Science have given aerial war a capacity of devastation and destruction without parallel in the history of mankind". It was important, she continued, that people were "made more fully alive to this danger" and, with this aim in mind, it was intended to "erect a model in stone of an aerial torpedo bomb".

The monument would be the first of its kind:

"There are thousands of memorials in every town and village to the dead, but not one as a reminder of the danger of future wars. The People who care for Peace in all countries must unite to force their Governments to outlaw the air bomb. We must not tolerate this cruelty,

the horror of mangled bodies, entrails protruding, heads, arms, legs blown off, faces half gone, blood and human remains desecrating the soil. We must not assent to this merciless destruction of men, women, children and animals.”

Sympathisers were invited to assist with the cost of raising ‘this first Anti-Air War Memorial’, which was unveiled on 21 June.

### Between Epping Forest and Ethiopia

By this time, the Anti-Air War Memorial had already been through the first phase of its existence. It had been raised the previous year, as ‘a protest against war in the air’, on land owned by the socialist feminist Sylvia Pankhurst. Together with her Italian companion, Silvio Corio, she was then living on the High Road in a ramshackle building called Red Cottage, which served as her campaign headquarters and the editorial office of *New Times and Ethiopian News* while also doubling as a café and roadhouse (‘On the way to Epping Forest’) offering teas, lunches and suppers to passing travellers and excursionists.

During the first world war, Pankhurst had witnessed the first Zeppelin raids on London. In 1932, she had deplored Britain’s bombing of rebels in Burma and north-west India. In October 1935, she was further outraged by Mussolini’s assault on Ethiopia, the only part of Africa that remained independent and had joined the League of Nations. Unveiled that same month by a group that included Pankhurst and Zaphiro, the secretary of the Imperial Ethiopian Legation, the monument stood prominently outside Red Cottage along with a plaque dedicating it ironically to politicians who, at the World Disarmament Conference opened in Geneva in February 1932, ‘upheld the right to use bombing Planes’.

### Eric Benfield’s journey

The Anti-Air War Memorial was sculpted by a man named Eric Benfield. In some descriptions of the stone bomb, he is identified only as a ‘Modernist’, though even that brief label is rather misleading. Benfield had actually started out as a quarrier and stone-worker at Worth Matravers, on the Isle of Purbeck in Dorset. By

the late 1920s, the stone trade was dying, squeezed by the war-spiced advance of concrete, and Benfield, like other Purbeck quarriers, was reduced to hacking out birdbaths or stone squirrels and owls for suburban gardens and the tourist trade.

Dissatisfied, he branched out to produce less conventional works, including a little man ‘fully pleased with his masculinity’, and leering female figures that irked summer visitors who knew what a lady should look like, with or without her clothes.

The piece that really ‘started people coming to see my work’, he wrote in his memoir *Southern English* (1942), was a crucifix featuring a baby nailed to a cross (‘small children can suffer the torment of the damned from their elders who would tear out my eyes for the mere suggestion that they could hurt their loved offspring’). By 1932-33, he felt he ‘was getting on in a line of country that was not supposed to be open to me’. His engagement with the tourist trade had extended to a liaison with Kathleen Wade, a mystery writer first encountered as a summer visitor in Worth Matravers. Indeed, he had abandoned his wife and three young children, and moved with Wade to Hampshire, where he took up the activity that he later described as ‘protesting in stone’.

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In Benfield’s account, the stone bomb was a response to the fact that, in 1934, the year after Hitler’s accession to power, a section of the press was “making much of certain politicians who seemed to be boasting that they, and they alone, had prevented the abolition of bombing planes”, proposed by Germany at the League of Nations Disarmament Conference in Geneva in 1932. These politicians, whose interest at the time lay in preserving the RAF and retaining what Lloyd George described as the right to bomb ‘niggers’, remain nameless in Benfield’s description. Yet his monument was also aimed at Stanley Baldwin and his insistence that ‘the bomber will always get through.’ Looking back during the second world war, Benfield declared that he had “no idealist belief that the mere illegality of the bombers would prevent their production, but I did get the idea that people who admired them so much might like to be recorded by a nice ugly stone bomb”.

The monument was treated as a provocation by fascist sympathisers. It was smeared with creosote on its very

first night ('the traditional way to object to any stone sculpture', as Benfield observed, happily counting himself into 'the select band who have had their public work tarred'), and shortly afterwards the stone bomb itself was stolen.

Benfield promptly set about making a new one, and the publicity caused by the despoilers ensured that the second unveiling, which took place on 4 July 1936, achieved much greater interest than the first. Ethiopia was represented once again, but this time there were also representatives from Germany, France, Hungary, Austria and British Guyana.

Respected during the post-war decades by local Quakers who recognised it as 'an ironic point of light' (in Auden's phrase), the monument rallied anti-nuclear interest in the 1980s. An annual Peace Picnic was held there, evoking the spirit of Greenham Common and ornamented by the white poppies of the Peace Pledge Union. The monument was feminised and converted into a memorial to the life and work of Sylvia Pankhurst, who had eventually moved to Addis Ababa, where she died in 1960, and was buried with great honours in Selassie Cathedral.

#### A pacifist fighter

The stone bomb, meanwhile, remains in its thicket at Woodford Green. In the 1980s, thanks to the initiative of Sylvia Ayling, a local resident, it was declared an immovable Grade II listed building. It has survived at least one subsequent attack. Towards the end of 1996 a vandal, who is considered more likely to have emanated from the Horse and Well pub opposite than from the dens of Essex fascism, carried it off and lobbed it into Epping Forest, whence it was recovered, sandblasted (perhaps a little vigorously), and restored, this time as 'heritage', to its shady recess in a suburb now more threatened by acid rain.

Eric Benfield is almost completely forgotten. Convinced that 'there is a field of endeavour to be worked in political sculpture which no one else yet seemed to have thought out,' he continued 'protesting in stone' intermittently throughout the 1930s. After the stone bomb he made "a very dead effigy of a live politician. It was the kind of stone figure seen lying on old church tombs. I merely meant to suggest that the man's policy was as dead as my figure".

He also wrote books. *Purbeck Shop: a stoneworker's story of stone* (Ensign, 1990) is a classic account of the stone-working culture in which he grew up, and there are several novels concerned with that ancient way of life and its intersection – resentful and opportunistic as well as doomed – with polite society and its admiring but also expropriating summer visitors. Published by Jack Kahane's Obelisk Press in Paris (alongside work by James Joyce, Henry Miller and Anaïs Nin), *The Dead Bury the Dead* features a lustful and predatory young grave-digger, who races around in a borrowed car, forcing himself on his shop-girl fiancée, overriding the more sophisticated embraces of the wife of an absent colonel and hiding his murdered victims beneath officially-buried bodies in the council cemetery.

Benfield knew the difficulties of living between worlds. Outside Dorset, he was a rude Purbeck genius who would accept invitations only to find a raw onion on his plate in tribute to his imagined country ways. At the same time, as his grandson Brian Bugler recalls, he was rejected by Purbeck people for having over-reached himself and in the process abandoned his wife and three children to severe hardship.

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He stayed with Kathleen Wade, and even achieved some standing as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts. He taught 'Sculpture as Therapy' at Park Prewett psychiatric hospital, near Basingstoke, and explained his work in the *Nursing Times* of October 1953. Remarking that, in all ages and civilisations, people had responded to the impulse to 'set up a stone', he hoped to prove that the mentally ill were no exception, even though they may have lived for years under the 'awful dread' that the world had laid them aside.

Not long afterwards Benfield suffered a paralysing stroke, and eventually shot himself on 7 December 1955. His sculptural work is dispersed, and his reputation as a self-taught sculptor and writer with strong and unassimilated views has almost entirely faded. Had he lived to see his ironic Anti-Air War Memorial wreathed in white poppies at one of Sylvia Ayling's peace picnics in the 1980s, he might have shifted a little uneasily on his haunches.

As Eric Benfield himself wrote, while recalling his monument during the second world war:

“(T)here was a strong Pacifist flavour about the unveilings; it was Anti-War, Anti-Bombing, Pacifist or what you will. Yet I knew that there had not been one such urge in its first stirrings in my mind or in its execution. According to a

dictionary, to pacify means to soothe, to calm – anything rather than to fight. But I had no intention of soothing or calming anyone; it was my way to fight.”

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*Patrick Wright is a cultural critic, historian, and broadcaster. Among his books are *The Village that Died for England* (Jonathan Cape, new edition, 2003), *Tank: the progress of a monstrous war machine* (Penguin, 2003), and (as co-author) *Stanley Spencer* (Tate, 2001). A version of this essay was published in the *London Review of Books* in 2001.*

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