

Women, Written in Stone

Taking a closer look at some of Chelsea's statues

Walking along the Embankment between Chelsea Old Church and Albert Bridge, the imposing statues of St Thomas More and Thomas Carlyle are hard to miss. Less obvious is a more modest commemoration, aptly doubling as bird-bath, featuring a line from the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, 'He prayeth best who loveth best all things great and small'. It was commissioned as a memorial to Margaret Damer Dawson OBE (1873-1920), who lived opposite at 10 Cheyne Row. As Secretary of the Animal Defence and Anti-Vivisection Society, she was one of the earliest animal rights campaigners. During the First World War, she broke the gender barrier by creating a volunteer cadre of women police officers, out of which the national Women's Police Service would emerge.



The Commemoration to Margaret Damer Dawson on Chelsea Embankment

Damer Dawson has been commemorated with a fountain in her name, but are there any other sculptures in Chelsea depicting women, or celebrating their feats

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and talents? The short answer is yes, and...no. Figurative nudes, there are a plenty. In the gardens of Cadogan Place there are two: *Girl with Doves* and *The Dancers*. Both were sculpted by David Wynne OBE, another of whose works, *Dancer with Bird* can be found in Cadogan Square. *Young Girl* by Karin Jonzen is located in Sloane Gardens. Retracing our steps back to Chelsea Embankment we will find *Atalanta* by Francis Derwent Wood RA and *Awakening* by his fellow Royal Academician, Gilbert Ledward.



Atalanta by Francis Derwent Wood



Girl with Doves by David Wynne

It's interesting and somewhat surprising that the *only* woman to be commemorated in Chelsea – and not with one sculpture but two – is Eleanor Gwyn, more commonly known as Nell Gwyn. Born in 1650 Nell became one of the first

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actresses on the English stage, women's roles having previously been acted by men or boys. Her fame grew as a result of becoming a life-long mistress of King Charles II, by whom she had two sons; Charles in 1670 and James in 1671. (They were the King's seventh and eighth sons by five different mistresses). She remained a favourite both of the King and the wider populace. According to legend, the Merrie Monarch's last words were 'Let not poor Nellie starve'.



"Venus" in Sloane Square

The romance between the King and Nell is depicted in the *Venus* fountain in the centre of Sloane Square. It was funded in 1948 by the Leighton Fund, set up by the Lord Leighton, President of the Royal Academy (1878-96), who bequeathed £10,000 to be used either to commission or acquire works of art to be placed in public places. Chelsea-born Gilbert Ledward sculpted a kneeling figure of Venus, goddess of love, holding a vase and pouring water from a conch shell, surmounted on a large bronze vase-shaped basin. It is here, behind the water tumbling over the basin that Ledward sculpted a bas-relief of the King and Nell. They are shown seated by the Thames; he is picking fruit from a tree as she fans herself. A cupid sits nearby with two arrows at the ready, whilst a deer and hound are seen running together, as a swan swims in the river. In October 1953 Leighton's successor, Sir Gerald Kelly, unveiled the statue which today has Grade II-listed status.

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Nell Gwynn statue on Sloane Avenue

In 1937 a new block of flats on Sloane Avenue was named Nell Gwynn House. High above the entrance in an alcove is a statue of 'pretty, witty Nell, as Samuel Pepys described her, with, aptly, a Cavalier King Charles spaniel at her feet.

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