

Weekend Wonder: The Skeleton Horse

Saturday 6 and Sunday 7 June 2020

Welcome to Weekend Wonder: The Skeleton Horse - sharing our heritage from Bruce Castle Museum & Archive.

This weekend we share an unusual story behind an artwork from our collections and look at how that story has stirred the imagination of other artists in our community.



From the collections of and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive & Museum Service)

The beautifully painted watercolour (above) shows Turner's House near the High Cross, Tottenham in 1881. The artist has paid great attention to the exquisite details of this semi-rural scene. This snapshot of everyday life (for some) in Victorian Tottenham shows an elegantly-dressed group (a woman, young girl and man, possibly of the same family) who are either visiting the house or returning home; a horse-rider (presumably a huntsman, judging from their attire) emerges from the side entrance to the stables beyond, a stable-worker carries a bucket and a skeleton of a horse can be seen positioned high over the gateway to the stables. A skeleton horse, that no one in this scene seems to take any notice of. Not such an everyday scene then. In fact, quite remarkable.

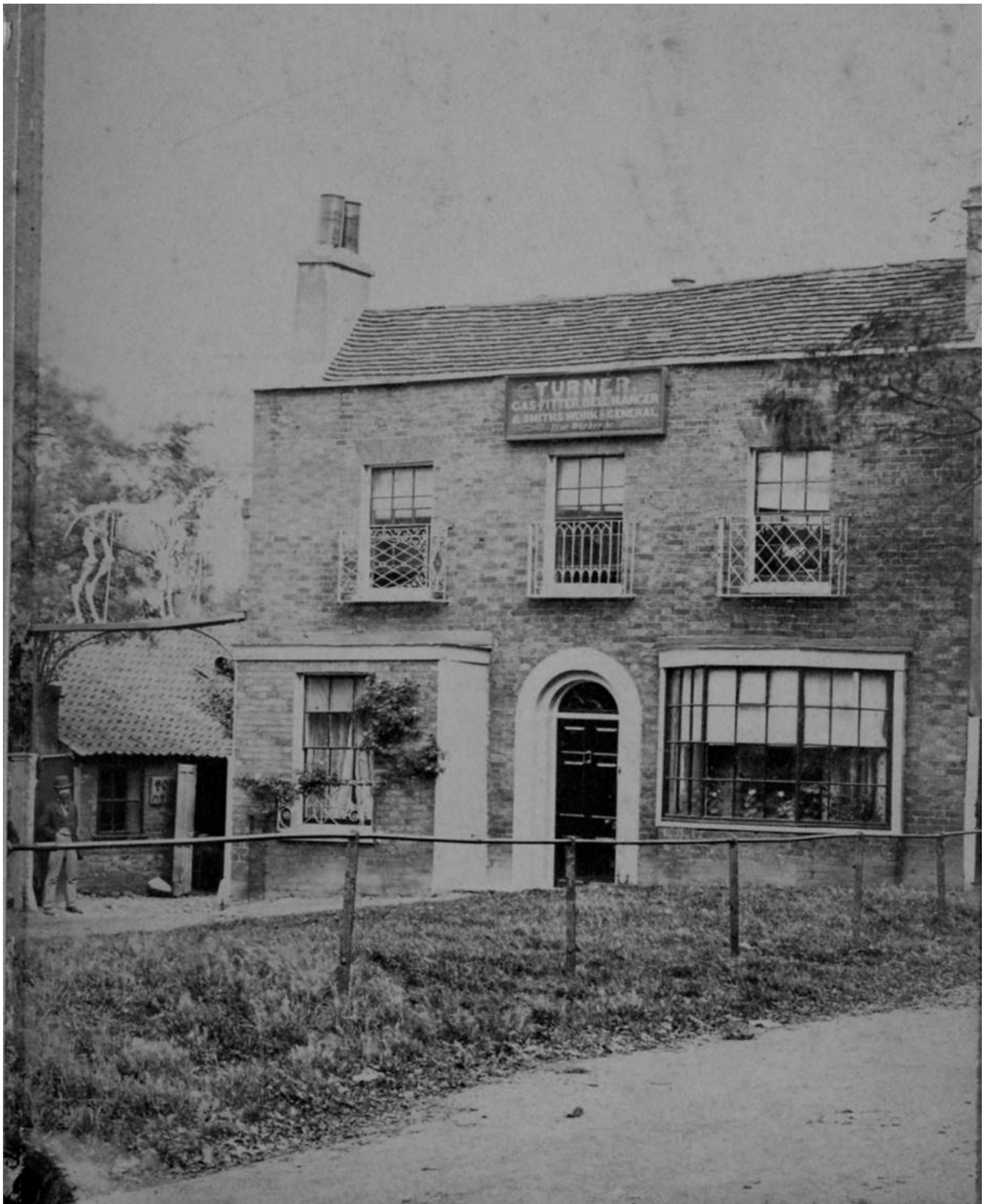
We learn about the story of the skeleton horse from Fred Fisk in one of the editions of his *History of Tottenham* (1923):

'Next to the Grammar School, standing back from the roadway with the green in front, opposite the Public Library, formerly stood a farrier or blacksmith's shop, where the much-spoken of skeleton horse was placed over the gateway At the

farrier's shop ...resided the family of Turner's, one son was a farrier, another a veterinary surgeon. The statement made [to me, about the skeleton] was that a horse belonging to a gentleman residing in Stamford Hill, which frequently passed through Tottenham, having a difficulty in dragging its load up the High Cross Hill, became a great favourite with its inhabitants. On one occasion the horse slipped opposite the farrier's, and in the fall broke one of its front legs. The animal was taken in hand by the veterinary Turner, and so skilfully was the broken leg set and put right, that the owner gave the horse to the vet, on condition that he did not part with it. The horse was used for some years by the vet in pursuit of its business. When the horse died ... [he] fixed the skeleton by means of iron supports, and placed it over the farrier's shop, where it served the purpose of an advertisement for the veterinary surgeon as well as for the farrier.'

The house is described as Turner's House at the High Cross. We know from the Census of 1871, that the head of the household at this address was Jane Turner, and she is described as a farrier. Her son William was her assistant, with another son George described as an upholsterer and her third son Thomas, a gas fitter. They also had a lodger and a general servant, Susan Nelson. There's no mention of a veterinary surgeon, but the role of farrier at this time also included sometimes being a vet. (The Worshipful Company of Farriers consists of craft farriers, veterinary surgeons and an amalgam of persons committed to the welfare of the horse.)

You can see in this photograph (below) of the house that there is a sign positioned high up in the middle of the front façade. It says 'TURNER. GAS FITTER. BELL HANGER. & SMITH'S WORK & GENERAL. Zinc Worker etc.'. With the exception of the sign, the details in the painting and the photograph are more or less the same, including the display of flowers seen inside the house filling the whole main bay window (lower right).



From the collections of and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive & Museum Service)

The painting is dated 1881, which is a significant year for the house and the story of the skeleton horse. The scene above, photographed by Tune & Co, was likely to have been taken not long before 1881 too. That year was when Turner's house was demolished and replaced by the striking [crenellated](#) terrace of houses of [Rawlinson's Terrace, which stand on this site today](#). (Rawlinson's Terrace had been built by builder James - possibly with his son William - Stringfellow, and named after William's wife, Emma Rawlinson.)

And the skeleton horse? Well, it moved opposite to the parade of shops on Tottenham High Road and was placed on top of the ornate shop hoardings of Coleman's the undertakers (which also advertised the family's other trade as builders and decorators). There are a few photographs of it below, the first view is looking north, with the skeleton horse on the left hand side of the road, c.1895. The next two views look south and date from c.1905.





All three photographs from the collections of and © Bruce Castle Museum (Haringey Archive & Museum Service)

You can just see one of Fisk's book shops in the middle photograph above of the High Road (on the right of the image). Back to Fisk to finish off the story:

‘When the alterations of the tram system took place, necessitating the pulling down of the old house occupied by Mr Coleman, the skeleton was taken down with the intention of replacing it on the new premises. The bones were in a wonderfully sound condition owing to many thick coatings of paint. The joints were somewhat the worse for the lengthy exposure to all weathers, but arrangements were made to have them strengthened.

After the present house was erected and the roadway widened, a note appeared in the *Tottenham Herald* commenting on the great improvement of the High Cross, and stating how much better the site was by the removal of the gruesome sight of a skeleton horse over an undertaker’s shop. These remarks might have been well meant, but their effect was that Mr. Colman. Sen., became, perhaps, imbued with the same idea, and instead of having the skeleton fixed up again, had all the bones, excepting three, - cremated! One of these Mr. Colman keeps as a memento; the others were given to a Tottenham lady friend, who preserves them in her hall.’

And so ends the strange tale of the skeleton horse, as told by Fisk in 1923.

Jump to 2001 and at Bruce Castle we welcomed the exhibition ‘*Roadworks*’, a visual arts and literature project created by artists working with Haringey Arts Council (now [Collage Arts](#)), which focussed on the past stories and communities to be found along the A10, one of the oldest roads in London. Along with ‘*Wordstealers!*’, a Family Day of music, workshops and roaming poets dressed as a highwaymen who would steal your words to make poetry, the skeleton horse story reared up again. Intrigued by this particular tale located on the A10, artists made an appeal to find out if anyone knew what happened to the ‘last bones’ that were kept as a memento by the lady in her hall....

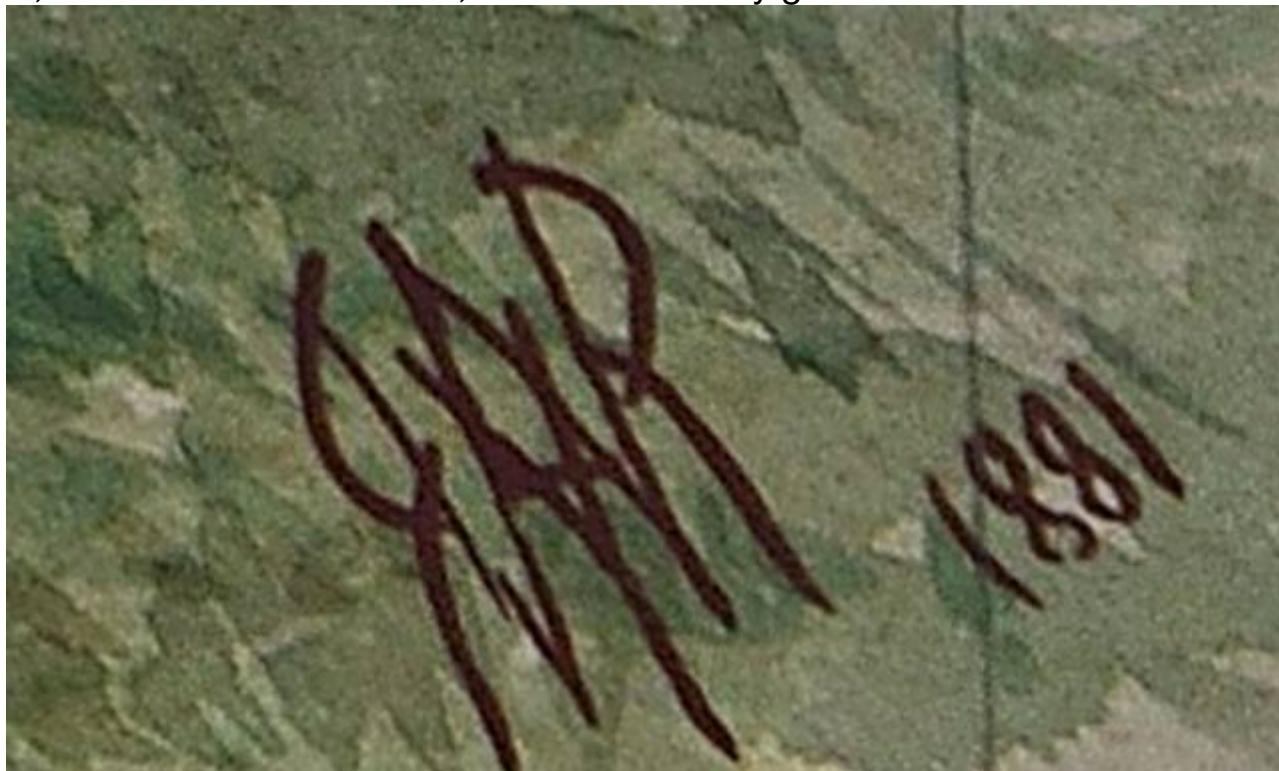


In 2005, the tale of The Skeleton Horse of High Cross was the choice for making a new sculpture in [Chestnuts Park](#) in Tottenham (see photograph above). Standing at 5 metres high, this community sculpture was designed and constructed by artist [Ann Carrington](#), artmakers and Artscope, students from King Alfred School in Hampstead, pupils from Woodlands School in Haringey (situated not far from Chestnuts Park), and local residents. Its wooden structure and form is striking, and is perhaps reminiscent of other [large-scale wooden horses](#) depicted by artists. The artist Ann Carrington sourced reclaimed materials and timber to inform the design, using spindles, dismantled chairs, brushes (to make the mane) and piano keyboards (perhaps echoing the local trade of piano-making in the district). When looking up close up, patterns and details are picked out using nails with straps of metal binding it altogether. The horse certainly has lots of fans and [makes people smile](#) as they cycle or walk by as well as generating a wonderful series of photographs of the horse as you can [see here](#) and [also here](#).

Just a couple of weeks ago, the new audio sculpture trail project [Speaking Stones](#) was launched – a great project that has emerged out of lockdown and an ideal artistic engagement for our current situation. You can check out more about the project on Twitter [@StonesSpeaking](#) (you can read more about it [here](#)). If you [click on this link](#), you can hear (and see) a new interpretation of the Skeleton Horse sculpture in Chestnuts Park telling its own tale.

We wonder if Fisk would ever have imagined that his telling of the story of the skeleton of the horse at High Cross would continue to stimulate and inspire, creating different interpretations of the original tale – and long may it do so.

And, for those art detectives out there, here's a challenge. We are struggling to establish the name of the artist of the beautiful watercolour at the head of this post. All we have to go on is the monogram of the artist's initials in the lower right corner alongside the date 1881. It might read 'RAYR' or RAVR', with the first 'R' written in mirror image. Here's an enlarged view of the monogram below. If anyone can work it out, or has seen it elsewhere, we would be very grateful to know more!



And for those who would like to enjoy more of an art fix, there is still time today (but only on until 6pm, after which it will disappear) to visit this weekend's **Online version of the annual Euroart Open Studios in Tottenham**, from the comfort of your own home. (A few of the artists are represented in our collections and we have collaborated with Euroart Studios on a number of art projects over the past two decades). You can check in with the website to look at all the different artists represented at Euroart: www.euroartopenstudios2020.co.uk, or Instagram: [euroartstudios](https://www.instagram.com/euroartstudios) Facebook: [Euroart-Studios](https://www.facebook.com/Euroart-Studios); Twitter: [EuroartStudios](https://twitter.com/EuroartStudios).

Until our next post – take care and stay well

From us all at Bruce Castle

Deborah Hedgecock
Curator

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