

# The fourth plinth

One of London's most famous landmarks is Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square, built around 1840 and 46 metres tall. At the top there's a statue of Admiral Nelson, one of Britain's military heroes, who died at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805.

Apart from Nelson's Column in the centre of the square, there's a plinth in each corner. A plinth is a square or rectangular block, usually made of stone, with a statue on top. Three of the four plinths in Trafalgar Square have historic statues on them, but the fourth plinth, located outside the National Gallery, has been empty since the square was completed.

The plinth was originally designed to display another historic statue but there wasn't enough money at the time to complete it. As a result, it remained empty until 1998 when the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA) commissioned three contemporary artists to create new sculptures. Each sculpture was to be displayed temporarily on the plinth.

The project was a great success and since then, many contemporary artists have displayed sculptures on the plinth. The most famous of these was sculptor Antony Gormley's *One & Other*. The idea of his project was simple. He wanted members of the public to occupy the fourth plinth and become 'living statues'. 34,520 people applied to take part and 2,400 of them were chosen at random. Every hour, 24 hours a day, for 100 days without a break, the 'plinthers' were put on top of the plinth. 1,208 men and 1,192 women aged between 16 and 84 took part.

The sculptures are chosen by the Fourth Plinth Commissioning Group and by the public. Several artists are asked to submit proposals and models of their sculptures are displayed to the public who can then comment on the works. One artist is then selected to produce the final sculpture that appears on the plinth.

Six artists have been shortlisted to replace the current work, *Nelson's Ship in a Bottle* by the British-Nigerian contemporary artist Yinka Shonibare. The shortlisted works are on display at a nearby church until the end of October. They include a pipe organ by American artist Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla from Cuba. The organ plays music when people type numbers into a cash machine installed in the plinth.

*It's Never Too Late And You Can't Go Back* is the title of another work by the German artist Mariele Neudecker which imagines how Britain would look turned upside down. *Powerless Structures* by the Danish artist Michael Elmgreen and Norwegian Ingar Dragset is a sculpture of a boy on a rocking horse. The boy represents hope for the future in a square full of statues representing Britain's military past. What would Nelson think on top of his column?

**1** Before you read, use the words in the box to complete the names of the London landmarks.

Buckingham Hyde National Nelson's Piccadilly Tower Trafalgar

- 1 \_\_\_\_\_ Bridge
- 2 \_\_\_\_\_ Circus
- 3 \_\_\_\_\_ Column
- 4 \_\_\_\_\_ Gallery
- 5 \_\_\_\_\_ Palace
- 6 \_\_\_\_\_ Park
- 7 \_\_\_\_\_ Square

**2** Order the paragraph titles.

- a People on the plinth \_\_\_\_\_
- b The current shortlist \_\_\_\_\_
- c Defining a plinth \_\_\_\_\_
- d About Nelson's column \_\_\_\_\_
- e Representing the future \_\_\_\_\_
- f The selection process \_\_\_\_\_
- g The original plinth \_\_\_\_\_

**3** Write the questions for the answers.

- 1 \_\_\_\_\_  
46 metres.
- 2 \_\_\_\_\_  
In 1805
- 3 \_\_\_\_\_  
There are four.
- 4 \_\_\_\_\_  
Between 16 and 84.
- 5 \_\_\_\_\_  
The Fourth Plinth Commissioning Group and the public.
- 6 \_\_\_\_\_  
At a nearby church.
- 7 \_\_\_\_\_  
Hope for the future.

**4** Write three more questions based on the article.

- 1 \_\_\_\_\_
- 2 \_\_\_\_\_
- 3 \_\_\_\_\_

**5** Answer the questions.

- 1 Which of the three shortlisted works sounds most interesting to you?
- 2 Are there many statues where you live?
- 3 If 'yes', what kind of statues are they?
- 4 Do you think it's good to remember historic figures with statues?

**6** Complete the task.

Imagine you have been asked to submit a work of art for the fourth plinth on the subject of 'Global'. What idea would you submit?

**Glossary**

- at random** (*phrase*) – without a particular method, pattern, or purpose
- contemporary** (*adjective*) – modern, or relating to the present time
- install** (*verb*) – to put a piece of equipment somewhere and make it ready for use
- landmark** (*noun*) – a famous building or object that you can see and recognise easily
- occupy** (*verb*) – to use a room, building or other place during a period of time
- pipe organ** (*noun*) – large musical instrument with pipes of different length
- proposal** (*noun*) – a plan or suggestion, especially a formal one that a group has to consider
- rocking horse** (*noun*) – a toy horse that a child can sit on and move backwards and forwards
- shortlist** (*verb*) – to put someone or something on a short list
- temporarily** (*adverb*) – existing for only a limited period of time