



Theft of the Armstrong Statue

A bronze equestrian statue worth £30,000 has been stolen from outside a country church. Detectives believe the gang who made off with the 5 ft. high figure by Henry Pegram may also have been behind the theft of a £3million Henry Moore sculpture from Hertfordshire late last year.

The Armstrong Memorial, Pegram's tribute to Boer War hero Lieutenant George Armstrong, is described as being of "international importance". It is the second time the statue has been stolen from outside St. Leonard's Church in the village of Semley, Wiltshire. It was first taken in April 2000, but returned six months later after a media campaign.

Police said: "The thieves cut the statue away from its stand using some kind of cutting equipment and carried it away. "It was stolen just one week after a similar theft in Avon and Somerset. We have been in touch with our colleagues there." On Saturday, a 5 ft. bronze statue was also stolen from St. Mary's Church in Chedzoy, Somerset. Valued at £15,000, it had been erected in 1950 to mark the resting place of Sydney Mason Collins, who had died four years previously.

The Henry Moore reclining figure was taken from near the Henry Moore Foundation visitor centre in December last year. It was in a farmyard where it was waiting to be repositioned after being removed from display. The sculpture measured 10 ft. x 6.5.ft. and security cameras filmed the thieves using a crane to lift it on to the back of the lorry. Police fear the artworks may be melted down for scrap.

Last night, Semley churchwarden Lady Meston told how the church had taken "expert advice" on how to seal the Pegram statue down after the previous theft. She said: "We cannot believe it has happened again. I think it is appalling. The statue was bolted down with four bolts. It was a landmark in the middle of the village." The thieves cut the alarm which went into the rectory.

After the first theft in 2000, the bronze was rededicated. Nobody was ever charged with stealing it. At the time, the priest in charge, the Reverend Peter Ridley, said: "It is a miserable thing to have happened. It is completely irreplaceable. It has been completely wrenched off."

The statue was erected more than 80 years ago by Lieutenant Armstrong's mother, who wanted her only son remembered as a cavalry officer. It is thought he killed himself because he was distressed at being unable to serve in the First World War in 1914 - after being wounded during the Boer War at the turn of the century.

Armstrong fought in Western Transvaal, when he was engaged in a fierce battle with the enemy at Vlakfontein - his company of five officers and 95 men was outnumbered six to one. Only 28 survived, including Armstrong who was wounded in the leg. He retired from the Army in 1907 and became a farmer, hunting with the South and West Wiltshire Foxhounds.

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