Reintroducing our Pioneering Women at Royal Society of Sculptors.

Rosamund Lily West in conversation with Virginia Ironside, introducing Anne Crawford Acheson (1882-1962)

In association with the Art Libraries Society

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Rosamund Lily West: Good evening everybody and thank you for coming to Dora House tonight, the headquarters for the Royal Society of Sculptors. I am Rosamund, I am the Paul Mellon Research curator here working on the Pioneering Women Project and this is Virginia Ironside, writer and artist. Virginia is here as she is the great niece of Anne Acheson, who is the lady we are talking about this evening. So, I am going to just go through about the project, the wider project relating to Anne Acheson and also some of the other women in the project and explain to you a little bit about the archive here, which is housed in our basement. We are talking about Anne because she is one of the really remarkable female sculptors that I am researching here in my capacity as research curator. This evening's event is the first in our Reintroducing Our Pioneering Women events. The idea of these events is to, alongside the wider project of Pioneering Women, were going to talk about and discuss these women. Women who in there own time were really pioneering in their field, the field of sculpture. This was, at this time, still a very male dominated profession. We will talk about Anne in more detail shortly with Virginia. The Pioneering Women project is a two-year project funded by the Paul Mellon Centre and its aims are to uncover the lives, histories and legacies of these women and beginning with our archive, which is held here at Dora House in the basement. I will be carrying out research into around twenty-five female sculptors. Many of them, like Anne, don't

actually have large presence in our archive and our archive is made up of over a thousand member files which continue to be live. So these are files about our members and these can contain photographs, slides, biographies, catalogues and press cuttings that give us information about each member, living and in this case deceased. It also contains correspondence and minutes to do with the Society, which shows us the day-to-day activities and running of the Society, some of which is on the back table, which we can look at later. This reveals how our member's careers developed, how they contributed to the education of sculptors, the training of sculptors, how they contributed towards the professionalisation of the work of sculptors, and how they interacted with and contributed to the society. The archive at present is un-catalogued and so access is limited. This project aims to really increase the access to this archive and knowledge of our archive. This archive represents this country's only official body representing sculpture. We were founded in 1905 and we got Royal patronage in 1911, and just to put Anne's career into context, she was elected as an Associate in 1923 when we were about eighteen years old. The archive here shows how these women formed networks, interacted with one another and how they took part not only in the Society but other artistic routes and societies including the Royal Academy, The Society of Portrait Sculptors and the Society of Women Artists. The archive represents key moments in art history such as the demand for sculptures for war memorials after the First World War. These women taught in art schools up and down the country, or in Anne's case Putney, and played a key role in the education of sculptors and post-Second World War education and training. Through researching these pioneering women this project shall reassert their histories and introduce them to us here at the Royal Society of Sculptors, to the academic community and members and also the general public, allowing them the attention that they earned during their lives and careers. This event is being recorded and it will be transcribed as well so for generations to come people with be able to come to our archive and find about Anne Acheson and hear her great niece talking about here in 2019, and hear us all talking about her. It is important to us here in the Society that these women's presence in the archive is increased so we can generate more archive material about these women. I shall now run through quickly a few of the other women that feature in this project alongside Anne. So first of all we have got – well, I will just show you some of our minutes of council proceedings, and there is one at the back there, these are some of our annual reports, again we have a few at the back as well, and these really reveal some of the day to day running of the Society.
Here we are with the first women who was a little bit younger than Anne, a generation or so behind her, [Rose Gwyneth Holt] was married to the

sculptor T. B. Huxley- Jones. It is one of his works we can see in this image, this was part of a fountain that had broke after he died and she is seen here mending it. She became an Associate of the Society in 1943 and was elected a Fellow in 1952, she was rewarded the Feodora Gleichen Memorial Award in 1948 for her ivory statuette 'Mother and Child' and that award was set up in memory of Lady Feodora Gleichen, one of our earliest women. She was actually elected posthumously, so she was one of the first cohorts of women elected here in 1922, the year before Anne. Alongside her, not posthumously, was Christine Gregory and Flora Kendrick, who were all elected in 1922, so really early. The award, set up in Gleichen's memory, awarded £100 to, and I quote, "A woman sculptor who has completed her training and is commencing her professional career and is deserving of assistance." Anne Acheson won this award in 1938 for her piece 'The Thief'. Next, we have Eva Dorothy Allan or Julian Phelps Allan; she used two names during her career using two identities. She or he became an associate in 1938 and was elected a fellow in 1948, so still quite early. From around 1929 Eva became known as Julian through her choice. She changed her name apparently when she began sculpting professionally to be taken seriously and to be known as a man. However, none of the other women in the project do this, Anne does not do this either. Curiously in our records and in our correspondence she is described by her new name Julian Allen but often with the prefix Miss, so that is a bit of a conundrum. Next, Rosamund Mary Beatrice Fletcher, and her member file is quite interesting because it contains a form dated 1951 which is from the Society for her to fill in, and it is sent to her in response to the number of enquires the Society is receiving after the war for sculptors from post-war architects to decorate buildings. The form that she fills in asks for the sculptor to fill in his name and obviously she fills in her name. This is an example of the assumption from the Society, even into the 1950s and later, that the sculptor would be male. Next we have got Dora Gordine, she was born in Latvia and studied in Paris before moving to England. She studied at the Royal Academy, as did Anne. She became an Associate here in 1938 and was elected a Fellow in 1949. Her collection, the Gordine Collection, is part of Kingston University. Dorich house, where she lived and worked was finished in 1936; it is quite a rare example of a modern studio and house commissioned by and for a female artist. Next, we have Christine Gregory, who as I mentioned earlier, was one of the first women to be elected here in 1922 in the very first cohort the year before Anne. She was also awarded the Lady Feodora Gleichen Memorial fund for this piece here, 'Child of Africa'. She was awarded that in 1945 and she was elected a fellow in 1948. Next we have got Lady Kathleen Scott, another really quite early member. She was famous as the wife and then widow of the polar explore Captain Robert Falcon Scott, also known as Scott

of the Antarctic. However, as you will gather from her inclusion in this project, she was a sculptor in her own right. Barbara Tribe was born in Australia and she became an Associate member in 1945 and was elected a Fellow in 1957. She enjoyed a long and successful career, proclaiming an artist never retires. Common to many of the other women in the project, her work is defined by her gender. In her membership file in the archive we have a newspaper clipping from the Evening Sentinel that describes her work, but it is under the section that is called 'Women's World' dated from 1979. Again, that really begins to put Anne's career into context. Next we have Josefina de Vasconcellos. She was born in England in 1904, again a bit younger than Anne, and she was the only child of a Brazilian diplomat and an English Quaker mother. She became an Associate here in 1941 and was elected a fellow in 1948. She achieved recognition for her work Reconciliation, which was cast in bronze for Coventry cathedral in 1995 and other versions were placed at the Peace Park in Hiroshima, the Berlin War Memorial and Stormont Castle in Northern Ireland. Impressively, that actually came up with a lot of these women, she was working to quite an old age, still working in her 90s.

So, we will go back to Anne now. What was it like work as a female sculptor in the early to mid-twentieth century, as this project concentrates on women working in the early to mid-twentieth century like Anne, and why were women like Anne so pioneering?

The art historian Pauline Rose writes on the female sculptor in this period, she writes from late Victorian right to mid-century. She points out that it was quite common for women's sculptural work to be patronised and trivialised, as we saw with Barbara Tribe, even in 1979 being in the 'women's section' of a news paper. The women sculptors in Anne's time weren't written about in the art press but were more likely to be seen in women's magazines and domestic magazines. Pauline Rose quotes a typical response to female sculptors in M.H. Spielmann's 1901 book 'British Sculpture and Sculptures of Today', in which he says; "Most sculptors of today prefer work of a lighter plane rather than taking their work to the higher plane." He explains however that this does not apply to the students now coming up through the art schools, which would have included Anne at this time, who are, and I quote, "filled with enthusiasm and undisturbed by paralyzing thoughts of marriage are very earnestly following up the traditions of the art." He also talks about how women are naturally more inclined for painting and to use colour because it is 'prettier'.

Virginia: …but remember also sculpture was often so heavy; you'd need to have muscles I imagine.

Rosamund: Yes, yes, definitely, I think that is another problem that I think some early female sculptors had. That they weren't obviously physically strong enough compared to men and that is why we often find a lot of women, like Anne, did smaller works because they were easier to handle. A lot of women like Anne worked alone whereas, a lot of male sculptors, who were doing quiet monumental work, could work in teams which they could maybe afford and have the social presence to employ a team of people. Whereas, women like Anne very much worked on their own and Pauline Rose also writes about how women like Anne, making quite small sculptures, in a way their gender went for them. She observes how a lot of men's smaller sculptors were often monumental works worked down, whereas women like Anne, from the get go, were intending to make works small. So, Pauline Rose observes how they are more beautifully modelled, detailed and more sympathetic and so, I think we could probably say that of Anne's work, definitely. I will show some of Anne's work very shortly. Some of the women that I have listed, like Anne, have very little in their membership file and they are very conspicuous by their absence. There are quite a few reasons as to why this could be which we can suppose. We as a Society have moved premises quite a few times and so even though our archive is here now is have not been here since 1905, as we have not ben here since 1905. To a certain extent we rely on members sending information to us, which can obviously vary member by member, and also over the years some members have had materials returned to them and I think again that is partly because of us moving around a little bit. We can always suppose that gender might play a part in this absence but it also true that many of our earlier members, men and women, don't have a great presence in our archive. The society, by embarking on this project, wishes to give the women the credit and prominence that they deserve and the recognition for their pioneering careers. Because then, as is now, to be a member - or what we called them then an Associate and then a Fellow - these women had to be recognised as a professional by their mainly male peers and so this is quite a big deal. So for Anne and these very early pioneering women to be recognised as a professional is very outstanding. I will just finish on this quote here by Rose Gwyneth Holt, who was the first lady I showed who is about twenty or more years young than Anne, Rose observes that "women are just as intelligent as men and their contribution to art is just as valuable. They are not given a chance to take art up seriously, what with looking after the house there is not much time left for concentrating on art." As I said, Rose was a little bit

younger than Anne but I think when we shortly go through Anne's career, we will be able to really tell that Anne did take her art very seriously.

These are some images relating to Anne, photographs of her and also some snippets from the archive. There is also going to be a rolling display of some her works while we talk as well.

So, as we move on to talk a bit more about Anne, we can assume that she definitely took her art seriously and she was definitely a professional, and had a very long career. I will just quickly run through her career and then we will discuss Anne.

She was born in 1882 in to a prominent Portadown family. Her father John Acheson was the owner of a linen factory, so as we were saying earlier, a really solid middle-class family. The Acheson's were liberal parents and Anne was one of seven, five girls and two boys, and amazingly for a late Victorian family four of the Acheson daughters got degrees. Anne's educational career and artistic training reveal how incredible talented and hard working she must have bee. She began at Alexandra School in Portadown then she won a place at the prestigious Victoria college in Belfast.

Virginia: Which was the only school in Belfast that awarded and took girls to degree level.

Rosamund: Wow. So, within her family environment and school environment she was among a lot of remarkable women. Then, she went to the Royal University of Ireland and she graduated with first class honours from Belfast Municipal Technical Institute, and in her education she excelled in anatomical drawing. She won a drawing competition where she was allowed to pick a prize and she picked a book called 'Anatomical diagrams for the use of art students.' This choice was to prove very relevant to what Anne did in the First World War. Then, she went on to win a scholarship to attend The Royal College of Art in South Kensington. So, now she comes over to London. She stayed at the Royal College for three years and then in 1910 she began teaching for the London County Council in Putney, she was teaching modeling. In 1911, only her second year into teaching, she successfully submitted her first piece for the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition and this was the 'Pixie', which was exhibited and priced at seven guineas. She had pieces accepted at the Royal Academy for the next four years up until the First World War, when her life took quite a different turn. During the First World War she gave up her work as a professional artist to join the Surgical Requisites Association. This was an organisation set up

during the First World War of volunteers, mainly women. Initially they were sending bandages and rolling up bandages to the front, but at the time Anne joined they were really expanding their operations and wanted to make more sophisticated medical and orthopaedic tools. As a sculptor, Anne was useful to them because she knew anatomy and was very interested in anatomy. When she was here, she joined a fellow sculptor called Elinor Halle who had developed an arm cradle to support broken arms, Elinor had developed it using Plaster of Paris. So as sculptors both Elinor and Anne would have known how to use this.

Virginia: I thought it was paper mache?

Rosamund: Yes, it changes to paper mache. Elinor developed that which does immobilize limbs because before their limbs were splinted quite crudely with wood and ties to the limb. When Anne came along and joined forces with Elinor she developed it further using paper mache. Eventually, Anne went on to develop what we know have, which was placing a limb in a plaster case, which completely immobilises the limb. It is light, capable of being X-rayed, cheap and you can use it quickly and in a field hospital. This work at the SRA earned Anne a CBE in 1919 alongside Elinor. By the time she comes to us in 1923 as an Associate she's about forty, she has already got a CBE and she has been working as a professional sculptor for some time. That is when we get Anne here [at the Royal Society of Sculptors]. You will see on the rolling images here we have the first mention of her in the archive, where she is described as an outstanding woman and it is recommended that she becomes an Associate. After the war, she returned to work and she continued to submit works to the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition. Between 1911 and 1949, twenty-seven pieces of works of hers appear at the Royal Academy and her career really takes off between the wars. She produces lots of her garden statuettes, which she becomes really famous for, and also car mascot figures, one of which is showing on the reel as well, they were very popular in the 1920s and 1930s. She is really cottoning on to what is popular and selling her work as well. A really prestigious commission she received in 1927 was to do a bust of Gertrude Bell, the explorer, then in 1938 she becomes a Fellow here and that's really important for our history and for Anne Acheson's history because she is the first female Fellow of the society, so she is really important to us because of that. Then in the Second World War, Anne once again volunteers and she volunteers with the Red Cross. After the Second World War, she does still have some art pieces accepted to the Royal Academy but her career, the heyday of her career, is maybe behind her. She moves back to Ireland to live with two of her sisters in Gleam House. Anne then dies in 1962.

So, now we will move on to you Virginia and ask you a little bit about Anne. Could you tell us as much as you can some of your and your families' memories of Anne and explain you are related and a little bit more about the family?

Virginia Ironside: Well, to start with I don't think she would have ever described herself as an "artist". I mean, that has real rarified twenty-first century overtones. Like all the women in our family – and most women actually – she was very pragmatic. She would always say she was a sculptor. She would never do anything not for money. It was how she made her living. Actually they were all in it to earn a living. She was single and she never married. It was a shame. Apparently she was madly in love with someone in the war but he died. She lived in Sydney Place Studios, which were off the Fulham road quite near here. Now it is a dreadful place taken over by interior designers but when I used to visit, when I was tiny, they were just artists' studios. She lived next door to a painter called T.C. Dugdale who was a very big society painter at the time, and he was married to Amy Browning who was also a painter. By the way they all called each other in those days by their surnames she was Acheson and Amy would be Browning. This was a picture that Browning did of Anne Acheson in a red shawl – it's called La Chale Rouge and it's an art gallery in Bayeux, oddly. This romantic picture is so different to the severe Northern Irish picture that I have. The other evidence of her love of clothes and fabric comes from a wonderful embroidered shirt I have of hers, I mean it is just so pretty. So, that's a side of her I never saw, that must be the art student side. What I saw was a workaholic, a tiny woman from Belfast with that [example of Irish accent] "I'm from Portadown. Hello there to you, how're you? Now would you like to settle down with some clay over there I'll give you a little model to make, now you be quiet 'cause I'm just working", and she'd be there in her studio and I had been dumped there by my mother who was rather a racy creature, and I don't like to think what she got up too when I was being left with Auntie Nan as we called her, but I'd be about six at the maximum, maybe younger. And be left with a little bit of clay to model things and press into casts. She had little tiny casts of horses and thing and you pressed the clay in and made a horse and you were very pleased with yourself. That is really what I remember of her. Very brisk, affectionate but not sentimental. She was presbyterian Northern Irish to her fingertips with a great work ethic. I can't imagine a drop of alcohol would ever pass her lips. Although that side of the family had a very dry sense of humour, very twinkly but, basically, hardworking, ambitious and what was so interesting was because of this education they had at Victoria College all the women in the family went on

to have very good careers. One ran a girl's school, one was a doctor, one was a sculptor, obviously, and one became a surgeon in India. So that is why I'm always rather baffled by the sort of "fighting through to break the glass ceiling" so many women bang on about these days. In my family there was no glass ceiling, my mother was a very successful career woman as well. So, I don't get it. And Auntie Nan was certainly one of the people who belied all this "women are downtrodden" stuff. We were all just like blokes, we were all doing our stuff, making our money.
Anne's sculptures often seemed at complete odds with her character. She made these lovely, I think they're beautiful, some of the garden sculptures she did, they were sentimental, but they were beautifully executed and very sensitively done, of children. She was childless and, to me as a child anyway, so singularly, apparently, unattractive, strict and upright. Yet she had this tremendously sentimental streak, as you can see by these lovely sculptures of naked children, and they'd often be put in the middle of fountains clutching a cornucopia with water coming out. They'd always be incredibly twee and, do you remember the illustrator Mabel Lucie Attwell? Anne's sculptures had that ethos to them - the chubby child period, coyly holding a little buttercup or a kitten and all with these wonderful names like 'The Thief' or 'The Pixie' or 'Naughty'. It was all very twee and innocent, very saccharine, but so beautifully done. Her sense of the anatomy of children was superb, and she knew exactly how they moved when they were shy or bold. So those are lovely, and they actually sell for quite a lot now, I mean not enough, I think the last I saw was on eBay was £2000 of a two-foot high statue. And then there were these, obviously car mascots which were, again you can see by the one, I imagine, that's the one that the tiny girl….

Rosamund: referring to piece 'Speed' yes, yeah.

Virginia Ironside: '…yes, I mean there was a lot of wind rushing through people's hair and it gave them a sense of real life. A lot of these pieces went into mass production and it was from them that she earned a lot of her living. She may have had a contract with Royal Worcester, but she'd make these extraordinary little pieces for the mantelpiece. I've got some, because I gave all my nice pieces to the Portadown exhibition and the ones I'm showing you aren't very good like this one called 'The Mantle', it's some kind of shawl, and her top is broken, but you can see the colours and these were reproduced in their thousands or maybe hundreds, all in different colours and flogged. This is another one which again is very typical, do have a look later if you want, this is a little child clutching a rabbit, I believe it was meant to be glazed, it doesn't look right with this matte surface, but these would be sold in quantities.

Her other means of income was making portrait heads of people's children – so incredibly professional and charming, full of life and personality – and garden ornaments.

My mother stayed with her a great deal when she was young - my mother later became a Professor of Fashion at the Royal College of Art, so she was absolutely obsessed with clothes and material, not really interested in Auntie Anne at all. But she would have to stay in these grim, cold surroundings, with a hard bed in Sydney Place when she was in London. But Auntie Nan may have been very down to earth and a single kipper for supper sort of thing, but she was very warm-hearted and kind. And good.

Rosamund: I just wanted to pick up on what you were saying about how frugally she was living and about her personality. Looking at these figures, and some of the figures on the slideshow, the range of her work, working for Royal Worcester, producing these figurines for clients which would often be their children or grandchildren, as well as doing the car mascots, there's quite a range of work. I think it's quite obvious she followed commissions, and followed money and work. She was unmarried as you said.

Virginia: She was entirely self-supporting, you'd think she was quite normal now but it wasn't normal then.

Rosamund: Yeah. So, within your family, she would have been seen as quite normal for your family, very hard-working, self-sufficient?

Virginia: Yes, one would just take for granted, she was a sculptor who lived down the road. What I was going to say was my mother was rather beautiful, and Auntie Nan made a mask of her face and, you must have seen them at car boot sales, well, now not so much, but they used to be sold in their millions these ghastly faces, all with green lips and differently painted. They would be put on people's walls like flying ducks were, because it was the flying duck era, so, you'd get masks of pretty women and bung them on your walls. My mother always used to say she dreaded going to antique shops in the 50s and 60s and seeing a hideous model of her face on the shelves being sold for 10 shillings. But that was typical of Auntie Nan, she would have her niece staying with her and she would think I can make a bob out of this and sculpt a mask of her face and sell it.
She was commercial, that's what I liked about her. There was there was no, "my art" or "artist", no pretention at all, she worked for money and did it well and thoroughly. As a result, like all the major artists in the past who

worked for money and produced what we would class as works of art, she was in her way an artist – her sculptural knowledge and skill was huge and her sensitivity profound.

Rosamund: I think what you're saying about her work ethic and the way she worked as well, we can see on these slides, some of these images that are from the Victoria and Albert Museum, the photographs aren't great quality, but you can see they are backed onto brown card. That's how Anne worked, she had postcard sized photographs of her work, which she placed on brown paper and sent out to clients or prospective clients, and she would write on the back of them what they were, how big they were, the weight they were, where they'd been exhibited. She would also put on the back please return to herself at Sydney's, Sydney Close. They're really interesting in the way they show how she worked, she's also quite savvy with it as well. It also doesn't require her to be quite flashy and go in person, she's sending these out to people and getting commissions, and a lot of these works she produced quite a few editions of as well.

Virginia: I love that idea! I didn't know about it until you told me. She's actually sending it out just like an Argos catalogue.

Rosamund: laughing Yeah! But I think it pays off because she, on her own, made a career out of this and she was our first female fellow, so she did well at this. I was going to ask as well, you said that some of these figures were quite cute and chubby and very lovely little children figures, and that she did what patrons wanted. Do you think her own personal taste, from remembering her own interiors, was she herself into that kind of thing or do you think she did that because people wanted that? Or was that her vision?

Virginia: I think it was a mixture. She was so talented; you couldn't do this sort of thing unless you had an empathy with children like that. Her studio was sparse, there was nothing in it, it was grey and smelt of clay. Full of bins of clay, and curtains and bit of damp cloth, very damp of course, all the figures were draped in wet towels. It wasn't a very healthy place to be. But she didn't seem in any way twee or sentimental and was quite brisk with children too. There was no talking down to children or anything like that, it was all very practical, but she clearly had an empathy with this sort of age. I was thinking, actually, because in Portadown where she lived, the head of the Art Gallery there said they wanted to commission some sort of piece, as I think it's called now, to commemorate her. But, I said I really didn't want a modern sculpture of, I don't know, two triangles on legs or worse, something really bad, because people are nothing like as good anatomically

as they used to be. But I could imagine it as rather a ghastly piece of public art, and I suggested they have a replica of one of her little girls say and blow it up, so it looked like a Ron Mueck, rather smart I thought. I said what about having 'Sally' which was a piece of a little girl. Then I thought you'd never get it past anybody a sculpture of a naked little girl, this sort of thing is just taboo now. But 'Echo' would be rather nice, there are some lovely ones of hers. But you couldn't really get away with it as they're a bit too naked and sexy now, don't you think?

Rosamund: Well, I don't know if they're sexy! I should just mention we are talking about the exhibition in Portadown. Hopefully, there is a renewed interest in Anne at the moment.

Virginia: Oh gosh they've discovered an artist from Northern Ireland who is a woman at Christmas time! Put out the flags!

Rosamund: She is the only Irish woman in our project as well. But at Portadown, where Anne was from, they had an exhibition there which ended in May and the publication that went with the exhibition is at the back there so you can have a look at that afterwards and it has a lot of her works from the exhibition. Also there has been a plaque unveiled in Portadown now.

Virginia: Oh yes! That's absolutely wonderful.

Rosamund: And also, quite a few years ago, David Llewlleyn wrote a book on Anne Acheson, which Virginia has kindly brought in here, which is called 'The First Lady of Mulberry Walk'. So, there is information out there about Anne, but I think for a lady who had such a long career, and sold so much work, and exhibited so widely, she's not as well-known as you'd think. And this title 'The First Lady of Mulberry Walk', refers to her work in the First World War with the Surgical Requisites Association. So even aside from her artistic career, to have developed the technique that we still use today of a plaster cast on a broken limb is really impressive.

Virginia: It shows how pragmatic she was.

Rosamund: Yeah! And really practical thinking. Interestingly, it did take a while for the medical profession to take on the plaster cast as they were a bit dubious about it at first. Obviously, they took it on quite quickly after that. Because, as we said, she knew about anatomy, she used Plaster of Paris, she'd used plaster casts before, and she was very practical as well. So, her being more well-known is really important, she's an important woman in

terms of art. But also, in terms of orthopaedics and medicine, in terms of the history of the First World War as well, a war that saw a lot of injuries and this, as you said, perhaps quite sort of severe little lady from Portadown had a huge impact didn't she, and people's limbs were saved by her work.

Virginia Ironside: Yes, but one of the tragic spin-offs of this was that because of these bombs that were injuring people, if a bomb comes you would naturally put your arms up to protect your head, they got lots of injuries to their arms which made them a nightmare. But the old splints would often make their arms heal in a bent way which meant they couldn't be sent back to the front. But I'm afraid with Anne's Plaster of Paris they would be healed completely and back they'd go to be killed. So, there was a – you know – nothing is all good or all bad.

Rosamund: An unintended consequence.

Virginia: Yes exactly.

Rosamund: So, did Anne have relatives fighting in the war as well? Because obviously living here in London she'd have seen injured soldiers around, coming from train stations.

Virginia: Well, her brother survived, and one of them became resident in India, who was my grandfather, and the other one continued with the linen mill, Edgar. So, they were all successful.

Rosamund: That's interesting, yeah. I was also quite interested in what you thought about, and opening it out to the audience as well, when Anne was working as a sculptor and when she became an Associate and a Fellow of this Society and when she was selling her work, life as a female sculptor was quite different to what it is today. Today the Society and our patron, the Queen, is a woman, Caroline, our director, is a woman, our President is a woman, the board is about 50:50 men and women. So, there are a lot more women here and present in the field of sculpture than when Anne was really pioneering in this field. What do you think someone like Anne would have thought of the art-world now? How do you think her career would have been different if she had been practicing in the twenty-first Century rather than at the beginning of the twentieth Century?

Virginia: Well, those questions are always very difficult, my father always used to say if you want to answer questions like that you need to say, "if my Aunt had wheels, she would be a bicycle". I think she would be rather

horrified by the emphasis on art, this sort of self-indulgent idea of art as being something "other". I mean she was very pragmatic, and we never thought of her as an artist at all. She was a funny little relative who lived down the road and made her living out of sculpture and was jolly good at it and good for her. But I think she would have been baffled; I mean even the idea of having an exhibition of her work might have confused her.

Rosamund: So, do you think she was proud of herself, proud of her work, proud of getting a CBE, proud of her voluntary work in two World Wars?

Virginia: I'm sure she was very proud of doing the war work and I think she must have been pleased with herself for the sculptures that she did and being able to make a living. But we're not a "proud of ourselves" sort of family to be honest. I don't think she would have gone home at the end of her life thinking her life had been wasted in any way. I think she always worked to the height of her abilities. She was a perfectionist, but not a sort of nutty one, she did her best and she wasn't stroppy in any way at all and, apparently her kitchen was very untidy. I mean she got up in the morning at the crack of dawn and started working on her clay things and did that until the evening, and then had a kipper and a glass of cold water for supper and that was it. That's what everybody had in those days, but there wasn't much fun and frippery in her life.

Audience Member 1: What happened to her papers at the end of her life because obviously we've got some in the archive here, but do you know?

Virginia: I don't know but I think one of her nephews has got some, but I don't think there were many papers. There were some which her nephew Neil Faris has. He should be encouraged to give them to you, because when there's an archive to be had and when there's somebody willing to keep the stuff, usually you can't get rid of it, but you know you're here laughing, but I shall try to galvanise him.

Rosamund: Yeah, we would definitely be interested, as I said at the beginning, in generating more material about Anne for this archive is really important to us because we don't have a lot on her in the archives, but that is not a reflection of how important she was, of how important she is and means to the Society as a whole. It's women like Anne who have really helped form the Society over the years. So yes, more archive material is definitely something we'd be interested in.

Virginia: But I think it's also credit to the Society that she was accepted as a woman in the first place, so she's got a lot to be grateful to you for.

Rosamund: Oh! Laughs I'll say thank you, but it's nothing to do with me. Referring to that, one of the slides that's scrolling through and is over there for you to look at, is the mention of her in our council minutes, because it says in the minutes that Mr. Pomeroy, who was a sculptor and was serving on the council, has suggested to the council that members approach outstanding women sculptors, he mentions two women and also Ms. Acheson. So, she's already on their radar, but I'm not surprised that she's already on their radar because, as we said earlier, she was about 40 at this point, she'd got a CBE, she'd sold a lot of work, she was a real solid professional artist at this point. So, for any of these early women to be noticed, especially Anne, shows how good they were to be one of these early pioneers.

Virginia: Absolutely, yes.

Rosamund: And that's the first mention of Anne in our archives as well. And also, at the back we've got a mention of her in the annual report being elected as an Associate and also being elected as a Fellow. You can see in the list of other Fellows elected in the book at the back that, like I said earlier, she's the only woman elected at that point as a Fellow, all of the others are men. Most of the sculptors on the council would have been men, the President was a man, probably a lot of patrons she'd had were men as well, so she's a really impressive woman in her field.

Virginia: Yes, I don't think she would have felt very "Gosh I'm a woman and they're men" because I think in that world, they were just all sculptors. I don't think she would have felt "Oh I'm a woman" because she was too practical. She would have thought along the lines of "Oh this will help me; I'll add this to my CV and get more commissions".

Rosamund: I think in a way as well the Society, in a way, is treating them as men to a certain extent, as we were saying earlier, the sculptress/sculptor thing, our correspondence records don't say sculptress, they say sculptor. There's also reference to 'brother sculptor', it's always 'he'.

Virginia: But again, they were very blokeish these women in their own way, calling each other surnames. Did they call each other surnames at school? I don't know. But I'd love to share the description of her studio that I brought with me.

Rosamund: Oh yes! Would you like to read it? This is from Virginia's book 'Janey and Me'.

Virginia: 'She was small and wiry with a strong Belfast accent and an enormous work ethic and her grey hair was always tied in a bun. She didn't dress in an arty way but was always usually covered with an enormous sculptress' apron. Auntie Anne's studio…' this was described by one of my relations at the time '…was large with a high vaulted roof and skylight and was filled with partially completed works placed on various tables and pedestals all covered with wet sheets. It felt and smelt terribly damp and was bitterly cold if one happened to be there during the Christmas holidays. There was a curtained off area where Auntie Anne slept and kept her clothes…' I mean fairly grim really, '…I cannot remember any facilities for cooking or washing, but they must have existed somewhere, I slept on a camp bed among the art, I don't think that Auntie Nan felt entirely comfortable with children, but she was extremely kind to me in a rather brisk way. She would settle me down at a table with a huge lump of clay to model and she would then uncover whichever particular statue it was she was working on at the time and proceed to work. It was very primitive, but delightfully bohemian.
'It was in this studio that my mother used to stay when she was in London, behind a pole draped with a curtain for decency's sake, on a Holland covered Chesterfield which was too short for her and every morning Auntie Nan, champing to get to work, would be up drawing the Holland blinds on the huge window to display the sight of damp shrouded figures on stands around the studio.'
That's the sort of atmosphere, no-one was very comfortable there.

Rosamund: It's not very glamorous is it laughs

Virginia: No, but the idea of just sleeping behind a curtain in the studio all your life, anyway that was her life.

Rosamund: Yeah, that's definitely not very glamorous. Did you get the sort of impression, even though she wasn't very arty herself, that she was part of an artistic community where she was living, who she was associating with, and then also when she moved back to Ireland and she was involved in some Ulster art communities.

Virginia: I don't feel that, but then, these two friends she had in the studio next door, the Dugdales, and all the studios were peopled by artists, so they

must have shared a kipper the odd evening, I'm sure they did have a little community there. But money was so tight then and, you know I remember of course in the 50's, everything was very grim, and that was even before that, so it was all going back to a boiled egg on a single gas ring and maybe one bar of a fire if you were lucky, probably putting on gloves.

Rosamund: So even though she made a career out of it she lived quite frugally.

Virginia: Absolutely. She probably made enough to live.

Rosamund: Does anyone have any questions or comments from the audience at all? So, thinking about Anne Acheson's work as a female sculptor and one of our earliest female members, our first female Fellow and about her work in the First World War, all these crossovers between art and medicine, art and orthopaedics and anatomy, which she obviously had a keen interest in, as we've seen that as a student, she asks for the anatomy book. So, does anyone have any comments or questions for Virginia at all about Anne Acheson?

Audience Member 2: I'm interested to know what takes her back to Ireland. Is it age and wanting to get back to family?

Virginia: Oh yes, that would be where, she was very Northern Irish and she would have fitted in there much better and had a family I should think too. I think she thought she could help her sisters who were all getting on and, again, continue to be independent within the family rather than dependent on anyone.

Rosamund: I think what we'll do now is, as I said we've got some archive material at the back of the room to do with Anne. We've got a council minute book, as I mentioned earlier, there's a close up of it here. Then we've got three of our annual reports, one that shows when she's elected as an Associate, one when she's elected a Fellow, and we also have the annual report out from 1939 on a page open which shows what the Society is doing to prepare for war in terms of sculpture and sculptors. We also have the publication from the exhibition at Portadown…

Virginia: That's got some lovely photographs in it, so it's worth looking at that. Have a look at the Mulberry Walk book and do have a look at these little pieces, and that's a card, a Christmas card, every Christmas she'd send

us a Christmas card that she'd drawn. I don't think her drawings were nearly as good as her sculptures.

Rosamund: I like that she's drawn one of her sculptures though laughs.

Virginia: Yes exactly, an eye for promotion.

Rosamund: And when you're looking at the archive material at the back, make sure you don't have your drinks near it as well. Do flick through the exhibition publication, that's a new publication, but if you leave the open archive books and just look at those. But like Virginia said, there's some lovely photographs in there, there's a photograph of Anne when she's 18 with all her siblings and mother and father. There's a lovely picture of her in later life working on a piece as well which is lovely. There's also a good picture of her working at the Surgical Requisites Association on a soldier as well, so do have a look.

Virginia: Well, I brought one, why don't you bring that so there are two.

Rosamund: Okay, yes that would be good! And before you get up, I just want to say thank you so much for coming to talk to us and sharing your memories about Anne Acheson, because a really important part of this project is all the women in this project are deceased, so obviously we can't speak to them, but it's really important for us in terms of the archive and in terms of a presence in the archive and preserving memories and information on these women, if we can talk to people that actually knew these women or were related to them or worked with them, because we are hoping that this archive will be here for hundreds of years. So, say in two hundred years, people will be able to come and consult this archive and know that Anne Acheson existed, know that she was important to this Society, that she was our first female Fellow, her important work in the First World War, as well as her huge body of work as a sculptor, people will be able to view that in our archive and see that she has a presence and that she's important to us. So, this transcription is really adding to her presence in our archives and thank you very much for talking to us.

Virginia: Yes, one thing I hadn't mentioned is that my mother, who ended up as a Professor at the Royal College of Art, married my father, Christopher Ironside who taught at the Royal College of Art, so I've had a very arty family, and he did a lot of sculpture himself and designed the backs of the first decimal coins. And Anne of course was at the Royal College of Art in her time too. So, I've been steeped in people poring over bits of clay and

then making casts, so it's in the family all be it a different side of it, so her spirit lives on.

Rosamund: Oh good, yes, and here in the basement of Dora House.

Audience Member 3: Thanks very much for a great presentation. I wanted to ask Virginia, the portrait you've given is of a very practical woman. What do you think was going on in her imagination, that she was interested in leprechauns and all that?

Virginia: *laughing* Well she was far too down-to-earth to imagine leprechauns were real! It may have been the children she'd never had; I don't know. This is rather squeezing the last drops of lemon. I think it must've been anatomical and also, she loved watching children play, because children have very different movement when they're playing, to adults, not that one sees adults playing at all, but she caught all these odd kinds of childish things, which you don't see when people are grown up. Perhaps it was a kind of gap in the market, particularly with all these blokes doing and painting heroic things and addressing big issues, people like George Watts.

Audience Member 4: I was interested in what you were saying about the glass ceiling, and you were saying that perhaps you felt that it was sort of a myth in a way, but do you feel perhaps in any particular way that she was from a particular class, I mean obviously her father owned a linen company, but do you think mainly class had anything to do with the fact that a woman could only be successful as artists if they had the means, if you like, to be able to study and do that. Perhaps she was lucky in the fact that she came from a family who could allow her the opportunity to do that?

Virginia: I don't think that there was ever any idea that she would be supported by them, but she came from a family who were educated and believed that money gave them the means to be progressive, and I think, when you're just scrubbing potatoes and cleaning floors, it's very difficult to think about progressive things because you're so ground down. So, she had the freedom, the parents had the freedom to think in a progressive way and send their children to this special school. It wasn't a sort of "Oh I'm so grand I can do what I like" at all, it was a different ethic that drove them. They all had to earn a living, no question. But, because of where she was sent to school, she was able to get a degree and that was wonderful in that a lot of other women wouldn't have been able to have that. The money gave her the opportunity, absolutely, you're quite right.

Rosamund: I think also with her training, she's obviously grabbing those opportunities, because she wins a scholarship, I think twice, and that's how she ends up in London, she wins a scholarship to the Royal College of Art, so obviously she has opportunities in terms of her family and in terms of her attitude, but she's also extremely talented as well. To win these scholarships it's really impressive isn't it.

Virginia: She has drive, and it doesn't matter how much talent you've got, without drive you're doomed and you're quite right, she'd seize these opportunities when they came.

Audience Member 5: What were the car mascots you referenced that she was making? I'm intrigued by those.

Virginia: Well, I've seen a couple and I don't know, because I'm not a petrol head, I don't know what cars they were, but they were often winged figures, you know like on the Rolls Royce, well they were versions of that in all different styles and they were very sweet, I'd love to have one.

Rosamund: I get the impression, like the 'Speed' one, this is the impression I get, that they're one-off custom pieces perhaps for wealthy clients rather than the Rolls Royce sort of ten thousand of them made. Is that the impression you get?

Virginia: I don't know how many were actually, I suppose a couple were used but I'm not sure, but she went in for quite a few competitions for car mascots and I think she didn't get the Rolls Royce one, which was a shame as it would've been lovely to get that. One of her nephews has got one of the prototypes.

Rosamund: Oh wow! On his car?

Virginia: No no, that'd be nice!

Rosamund: Oh, okay laughing. But, again, I think it's showing how she adapts to fashions and tastes, and as we can see with it, you can really see that it's supposed to be on a car, it's like she's sitting on the front of the car, and she's always thinking about the fighting of a work and the situation and the materials as well. And again, we can probably imagine with that one, with her writing on the back of it, that she would write that it's for a car and write suggestions for it. She's very adaptable.

Virginia: Yes, I'd love to have one on my Fiat 500!

Audience Member 6: Can I just ask something else; I think there was a television program?

Virginia: Yes, there was, it was made by BBC Ulster.

Audience Member 6: Is there any chance of ever getting access to that, because I was quite interested in her work and I tried to watch it and I think it's not available.

Rosamund: It's not available on iPlayer anymore *(ed. The Royal Society of Sculptors has a digital copy of this video – please contact us to enquire)*

Virginia: No, I've downloaded it, but god knows how I could get it to you.

Rosamund: I want to approach the BBC to see if we can get a copy of it here, and then if we did have a copy of it here that would be available for our researchers to consult.

Virginia: Yes, it was very good.

Rosamund: Yeah, so that would be something we could do.

Virginia: I think I have got it as a download so I'm sure there must be some way of, even if the BBC wouldn't like it, sneaking it to you.

Rosamund: Do we have any more questions or comments?

Virginia: No?

Rosamund: Okay.

Virginia: Well, thank you very much.

Rosamund: No, thank you for coming, Virginia!

Virginia: It was lovely to talk about her.

Rosamund: Thank you, yeah, it's lovely for us to talk about her at the Society as well, she's very important to us. Right, well anyone that wants to

look at the archives, the objects are at the back and they're all labeled explaining what they are, but as I said, don't hover over them with your drinks please, or any food if you have any food, just be careful of them, please. Thank you!

Applause