



Interview with Charlie Langton:

Meet the Sculptor...

When thinking of great British artists, racecourses don't immediately spring to mind, but that is the ideal place to admire the work of Charlie Langton, who specialises in life-size equine sculptures. He chats exclusively to *Dream Escape* about his inspirations, and his favourite commission unveiled by Queen Elizabeth II.

WORDS | KARYN NOBLE

The beauty and skill of the thoroughbred horse have been admired by many, but no-one quite captures the characteristics of a champion racehorse like Charlie Langton.

The world-renowned sculptor is famed for his life-sized works in bronze, particularly *Yeats* who stands in the parade ring at Ascot, and his piece *Mare & Foal* that was commissioned in 2017 for (the late) Queen's 90th birthday at Newmarket Racecourse, both of which were unveiled by Her Majesty. In November 2022, a miniature version of *Mare & Foal* sold at auction for a six-figure sum.

It has been a gradual rise to international acclaim for Charlie, who first won an art scholarship to the esteemed Charles H Cecil Studios in Florence, a private atelier that trains budding artists in classical drawing and oil painting.

This technical discipline combined with his mother's love of horses and exposure to his great-uncle's breeding of successful racehorses sowed the seeds for the great works we see today.

Dream Escape was fortunate to catch some time with the much-in-demand artist, not long after the birth of his first child, in this especially poignant interview.

Charlie, when did you realise that you wanted to be a sculptor?

I think I have always enjoyed making things, whether it was in clay, wood or offcuts in my father's shed, where I had a small workbench and toolkit. I hated reading, so art was my escapism. The more I did, the more encouragement I got from family and teachers, and art quickly became part of me. From a very early age I knew I wanted to 'do art'... →

Previous page: Charlie works on Pegasus for the National Memorial Arboretum
Left to right: Mare & Foal; Yeats; Next page: Queen Elizabeth II visits Yeats at Ascot;
HM The Queen with Mare & Foal. Last page: Charlie sculpting Aerion; Charlie
sculpting Fear the Lion



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I didn’t know what exactly that meant but it was my focus (alongside cricket).

I won an art scholarship from school and went to study in Florence at The Charles H Cecil Studios. Although predominantly a drawing and painting school, it had a small sculpture studio. The building was Raffaello Romanelli’s studio, a leading sculptor of his day (1856–1928). It housed a huge collection of his works in plaster, including an over-life-size equestrian monument and several smaller horse sculptures; all covered in a thick layer of dust and lit from a solitary high window. The sculptures and the whole room were an Aladdin’s cave of inspiration for me and it was here

that I really became focused on sculpture over painting. I was so incredibly lucky to have had the experience of being in Florence, the epicentre of artistic creativity, and where the master sculptors Donatello and Michelangelo lived and worked. It really fuelled my aspirations and still does today. **What drew you to horses in particular? And especially life-sized portraits of them?**

My mother was fanatical about horses. She kept them at home and I was riding at age six on a slightly frenetic Welsh mountain pony called ‘Whiz’. My great-uncle had bred several successful racehorses and ran a small stud for broodmares. When he passed away in 1995 he left his interest to my mother.

Although there were no horses left by this point, my mother decided that she wanted to start breeding racehorses herself, so set about resurrecting the stud. Horses were therefore around me from an early age. I painted a horse called *The Argonaut* for my mother’s birthday one year and it led onto receiving commissions to paint horses for others. I became very interested in the structure of the horse, particularly around the eye. I then wanted to know how they were put together and how their anatomy worked, so I started to sculpt horses and tried to establish the muscle structures and skeleton.

I found sculpting a much clearer way of understanding the whole form. This grew into a fascination with horses and particularly the thoroughbred racehorse. I started to receive

commissions, thanks to some charity auctions and some brave and very kind patrons. The commissions kept coming and in 2010 I was put forward for two competitions. One, to design and sculpt a perpetual trophy for the Derby and the other to sculpt an over-life-size bronze of the four-time Ascot Gold Cup winner, Yeats, for the new parade ring at Ascot. I won both competitions and suddenly I was in at the deep end.

I had an exhibition at The Tryon Gallery in 2008, which had helped enormously in terms of getting my work seen, but these two very public commissions really changed things; particularly sculpting *Yeats*. I spent a lot of time over at Coolmore Stud in Ireland, studying him, observing and sculpting from life. I loved every second of it. Being →



surrounded by champion racehorses and stallions; not only Yeats, but Sadler's Wells, Montjeu, Galileo, High Chaparral. I was absolutely hooked and I loved learning about the differences between each horse and how these traits were passed down the bloodlines. Capturing the difference between champion racehorses became a passion for me.

What has been your favourite commission to date? Or is that like choosing a favourite child?

Choosing my favourite child, at this stage, is very easy, as we have just had our first. Choosing the favourite commission is also very easy. It was *Yeats*. I had always loved watching Yeats run, so to win the commission to sculpt was incredible. To know that it was life-size was even better and to know that its home was going to be the centre of the parade ring at Ascot and that it was going to be unveiled by Queen Elizabeth was beyond all my hopes.

Working on this scale for the first time was a big step, especially for such a public work. It seriously focused my mind and I knew that this sculpture not only carried my career on it, but it also had to capture the greatness of the horse and his unrivalled achievements. I want this to be worthy of his career and those who were involved with the horse. It had to stand the test of time and it had to work in scale from 360 degrees and also stand up to the closest scrutiny. I loved the challenge but felt more excited about it all than nervous. As I was three months into sculpting him, my father passed away, very suddenly. It was deeply traumatic and it really knocked me sideways. Sculpting *Yeats* was my outlet and I put absolutely everything into it. As long as I was sculpting him, I wasn't thinking about anything else. My world was falling apart but this commission was pulling me through it all. It will always be my favourite commission for this reason. It really helped me through a very difficult time.



“I was so incredibly lucky to have these opportunities to have met Queen Elizabeth. I met her on four occasions and I was always completely lost for words.”

Mare & Foal, featuring Queen Elizabeth II, is a well-known landmark at The Rowley Mile Course at Newmarket Racecourse. As you mention, the Queen also unveiled your bronze of *Yeats* at Ascot Racecourse in 2011. Did you get to share some special moments with Her Majesty during her lifetime, given your shared love of horses?

I was so incredibly lucky to have these opportunities to have met Queen Elizabeth. I met her on four occasions and I was always completely lost for words. She must have been very used to this reaction, as her warm smile would make you feel a

little bit more relaxed. Walking across an empty parade ring in front of a packed crowd with her to unveil *Yeats* was a moment I will never forget. She asked whether this was my first big sculpture and that she had heard it was very good, so to relax. It was so kind of her to put me at ease. Her horse Carlton House had just come third in the Derby in a thrilling race, so she was extremely excited about that.

Can you tell us what a typical day at work looks like for you? I normally set myself a target of what I want to achieve the next day the evening before, so that when I arrive at the studio →



I know exactly what I need to do and I won't finish the day until I have achieved it. I take lots of breaks to keep a fresh eye. I put a sign on the door to politely tell people not to disturb me, put on an audiobook (or cricket Test match special, if possible) and sculpt. Studio days make up the bulk of my time, but I'm out looking at horses and sculpting from life in yards as much as possible; I always get better results this way. Other days are spent checking projects as they go through the foundry and are cast into bronze.

What are you working on at the moment?

I am currently working on several pieces. One is by far the largest sculpture, or group of sculptures, I've done. Annoyingly, that's all I can say about it, other than I'm absolutely loving the huge scale and variety of challenges that comes along with a project of this size. I am also sculpting [Irish thoroughbred racehorse] Stradivarius, which I am absolutely thrilled about. He is a particularly interesting subject and I'm thoroughly enjoying sculpting him.

If you could sculpt any racehorse and put it anywhere in the world, which horse would it be and where would you like to see it displayed?

I was so incredibly lucky with Yeats, that will be hard to beat. I would love to do something in London and Newmarket that encapsulated The Queen's love of the racehorse. The thing I love about what I am lucky enough to do is that every champion horse is different. I would love my bronze of Stradivarius to be at Ascot, Goodwood and York but I think that might be asking a lot.

“Erika and I have just had a little boy, Nico; days off will now have a new and exciting meaning. I hope he'll want to help me in the studio when he's old enough.”



IMAGE © ERIKA ROGER

Ascot is a big feature in the UK racing calendar, what are your tips for enjoying the day?

Get there early and soak up the atmosphere before racing and to see the horses in the pre-parade ring. Read about the horses, the trainers and the stories. Ascot is where the owners and trainers are aiming, but each horse has its own route to this big stage.

And finally, how do you like to relax on your days off?

I do a lot of exercise: running and swimming. I have done two

ultramarathons, (the Marathon des Sables in 2014 and 2022). I can get up onto the Wiltshire Downs and the ridgeway from my studio, so I love doing that. I also love travelling; getting away from the studio and changing the scenery really helps me creatively, plus I want to see as much of the world as possible. I also love film and cricket. My girlfriend, Erika, and I have just had a little boy, Nico; days off will now have a new and exciting meaning. I hope he'll want to help me in the studio when he's old enough. ☺

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**Holly Mackie,
Owner and Director**

“The exquisite beauty and personalities of Charlie's horses resonate instantly.

I met Sadler's Wells, Galileo and Montjeu at The Coolmore Stud.

They command attention but in a beautifully dignified and humbling way. It's a privilege to be able to share such exclusive visits and special introductions with our *Dream Escape* clients.”



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