



A FEEL FOR STONE

Fergus Wessel is a talented letter cutter and stone carver, whose impressive work ranges from personal memorial stones to coats of arms for grand institutions. *Lorraine Harrison* and photographer *Laurie Evans* went to visit him at his workshop near Oxford.

FERGUS WESSEL'S love of the solid and tactile quality of stone was evident from an early age. As a child he surreptitiously acquired a screwdriver and hammer and spent many a happy hour producing three-dimensional creations.

His innate feel for the rhythmic and lyrical qualities of lettering doubtless has its roots in the early influence of his mother, Miriam Macgregor. She is a wood engraver and compositor for the Whittington Press, which produces fine limited-edition books. At school Fergus was advised that pottery was a more commercially viable career choice than sculpture and so he studied ceramics at Falmouth, after which he spent six years at the Winchcombe Pottery, throwing pots.

But he could not ignore his early calling and his perseverance won him a much-prized apprenticeship as a letter cutter and stone carver at the Cardozo Kindersley Workshop in Cambridge. After three years' study, he set up on his own in 2003.

Operating from a small but orderly workshop in the Oxfordshire countryside, Fergus works with a range of materials, each carefully chosen for its unique qualities. He favours Welsh slate for complex typographic pieces, finding its smooth surface sympathetic for letter carving. Portland and York stone both feature prominently and he also uses marble. One of Fergus's particular favourites is Hopton Wood limestone, which he uses when a more textured surface is

called for and which was often used by the great sculptors and carvers Eric Gill and Henry Moore.

A large proportion of the commissions Fergus works on are memorials. These can take the shape of headstones set within churchyards, wall plaques, carved stone benches or occasionally an obelisk or monolith. Even to an outside observer these pieces are often rather moving, expressing both a gravitas and sense of celebration simultaneously. The vast majority of commercially produced headstones are standard designs with machine-cut lettering, each varying little from the other. In contrast, an individually commissioned stone aims to express something of the character and essence of the person being



FROM TOP LEFT Precision is the key to the stone carver's working practice, from a needle-sharp pencil point to the skilful sharpening of chisels on the grinding wheel. Fergus draws each character onto the stone freehand, giving the letterforms life and vitality. He employs a wide array of masonry chisels of varying sizes but the technique is the same whether he is cutting a fine serif or a large piece as here.

LEFT Fergus in his well-ordered studio surrounded by some of his commissions, all in various stages of production.

ABOVE Here Fergus is carefully gilding the letters using 24-carat gold leaf. This adds an extra dimension of light and movement to the finished piece. Now complete, this slate plaque is given a final wash down.

remembered and requires a high degree of sensitivity and empathy from its creator.

'A memorial, a commemoration of a person's life, is the most challenging dedication to create,' explains Fergus. 'The words and design need to be precisely balanced, fashioning a stone which is strong, dignified and simple. It must be an eternal testimony, lasting for hundreds of years, while blending in with its surroundings from the moment of placement.' Perhaps not surprisingly, applications for permission to install one of Fergus's striking and beautiful pieces, often fashioned from local stone, are enthusiastically supported by church authorities.

Whatever the job, it is important to Fergus that the client is involved at every stage of the fulfilment of a commission. At the initial meeting, the choice of text, stone, letterforms and final placement are all considered. Some clients know exactly what they want while others are seeking more guidance and input. Fergus is always open to suggestions and happy to advise. 'Some of the nicest jobs are when clients want something unusual,' he says. Once the design has been finalized it is drawn onto the stone and fine adjustments of spacing and arrangement made. As it becomes more apparent what the finished piece will look like, the client can more fully

appreciate aspects such as scale, texture, and the way light falls on to the surface of the stone. 'Clients do like to be involved at this stage,' he agrees. Fergus always sees a project through from conception to installation personally, even when the final piece is destined for foreign shores.

It was while studying in Cambridge that Fergus developed an interest in heraldic carving. He is often asked to produce stone representations of ancient coats of arms for institutions, as well as newly created designs for honoured individuals. These highly decorative works are sometimes embellished with the application

of vivid colour and this considerably enhances their characteristic ornate flourish and verve. These more flamboyant pieces provide a complementary counterpoint to the sober tone of the memorial stones. Fergus has produced commemorative wall plaques, tablets and rolls of honour, and several schools and Oxford colleges rank among his clients. He also undertakes commissions of architectural stone lettering; these are large-scale inscriptions cut *in situ*, often at dazzling heights.

The art of stone carving is at once both physical and meditative, requiring a high degree of disciplined hand-to-

eye coordination. In order to produce typography which is beautifully proportioned, yet retaining vitality and rhythm, a fine balance must be achieved between the careful, precise working of the stone and the lyrical quality of the letterforms. As Fergus explains, 'Hand-cut lettering has the life, energy and versatility of no other technique. The quiet mallet and chisel are infinitely more precise than machine cut lettering as our hands are our finest tools, capable of honing the highest standard of accuracy and detail. The finished piece is therefore personal, flawless and unique.'

Fergus Wessel very much considers himself a craftsman rather than an

artist. 'I like the feeling of being a tradesman,' he says. 'I still use many of the skills I learned as a potter; and the workshop life, the ethos is the same. You don't work for money but for love!' Certainly, he is a young man enthusiastically engaged in keeping alive a traditional craft that stretches back to some of the earliest building techniques and skills, and, due to the enduring nature of stone, the pieces he creates should last far into the future. **BB**

To find out more about Fergus Wessel's Stone Workshop, telephone 07779 294673, e-mail: info@stoneletters.com, or visit Fergus's website: www.stoneletters.com