



SPECIALIST PROFILE

Fergus Wessel, letter cutter

A chance encounter with a sculptor and letter-cutter inspired Fergus Wessel to adopt his art

*'A ship, an isle, a sickle moon -
With few but with how splendid stars
The mirrors of the sea are strewn
Between their silver bars'*

So reads the latest plaque on Fergus Wessel's workshop walls. Taken from the poem *A Ship, an Isle, a Sickle Moon* by James Elroy Flecker, 1921, it is one of several on the theme of sea and sky made by the letter-cutter for *Art in Action* - an exhibition being held from July 13 to 16, in Wheatley, Oxfordshire.

Fergus uses British stone, such as Welsh slate, for his lettering. Around half of his

commissions are memorial tablets and grave-stones (which cost £1,000-10,000, and generally take from three weeks to complete). The remainder comprises opening plaques, architectural lettering, and house signs. He is also a skilled relief carver, and can embellish his work with an incised or raised coat of arms, or other motif.

'Lettering is much harder than carving,' says Fergus. 'It is so disciplined.' But it is not a discipline best served by machine. Instead, it requires the sensitivity of the human eye. For legibility and aesthetics, letters and words are rarely placed at precisely equal distances, and the spacing needs to be adjusted 'by a nothing' to look perfect.

When he left school, Fergus spent two years at University College Falmouth training to be a potter. He was a thrower for six years at a studio that supplied restaurants, but he grew tired of the repetition. At the same time, a sculptor, who also did some lettering, rented a space nearby. 'I used to watch him, and think: "This is good stuff";' says Fergus. After trying his hand at lettering under the sculptor's tuition, Fergus decided to change career, and did a three-year apprenticeship at the renowned Cardozo Kindersley workshop in Cambridge. 'It was very intensive, but an incredible experience,' he says.

Apprentices start by drawing an alphabet on slate, then, very slowly carving out a single letter at a time. Each one has to be perfect, even if it takes weeks. Once it is complete, they work on the workshop's commissions. In Fergus's case, this included a 25-metre-long carving for Churchill College, Cambridge, executed *in situ*; a plaque for the Gilbert Collection at Somerset House; and a 216-word inscription on the restored gravestone of essayist William Hazlitt, in St Anne's churchyard, Soho.

He was asked to stay on, which he says, 'was quite an honour', but decided to set up his own business as his wife, Hannah, was pregnant, and he wished to be able to work from home in Oxfordshire. They now have two children, both under four years old. Fergus's workshop provides a peaceful foil to frenetic family life.

Lettering requires few tools: 'All you need is a commission, a piece of stone, a chisel and a mallet, and you just get on with it,' he explains. The simplicity and sense of tradition appeal to him. 'It is the same technique that has been used for thousands of years, and that gives you a great feeling of responsibility.' Although the work 'has an amazing rhythm, and is hugely satisfying', Fergus admits his goal is to produce a flawless piece of work: 'Every time I start, I think: this one is going to be perfect.' **JENNIFER GOULDING**
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