

Martin Gwilliams
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Shall I carve... ?

Do you remember the last time you learnt something new? I don't mean facts and figures, I mean a new language, hobby or skills for your job, something which took time to grasp and perfect, maybe you're still on the road to doing whatever it is. This month I have been getting to grips with the art of stone carving. The last time I carved stone in this way was just over four years ago as part of my diploma at college.

Some say stone carving is more forgiving than stonemasonry, as the curves and ripples of the carving don't need to be as exacting as the mitre or arris on a hoodmould, for example. But the carver must still aim for perfection!

The process for carving started with the construction of a clay maquette/model of the thing I would be carving. In this case it's a series of croquettes which adorn the finial, the piece of masonry which tops each pinnacle on the parapet of the north ambulatory. The design for the 'foliage' is referred to as a poppyhead, they can be seen (with a good pair of binoculars) adorning the copious amounts of pinnacles which top the parapets around roof line of the Cathedral.



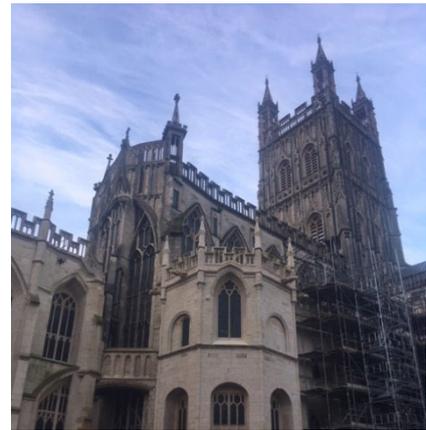
I began with a piece of board on which I drew the outline of my croquette. Then taking a handful of clay I started to build up the mass of the croquette until it reached my desired height, around 35mm. I built it up by taking small pieces of clay between thumb and forefinger and laying them first on the board, then in layers until the right height was achieved. Then using a series of modelling tools, I started to take away small sections of the clay. Then the shaping began. I carefully replicated the curves and ripples of the foliage - leaves and veins, until I had the desired contours and design. The making of the model gave me the chance to feel and see the shape I would be aiming for when it came to carving.



Before carving the foliage on the finial which I completed a few weeks ago, I made a couple of quarter sections of the finials on which I could practice; I'm glad I did! As the foliage and design for each croquette is symmetrical, there is a meticulous discipline that is required for carving. After a portion is carved on the left-hand side, then the same section on the right-hand side is then carved, continually referring to the clay model as I guide for shape and dimensions. This back and forth continues until the carving is complete. My first practice piece isn't beautiful or perfect, however, it has taught me a lot about how I need to approach the final piece. I'll produce one more practice before carving the final finial in the New Year.

Unwrapped

At the end of last month, following the near completion of the north ambulatory project, the scaffolding shrouding several bays were taken down to reveal the restored elevations of the ambulatory and apsidal chapel. If you need a gentle walk after the excesses of Christmas dinner, talk a walk on the north side and come and see the splendid new set of gargoyles, restored parapet, topped with beautiful new pinnacles. Also look out for my corbel, hood mould and other contributions to the project (do bring binoculars, if you have them). The section of remaining scaffold with stay in place for the next project as it will help give us access to the exterior of the north transept and north aisle, the focus for the next couple of years.



Christmas letters



Over this last weekend I have managed to get back to my first love – letter carving. I carved the alphabet in a series of cannily cropped letters, showing (hopefully) enough of each to work out what it is. They are also in order in this instance so that helps. I'm interested in exploring how much of a letter (or word) needs to be seen in order for it to be readable and legible. It's something that I remember exploring at design college years ago, but I'm now interested in how it works in the medium of stone. The piece needs a little tidying to finish it off, however, see what you think.

Merry Christmas!