

Martin Gwilliams
Progress update September 2021

Away Days

Refreshed from my holiday in August, I was ready to go in September. The month included a day of demonstrating letter carving; a week in York with CWF to start a new module; the month ended with two days in Lincoln for further CWF study sessions. Oh, and in between I have been on site repointing the miles and miles of joints around the north transept.

At the beginning of the month, we welcomed three new apprentices to the workshop at Gloucester. It has been a nice gentle start for them as we have all been out onsite on the scaffold around the north and west faces of the north transept repointing. Having them alongside to chat to, getting to know them, and of course passing on little tricks and techniques regarding the fine and enjoyable art of pointing has made the task even more pleasurable. They have brought a lovely, lively energy to the place.



Northleach



On Heritage Weekend in the middle of this month I headed to the Old Prison at Northleach to The Friends of the Cotswolds first Heritage Craft Fair. I was there to demonstrate and let people (adults and children) have a go at letter carving. It was a bright sunny Saturday, the perfect day to be outdoors and the setting in the grounds of the Old Prison were ideal for the Fair. The doors open around 10am and from then until around 3.30 in the afternoon I had a steady stream of people coming along to my stall

and having go. I guided each person through the basics of carving a letter, talking to some of them about being an apprentice stonemason at the Gloucester Cathedral and all sorts of things related to stone: What do I do if I knock a bit off? What type of stone do we use? How did I get into it? This last question being key to how it all began for me, with a three-day letter carving course back in 2013. I chose to do letter carving at the Craft Fair as it gave people a chance to have go, rather than simply watching me do some carving or masonry. It is so simple to do, even I can do it! And just maybe, I hoped that I might inspire someone during this day to take it up as a career, or at least a hobby. People I spoke to during the day were pleased to know that people like me were still doing traditional crafts. A real highlight for me was seeing the faces and expressions on people's faces as they managed to carve something resembling their initials. It was a very enjoyable day and a great experience for me, something I am keen to do more often.

York

On the Monday of the following week, I headed to York to start the Historic Ornamental Carving module for my CWF Foundation Degree.

September was the beginning of my sixth year of doing stonemasonry, and in this time I have carved stone three times. Although masonry skills and techniques can be used to make pieces, carving also offers, and involves a whole lot of other skills. Leading up the week I found myself not wanting to enjoy the carving session that were planned, as the potential to discover that it opens a whole new lot of possibilities within the stonemasonry world felt like it

would leave me feeling sad and disappointed that I had not done more of it sooner. Perverse, I know, but that's how my brain was working. However, there was still something inside me that also knew that it could add another dimension to what I can do in future.



However, the carving sessions were out of this world. After the first full day of carving, I went back to my hotel room on a massive high. I could have stayed carving all night; it really was very addictive and hard to stop at the end of the day. A contributing factor was that all 11 of us CWFers were working in the same courtyard so we could see each other's work, share tips and tricks and generally encourage each other and enjoying each other's company; also the sun was shining down on us, which helped.

Our task is to carve the head of a Fawn in stone. It is around A5 size, with a depth of around 150mm. The facial features

which have high and low points across seemingly short spaces, as well as rippling hair are all part of the challenge. I began by using my masonry skills to remove large areas of waste. Then I moved onto blocking out various surfaces and features. One of the brilliant tools we had was a piece of card, which is arch-like. It helped us to measure various heights and depths that are key to starting the process, finding the contours of the face. Marking on the high spots I could then, with a certain confidence, carve and peel away the stone that wasn't needed. With some other top tips from our tutors, in particular learning how to use callipers and other measuring devices, along with some tutoring on carving I was able to begin and get some way to making the stone resemble a face. Another top tip is to regularly stand and back and look at the carving from various angles, to really study the contours of the face. At one stage it resembled Tutankhamun's death mask, but by the end of the of the couple of hours we spent on them on the Friday morning mine was starting to take shape. Hopefully by November it will look more like the maquette.



Over the following few days, I found myself surreptitiously studying the faces of fellow CWFers, and occasionally since, members of the public. I am really beginning to see how fascinating the human face is. I looked more carefully at eyes, cheeks, chins, noses, hair, seeing how the contours work together. The carving has given me a boost and has opened my eyes to the possibilities of what I can now do and add to projects I have in mind.

During the week we had some time to enjoy the architecture of the Minster. All sorts of lovely decorative carvings caught my eye, but in particular were those above each seat in The Chapter House. They are truly exquisite and captivating, conical-like forms, with foliage and creatures wrapping around each one, delicately pierced and undercut. I'll think I'll carve one of these next! They are truly breath taking, adding another dimension to an already incredible room.

Lincoln

At the beginning of the last week of September, I spent twenty-three and a half hours in Lincoln, spread over Monday and Tuesday. There was the chance to meet the next cohort of CWFers, to share with them our experiences, and hopefully encourage them. But the best bit was seeing and touring the Cathedral.

Lincoln has special place in my heart as it is where my journey into stonemasonry began in 2013. Back then I spent three days there on a letter carving course. I was instantly hooked. I had the same sort of feeling back then as I did after the couple of days of carving in York - a massive high. One of the things that grabbed my back in 2013 was the beautiful carvings on the columns and arch at the west end door, which are wonderfully illuminated with beakheads, diapers, chevrons and all sorts of other marvellous things.



Arriving in Lincoln late on Monday afternoon, after dropping my bags of at my hotel for the night I headed for the Cathedral. The late afternoon sun was doing a spectacular job of lighting the west front; it looked as good as ever! The next day we were fortunate to have tour of the Cathedral, which included going right to the top of the main tower, and also taking in views inside from the triforium and west end gallery. I had forgotten how wonderful the inside of the Cathedral is. Sitting in a seat at the east end of the Cathedral, looking at and admiring the massive technicolour stained-glass window felt a little like starring at the super wide-screen, HD TV as the colour is so vivid. However, the real highlight of our tours for me was being able to get up-close with the beakheads, thanks to a special tour we had of the scaffold currently in place at the west end. I think an entrance like that a Maison Gwilliams will be perfect. Time for me to get carving... !