



ROCK OF AGES

In a set of converted farm buildings in the Vale of York, a family firm of stonemasons is carving a future from an ancient craft

Words Hazel Dolan | Photographs Jeremy Phillips



Director Robin Winterton began his career in stonemasonry with a four-year apprenticeship at York Minster. He founded The Stone Fireplace Company 15 years ago

Sunlight floods into the vast barn of a building just north of York that is home to The Stone Fireplace Company. Its brick walls are lightly blurred by a fine covering of stone dust, and each ‘banker’ or bench is set up with work in progress, such as part-carved friezes and frames, while at the back of the space is a U-shaped bench with a single finished piece, laid out and ready for despatch.

For the past 12 years stonemason Robin Winterton has worked from this row of arches, turning out a steady flow of handsome limestone and sandstone fireplaces and carved stonework, alongside his brother-in-law, James Robinson. The big news is their new apprentice. After five years and a series of swift promotions in retail, Rosie – the youngest of Robin’s three children – has joined the team. It’s a surprise and a delight. He hadn’t anticipated her career switch and he’s still slightly bemused by it.

Two weeks in, mallet in hand, she is ‘flattening off’ an early, pre-college apprentice piece, steadily chipping away at a block of stone. Next a chamfer, and then a scotia, a smooth concave curve. The backdrop to conversation is the bright percussive chink of her mallet on chisel on stone. He pauses to listen. ‘That sounds OK,’ says Robin. ‘It’s a bit like with a golf ball – you can tell when you’ve hit it right because of the sound.’

Though trained at York Minster, Robin himself isn’t from a long line of cathedral stonemasons. ‘That would sound very romantic, wouldn’t it?’ he says, ‘but no.’ His mother wanted him to go to art college but he was keen to buy a motorbike and wanted to start earning. He applied for five apprenticeships – everything from printing to joinery – but his mum thought stonemasonry sounded like the most artistic option. After the first morning, with his hands covered in blisters, he wasn’t planning on going back.

‘My Mum said: “Why don’t you just go back until the end of the week?”. Anyway, I went back in the afternoon and they saw my hands, so they took me out onto the cathedral and the scaffolds and found something else for me to do. That was it, I just carried on, and I don’t think I ever thought, once I had trained, that I would do anything else.’

In a career that spans four decades, he went on to Beverley Minster, Salisbury Cathedral, and castle restoration for English Heritage, before branching out on his own, testing the fireplace market at a few interiors shows. Guiding a chisel, taking the two dimensional to three, is second nature to him.

Stonemasons past would recognise the many techniques, and perhaps envy the tools: nylon mallets and tungsten carbide-tipped chisels. ‘When I ➤



Right: Each fireplace design has to be balanced and symmetrical so the same motifs are reversed and repeated on each side
Below: For fine detail, Robin reaches for his trusted tools: a small carving hammer and the slimmest of tungsten carbide-tipped hammer-headed chisels



started I had a wooden mallet,' says Robin. 'Then one of the lads I worked with, slightly older than me, turned up with this nylon mallet – the other guys thought this was witchcraft. Everyone uses one now, however.'

'I wouldn't leave mine on site because I know I wouldn't be able to replace it,' he adds. 'I have been using it for 40-odd years. All the chisels come and go but the mallet is the only thing that is constant. I would know blindfolded that it was mine.'

Commissioning a fireplace is a rare chance to create something both practical and artistic. There's a beauty in the proportions of Robin's, a delicacy in decoration, whether botany, mythology or random inspiration. Each one is different and site specific, whether destined for castle, manor house or private home. He encourages his customers to engage in the whole process and visit the workshop. 'A lot of people think that stone is a really hard material, whereas it's quite workable, really,' he points out. 'We work on about eight different types of stone and they've all got their own characteristics. There are certain things you can achieve with each. You can make the same design with all of them, but they all have a different feel to them when they are finished. Sandstone gives more of a rustic look, limestone, more formal. Some are easier to work than others: sandstone is very abrasive, so you are constantly sharpening your chisels, whereas

limestone is totally different: you don't need to sharpen your chisels at all, you just keep working.'

His own favourite is Ancaster, a Lincolnshire limestone, popular with customers. Tadcaster, the priciest, is used in the restoration of York Minster, and many like the link with the city. Portland has lots of shells within it, and Weatherbed Blue and Buff are used more for hearths as a contrast. Then there are the sandstones: earthy Dunhouse, Blackster – which has more markings, and grey Woodkirk.

'You just have to be practical and use stones you know are going to be consistent and workable,' he says. 'There is a lot of imported stone coming in, and the quality is absolutely great. We haven't used it yet, but we will source whatever the customer wants. There is no point in us offering a bespoke service, and then saying you have got to have this type of stone or that.'

Each piece starts with a blank, flat surface, and pencil and steel square to mark out a rough frame. Within that, he draws a moulding's form or, following a template, a more elaborate frieze or relief. Subsequently, every movement of the mason's chisel will be to cut away and gradually reveal and refine its shape.

The nature of the work is both instinctive and absorbing. 'The piece you are carving hasn't seen daylight for millions of years, which is a very strange thought,' he says. Touch is key. 'James ➤





Above: The reverse side of the template is covered with charcoal so that the design can be traced onto the stone surface
Left: Work in progress is lined out on 'banker' workbenches. Stone off-cuts are kept to use in smaller carved projects, including house nameplates. Stonemasonry is dusty work so a well-ventilated space is essential, making the cavernous interior of the former farm buildings ideal. To the side of the workshop, a staircase leads up to the former hayloft, which now serves as a studio and showroom for the business
Right: Robin follows the lines of the intricate Celtic pattern in pencil to transfer the design to the stone. In time it becomes second nature to pick up exactly the right sized chisel and set it at the precise angle needed



Top right: Going over the faint charcoal lines in pencil gives a clearer outline for Robin to then follow with his chisel
Top middle: The size and angle of the chisel are key to cutting away exactly the right amount of stone to free the shape
Above: When possible, Robin will move his workbench out into the open yard so that he can take full advantage of the natural light. The bench can be used to lift, support and hold firm each piece of stone as it is being worked on



From top: The showroom displays a wide range of designs, and customers who might prefer to buy a ready-made piece can buy from the finished selection; mallet-headed and hammer-headed chisels are essential items in a stonemason's kit; Robin with daughter Rosie, who recently started her apprenticeship as a stonemason; the carved relief work on this fireplace took a week to complete

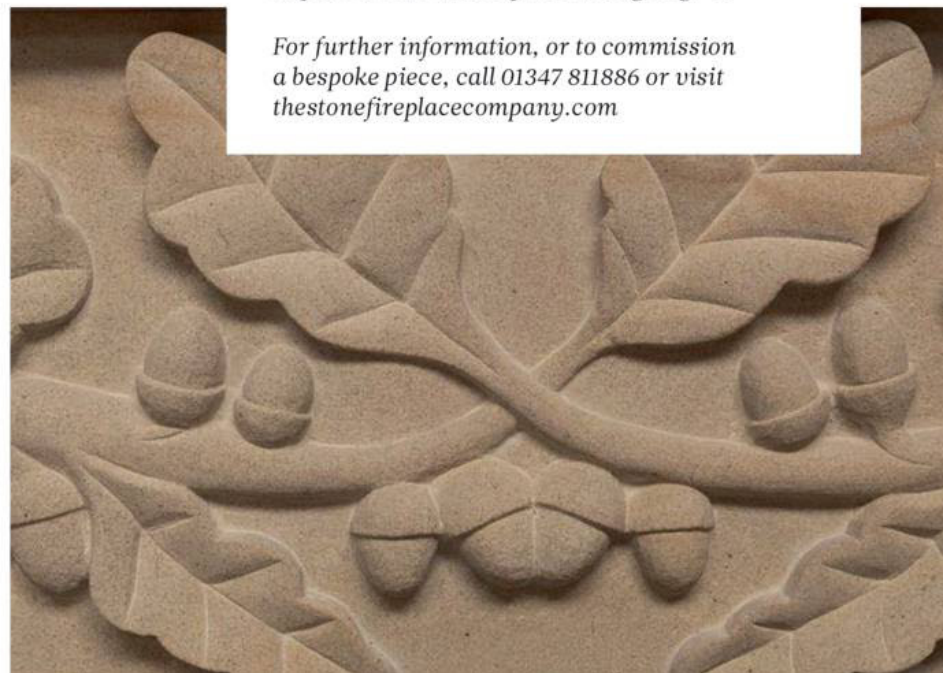


says he can't work without gloves on, but I don't feel you get a proper sense of it. You need to hold a chisel and I feel you have more control over it without gloves. I've told Rosie I don't want her wearing them when she's working, and they don't wear them at the college either.'

Each piece of work is finished with a series of ever-finer rubbing pads, erasing chisel marks. Although Robin says there is a market for an aged or distressed finish, he is never asked to keep these signs of workmanship.

Rosie's future is to learn how to shape stone as Robin does. He hopes her retail background will take their marketing to a new level, but the heart of their business will remain the same: traditional craftsmanship and the commitment to make beautiful bespoke pieces well.

'I think people like the personal interaction and they also like to see their piece being made,' he says. 'My customers like the idea of me standing there, carving and making. They don't want to think of it being done on a machine. I think there will always be a place for stonemasons. It is important that we keep the trade going.'



For further information, or to commission a bespoke piece, call 01347 811886 or visit thestonefireplacecompany.com