

Carving history

From a workshop at the foot of York Minster, where all manner of cheeky gargoyles are created, mason carver Tim Foster downs chisel and tells Abi Bliss what it's like to make something that will last 600 years

York is quite a rich area for work as a result of its heritage and wealth of historic buildings. In Europe, everything's state-sponsored, so their cathedrals tend to be in better condition and they won't let you touch them with a bargepole.

I'm very fortunate in this workshop because I'll be able to see my work in context for the rest of my life. In previous jobs that I've had, you carve something but you never see it again because it gets shipped off to America or Dubai.

Although each job is done as an individual piece, each has to fit to the next—it's like a big Lego kit, really.

History is embroiled in the work, but you don't necessarily think about it all the time. It's the representations that smack you in the face. Looking at the carvings the medieval workers produced, with what they had, makes me wonder what their world was like. Why did they carve that particular depiction? What drove them? Were they religiously motivated or just craftsmen with as much cynicism and realism as me now?

People often say of a piece: "Is that your ex-boss?" I'm staying shtum about that! But there are caricatures people have done of the foremen and previous bosses here.

My favourite carving is inside the Chapter House. There are lots in there and because they're inside, they've survived very well over time. We can use them to capture the style for the ones we're restoring now.

There has been a move to replace less and less, as the people in charge take decisions that are increasingly conservation-based. They'll try and save more of the original but sometimes the practicalities seem to go out of the window—a conservationist will make a decision on something that's more appropriate to the inside of a museum than outside a building.

The cathedral was quite black at one point. Cleaning it has probably caused damage because the limestone takes on a coating and becomes very crusty on top. When you break that away, it becomes exposed and the process of wearing away starts all over again.

Stone has a natural lifespan. That's what we say to people—the building is as original as it can be. We believe what we do is more in keeping with the original than trying to save it for ever and a day until it turns to dust. Perpetuating the craft is more important than trying to sell a glorious ruin to people.

The most difficult part about my job is convincing my wife that it's all worthwhile. With four children, it can be a struggle. But I couldn't just sit in front of a computer all day; that would really drive me mad.



Set in stone

Tim Foster and his colleagues are currently working on the restoration of the Minster's East Front, a project that will need £23 million to complete. Help the cause and secure your place in history at the same time by sponsoring a stone. For £600, your initials will be written in indelible ink on one of the replacement stones. Visit yorkminster.org for details.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL POWELL

"I do not make mistakes. I am always asked: **'What happens if you knock a bit off right at the end?'** Well, when carving ornamental work, you can hide it. With large pieces of masonry, it's harder. By the time a job finishes, you're taking millimetres off—not smacking it with a huge hammer."