

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF



Bernard Johnson talks about the training he has received to help him become a stone carver after 25 years as a sales director

Bernard Johnson stone carver

I have changed careers. For 25 years I was a sales director at the Oxford University Press. Now I'm a self-employed stone carver and letter cutter. I work in limestone and slate, making garden ornaments, plaques, and memorials.

I'd long nurtured a *dilettante* interest in stonework. But it never occurred to me that this could become my occupation. The turning point was in 2000 when my wife persuaded (and paid for!) me to attend a stone-carving course on the Isle of Portland. I was hooked. I loved the material and the process – at once both destructive and constructive. Carving became a hobby and developed as I acquired tools – including some from a retired stonemason who had carved many of the gargoyles that grace Oxford colleges.

When the OUP offered me redundancy in 2003 I seized the chance to enrol on a course at City of Bath College for three years. I learned how to cut stone accurately to within one millimetre and how to set out work such as ball finials and tracery. I also attended several creative courses on calligraphy and letter cutting. So I was thrilled when, last year, I received a Queen Elizabeth Scholarship Trust (QEST) award for further training.

Most days involve a combination of planning, design, making and administration. Commissions begin as enquiries, so I often spend the morning drafting sketches, estimating costs and getting back to people. Once I get the go-ahead for a job, I produce scale drawings for approval and ask for a deposit to cover the cost of the initial work and the stone.

I am usually itching to get carving, so I drive out to my studio

as soon as I can. Generally I have a few jobs on the go but I nearly always have some letters to carve. These have to be done with great care. Design is critical and I'm continuing to learn and improve. The QEST award is currently funding tuition with Ieuan Rees, a master craftsman in Wales. I am conscious of putting his advice into practice every day.

I'm continuing to benefit from the training I received at Bath. The course was technical and funded by the Construction Industry Training Board. My tutor Sean Hepburn constantly stressed accuracy in drawing and execution, together with the use of templates to produce detail such as mouldings. Although I am not producing work for building or restoration, every day I make use some of these skills to make items such as bird baths, sundials and benches.

In the afternoon, visitors often drop by. My studio is at Claydon House, the National Trust property near Buckingham. Having an open studio is good for marketing. I can manage to get on despite the odd interruption – usually to ask what I do if I make a mistake. Answer: live with it or start again!

At 5pm I sweep up. I like to keep the place tidy. I will get supper on the way home if it's my turn to cook. After supper I'll check emails and keep my progress sheet up to date. And if there's time, I'll update my website www.bernard-johnson.co.uk ■

Further information on QEST is available at www.qest.org.uk

QEST Scholarships are open to men and women of all ages and are worth up to £15,000 each for further training and work experience.