

# Where Job Satisfaction is Hewn From Stone

*Maurice Colbeck meets the band of men and women whose ancient skills keep one of Yorkshire's greatest treasures up to scratch*

**M**ick Thompson, a mason at the York Minster Stone Yard, was unavailable for interview when I first called to see him.

Reason: he was pouring boiling lead for fitting arch stones, each weighing about a hundredweight, over the Minster's West Door. I didn't argue – this was clearly no time to bother a man with silly questions.

Mick is not always working at ground level. He's quite often occupied at the very top of the towering structure. The height doesn't worry him – he has every faith in the Minster scaffolding: "You could drive a car on it!" he assured me. One of his great satisfactions is that his work on the Minster will be there for his children to see long after he has dressed his last piece of pale gold stone which today costs about £100 a ton.

Stephen Mills, clerk of works at the Stone Yard, had urged me to talk to Mick Thompson, partly because of his long service – two spells, totalling more than 20 years.

## COFFEE

You enter the Stone Yard passing great blocks of stone which might make any carver's fingers itch with anticipation, then climb stairs to the adjacent offices, where everyone you meet seems to offer you a cup of tea or coffee. They're a friendly lot at the Stone Yard, who make it hard to avoid using the word "family".

Perhaps working on a great, centuries-old cathedral like York Minster tends to become a way of life, which binds the staff together and makes their calling more than just a means to a wage packet. "You become very

attached to the place, and think about it a lot," says Stephen. Certainly he has a fatherly feeling for his team. It was he who told me about Mick Thompson's apparently instinctive ability (though not visibly a Samson) to move large weights of stone with apparently little effort. Maybe this gift runs in the family, for Mick's father was a monumental mason, as were his grandfather and his great-grandfather.

## HAZARDS

Mick must have strong nerves, especially when pouring molten lead, though he takes such hazards as calmly as he takes great heights. "We wear protective clothing, including goggles and a face-mask," he explained, "and we make sure there's no combustible material or damp patches around, because that can make hot lead spit and fly about." Accidents are rare.

Stone workers at the yard are divided into masons and carvers, though there are many other tradesmen – painters, for instance, such as Keith Littlewood, who followed his father as a Minster employee. Pay for both masons and carvers is the same, and while their main tasks are basically different, at points they overlap. Any sign of artistic ability is warmly encouraged. "But all carvers," Stephen emphasised, "are first of all good masons."

**Mason Mick Thompson working on the Minster's West Door arch, using pale gold stone which costs £100 per ton**

*Simon Warner*