

Broadly speaking, the mason in his work follows a template, or pattern, and leaves a 'mark', used by him alone, on his finished task. The carver, however, 'signs' his work with whatever embellishments his creative instinct inspires him to add to the waiting stone.

Applicants for work in the yard can be art school graduates or, occasionally perhaps, middle-aged men who have discovered a latent leaning to the work. Nor are the newcomers all male.

Two female apprentices, Emma Dexter and Katie Worthington, may be found, chisel in hand, thoroughly enjoying their tasks – just as Stephen Mills obviously enjoys his own supervisory role. "Those two young ladies are already making a valuable contribution to the work we're doing on the Minster's West Front," he said.

Nothing, some say, reflects a man's personality more faithfully than his work-place.

In all, 50 staff, mostly full-time, work at the Stone Yard, comprising one of the biggest ecclesiastical labour forces in the country. "Probably Lincoln is next to us," says Stephen, "but their figure includes their glaziers, whereas our glass is dealt with by the York Glaziers' Trust next door."

The Minster's glass has been described as "the world gallery of a great European art", but visitors also show much interest in the stonework, which may be one reason why the old name for the Stone Yard survives. Most of the stone – moderately hard magnesium limestone – comes from Cadeby quarry, near Doncaster, said Stephen. "It varies, even from the one quarry. Some stone rings like a bell when you hit it, and very quickly wears out the mason's tools, but from the same scene you can get reasonably softer stone.

WINDIEST

"Inside the Minster, even the softer stones can last basically for ever, but the area we're working on now, the West Front, is probably the windiest we have to deal with. How long the stone will last largely depends on where it is going to be fixed, and also on how detailed the carving is."

Stephen describes his own job as "a terrific challenge. No two days are the same. On the one hand I'm dealing with craftsmen and women, on the other with deans and canons,

Stephen's office is immaculate but revealing. Unmistakably modern, with a digital camera which magically reveals all possible aspects of York Minster at the touch of a button, it also contains a three-dimensional 'library' of plaster casts from beautifully carved copies of Minster statuary by artist Rory Young. These provide detailed specimens of the Minsters' marvellously varied stonework.

Stephen's brief is a wide one – "to oversee work on the cathedral and surrounding properties". While the Stone Yard is the hub of his working life, its name nowadays is rather a misnomer, since besides 11 masons and 10 carvers, so many other trades are involved: plumbers, scaffolders, joiners ... and these workers also look after the canons' houses, the deanery, the Minster School, the library and other properties.

the surveyor of the fabric and the bursar – a huge mix of people!" He "spends more time on the Minster than in it" and tries to get aloft to the scaffold very regularly, as well as visiting the workshops and drawing office.

"Here we have one of the largest groups of highly skilled people in the country. John David is our draughtsman and setter-out, performing an ancient and skilled craft. He takes measurements from the buildings and makes full scale-drawings and templates, often very big and complex, for the masons to use. These are difficult skills to keep!"

FAVOURITE

Stephen said he found some areas of the Minster very special: one was the Zouche Chapel, another the Chapter House. As for the Minster itself: "Early mornings in spring when the sun is streaming through the windows is a favourite time for me, as is late evening in summer when the sun is shining through the West Window."

But perhaps the experience he most remembers took place late one November day when he was working at the Triforium Arch level and the cathedral was dark and empty, except for the choir rehearsing for the Christmas service of Nine Lessons and Carols. "The effect was unbelievable," he said. "It made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up!"

