

A career set in stone

After being involved in restoration work on St Paul's Cathedral and 11 Downing Street, London-based stonemason Katie Worthington became self-employed.

Kate Fleming talks to Katie about her work in stone.

Stonemasonry is an ancient art with surviving examples of work that date back to prehistoric times. Katie Worthington became interested in this age-old profession because of her lifelong love of historic buildings and visits to graveyards.

Following her A-Levels, Katie completed an Art Foundation course at Hertfordshire University and it was during this course that she was first drawn to stonecarving. "I was intrigued by artists who carved breezeblocks, so I thought I'd give it a try myself and found that I really enjoyed it - I did 12 pieces [of carved breezeblocks] towards my Art Foundation." Her burgeoning interest in this medium was encouraged by a tutor who "pinpointed my talent for stonecarving from my work on breezeblocks."

Katie then went on to study a two-year course at Advanced Diploma NVQ Level 3 in Architectural Stonecarving, Masonry and Letter Cutting at Weymouth College and obtained a distinction.

Her first job upon completing the NVQ was as an apprentice at York Minster, where she remained working for two years and during this time she was able to concentrate on carving, which furthered her experience for future jobs. Upon leaving York Minster, she was then involved in the Great West Door Millennium Project. This was mainly restoration work, although she was also selected to make a plaque to commemorate the project.

Katie's portable skills and expertise have meant that the world is her oyster and during a nine-month trip to Australia she was able to spend three months working on St Andrew's Cathedral in Sydney. When she returned to the UK, she then moved to London where, for six months, she was part of a team restoring Wellington Arch. In recent years Katie has worked on many notable addresses such as 11 Downing Street, the Palace of Westminster and St Paul's Cathedral. But her proudest achievement, and one which she refers to as her "most prestigious architectural carving to date," is carving half a Corinthian Capital at St Paul's Cathedral.

In 2004 Katie decided to become self-employed: "You need that level of flexibility to get private commissions," she explains, "and on private commissions you get to speak to the client. This is more personal and means you can use their ideas. Another advantage," says Katie, "is that, in general, building restoration projects are 'prescriptive'; you



are attempting to restore what was there previously by looking at carvings near to the bit you are restoring - there is no room for interpretation." Nevertheless, being self-employed can have its downsides, as she explains: "You have to manage yourself and if anything goes wrong you are held personally responsible."

Katie cites Michelangelo as a major source of inspiration, and quotes Longfellow as her guiding philosophy: "Think not, because no man sees, such things will remain unseen." And her passion for stonecarving is apparent: "I love being creative and making things. I also get to see things that the public wouldn't normally have access to, for example, I have walked on the outside of the Houses of Parliament! To be a successful stonecarver, however, you need to overcome vertigo and be prepared to work at great heights, as well as in cramped conditions."

The appeal of creating a lasting legacy is obvious, and if you're considering a career as a stonemason, Katie offers the following advice: "A fascination with history and architecture are essential, as is having creativity." She also advises that taking a reputable stonecarving course is "crucial" and reassuringly, she confirms that there are: "lots of opportunities in restoring buildings."

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