



Four of the models whose heads decorate the roof of the Chapter House at Westminster Abbey, in central London: from the left, Barry Stow, Kate Sanders, Marcus Beale - all architects involved in the project - and Martin O'Connor, a sculptor and site manager
 KATE NORTHINGTON/CLARE KENDALL

English Heritage shows how to get a head at the abbey

Purists angered by quango's choice of models for restored stonework at Westminster Abbey

By Paul Signell

Inscrutable and emotionless, the stony visages will scrutinise the shuffling of prime ministers and the passing of monarchs for generations to come. Immortalised in Chilmington stone, the great heads adorning the top of Westminster Abbey in London are timeless reminders of, well, building surveyors, bureaucrats - oh, and the boss of a scaffolding firm.

Thirty-two stone-carved heads were unveiled last month as work approached completion on a £3m restoration project at Westminster Abbey's historic Chapter House.

But years of traffic pollution, smoke from Battersea power station and weather erosion had left much of the building in need of repair, including many of the heads and gargoyles, some of which were unstable and in danger of falling on the public below. A new collection of heads and gargoyles was commissioned to replace the weathered Victorian ones, and a select few bureaucrats involved in the project have enjoyed the privilege of having their contribution to the project carved in stone.

A list obtained by the IoS reveals that carvings adorning the abbey include those of eight directors and managers from English Heritage, seven employees of Nimbus Conservation, which led the project, two from the firm managing the project, the boss of a scaffolding company and eight members of the abbey staff.

Will Hurst, news editor of the architects' weekly Building Design, said: "It is hard to understand how English Heritage apparently saw fit to award itself such an honour. In contrast to the original gargoyles, this exercise seems humourless, unimaginative and indulgent."

Critics argue that the faces, paid for by the taxpayer - for less than 1 per cent of the £3m budget, accord-



ing to English Heritage - should have been open to a wider audience.

Matthew Elliott of the TaxPayers' Alliance said: "It is rather odd this project ended up immortalising bureaucrats in one of the nation's most important buildings. The workers who did the renovation and the taxpayers who funded it seem to have been almost entirely left out. Perhaps this will function as a historic warning to future generations about the dangers of letting quangos get too pleased with themselves."

Manjit Pbrill, the director of Nimbus Conservation, whose face adorns one of the pinnacles, said: "Between us, the architects and English Heritage we drew up a list of preferred people and made the numbers up to about 32. We then we offered people the chance to have a portrait carved of them. Some people declined and some accepted. Then there is a certain number from English Heritage."

English Heritage insisted that those commemorated in stone had played a significant role in the project: "The new heads are portraits of people involved in the repair and conservation project. This practice harks back to medieval traditions of representing real people, whether as portraits or caricatures, alongside the angels and demons."

"While the masons, scaffolders, engineers and architects are heavily represented - they account for half of the new heads - we followed the medieval practice in representing members of the clergy at Westminster Abbey and of the team who commissioned, planned and ran the project."



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