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In Conversation with Stone

Words - Jennifer Tetlow



We've been communicating throughout the journey, eyeing each other in the rear-view mirror – imagining, shaping, deciding, un-deciding and re-forming. Now, unloaded at my workshop, the stone block sits with me in silence. Expeditions to the quarry have always filled me with excitement and anticipation – the search for the right stone amidst towering walls of rock, solid terraces of potential, or from steps that reveal twists, curves and strata where the stone formation is laid bare, raw and natural.

In my early days of working stone, thinking it would be a good way to learn, I worked part-time in a quarry. Each quarry is different – this one was West Riding stone, mostly laid in beds of three and four inches – and my job was to rive stones from the quarry bottom, shape, then haul them to the surface. It was physical and brutal work. I used a large crow-bar to prize the stone slab intact from its lying place then 'walked' it to a work area where, with pitch-nicker

and hammer, it would be shaped true and square, made suitable for flagstone or roof-tile. The pristine surface of the stone gleamed wet and an intoxicating sweet, earthy smell rose from mineral opened up to the air for the first time in millions of years. Smitten by the colours, patterns and textures, I spent far too long marvelling at the freshly revealed stone faces. Pay at the quarry was piece-rate, (calculated by how many square yards of flagstones were completed) and my first week's wage was pitiful.

Now, in my workshop, the relationship grows. This is fine-grained sandstone; it is a 'freestone', which means it can be cut or carved in any direction as it is not significantly 'bedded'. (Beds are the laminations and layered structure of sedimentary rock.) The stone is a buff grey with black speckles, flecks of coal; a carboniferous-seam sandstone, the story of its formation told in the journey of its many grains.

The carboniferous is a period that spans some 60 million years, from the end of the Devonian period about 350 million years ago, to the beginning of the Permian period. Life on earth was well established, lower sea levels promoted the growth of lush swamps and vast forests, later to become coal beds. In the middle of the period there was huge climate change which caused marine and land extinctions, followed by glaciation and mountain building as



continents collided. In all this movement and turbulence, grains, sediment and particles were transported by ferocious winds, glaciers and water until finally they were deposited in layers on the bottom of the sea, rivers and lakes. Over time, and with the action of extraordinary pressure, these particles compressed to form sedimentary stone.

I make the first strike. The chisel cuts into the stone, a primeval connection to the fabric of everything, to the heart of earth. The Inka knew this, they regarded stones as animate, sentient and sacred – building with stone ordered the chaos of unordered nature. The deep, primitive pleasure I feel as I work the stone connects me to an experience shared by the pre-historic stone-tool maker, to the carver who cut the cup and ring marks on remote Hebridean stones and the Bronze Age craftsman at work over his smelting copper and alloys. I experience the same as those who carved Egyptian hieroglyphs, formed iron-age tools, constructed Roman architecture and the monumental carvings of Medieval Europe. When I encounter these carvings I look for the tool marks of their making, I understand the direction of chisel stroke, acknowledge the skill and feel the craft. I am with them in their work, amongst them, and sure I can hear the sound of the hammers.



From early times, stoneworkers tested blocks with a sharp tap to check for cracks or flaws. The noise stone makes in response to being worked is important to the carver – it speaks its condition, tells whether cuts are clean, if it is stressed or tolerant of the attention. Some stones are more sonorous than others, ringing like iron or emitting bass vibrations, singing, clicking or chiming.

Stones are used for music-making by many cultures around the world. The Sea Dayak people of Borneo use stone chimes; in Hawaii pairs of stone castanets consisting of round, flat pieces of basaltic lava, are played by the hula dancers; in Azerbaijan there is a rock which makes a deep resonating sound when struck, known as a gaval-dashy, meaning ‘tambourine stone’. A widely celebrated instrument was a lithophone built in 1840 by Joseph Richardson, a stonemason and talented musician, from Keswick, Cumbria. Richardson used sixty-one hornfels, stones from the river bed or nearby mountain in Skiddaw in the Lake District and with painstaking care tuned the stones by cutting them into different length slabs and laying them horizontally. Joseph Richardson and his sons made a successful career of touring Britain and Europe performing concerts and recitals with the new Rock Harmonicon.

A bird I carved in Portland stone made music. It sang beautifully, with a distinctive and haunting quality. Its plump body sounding rich and bell-like when tapped and chiselled, the note softening and rising as I slimmed the neck, and lighter still, and so delicate a ring, as I rounded the eyes, and then the purest soft whistle as I shaped the beak.

The stages of carving my sculpture are divided into three: roughing out, refining the shape, and putting in fine detail and a finish on the surface. All the stages are achieved with a modest set of tools, which differ little in design from the earliest ever found. A mallet and claw chisel are used for roughing, then a flat chisel, later smaller flat chisels with a dummy mallet. Tools become shaped from use, chisel shanks smoothed from holding, and mallets worn and comfortable in the hand – they are cherished.

There was a hammer I desperately wanted – on one face the maul has a wedged blade, for splitting rock, and on the other a flat, resembling the head of a sledge-hammer with sharp edges, used for dressing stone. Having saved for months I was dismayed that the toolmaker didn't have one available, but he asked me to stand up straight next to a beam, marked my height in chalk, noted the length of my arms and examined my palms. It was for the best, he said, and the hammer would be ready in a week. It would be my very own, made-to-measure hammer, the perfect weight and the handle length measured against my own body.



The carving and contact is deep now, the shape defined. I am getting to know this stone, becoming aware of its insides, its soft and hard, its flow. I'm listening, absorbing and respecting its revelations. Its subtleness and calm, slow way make my frantic purpose an embarrassment. I'm in haste, chasing my idea and forget our partnership. This stone knows so much of me as I press in to make curves and contours – it reads my being, knows my strength and nerve. It has felt each twitch and turn, energy burst and heartfelt intent, it comprehends every fibre of my being. It has seen my soul.

A finished sculpture sits on my workbench and I'm trying to work out where the weeks went. Now comes a strange time of releasing the stone and letting it go. I hope for it a life of quiet and centuries of rest after the tumble and extremes of its creation, the noise and excruciating violence as it was blasted from the quarry, and my peculiar meddling. It will, of course, in its own determined way, grain by grain, be worn, scattered and eventually carried as sediment to a future river bed.

I'm in conversation with a new block. It is taller than me and my chisel sound reverberates through its bulk and far beyond. And once again stone earths me.

