HOW I CARVE A HEADSTONE

Some idea of how a present-day artisan goes about fashioning a headstone along traditional lines is useful knowledge for anyone interested in either the cultural-historical aspect of old burying grounds or the artistic and technical aspects of markers and memorials. With this is mind Frankie Bunyard (the carver) and Robert B. Stephenson prepared this article for THE NEWSLETTER. Mr. Stephenson made the photographs.

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I LIKE to think of myself as a Letter Carver, rather than as a Stonecarver or a Woodcarver. The material is less the thing than what is carved into it. The joy is in the bringing out from a blank surface the rythmatic forms of the letters. When I was first asked to make a headstone, in 1977, I hesitated. I knew nothing of grave markers, their lore or design, the symbols used or their development over time. But my client persisted, and in the end I took the commission. The finished stone is now in the Congregational Cemetery in Andover, Massachusetts. The shallow-cut slate design is a rather free interpretive copy of several ancient stones in Lexington.

With this introduction to carving headstones behind me, I was less reticent when a second opportunity came my way in 1980. The client, an architect and the nephew of the deceased, had conceived and developed the design himself. This early planning stage is certainly as important and often as time-consuming as the actual carving, for the final effect grows out of decisions made at the outset: the choice of stone, its size, shape and proportions, the lettering face, the layout and spacing, the text itself, the decorative flourishes. Each choice takes time and thought and some careful research. And for the end result to be pleasing, each has to be consistent with the others.

For this particular stone the motif had, in a sense, been researched by the deceased herself. She was a keen antiquarian, the author of *Art of the Anglo-Saxon Age,* which was published in 1964. In that book is pictured "one of the few surviving examples of early Saxon ornamental sculpture in the south of England," an intricate bit of carving on a church portal in Britford, Wiltshire, not too far—incidentally, from where I grew up. I used a somewhat adapted version of a portion of this for the interlocking circular device that is the prominent feature of the stone. An adaptation was called for, less on artistic grounds than because of technical problems presented by rendering in slate what had originally been carved in limestone.

This is how I set about my task: After perfecting and refining the design, I made a full-scale pencil mock-up on tracing paper. As this mock-up would later be transferred to the surface of the stone, it had to be precise and definite. Once I start carving the opportunities for revision rapidly diminish.

The next step was to obtain and prepare the stone. For this project I chose a Pennsylvania dark gray slate, two inches thick, with a natural cleft finish back and a smooth surface on the front. The quarry cut this to my specifications: 47 by 20-1/2 inches with a rounded top flanked by the traditional rounded shoulders. This slate and its preparation cost about $450, no doubt it would be more today. I allowed at least a foot of stone below ground level, which left nearly a three-foot carving surface.

With the stone still in its wood packing frame, I set it flat on a *turtle*, which is a sturdy rolling cart used in type foundries. It is perfectly suited as a base on which to position work. It also keeps the carving surface at elbow height, which is for me the most convenient placement. Some carvers prefer having the stone in either a sloping or an upright position.

The next task was to transfer the design to the stone. This is quite simple, really, just a matter of placing transfer paper (a form of carbon paper) between the slate and the mock-up tracing, firmly securing the transfer and mock-up to the slater with masking tape, and retracing the designs and lettering. I was now ready to start carving. For this stone I used three differently sized chisels, the widest being 3/8ths of an inch. All the lettering—which is Baskerville Old Face, traditional and elegant—was cut with a single 3/16ths chisel. The right chisels are very important and for the most part they are unavailable in this country, so I have them sent from England, where traditional stone carving is still a common craft. I use chisels with carbide tips, which holds a good edge lengthen the time between sharpenings. Each has a double edge, that is, it is sharpened equally on both sides, and a straight, slender shaft—not at all complicated or impressive looking.

I guide the chisel with my left hand, tapping its head with a small steel-wrapped conically shaped mallet called a *dummy*. The idea is to work up a rhythm of constant tapping while always inching forward with the point of the chisel. I could not guess how many taps this stone absorbed but it must have been in the hundreds of thousands.

I start with a small groove down the center of the letter, using gentle taps to avoid large chipping. I then widen and deepen the cut, both sides equally, with heavier strokes until I reach almost the desired width. To cut the serif, I roll the chisel up to the surface at the end of the stem, and widen it into a fan shape. Last, I use a series of rhythmical, uninterrupted minute taps down the entire length or curve of the letter. The angle of cutting is always constant, even in the serifs. As a result, the narrower parts of a letter are also the shallower, and this creates an interesting condition at the junction of a T, for instance, and a roller-coasting effect in an O. The slightest irregularity of angle or depth creates a shadow which catches the light differently and distracts from the whole.

Sooner or later I make a slip or two. Minor chipping or flaking can usually be repaired either by deft recarving or by a mixture of stone dust and epoxy. Big mistakes are best not thought about!

In all my work I invariably start slowly and pick up speed as the project nears its end. This headstone was no exception: I probably spent an hour on each letter at the outset, getting the time down to perhaps twenty minutes later on. The letters M and W take the most time. My least favorite are the lower case e's, and the most fun are the j's.

With the basic carving complete, the final touch was to add my mark at the foot of the stone—my initials joined back-to-back. Unlike some carvers of times past I did not add the price!

A good washing down with water was all that was needed before transporting the finished stone to its final resting spot. I would have preferred to set it myself, but the cemetery, Forest Hills in Boston, would have none of that, presumably because of union regulations. They did not even want me on the scene. And so it was not until a bright autumn day shortly afterwards that I was able to see the stone in place, standing there in line with others. There is where the final pleasure lies: in the feeling that one's creative efforts have been made as close to permanent and enduring as is perhaps possible.

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