

THE STONE QUEEN

SUE CADE discovers a sculpting virtuoso in genteel South Devon

HEAR the word stonemason and you might imagine a ripple of muscle (Poldark-style) chipping away at a hunk of stone, sporting medieval breeches. So the petite, eloquent woman in front of me, dressed in a leather apron and wielding an angle grinder is something of an anomaly.

This is Pippa Unwin, one of only a handful of qualified female stonemasons in the UK. If you have children in their twenties, you might remember reading *Houdini the Disappearing Hamster* and *The Great Zoo Hunt* – both books illustrated by Pippa after she trained at Cambridge Art School. However, her heart wasn't fully in it, and lured by the idea of working in three dimensions, Pippa secured a place at Bath College to study Architectural Stonemasonry and Carving.

"Halfway through I needed to find a job, and fortune smiled on me in the guise of Mark Luscombe, who took me on part time while I completed the course. I stayed with Mark at Keystone Masonry for five years, from apprentice to becoming a director of the company."

Pippa literally left her mark on restoration work at Salisbury Cathedral, Hampton Court Place and Parnham House. "I was mainly carving with limestone, the local stone in Dorset.

It's still my favourite material, much softer than granite and marble, and brilliant for finer detail." Pippa prefers using stone from smaller quarries rather than the more familiar Portland and Bath varieties. "Chicks Grove Stone from Tisbury is one I particularly like – it was the stone originally used to build Salisbury Cathedral. Also Hamstone, an orange-coloured stone from a quarry near Yeovil."

After stints in Wiltshire and Dorset, Pippa took the plunge as a self-employed stonemason, moving to Devon in 2012 to settle near Kingsbridge with new husband Andy, and their dog Beetle, a Jack Russell with a hint of dachshund somewhere in her lineage.

Fortune smiled again for Pippa when she was making a fireplace for a client in Thurlstone. "They kindly suggested I have a chat with Sam Ball – he's the owner of Westcountry Stoves in Aveton Gifford. Sam thought I'd be a useful neighbour so he provided me with this workshop space next door to his showroom, and I've been here ever since."

Although Pippa is happy to design for clients, she loves it when customers bring their creative ideas to her. "One couple had adopted two children from Venezuela – they asked for the



Stone mason Pippa Unwin



left Pippa's favourite type of stonework is sculpture

below Her favourite subjects are animals and birds



PHOTOGRAPHY: TERRY JEFF



TEN PLACES TO ENJOY SCULPTURE IN DEVON

1. Broomhill Sculpture Park, North Devon
2. Stone Lane Sculpture Garden, Newton Abbot
3. Delamore Arts, Cornwood in May
4. Exeter University Sculpture Trail
5. Ilfracombe Harbour for Damien Hirst's Verity
6. Dartington Hall
7. Marwood Hill Gardens, Barnstaple
8. Heather Jansch Sculpture Garden (open for NGS August 29th/30th)
9. River Teign, Peter Randall Page's Granite Song
10. Sculptural, Coombe Trenchard, West Devon in May and June



Venezuelan Bird of Paradise to be incorporated into a fireplace, along with a badger to represent Brookwood, the name of their house.”

When she fashioned a surround for her own home, Pippa took inspiration from the nearby coastline and really went to town, concocting an ornate frieze of waves, beneath which appear seaweed, fish, mermaids, sea horses with a surfer, for husband Andy, and a sail, for her. For not only is Pippa an expert stonemason, she’s also a qualified coastal skipper and loves to get out on the sea, one of the appeals of living here.

Since the move to Kingsbridge, Pippa’s had more time to pursue her favourite type of stonework – sculpture. Her favourite subjects are animals and birds.

She’s created a life-size polar bear, hares, pigs, hens, cormorants and a sculpture of her beloved Beetle. She often sculpts with Kilkenny limestone, which polishes to a speckled black, or alabaster, a white stone that turns translucent

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when polished. Visitors to the sculpture garden at Delamore Arts in May will have seen some of Pippa’s work, and a number of her pieces were on display at Dartington Hall during the Ways With Words festival.

Pippa has taken part in the annual European Stone Carving Festival. “About 150 stone carvers arrive together in a cathedral city - we’re given a block of local stone, a theme, and two days to create our sculptures.”

Pippa’s carved in Trondheim, Lincoln and, this year, Strasbourg. “It’s such a great atmosphere with everyone manically hammering away.”

I ask Pippa if she always gets the same reaction when people discover her trade.

“Everyone says how unexpected it is to meet a woman doing what I’m doing. Being a stonemason is still very much considered as man’s work. In all honesty it’s rather nice to buck the trend.” ♦

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