



THE WOOD CARVER

JOHN DONALDSON, CREATOR OF THE NEW STIRLING HEADS



STIRLING
CASTLE

John Donaldson was born within sight of Stirling Castle – little did anyone suspect he would become part of its history. After leaving his job as a PE teacher the self-taught craftsman earned himself a reputation as one of the finest wood carvers in Scotland.

From 2004-09 he was engaged on a remarkable project to recreate the Stirling Heads – a set of carved oak Renaissance medallions, each a metre wide, that depict courtiers, Classical heroes and other figures. The originals once adorned the ceiling of the King's Inner Hall in the castle's mid-16th century palace block. The new set of heads are being used to make its ceiling look as dramatic as it did when the palace was at the heart of Scottish royal government.

The ceiling was intended to magnify the king's majesty while reminding the viewer of his dynastic roots and great learning. The recreation of the ceiling is one of the most spectacular aspects of Historic Scotland's project to return the royal lodgings to how they may have originally looked. It is also the first time someone has thought about the heads from the perspective of the men who made them. Their names are lost – there was probably a couple of Scots led by a French master craftsman – but every cut they made says something about them. Some were more skilled than others and they had good and bad days.

Mr Donaldson says: "The skill of some of the work is remarkable, among the very finest that you see before the 19th century. They show wonderful observational skills and have a remarkable passion and life. Many of the faces are powerful and expressive, and must have made quite an impression on people looking at them. You get engrossed in each of them. They all had their challenges and idiosyncrasies that made them fascinating to recreate. One, of a nobleman, was unusual because while the hair and the clothes were superbly done, the face was quite naïve. The contrast with the drapery was very sharp, because that was wonderfully carved with real energy and vigour."

As craft commissions go this was a big one, and would have been so in the Renaissance, with each piece weighing 40 kg and taking a month to complete. Before the carving started the oak had to be procured – the wood for the originals came from Poland – then dried and assembled into blanks ready for the carvers.

All the heads are highly individual and many marvellously expressive, displaying enormous skill and an intimate understanding of how to get the best from oak. The curls in characters' hair are picked out with lifelike precision and the folds in their clothes are replicated with the exactness of a painting. Yet many have puzzling aspects, not least whether they are portraits of real people. One is reckoned to be Margaret Tudor and another James V. But in some cases Mr Donaldson has questioned the accepted wisdom about who they represent.

"There is one which people say might be the king himself. But I'm not so sure. To have portrayed the king with what looked like a broken nose - a beak like a pugilist, and not the best piece of carving in the group, seems at odds with the stature of the subject. I think, if you have to carve the king's portrait you'd use your best carver and do your best work – but that's a 21st century opinion."

Mr Donaldson was commissioned to do 37 heads for the ceiling and another four for display and as spares. All 41 are now complete. Perhaps surprisingly, creating replicas could be more demanding than making the originals. "The whole way we interpret a face can come from the smallest detail, like the way a mouth turns down at the end. The original craftsman makes his cuts, sees how they turn out, and can decide at any point that he likes the look of it and stops. I didn't have that freedom, mine had to look the same. That could be very challenging because working with wood is never exact. There might be five folds of cloth at someone's elbow and you are there just wishing you had another eighth of an inch to work with."

The decoration round the edges of some of the medallions was cannibalised from now-lost heads. Mr Donaldson, aged 62, believes these composites point to there having been at least 47 originals. As the King's Presence Hall requires only 37 to fill the ceiling, other rooms may have been similarly adorned. Only 34 medallions now exist, along with sketches of two destroyed in a fire. This meant to complete the project a new one had to be created – but there was a major issue as it could not be based on a surviving original. However, the outside of the palace is decorated with stone statues of the same era and covering some of the same themes, like Classical gods and Scottish royalty. One of these was selected to provide the inspiration for the final head – however the face is of someone very much of the 21st century, Mr Donaldson's own daughter Fiona. This approach allows Historic Scotland to maintain the sense of authenticity it is striving for in every aspect of the palace project.

There were times when Mr Donaldson says the sheer scale of the project felt overwhelming. "Each carving involved its own worries and apprehensions. But I just stood back and thought that not everyone gets an opportunity like this. In 200 to 300 years there will be people looking up and wondering who did that work. It's quite a privilege to be locked into a chunk of history like that."

- Mr Donaldson was educated in Falkirk, then trained as a PE teacher in Glasgow 1964-68. He taught in Falkirk, Dundee, Whitburn and Livingston. He resigned from teaching to become professional woodcarver in 1991. He is married, with four children, two grandchildren. In his spare time he competes in triathlons.

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