

Background

The Wood Carver

After five years, master woodcarver John Donaldson has completed a truly remarkable feat of craftsmanship – the creation of a new set of Stirling Heads.

The mid-16th century originals are one of Scotland's great Renaissance treasures, depicting the faces of kings, queens, courtiers and Classical heroes.

Hand-carving the 41 replicas, each a metre wide, has seen John cut his way through around 2,000kg of oak, wearing out three mallets and a series of chisels along the way.

It has also brought him closer than anyone before to an understanding of the men of 450 years ago whose work – right down to the idiosyncrasies and errors – he had to replicate.

Their names are lost, though it was probably a small group of two Scots led by a French master craftsman, but every cut says something about them.

“The way a wood carver approaches a feature is like a signature, they do it in the same way time and time again.

“There seem to be about three different styles for eyes and for ears, which would fit with the idea of there having been three craftsmen,” says John.

The act of recreating their work has highlighted just how talented – though not necessarily well-schooled in subjects like anatomy – his predecessors were.

Centuries of damage, perhaps through knocks and blows, as well as through drying and cracking, have caused distortion on some of the originals.

John has been able to identify and compensate for some of these losses, allowing us to get closer to how they appeared when they were first cut from top-quality oak imported from Poland.

“There are times when I started one of them thinking it wasn't among the best of the heads, then I'd start to find there was much more to it.

“Distortion, through shrinking and drying, obscures the fine nuance especially around

the lips and cheeks.

“Running your fingers over the face would show that it had been approached with far more sensitivity than is obvious to the eye.

“There is one, of a young woman, with her hair flowing back in braids that I have a particularly soft spot for.

“The tip of her nose and top lip have been damaged, but I have replaced them in the replica – you look at her and she really is a bonnie piece.”

Perhaps one of the most impressive aspects of the heads is that the carvers created them with such a high level of detail.

As they were intended to be brightly painted, they could have left many of the intricacies to others.

The sleeves of fashionable slashed doublets are faithfully captured, as are the folds in materials, the curls of beards, the petals of flowers, the muscles of a greyhound and all the berries and leaves in the borders of each of the 40kg roundels.

Having said that, the standards vary.

Sometimes it appears that a carver of very great skill has done the bulk of a head, but left critical features like eyes to someone of far lesser ability.

And while some of the heads are of an astonishing sophistication – so lifelike the depiction might almost turn and speak at any moment – others have an almost rustic naivety.

There were probably many more originals than now survive, and John regards the scale of the enterprise as one of its hallmarks.

“Before starting this project it would have been quite something to be commissioned to make just one, but doing this many really makes you think about the size of the job they were undertaking.”

He is equally aware that no one in modern times has been able to appreciate the heads as they were originally intended.

They were used to decorate two, or more, ceilings in the royal palace at Stirling Castle and were supposed to be seen as groups rather than individually.

As such they probably had quite an impact on the observer.

The best are bursting with life and energy, the creations of men who knew how to make stubborn oak appear to flow like silk, or look rigid like armour.

On top of this there was the human expressiveness – from the smooth skin and gentleness of noblewomen to the bulging eyes and iron jaws of conquerors.

Even after so many years of familiarity John still finds the medallions quite awesome.

“These are tremendously powerful pieces of work, and seen together they would be

very impressive.

“What ends up being so striking is the sheer drama of the heads.”

John Donaldson and his work

John Donaldson was born within sight of Stirling Castle – but never suspected he would become part of its history.

He was educated in Falkirk then trained as a PE teacher in Glasgow from 1964-68.

John subsequently taught in Falkirk, Dundee, Whitburn and Livingston.

In 1991 he left teaching to become professional woodcarver and has undertaken a wide range of work for public and private clients.

Aged 62 he is a keen runner and also competes in triathlons.