

THE MILLENNIUM PILGRIM IN THE MINSTER

By RORY YOUNG, the Sculptor, in June 2002

[Reproduced from Pepperpots, No 16, August 2002, of his address to the Friends of Southwell Minster]



At the end of 1996 the Cathedral Architect, Martin Stancliffe, asked me to carve the likeness of Michael Dennis for a label stop on the north window of the Chapter House vestibule. While I was carving it in situ in the summer of 1998 the Dean asked me to consider your Millennium Project. Meanwhile, in 1999, I carved a similar portrait label stop between the south windows of the south east transept, this time of the late Eric Freckingham.

The concept for the Millennium Pilgrim, as it came to be known, gradually evolved during 1999. The various designs were produced during 2000; permissions were sought and granted and I was finally commissioned by you that autumn.

Commissioning is an act of faith and trust, and is not easy; there is always the risk of disappointment. This commission has given me special pleasure from its inception to its conclusion today – my invitation to return here to talk about the work.

It is always an honour and a privilege to be asked to contribute to a great building such as Southwell Minster. I had first come here twenty-five years ago on my post-Art-School eight-month tour of the North of England. I have always regarded the Minster as a national treasure together with this town. By-passed by the railways, it has remained amazingly intact and still seems like the setting for a Victorian novel!

I foresaw various challenges in this commission: to create a work of art that would harmonize with and honour an important ancient building; to add to the substantial religious art collection here; to create a thought-provoking image that might appeal to the casual passer-by as well as to 'church people' as they enter the Pilgrim Chapel below. The specific challenge was to illustrate the theme of pilgrimage. But how? I went beyond the archetypal image of St. James the Great and his followers through the centuries, in which we recognise the outward props of a physical journey (to Compostella). One such pilgrim is perfectly captured in a small twelfth-century carving high up on Lincoln Cathedral that I had the luck to see at close hand last year. So in place of a narrative or 'historical' image I produced a figure to whom we might all relate, but who is beyond time and space. I was moved to witness recently in St. Petersburg Russian Orthodox worshippers 'using' icons of the Saints, as our ancestors did before the Reformation. Instead, here we have Everyman, not to be revered, but serving to inspire contemplation of our inner and spiritual journey through life. Thus he is effectively the opposite of an icon, not being deity or saint.

The text that inspired me and which resulted in the specific detail of the image was suggested by a friend to whom I showed my initial sketches. It comes from Chapter 12 of the Letter to the Hebrews: 'Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.'

The model I chose happened to be a professional athlete, at the beginning of his career. He is bravely stepping out almost as if onto a tightrope. Though the body conveys a sense of confidence the angle of the head and the

features convey the tentative nature of true commitment: self-doubt and despair accompanying hope. I attempted to achieve a balance between body and drapery. The latter is somewhat abstracted. As well as being integral with the figure (and physically supporting the head), it relates to the mouldings of the adjacent Early English arches. Its overall shape is resonant of a mandorla, a sacred aura or space (and symbolic of the Kingdom of Heaven). In the expression of his hands we read a paradox. His right hand sweeps away the impediment of materialism as he resolves to attain spirituality. Simultaneously his left hand still anxiously clutches at worldly security. We all share the dilemma experienced by that great pilgrim Abraham when God called him to leave home and follow Him on a long and arduous journey. He had his household to look after and had to convince them to come with him. It is difficult to deal with practical responsibilities whilst allowing our lives to become spiritually enriched and meaningful.

The design process involved making a series of models. First, to assess the size and outline of the sculpture, I made an architectural model, 1:10 scale, which showed the sculpture standing on its pilaster over the entrance to the Pilgrim Chapel. Within the great Norman arch which encircles the bay I had envisaged cutting the Letter to the Hebrews text, or at least painting it. Though this was approved at Southwell, it was turned down by the Cathedrals Fabric Commission. In due course when the sculpture was in place I came to realize that any text would be superfluous and possibly distracting from the image. Committees act as checks and balances and their wisdom can be useful!

Early on I made a 1:5 scale clay model on its pilaster; subsequently I worked on another model at 1:2 scale resolving the detail. Contemporary attire was tried and finally abandoned as inappropriate. This model, together with a full size painted cut-out placed in situ, was shown to the Fabric Advisory Committee for approval. Now I could make a full-size model in polystyrene which I also placed in situ to check final details. It was this model that was used by my assistant to 'block out the stone, with angle grinders and drills.

When the stone had assumed the general form it was light enough to move on to an inclined portable 'work table'. A stained glass window at Chartres of c1225 shows two sculptures being carved in an inclined position. The reason for this angle is that one can look up the figure at the same angle as that from which it will be viewed when on the building. An added convenience is mobility of the work so that light can be made to strike all parts from any direction. The stone was being worked on by a total of four people at different times over a period of exactly three months. The hands and head were completed, using the life model. However the feet were completed in situ, the sculptor removing his socks and shoes on the scaffolding! The 'final touches' involved cutting MMI RY on the base between the feet. This can only be seen by looking down from the north wall-walk.

The installation was nerve-racking, involving a large scaffolding to support a steel beam up to which the statue was hoisted. It was then pulled along the beam suspended from rollers and lowered into place with a large stainless steel dowel securing its back to the wall.

The stone, Ancaster Hard White, was chosen for its reliable hardness and its geographical proximity to Southwell. It came from a now overgrown quarry known to have been used by the Romans, which supplied Lincoln Cathedral and many famous landmarks. However, it is geologically different from the sand-lime hybrid Mansfield White of which the Minster is built. A sound block was sawn in half and the chosen piece was converted into a coffin shape out of which the figure gradually emerged. In a few weeks we got down to the level of the torso and the blue 'kernel' was revealed. I know this phenomenon in Clipsham stone which has been used in the restorations of Oxford and Cambridge colleges. I phoned a geologist friend who explained that both are 'blue hearted limestones', the colour being iron sulphide, the result of anaerobic bacteria that lived in the rock, when it was under the sea millions of years ago.