

KINGS STATUE PROJECT, ARTICLE FOR NSS: CHRIS DANIELS

As the great, great, great, great grandson of George the Third it was fitting that the Duke of Gloucester should unveil the commemorative plaque to the newly restored Kings Statue on Weymouth seafront this summer; he also attended a luncheon hosted by the council where he met some of the Osirion Building Conservation team members that carried out the work - Phillipa Hammond, Nigel Biffen and Mark Gallagher.

Weymouth and Portland Borough council, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund, had awarded the contract for the monuments restoration to Osirion Building Conservation based on a conservation report by Chris Daniels commissioned by Colin Ellis, WPBC Conservation Officer, some years previously. The process was to clean, dismantle as much of the broken statuary as necessary, repair and then rebuild before painting and gilding.

Cleaning

The work started last September and carried on through the winter months in a specially protected scaffolding, after the accumulation of 200 years of paint and dirt had been removed by carefully controlled high-pressure steam cleaning of the monument using the Doff system, the cleaned stone showed the Portland stone plinth to be peppered with holes and fractures as rusting iron cramps expanded causing the ashlar work to break and collapse.

Coadestone

The figures of lion, unicorn and king with his symbols of state, constructed from Coadestone a modeled terra-cotta developed in the 18th century by Eleanor Coade of Lyme Regis, were also in a perilous condition whilst not only rusting metal was pushing apart the pieces, many years of inappropriate repair had exacerbated rather than cured structural and construction problems. The most impressive discovery was the exquisite detailing on all the statuary, decoration that had been obscured by up to 5mm of paint layers, in an ironic twist this paint had served to cushion the erosive effect of weathering to the extent of preserving most of this fine modeling; traditionally Coadestone was produced by the best sculptors and modelers of the time who produced some exceptionally fine pieces, such as the impressive lion at the end of Westminster Bridge in London.

When the statue was originally commissioned it was to be situated lower down and in front of a building, the back was plain and unadorned, where the full quality of the work would be appreciated, rather than ending up high and out of range.

Initially it was delivered to Weymouth and assembled by the supplier four years before it was erected in its present position, the subsequent re-assembly on top of the Portland stone plinth was poorly executed with metal fixings becoming exposed, pieces mounted incorrectly (with damaging alteration carried out to get them in place) and elements such as the Horn of Cornucopia not making it to the final position all of which provided a head start for the processes of deterioration.

Paint

The question of which paint scheme to use had been discussed on a number of occasions, the [2004] report had noted that lead based paints had been used and also discovered traces of gold leaf; a second investigation confirmed the use of lead based paints and described the colours. Silicate paint [the discovery of which was actually prior to when the statue had been painted was proposed as it was determined that the durability and low maintenance requirements would suit the exposed position of the statue, the problems would be irreversibility and lack of strong colours; after much expert discussion and analysis it was decided to use traditional, lead based paints and the palette supplied by Osirion was agreed upon.

The scheme for the Union Jack was created by folding a sheet with the flag design on it in the same way as had been modeled in the clay and transferring the position of the colours to get a true representation, rather than the incorrect style of the last redecoration.

Metalwork

The main body of the king was originally constructed around iron bars and cramps that were all in advanced states of decay; the head and shoulders, a separately cast and fired piece, were anchored with a bolt through the head – this had completely disintegrated and it was only gravity and painted lime pointing that prevented it falling off.

The rear of the statue had been filled with concrete on top of years of rubbish and this allowed moisture to sit on and cause the disintegration of the main mounting lugs of the statue, a bar through the leg had also expanded and blown the ankle and foot apart.

There is now a stainless steel armature installed, anchored securely in the Portland plinth, running through the leg and torso culminating in a bolted fixing at the head, finally a dressed lead cap with stainless steel spikes was fixed to the top of his head to prevent the ever present seagulls landing and making their mark!

All accessible rusting cramps were carefully removed from the stonework where possible and replaced with stainless steel these were set in behind the original stone fragments recorded, removed and stored during the cleaning investigation; when there was no original stone available Dutchmen were cut shaped to follow the lines of the missing stone rather than with straight joints as this was a good match for the use of original pieces.

Texturing

Obviously the original stone had endured many decades of exposure to the coastal environment so to reduce the visual impact of newly cut smooth stone each piece was finished by sandblasting to give a texture to match the

original; this did mean that the pieces had to be fitted exactly as there was no 'dressing in' carried out on site.

Lion

The lion had some open joints where the fired pieces were joined together, though there was no evidence of movement, the presence of cuprous stains to the stone beneath indicated non-ferrous dowels. The cleaned head was discovered to have a large section missing that had been filled in with cement in a very ugly manner, which was removed and a special Coadestone repair mortar used to recreate the impressive leonine features.

Once ready the lion and other elements were prepped, primed and gilded completely using thousands of pounds worth of gold leaf to give the appropriate finish. Environmentally controlled windproof and dust free 'tents' were constructed around each piece to provide optimum working conditions for this delicate task.

Unicorn

At some point circa 1946 the unicorn had lost its' head and front leg, possibly due to the effects of war, these had been replaced with good quality castings of 'cimente fondue' – unfortunately on a ferrous metal armature that is now in a state of deterioration that will eventually break the head apart. Therefore a mould of the head has been made so that before the inevitable happens a perfect copy using more suitable materials will be produced in the local college workshops with the help of students, ready to be fixed in place when needed. (Note: this work has now been completed)

One ear was lost and the other was partially missing, there were also areas of the casting surface spalling off where the metal was just below the surface. These missing areas of the head and a thumb missing from the Kings hand were remodeled in epoxy putty on stainless armatures.

The new unicorn horn is made from fibreglass reinforced plastic (GRP) over a threaded stainless steel bar, primed and finished in gold leaf; pragmatically the design allows for future replacements [one has already been made] to be efficiently fixed after the traditional stealing of the horn by 'souvenir' collectors!

Colours

The vibrant colours of the statues and effects were created using traditional lead based paints by Warwick Brown who also did the naturalistic colouring of the king; with some investigative work carried out on the original finishes used (samples have been archived for posterity) it was decided to proceed with considered interpretations of heraldic and regal colour schemes to present this extraordinary monument at its' best; the realistic face tones were taken from an existing waxwork, on display at Kew palace and produced in 1996-7 from an original mould kept at Madame Tussauds. This was painted using contemporary portraits of the king and had reputedly been modeled from life -

as had the Coadestone figure.

This can rightly be considered the centrepiece of the south coast town, and with the conservation work carried out to the other statues on the seafront is part of the regeneration of Weymouth's Georgian townscape.

Two other statues were worked as part of this project a marble and granite piece of local benefactor Henry Edwards was Doff cleaned and some small repairs carried out.

The life size bronze of Queen Victoria was cleaned and waxed to retain the rich patination the metal had achieved over the years. Her Portland stone plinth was poulticed to remove the green cuprous metal stains, repaired with mortar and Dutchmen piece-ins, with the final step a shelter-coat of the stone to blend in the new work and provide a protective, sacrificial layer.

Special mention and thanks must go to the following people, all of whom contributed to the successful outcome of the project:

Warwick Brown; Alex Evans; Scott Lewis; John Goodliffe; Sarah Groves; Ruth McNeilage; Jenny Cheshire; Paul Webb; Mocean Engineering; SW Scaffold; Foundation Degree Students of Weymouth College