



CARVING A UNICORN KINFAUNS OLD PARISH CHURCH

by Michelle de Bruin, edited by Sophie
Nicol, TayLP



BACKGROUND

I was first approached about the unicorn restoration in 2015 by the Tay Landscape Partnership, who had been working on a long-term project to conserve the ruins of an old church in the parish of Kinfauns.

The ruins, covered in ivy, were the subject of a sensitive conservation project by a team which comprised Perth and Kinross Heritage Trust, @rchitects Scotland, and Historic Environmental Scotland, with plans to remove the ivy and consolidate the walls to prevent further damage to the ancient church. Only one part of the building remained intact – the Charteris Aisle, an addition made to the older church built in the 1500's. There was evidence from some grainy old photographs that the finial at the southern gable end had been carved in the form of a unicorn, however this had mysteriously disappeared within the last 100 years, and there was a will to reconstruct and replace it, to complete the renovation.



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As a sculptor specialising in stone carving my work varies considerably, mainly designing and then carving new sculpture, for public or private space, or as part of new buildings. One of the skills that I have learnt over the years is to copy architectural features on historic buildings also, a finial, or capital for example. In the case of the unicorn at the Aisle of Kinfauns, all those skills had to be brought together. With no remaining sculpture to base scale, or proportion on, and working from the distant photographs only, there were a lot of decisions to be made.

UNICORN STYLE

My first impressions were thus:

- That the unicorn was a representation of the traditional chained unicorn of Scotland
- That it was a rather naive and rusticated version – as if made by a mason rather than a carver.
- That the horn itself was clearly not part of the main body of the sculpture, and being rather long and thin, was not likely to be stone.



Taken from © Magnus Jackson photo

I met up with Sophie Nicol of Tay LP in February 2016 at the Aisle, where we examined the mausoleum. I took in some basic measurements of the stone work, in order to establish a sense of scale – to be used alongside the old pictures. We examined the stone used on the building so that I would be able to find a match for the original, I also collected some samples. In order to help with artistic interpretation, we went into the mausoleum and examined and recorded the carvings existing internally for the Charteris and Chisholm families. These comprised some rather rusticated, but lively family crests, which we paid close attention to because the unicorn finial bears a shield for which there is no indication of content.

DESIGN PROCESS

The next step for the unicorn was to try to establish some basic proportions. There was a little difficulty with this because the very top section of masonry of the gable end had also disappeared over the years, but obviously the 'footprint' for the unicorn would be the only material evidence alongside the pictures, that we had for scale – also he would have to connect to the building when made! So it became apparent that the top of the gable would have to be made as well. The other constriction that I had in mind, was that the detail on the shield would probably have to be something like the crests within the mausoleum, and that this was a useful clue for scale, because sandstone in itself (no matter how fine) has its limits when it comes to carving very fine detail. For instance – how many fleur-de-lis can you really carve in the limited space of the shield? I decided that 160mm was the minimum width of the shield and, in addition, that the detail would have to be clear from the ground, and that it would have been at the time. The proportions of the masonry taken from the site visit, the footprint, and the detail on the crest became the constraints for the design.



Plaster shield detail in
Aisle building interior

There was some discussion about the stone. It had to be something hard wearing. There was some evidence that it might have been Pitairlie sandstone, from a nearby quarry. Though it is reasonable to look to the original quarry for a replacement, it is not always feasible, since the stone quarried from a place may vary over the years, as the quarriers work through the beds. In this case – though still quarried, the stone had become extremely ‘beddy’ with strata loosely packed, and at risk of splitting at dimension. I considered it appropriate to use a stone from Yorkshire instead. Woodkirk sandstone is similar in colour, but is free of beds, and would make a carving less susceptible to cracks or splits over time. I also felt that there was good precedent for this on site at the Aisle, because of the apparent mixture of stone used there over the years, though it is always possible that the variation was natural from one quarry.

Following a few preliminary drawings, it became apparent that the best way to move the reconstruction forward would be to make a model, as indeed would be necessary for the carving. So I made a model in clay which could be used eventually for scaling up for the carving. It was an interesting experience making the model, since my own instincts to follow some basic knowledge of horse anatomy had to be repressed somewhat, every time I referred back to the original photograph.



Scale Clay model and stone block.

MATERIAL FOR HORN...

The only question which remained unresolved was the question of the horn. It was decided that there was some precedence for wood, and in some ways, it seemed a practical option too. Unlike a metal, there would be no staining down the stone, also, that a hard wood like a well seasoned piece of oak, would last for many years, be easy to remove or replace, and is relatively inexpensive to do. I was certainly very happy to get my wood carving chisels out!



THE BIG INSTALL

The unicorn was finally taken up to Kinfauns in May 2017, and successfully installed on top of the Aisle by the contractors. I rushed to see it from the angle of the original picture, and I am sure that the proportions are good. The detail is harder to agree on because the question is never decisive when restoring something so old, or undocumented. The will to preserve it is the main defining factor in the reconstruction. The spirit of the unicorn is restored.



Stonecarver Michelle De Bruin at the installation of the unicorn at Kinfauns.





Funded as part of conservation project of the medieval church, delivered by PKHT as part of TayLP with additional funding from Historic Environment Scotland.

For more info go to www.taylp.org