



Nice Little Urner

Sometimes only the best will do. Sometimes modern alternatives will not cut it; even if the eye cannot discern a fake, the heart somehow knows a reproduction from the original.

Written by John Boley

That is how it is in the restoration business. There are many techniques that can produce effects not just comparable to traditional stone finishes, but better – perfection is available. But perfection is not what is wanted. What we want is the real thing, carved by a genuine banker mason.

So says James Ginter, director of Sydney's Traditional Restoration Company. This small and exclusive business has been

responsible for some of the finest renovations of centuries-old buildings in the New South Wales capital and beyond over the last thirty years, keeping as busy as it does largely because of a refusal either to compromise on quality or to tolerate modern methods of reproducing stone finishes in lieu of serious and painstaking craftsmanship.

At St Mary's, in the foothills of the Blue Mountains, James and his team have some 24 highly experienced masons, many of them from Europe as the skills are so rare, who can repair or



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copy damaged stone just as it would have been done originally, hundreds or in some cases even more than a thousand years ago. Modern reproduction techniques can actually produce a finer, flawless finish, he says, but no one really wants it because it will never look quite right.

Demand for restoration work and similar work in traditional stone is in general decline, says James, but this company is unlikely to lack for work in the medium or even long term, given its uncompromising attitude to quality. In a declining market, he says, it's the people in the middle that get squeezed, his medium-quality competitors. At the bottom there will always be room for someone to do a fast and cheap job, and at the top, there will always be a market for the best.

“It's a tough market. We refuse to compromise on quality, [which means that] not every client is suited to us. They will choose a contractor on the basis of how much risk they want to take, what value they place on their asset and the aesthetic quality. It's the value for money

statement that we focus on.” While some potential clients only want the most casual or basic care of the buildings in their portfolio, others, such as Sydney's authorities and federal and state government departments, usually take the long-term view and understand the need to keep the building in good condition for as long as possible, which means doing a thorough, if somewhat more costly, job.

There are in fact several linked companies within the business, notably Traditional

Restoration and its contracting arm, and Traditional Stonemasonry (Consulting). In addition, a separate company was formed in New Zealand in 2010 to carry out a project in the capital Wellington; this company was updated in 2013 and is being retained in order to provide consultancy advice and to assist with the rebuilding of Christchurch. The consulting arm produces exceptionally detailed analyses of the state of buildings and stonework and lists required and recommended treatments. A sizeable proportion of the work listed in these consultations comes to the contracting arm of the company, but a lot doesn't, usually because it is beyond the budget of the client. However, a client who uses the consultation as basis for a contract is at a considerable advantage as James and his team can – as he himself points out – hardly claim to find any surprises or come across conditions that would give rise to variations, because they wrote the reports.

Many of the requisite skills, including metalworking, are available in-house, but external suppliers must be chosen with care. First, stone is sourced within Australia wherever possible to match the original – in many cases the original supplying quarry will have long since closed, but there are surprising stocks of stone around that may match. China ➤



► can supply, but rarely to the right quality as yet, though James foresees that this source will improve. With external contractors, the story is simple – it doesn't matter if it's scaffolding, electrical, or other services, they have to learn how to work in the very rarefied atmosphere of restoration.

Like James' own team, suppliers must all learn to be exposed to the public gaze. Many readers will recall the recently finished \$7.4 million Sydney Town Hall clock tower renovation, with its deco-

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orative hand-carved capitals and urns. Traditional Restoration altered its usual site screens to incorporate Perspex windows so passers-by could actually see what was going on and – importantly – how much superb craftsman's work was going into the project. For some time it was one of the sights of Sydney.

BANKER MASONS



At St Mary's there is a fair imitation of a thousand-year old tradition in the form of the stone Banker shop. There is a rich history behind the term 'banker' in the masonry context, and it has nothing directly to do with moneylending.

In fact the term, and stonemasonry itself, is at the heart of some of the most enduring traditions that began in the Old Country and have spread across the world. In the early part of the second millennium, at a time when many of the great religious buildings were being started (many of them taking centuries to complete; many more of them have never actually been finished), the building sites had what was called the Lodge.

The 'banker' itself was the large table on which would sit a massive lump of stone that was to be carved by a 'banker mason' – someone skilled enough to take a rough-hewn block of stone and carve it by hand into a cornice, tabature or any other of the many shapes required for the decoration of the cathedral or church. The banker mason was distinguished from the fixer mason who would then take the carved product and place it into the structure of the building. Below the master mason, the banker masons would be the top earners, and they all stayed at the Lodge, an enclosure in the forecourt of the cathedral site, which was guarded fairly jealously to ensure no unauthorised access.

Those authorised would all be of banker-mason stature, each with his own unique 'signature' mark to make on the piece of stone being carved (rather like a hallmark on precious metals) and each proud of the skills and techniques he would not wish lesser craftsmen to see and learn (the skills would be passed from father to son – remember how many generations it would take to build a cathedral). The master mason would inspect a finished carving and inspect that mark before paying the wage, a good reason to keep secret the mark.

The Lodge was the origin of the craft Guilds that eventually became the norm for many trades, determining who was allowed into the Lodge and negotiating rates of pay for their members. Also from this source we derive the Freemasons and their Lodges, mimicking the secrecy of entry into the Lodge itself.

And there must be no mistakes. James reminds that a piece of stone sitting on the banker might already have cost \$30,000 before a chisel goes near it; once carved, it may now be worth more than twice that. "It's something for the crane driver to think about when he is lifting it into place," says James. "If it arrives on site and it's chipped or scratched, it can be rejected, which would be a very expensive situation. We believe it is better to spend a little longer on a project and not worry about damaging anything." Clients are often impatient, he adds, and the company will always try to fit to schedules, but "the memory of how long the project took will fade extremely quickly once the last bit of scaffolding comes down. But the result, the outcome of the project, will remain with you for the next 150 years."

James and his team evidently enjoy their work. Founder Kris Krawczyk is still working, and together with Nicola Ashurst, one of the world's foremost authorities in materials conservation (she has worked on some of Europe's most important historic buildings whilst working for the past 25 years for English Heritage and Historic Scotland), they can advise on how to restore, renovate or sensitively replace just about anything you can think of that is of historical significance. But only if you want it done well. ■



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