

# Jon Edgar: a life in sculpture

Sussex has a history rich in associations with sculptors. One of the latest in a long line of nationally-renowned sculptors with a county connection is Jon Edgar. He currently has a major exhibition in Worthing

SUSSEX plays a big part in the life and work of Jon Edgar, a respected younger UK sculptor. Born in Rustington, he trained at the Frink School in the Potteries and worked in Herefordshire before coming back to live and work in the county near Petworth. He takes much of his inspiration, both for his subjects and the materials he uses, from his surroundings.

Now people in Sussex can see his work close to home. Worthing Museum and Art Gallery is hosting an exhibition of his work until June 19. More than 40 works on show are displayed in the garden and a number of locations around the museum, including direct carvings in wood and stone as well as closely observed terracotta portraits.

Worthing seems especially apt to host his latest exhibition as nearby, Liverpool Gardens looks up to one of Elisabeth Frink's last works, four male heads called *Desert Quartet*, recently listed with Grade II\* status. The Frink School, where Edgar trained, was named after the sculptor as it sought to continue the tradition which she represented, attempting to give some balance to the decline in figurative training and increased conceptualism in sculpture schools in the UK.

When Edgar, his partner, landscape

historian Kate Felus, and their son Hal, aged three, moved to Sussex they inherited many of the acquaintances and friends of their new home's former occupant – someone who had spent over 40 years in their village. They were all keen to welcome a young family into her former house.

Edgar got to know two sisters, now in their 90s, who had both led action-packed lives.

He wondered about asking one of them to sit for him. It gradually dawned on him that a study of both heads would be even more interesting, giving all sorts of insights into the bonds of sisters, genetic and otherwise.

The sittings eventually came about and, as they talked, their conversation uncovered the fact that they also had a brother.

Edgar felt it would be impossible not to at least try to secure the brother's agreement for a sitting. He thought the third element of the brother's head would add much to the formal composition as well as giving a gender balance.

Both sisters helped ease the way with their brother and the portrait-triptych *Sussex Siblings* came about. Edgar hopes that it is a fitting celebration of both Age and Family and feels that West Sussex's climate



Above: Detail of *Pedestal*, Portland stone.

Below: Detail of *Sussex Sleepers*, Portland stone

Opposite: Jon Edgar and his son Hal. Picture: Anne Purkiss

Opposite, below: Edgar working on *Detainee*, granite





## THE EXHIBITION

Exhibition works relevant to the county are linked by material or subject.

*Rustington Bust* and the little chalk pebble heads were carved from materials found in that parish; *Ceres* from oak with an agricultural link, originating in Billingshurst. *Sussex Sleepers* seems to have been inspired by the mystic landscape and land forms of the Downs. These local links and the names of sculptures offer a helping hand for the viewer, but the sculptor asks that the viewer spends quiet time with the works before reading or talking about them.

Edgar offers the following advice on how to get the most from the exhibition: *People rarely appreciate sculpture with the same sensitivity with which they respond to music and other forms of*

*art. It takes time to reveal itself; you need to expend physical energy – moving – to take it all in. Disregard artist statements and intellectual pomposity in favour of spending time walking slowly around the sculpture letting your eyes and fingers decide whether you connect with the work – or not. It really is as simple as that.*

Busts of Wilfred Cass (Cass Sculpture Foundation at Goodwood) and Duncan Carse, Antarctic explorer and voice of *Dick Barton* are also present; Fittleworth was Carse's home for 40 years.

*Jon Edgar – Carvings and Claywork* – until June 19th at Worthing Museum and Art Gallery, Chapel Road 10–5, Tues–Saturday. Free admission. Tel. 01903 221448





Above: *Wight Man* alabaster; *Lovelog* behind

Above right: Detail of *Sussex Siblings*, terracotta;

Left: *Sparrow Sleepers*, Petworth marble

All the works on this page are on show at Worthing Museum

**Opposite:** Edgar at work with sitter Wilfred Cass at Cass Sculpture Foundation, Hat Hill Copse, Goodwood.

Picture: Cass Sculpture Foundation

## SCULPTORS AND SUSSEX

Chichester Cathedral's 12th century Lazarus reliefs influenced the young resident, sculptor and typographer Eric Gill and later on, sculptor Henry Moore. Gill's long association with Ditchling is well-documented; less so was his friendship with Jacob Epstein and their plans to form 'a great scheme' of doing some colossal figures together as a contribution to the world, as a sort of 20th-century Stonehenge' in Sussex in 1910. They found an empty farm with six acres of land in Asheham House, south-east of Lewes, and convinced William Rothenstein to buy the lease but the scheme failed.

Among contemporary work in Chichester Cathedral are sculptures by Philip Jackson and John Skelton, the latter the nephew of Gill who worked at Streat for 50 years and whose workshop and students continue. Worthing Museum recently acquired a wood carving by Skelton. Peter Randall-Page grew up in Crowborough; Frank Dobson R.A. attended Hastings School of Art and Henri-Gaudier Brzeska's letters refer to Littlehampton's rejuvenating qualities in his occasional visits from London during his tragically short life.

## LOCAL MATERIALS

In the early 1800s, Petworth Marble (Sussex Marble, or Winklestone) rivalled many of the stones which were routinely imported from the continent. A kind of shell marble occurring in the Wealden clay at Petworth, its quarrying was concentrated on the Egremont estate at Kirdford and there are accounts of industry at Plaistow. It was used in several chimney pieces at Petworth House and further afield at Westminster Abbey in Edward the Confessor's Chapel, the tomb of Edward III and of Richard II and his Queen are in grey Petworth Marble. In Canterbury Cathedral, the Archbishop's Chair is an entire piece of the stone. You can also see it in the Nave pillars of Chichester Cathedral.

These facts are now little known, but were interesting to a sculptor having returned to his native county intent on exploring interesting local stones to carve. Fittleworth ironstone is harder than granite whilst Horsham stone looked promising but was not pleasant to work. Back in 2008, Edgar made enquiries through the Petworth Society Magazine for a source of the local marble. Plaistow Parish Council alerted Edgar to a seam of the rock that had been uncovered as part of new foundations at Sparrow Farm.



## THE ARTIST

Jon Edgar was born in Rustington in 1968 and grew up in Billingshurst.

After reading Biology at Exeter University and Landscape Ecology and Design at London University's Wye College he found opportunities for personal creativity were decreasing and spent two years at The Frink School of Figurative Sculpture in the Potteries. He then moved to Herefordshire where he established himself as a sculptor, completing busts of Sir Roy Strong, Sir John Harvey-Jones and exhibiting carvings at Chelsea Flower Show and Hereford Cathedral.

He became a visiting sculpture tutor at The Edward James Foundation's West Dean College in 2005, returning to live in Fittleworth with his young family in 2007. His work is now in several public collections here and abroad.

and people have probably made an enormous contribution to the character of his sitters.

A coincidental meeting with another sculptor with Sussex links, and with connections to the same parish some 80 years earlier, proved to be a revelation. Alan Thornhill was brought up in Fittleworth in the 1920s and spent a period in the 1970s at Duncton. In 2001, then a trustee and visiting teacher at The Frink School, Thornhill had challenged the conventional sculptural path of conceiving small models, or maquettes, which are then enlarged in a chosen material.

Thornhill found this approach deadening to creativity, devising his own methods of working with clay so that he could respond to anything that came to him, turning and moving the piece as it developed.

In 2002, whilst disillusioned trying to resolve a pre-conceived idea, Edgar adapted Thornhill's method in early carvings. The danger of ending up with nothing positively invigorated the process and carvings did somehow resolve and finish themselves.

Edgar said: "I was influenced by the teachings of Alan Thornhill at the Frink School. His way of working

helped me to discover the only approach that I didn't find mundane: abandoning the use of the maquette, trusting in visual response, avoiding notions of normality and celebrating the unforeseen which springs, it seems, from somewhere inside oneself.

"This results in many of my carvings being turned on their heads as things start to emerge, disregarding the apparent initial images and working in other directions. At some point the emergence of more powerful forms demands that the working ceases, hopefully with the ambiguity of several layers of imagery locked into the piece.

"This process, daring and risky as it is, continues to excite me as the sense of wonder (and puzzlement) continues. My sculpture in wood and stone is non-conceptual, of a human scale and should stand without the need for interpretation. In contrast, work from life in clay contributes a memory of forms which emerge, with landscape and other organic references, in these carvings."

When working on portraiture Edgar sometimes approaches people whose work he admires. Those agreeing to sit might spare a day or even less, resulting in a clay portrait sketch

where correctness may play a lesser role than liveliness. Removing the obligation to purchase creates a favourable energy; the sculptor has to please no one and fights rigorously against the idiosyncrasies of his own observation, in pursuit of sensitivity and warmth. Others, with more objectivity than artist or sitter, can decide whether the works will endure.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

- Archive: [www.jonedgar.co.uk](http://www.jonedgar.co.uk)
- Cass Sculpture at Goodwood [www.sculpture.org.uk](http://www.sculpture.org.uk) (open this year Tuesday–Sunday until 7th November)
- Anne Purkiss is a London-based photographer who has documented people who live and work in the South Downs area for over 10 years. She has a large body of work in the National Portrait Gallery. [www.purkiss-images.net](http://www.purkiss-images.net)
- Chichester Cathedral is open 7.15am – 7pm in the summer months. [www.chichestercathedral.org.uk](http://www.chichestercathedral.org.uk)
- Information on all the sculptors mentioned in the article, Petworth Marble, The Frink School and explorer Duncan Carse can be found on [www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)