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Simon works on the 'Prestatyn Lady' figure for the Clwydian Range and Dee Valley (North Wales) AONB.



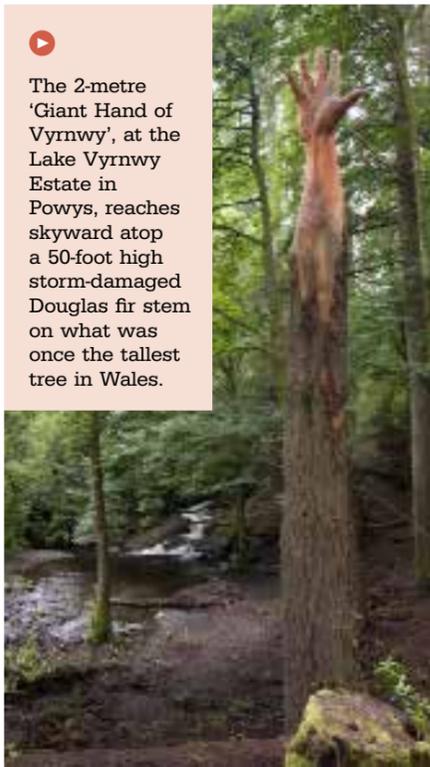
Chainsaw carving with Simon O'Rourke

FOUR-TIME ENGLISH OPEN CHAINSAW CARVING CHAMPION, THE HUSKYCUP (2016) 'THE BEST BRITAIN HAS TO OFFER' AND THE NEW FACE OF STIHL, SIMON O'ROURKE IS POSSIBLY THE BEST-KNOWN TIMBER CHAINSAW SCULPTOR WORKING IN BRITAIN TODAY.

CREATOR of nearly 2,000 sculptures, Simon's private and public commissions encompass animals, birds, mythical beasts and life-sized characters from fantasy, fiction and comics to historical and contemporary real-life heroes. In the UK, the 2-metre 'Giant Hand of Vyrnwy', at the Lake Vyrnwy Estate in Powys, reaches skyward atop a 50-foot high storm-damaged Douglas fir stem on what was once the tallest tree in Wales.

Fresh from installing two life-sized human figures at Prestatyn, essentialARB caught up with Simon at his home near Wrexham while resting his knee, operated on to rectify an infection formed by kneeling on hard surfaces to carve low down.

That Simon, now 40, works with a chainsaw in 3D rather than pen and ink in 2D is a quirk of fate. Growing up in Liverpool, he was fascinated by children's books, particularly the illustrations in Frank Muir's 'What-a-Mess' series. Within these stories, based around the adventures of an Afghan hound, Simon says, "Unconnected narratives showed creatures interacting in



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the main illustrations. In my work, I aspire to illustrate a narrative, giving a viewer the feeling that they have experienced some of the story by adding details that give a context. You can do an awful lot just with a figure's appearance."

Gaining a degree in illustration at what is now Wrexham Glyndwr University, and needing an income while building up his name, he joined Acorn ArborCare, for no other reason than that his friend was starting a tree surgery business and the opportunity was there.

Working as a groundsman, he enjoyed the outdoors. He went on to complete an RFS Certificate in Arboriculture (Llysfasi College, Ruthin), his NPTC 31, 32, 38, 39, 40 and 41 tickets and worked his way up to team leader. Along the way, in 2003, he provided the illustrations for an arb client's self-published children's book.

Simon discovered the possibilities of chainsaw sculpture in 2000, watching Llanfyllin-based sculptor Andy Hancock (creator of the Lake Vyrnwy Sculpture Park) carving in Wrexham. His own sculpting experiments, first a mushroom using a standard bar, led to his first

commission (a tortoise) and the sales of sculpted figures through sister company Acorn Furniture.

An invitation to compete in the first 'English Open Chainsaw Carving Competition' (Sandringham, 2004) alongside 50 international competitors raised his sculpting profile. Coming third overall, invitations to further competitions gave Simon the confidence to establish his own part-time sculpture business in 2005, leaving arboriculture to carve full-time in 2007.

In 2006, he asked the organiser of the elite chainsaw carving competition 'Huskycup' (Germany) what it would take to receive an invitation to carve there. "I was told to send in a design. If they liked it, I would be invited. I designed a 12-foot-high 'Ent' (Lord of the Rings) marionette, specifying the timber sizes and the joining parts needed, saying that he would have to string it up. I was invited to participate and have been invited (alongside 12 to 26 other contestants) ever since."

Whether carving internationally or carving in the UK, Simon is as at home working on a professionally-erected scaffold tower ('Giant Hand of Vyrnwy'), a self-erected aluminium tower, a MEWP or on the back of a lorry (for ease of transportation), as he is working on the ground in a rented yard on a farm in North Wales.

Employing a team of three (including wife Liz, trained carpenter Dan Barnes and PA Antonia), his workshop houses mobile platforms, 12 chainsaws, standard bars, specialist carving bars, a sharpening machine, a weight compensator, sanding tools, angle grinders and more power tools.

There are fewer green timber stems in stock than expected. Unless a client has carvable timber, most butts are sourced per project from local tree surgeons and forestry contractors during a commission

'preparation' phase. There are some rarities, Bog oak and Pear wood (for an indoor sculpture) that will be used, eventually.

"I love working in sweet chestnut and oak, *Quercus robur* if given the choice. There is only an inch of sapwood to remove, it takes a nice finish and ages well. Sweet chestnut is similar to oak in properties, colour and texture. When you get a big piece with no cracking or ring shake, it is great wood to work with. With timbers such as redwood, I lose up to six inches of sapwood all around the diameter. I do like Wellingtonia, Western Red cedar, *Macrocarpa*, and cedar (*Libani*, *Deodar* and *Atlantica*) and tend to avoid woods that rot



quickly like beech, horse chestnut and birch."

Sculpture planning and preparation is crucial to any commission and can take anywhere from two to six days. He illustrates with 'Prestatyn Hillside Shelter', two figures standing on the balcony of a re-serviced hillside shelter (built 1929) marking the end of Offa's Dyke walking trail (the old Welsh border); the figures opened to the public in January this year.

"The Clwydian Range and Dee Valley (North Wales) AONB approached me for a life-size figure looking out over the view. We talked through the figure(s) and the era(s) to reflect. It is an exposed site and a public area, so the figure(s) needed to be solid. I measured the area and the height of the balustrade."

He drew two figures: "A lady in 1920s-style dress with a clutch bag in one hand, illustrating the era, and a male hiker wearing a bobble hat, with rucksack, binoculars and camera representing

the excitement of walking and looking at the view." Unable to bolt the figures through the balcony floor disturbing the shelter's protective membrane, "Fixing one hand to the balustrade gave each figure a level of strength and solidity."

Simon needed a piece of oak, with the stem wide enough to carve a figure from half of the diameter. "You guarantee less splitting, cracking and general movement by removing the centre of the tree, especially important when carving the eyes and face, the first point of reference when looking at the human form."

"Someone posted on Facebook, '20-foot oak log, free, if you can move it!' I missed it. The next day, I received a call from a contact that had picked up the log, intending to use it for firewood. Cutting off the first five foot and ringing it up, he then looked at it and thought it was too good for firewood and wondered if I might like it. I hired a friend with a flatbed wagon and crane to pick it up that afternoon."

Simon studied skeletal form during his degree. "Knowing what happens below the surface is crucial for carving figures. Many carvers start with an owl (one of the most popular carvings) because of its round shape. I would want an owl to look animated, turning its head or having just landed. As an owl turns its head to the left, the left wing drops a little, the right rises and it shifts on its feet. These tiny nuances make a difference."

For larger, lateral figures, the timber's size dictates what can be carved. With 'Hemlock', a 5-metre length dragon, Simon carved a solid and bulky low-bodied stalking triceratops-type figure to act as a counterweight to a 1.4-metre neck and head and (when attached) a 6-metre cloth wingspan.

While it varies from year to year, Simon currently carves 80% of his work in his workshop. Log preparation includes stripping off the outer wood and planning the design, marking out the height, which never changes. "Good planning makes it easier and will always make the finished piece look better."

Simon carves (on average) four hours a day. "A human figure takes between two and five days. Experience and planning allows me to be this quick. I use the bigger petrol chainsaws for as short an amount of time as possible (half a day), being as economical as possible, by knowing where I am cutting to and the point at which to stop. When I started carving I was a nibbler. Now each stroke has to be bold and confident."

He uses four or five chainsaws daily. The Stihl MS 661 (3-foot bar) or MS 441 (2-foot bar) – in future maybe the new MS 462 – is used for the opening cut, depending on the size of log. "The first cut is always the hardest. It's the decision-making cut



Simon with his carvings of The Beatles.



Simon designed the 12-foot high 'Ent' marionette for the 'Huskycup' (Germany).



Prestatyn Lady.

and you cannot go back." He sharpens his own chains.

For fine detail, Simon uses Stihl's cordless range, charging one battery while he uses the other. One battery lasts 30-40 minutes and takes 25 minutes to charge. The MSA 200 (similar in performance to the MS 211 or MS 231 petrol chainsaw) and MSA 160 are his saws of choice, because they weigh less and cause less vibration. For the exquisite detail – female faces, hands and other extremities that require a smooth finish – he uses sanding tools. For men, often a craggier finish will work.

On entering a two-year sponsorship deal with Stihl in August 2017, he says, "I sought sponsorship for years. Carving is relatively new, and manufacturers may have been reluctant to endorse carving as a use for saws until it could be done safely within the operating guidelines."

That sponsorship is



now offered reflects advances in chainsaw technology and the levels that carving has reached in the world. Like everyone else, we have a health and safety officer to ensure our compliance with all current regulations."

It seems important to say that Simon would rather not have to retire early. "As a tree surgeon, I used a chainsaw for one to two hours a day. Sculpting eight hours a day raises the risk of HAVS (Hand and Arm Vibration Syndrome). I have a spring-loaded tool balancer (weight compensator) in the workshop to take the weight of the chainsaw so as not to aggravate my underlying tendonitis. Creating artwork with such a destructive tool is amazing, but

you have to look after yourself." He stretches, walks the dog and runs when his knees allow.

Having just finished filming a three-minute chainsaw segment for Stihl, the one thing Simon is not short of are videos showing the process of sculpture creation. They are shot on an 'Oli Action Camera' (better he thinks – and cheaper – than a 'GoPro') for raising his profile on social media and for showing to clients.

Once installed, sculptures are left to endure the elements, or treated, depending on whether the client wants a specific finish. "Decking oil applied two to four times a year can help retain colour. My favourite part of a commission is often seeing a client's face when they see the sculpture for the first time."

An admirer of carvers such as Hikaru Kodama (Japan), Scott Dow and Chris Foltz (America), Edith Platzotta (Austria) and Chris Woods (South Wales), he says, "I can always learn by watching others and I am always pushing myself to get better." One piece of advice he would share with budding



sculptors is "Be yourself: don't be afraid to try new things, but mostly, don't get attached to your own work."

With work and competitions booked in throughout 2018, above all else Simon loves carving the human form. 'The Beatles' (2017) carved from cedar at Liverpool's Pier Head ferry terminal to raise money for Variety, the Children's Charity, was a sort of homecoming. Setting the task of finishing each suited-and-booted member of the 'Fab Four' within 6 hours, at 5.5 hours, Paul McCartney took longest. "He was the first and it was hammering down with rain. Everything moves slower in the rain. The rest of the time we had glorious weather. The whole event made me realise how far I had come and the grasp I now have on the human figure."

Simon loves Greek mythology and would welcome a classical commission. He carved for Stihl at the Arb Show at Westonbirt Arboretum May 11th-12th, and will be in

Germany at the Huskycup (Blockhausen, May 19th – 21st).

Still without an official body or regulator, Simon refuses invitations to 'judge' chainsaw carving competitions. He is unsure of the merits of 'judging' art, saying, "It's all subjective. One man's best piece is often another's worst." He is, nonetheless, hosting the carving section of the North Wales Country Fair (Rhug Estate, 7th-8th July) and auctioning the ten sculptures carved over the weekend for charity.

Simon's most recent public commission, a sculpture trail for Fforest Fawr near Cardiff, for Natural Resources Wales, installed in April, tells a story of the animals (including a howling wolf, stag, lynx and more) that once lived in this forest. Not only does each sculpture come with the fine and nuanced detail that offers the viewer a context, Simon has written verses for each, telling the whole story his way.

Carolyne Locher

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