

Oops! I did it again

Stone carver Alex Wenham has become the first mason to win the European Stone Festival two years in a row. This is his account of this year's Festival, which was back in its home town of Freiburg in Germany.

At last year's European Stone Festival, hosted by Lincoln Cathedral, when the time came for the judging and the awarding of prizes, I was a bundle of nervous energy. I had chosen a carving which was ambitious for the time allowed and I had pushed myself to the full extent of my ability to more or less complete it in the two days of the competition. I knew it could stand up to the best of the other entrants in the competition but the prospect of winning seemed so distant that when my name was announced as the winner of the qualified masons' class it took me a few seconds to realise what had happened.

This year, at Eschholz park in Freiburg, Germany, I chose a subject which was every bit as ambitious – an octagonal pilaster capital with a squirrel eating a pine cone on a branch of fir-tree needles – this year's theme being 'Flora and Fauna of the Black Forest'.

I attacked it calmly and confidently, safe in my presumption that I would not be in the running for the prizes as nobody had ever won the competition twice, let alone twice in successive years.

As a result, I was able to finish my block of red 'Schilfsandstein' (sandstone) in the time I had

Alex Wenham

Alex Wenham is a British stone carver currently living in Paris and working at the prestigious 3D Pierre carving workshop. He is, however, about to return to the UK after what he describes as "eight happy years" in France. He is moving with his young family to settle in Oxford, where he plans to establish his own workshop.

He invites anyone interested in employing his undeniable stonemasonry or carving skills, or wishing to contact him for any other reason, to email him at alex@alexwenham.co.uk.

More information about Alex and his work, including lots of pictures, can be found on his website.

www.alexwenham.co.uk

calculated for it without any of the stress or nervousness I had last year.

When the time came for the organisers to announce the results, I was among a few friends at the very back of the 400-strong crowd of participants and visitors. The winners and runners-up in each category (apprentices and qualified masons/carvers) were announced. And I agreed with the judges decisions: Andras Bankö of Hungary took first prize in the qualified masons' class for his 'Spirit of the Forest',

which was a gnarled face in the stump of a tree in a robust cream-coloured German sandstone. It was a class act.

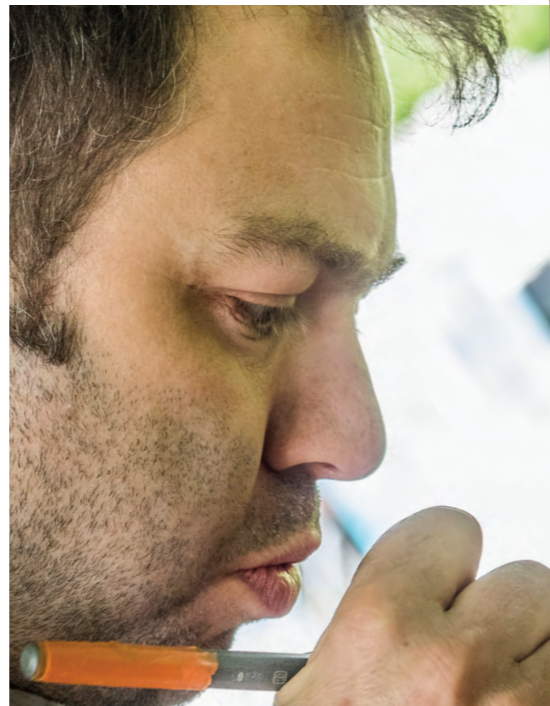
It seemed as if the judging was over and the auction of the pieces produced during the weekend that always ends the Festival was about to begin. But then the jury announced a new category for this year of 'Overall Festival Winner'.

It was a huge honour and one of the proudest moments of my life to hear the announcer call out: "Aus Grossbritannien — Alex Wenham".

Besides myself, currently living in France but returning to the UK later this year, there were two other British carvers on the podium: Marc Luscombe (who lives in the Netherlands) won third prize in the qualified masons' class for his 'Bruno the bear', and Joseph English, who took first prize in the apprentice category with his 'Yogi Bear' (see separate box).

Congratulations to both of them for their well-deserved successes.

Besides the competition aspect of the Festival itself, the event was a great social success (as usual) with live music, excellent food provided for the participants and various other fringe events across the city and around the Festival ground. ➡



Above. Alex Wenham, the first mason to win the European Stone Festival twice in a row.

Right. Alex's winning squirrel capital demonstrated his masonry skills as well as his artistic interpretation.

Far right. Bear Fishing by Thomas Probst of France was the Competitors' Choice winner, chosen by those taking part in the contest.

West Riding Stonecarving Association's Joe English wins apprentice prize

Three members of the West Riding Stonecarving Association in Halifax, accompanied by their supporters, competed in the European Stone Festival in Freiburg, and the youngest of them, Joe English, came away winner of the Apprentice Class.

The contest takes place over a total of 17 hours. After a weekend of frantic carving, Joe, who lives in Victoria Street, Halifax, produced his finely crafted award-winning 'Yogi Bear'.

Joe was delighted and said: "It has been hard work with a lot of pressure to finish on time but I had prepared well and focussed on doing the best I can – and it has paid off!"

A set of chisels and other tools were presented to him as his prize.

The other members of the West Riding Stonecarving Association team were John Swift (Chairman) and Andrew Bramley (Treasurer), who considered they had done well finishing in the top 20 and were able to go home with heads held high.

Secretary of the West Riding



Above. From West Riding Stonecarving Association are: John Swift; Joe English, who won the Apprentice prize; Andrew Bramley.

Right. Joe's award-winning back-scratching Yogi Bear.



Stonecarving Association, Bill Ashbee, said: "With this great success behind us we will now be working on next year to have even more of our Members participating. As an Association our aim is to further the ancient craft of stone carving and such events are key to helping us achieve this."

www.stonecarvingassociation.co.uk

The Festival has grown in prestige and renown year on year since it was started by the Freiburg Technical College for Stonemasonry & Stone Carving in 1999. It travels around Europe, being held in different cities but returning to Freiburg every third year or so.

The quality of carvings produced entirely by hand in just two days from a sawn block is extremely high – and seems to rise every year.

The feeling of achievement at completing so much in such a short timescale, thanks to being fuelled by the contagious energy of the festival, is immensely

powerful and commented on by many who take part. You could not hope to sustain such a pace during normal working days back home.

For any masons and carvers who have never attended this event, I heartily recommend trying it at least once.

It is an enriching experience at so many levels – the atmosphere is jovial and welcoming; new friendships are made every year and old friendships are strengthened; you can hone your skills by watching a sea of other European stone professionals at work with their different tools



The competitors at the European Stone Festival held this year at the home of the Festival in Freiburg, Germany.

Alex Wenham's top tips for maximising your potential if you plan to enter the European Stone Festival next year

1. Prepare. This could mean having a 1:1 drawing at the very least, or even templates or a working maquette. Blocks of expanded polystyrene, which can be carved with a hacksaw blade, are an easy and quick way of making a lightweight, transportable, full-size working model (that's what I did this year). Besides the functional value of drawings and a model, being able to show that you've taken time to prepare will show the jury that you mean business. The judges are typically the organisers and past organisers of the festival, who give a huge amount of their free time to make the event a success. If you can show that you care enough about the festival to prepare adequately, they are likely to be well-disposed towards you. Being prepared also means arriving with sharp chisels and having a plan for a sequence of work, so that your first thought when you start work on the Saturday morning isn't: 'where shall I begin?'
2. Choose a subject that you can finish in the time. Because the festival is partly self-funded through the sale of the works produced, which keeps the entry price down (it was 150 this year; 135 for apprentices), it is in everyone's interest that the pieces are finished by the Sunday afternoon. Over the many years that I've been attending, the winning pieces have always been completed carvings. Plan your work: think through the steps you will go through to complete your carving and calculate how long each will take. You can practice this during your normal working hours by trying to estimate how long each part of each job will take you. Calculating how long work will take is one of the most challenging aspects of our trade and vital for pricing work if you can perfect it.
3. Arrive in good time. In the early days of the festival all the entrants had the same type of stone. In recent years there has been a choice. This naturally means that some entrants will be working stones that are harder, more brittle, more plucky, more shelly and so forth than others. Arriving in good time on the Friday means you get the pick of the stones. Bring a wax crayon with you to mark your stone once you have chosen it.
4. Don't get drunk. The festival is a friendly event and great for socialising. There is live music in the evenings and the beer and the banter flow freely. If you can handle working intensely at speed with a hangover, OK. Otherwise, pace yourself.
5. Plan strategically as well as aesthetically by producing a carving that showcases different skills and finishes. The festival isn't a conceptual art competition but a technical one, so don't worry too much about what your carving 'means'. Winning stones often demonstrate competence in both banker work and carving, showing a range of surface textures and finishes (see my capital with octagonal mouldings, furry squirrel, blocky fir-cone, leafy sprigs of larch-needles and woody branch).

and techniques; and the networking potential is self-evident.

Considering all this, it's hardly surprising that the festival is increasingly over-subscribed. Numbers are capped at 150 participants and places are awarded on a first-come-first-served basis.

This year, 50 people had to be turned down, which made it particularly disappointing that, for the first time, 35 (a shamefully high 16 from England) failed to turn up without giving the organisers any notice that they would not be coming, which is not fair on all the others on the waiting list who were keen to take part.

The organisers point out that they have to arrange for the provision of accommodation, food, the stones and banker stations for the competitors and myriad other elements, all of which is wasted expense and effort if people do not attend.

The Festival also depends on the revenue from the sale by auction of the works at the end of the weekend to help cover the cost, so it is in everyone's interest that the places are filled.

In order to prevent this from happening again, the organisers are now considering asking for an up-front security deposit to secure a place at future events.

In the end this year there were 122 participants from 18 countries, including Russia, Lithuania, Japan, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Hungary and Israel. There were 25 competitors from England who did turn up and two from Ireland.

We all enjoyed the Festival and the participants from all over the world felt happy in the relaxing atmosphere of the Eschholz Park.

Next year's festival (26-28 June) promises to be more heavily subscribed than ever. It is being hosted by Strasbourg cathedral in France, which will be celebrating its millennium. The European Stone Festival will be one of many showpiece events being held in and around the red sandstone cathedral in the summer of 2015.

If you have not visited Strasbourg, I can tell you its cathedral is one of the most magnificent (and tallest) in Europe. It is well worth a visit.

The adjacent cathedral museum (Musée de l'Œuvre de Notre Dame de Strasbourg) hosts one of the most breathtakingly daring spiral staircases you will ever behold.

If you are thinking of attending the European Stone Festival next year, my advice is to enrol as early as possible because it is likely to be heavily over-subscribed.

Applications can be made using the festival website (www.stein-festival.de/en) and are normally accepted from January / February time. If you would like to register your interest, you can email your details and a CV to next year's festival organiser, Norbert Stoffel at norbert.stoffel@orange.fr

I look forward to seeing as many of you as possible in Strasbourg next summer, because I will be there trying to make it three in a row. ■

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