

The European Stone Festival, organised annually by Freiburg Technical College in conjunction with cities around Europe, moved to Strasbourg in France this year.

Regular British participant Alex Wenham (alexwenham.co.uk) was there. This is his report from the Festival.

This year's European Stone Festival took place in the historic French city of Strasbourg and was one of the most successful I have ever been to in terms of the quality of work, atmosphere, setting, number of participants and, in particular, the number of visitors. The European Stone Festival is often held in smaller towns and more peripheral neighbourhoods of cities, but in Strasbourg it was in the main square in front of the city's famous high-gothic cathedral. It was the factor most directly responsible for what must have been a record number of visits by the public, certainly from among those I have competed in.

Nobody kept a record of how many visitors there were, but the square is a large place and it was full. Even first thing in the morning before there were many tourists it felt full with 140 carvers and masons working away on the bankers. By mid-morning on both days, when coach-load upon coach-load of enthusiastic sightseers from around the world had arrived at the Cathedral (in addition to hundreds of intrigued locals) the event could be considered nothing but an overwhelming success.

Since the purpose of the European Stone Festival is in part to raise public awareness of our trade, the organisers of the event and the city of Strasbourg are to be congratulated and commended for their efforts. It can't have been easy: health & safety, security (even against terrorism), access, insurance, shade and shelter, all had to be taken into account.

Norbert Stoffel, who organised the Festival along with his team at the technical college in the nearby town of Saverne (which hosted the Festival in 2010) and the Cathedral's own works department can feel justifiably pleased with themselves. The Festival was one of several showpiece summer events surrounding Strasbourg Cathedral, which this year celebrates the millennial anniversary of its founding.

In 1015ad the city held an important position in the Holy Roman Empire. During the intervening thousand years, Strasbourg has sometimes enjoyed, sometimes endured a rich and varied history. For three centuries of the Middle Ages it was an independent city state. The region of Alsace, of which Strasbourg is the capital, has at various times been claimed by France, Prussia, the German Empire and Nazi Germany. There was also a failed attempt by local communists after the 1918 Armistice to found an independent soviet state of Alsace.

The result is a city that does not feel like it is in France... and yet does not seem to be in Germany, either (Germany itself is easily visible beyond the Rhine from the cathedral's tower). In fact, it does not seem to belong to anywhere else on Earth. The local patois is a hybrid of the two languages. When the natives speak French, they sound German: when they speak German, they sound French. It was a fascinating place to spend a few days.

As for the stonework produced at the Festival, this year the standard was noticeably high. The confusingly periphrastic theme this year was: 'The message of the builders in Romanesque art and the mysticism of the Rhineland; the wisdom in symbols and mysteries'. Most participants deciphered that as meaning simply 'Romanesque art' although, predictably, there was wide interpretation.

The decision to request applicants to submit a proposal for their work and choosing the best, instead of just allocating places on a first-come-first-served basis as usual, was a shrewd one. The event now consistently receives many more applications to participate than it can accommodate, so vetting makes sense. In the end, there were a good 20 or 30 carvings that could easily have been considered worthy of a place on the winners' podium.

However, this year there was just one Brit among the winners and it was not me, after my successes of the past two years. It was another previous prize-winner, Richard Bossons, one of five participants from York Minster. He won a prize for his

relief carving of a beast entwined in Romanesque foliage. Two other English cathedrals were represented at the Festival – Worcester and Lincoln.

Along with Rich, there were five French prize-winners on the podium, one Lithuanian and two Canadians. The Canadians were John-Philippe Smith and Danny Barber – Phil and Danny. They run their own masonry and carving business in Ottawa and are currently part-way through a huge project providing carved detail for the ongoing restoration of the 19th century Gothic Canadian parliament building.

For these old friends and business partners to have stood on the podium together must have been a wonderful moment for them, as well as a great PR coup for their company, Smith & Barber Sculpture Atelier Inc, which also organises the annual Canadian Stone Carving Festival. Phil's carving in the round was of a blindfolded man in combat with a basilisk. Danny's was a Romanesque corbel of an ass playing a harp.

However, the focus of everyone's interest at the Festival was mostly on one person – Ongky Wijana of Bali. He was awarded this year's highest honour of 'Festival Winner'. Ongky runs his own successful business in Indonesia, exporting his carvings all around the world. He also won the Festival's top prize the only other time he participated.

My banker was not far from him but it was hard to catch a glimpse of him as he worked during the event because he was almost continuously surrounded by crowds of spectators. And with good reason. Anyone with knowledge and experience of European stonework could see it and even the visiting Muggles instinctively understood. Everything about Ongky and his work felt other-worldly and alien. To watch him using his flat-faced wooden mallet, as I was fortunate enough to do for a few stolen moments here and there, was a mesmerising experience.

His long, flat, handle-less chisels, which seemed as if they had been home-made out of thin, beaten strips of firesharp steel, as well as his manner of sometimes holding them in his finger-tips like a violinist wielding his bow, had an almost ethereal elegance. It is my intention one day to try to make myself something similar to experiment with.

Sometimes standing at his banker, sometimes squatting, Asian-style, on the ground, Ongky produced in two days a sculptural capital the like of which many talented carvers might struggle to produce in a week or more. It is a beast catching hold of a 'sinful' woman whose legs are entwined in a snake, complete with volutes, abacus, neck moulding, foliage and a wall-line behind. I felt privileged to have witnessed its creation in such an improbably short time.

The European Stone Festival organisers once again provided a variety of stones for the masons and carvers to choose to suit their designs and styles. I dare say for the public it is interesting to see the different materials available and I imagine the Festival is able to source its stone in this way at a much reduced cost, since many quarries each presumably provide a small sample amount of produce. Perhaps it is even free.

If the Festival were not run as a competition but instead (as was the case at the wonderful Canterbury Festival in 2003) organised as a collaborative event in which the participants work together on a single project, then having a range of different stones could perhaps be desirable and worthwhile. My feeling, however (and it was shared by other Festival regulars I spoke to) is that in the context of an event where there is an element of competition it is hard to comprehend the decision not to provide everyone with the same material.

It was noticeable this year that there was a great difference in hardness between some of the sandstones provided and the softer, creamy-yellow limestones. For my own part, I had no complaints about the block of the local sandstone I chose on the recommendation of the masons from the local cathedral. Being one of the early arrivals often pays off in this regard, I have found. The stone was robust, not brittle, held a good, clean line, and my block had some interesting colour variation in one corner, with the predominant red giving way to a grey-green hue.

I was happy to have worked the same stone from which Strasbourg Cathedral is built. I was also pleased to finish my carving in the 17 hours allocated. It was a Romanesque capital showing an ouroboros – a beast eating its own tail. On the Monday morning after the competition I was fortunate enough to be invited on an informal tour of the cathedral's works department, apparently the only one still to exist in France.

Like other cathedral workshops, Strasbourg's is a haven of hand tools, training, best historical practice and calm thoughtfulness. When you see a workshop with windowills covered in potted plants, and the leaves of those plants do not appear to have any dust on them, you get the idea you are in a workshop free from the pressures of capital, shareholders and profit.

Although I have worked on three cathedrals over the years (St Paul's in London and Chartres and Moulins-sur-Allier in France), I have never been employed as part of a cathedral's own in-house team. Probably by now I am too reliant on my grinders and air-guns and too used to the fast turn-around times of the commercial circuit to be satisfied by the methodology of cathedral workshops, but I have visited friends who work in these environments over the years and have always been rather overawed by them.

L'Oeuvre de Notre Dame de Strasbourg (the Works of Our Lady of Strasbourg), as they call themselves, was like other charming cathedral workshops... only even more so; even more idiosyncratic. The cutting shop is on the third floor of the building! Below it are meeting rooms and rooms for teaching visiting school groups.

In the super-clean workshop itself, accessed by an industrial lift with a large maximum payload, several of the bankers bore large stones of gothic tracery of a mind-bending finesse and complexity. One, I was told, had been worked on for months, perhaps half a year. Next to it on a set of shelves lay the parts of a gothic pinnacle finial, with the curled leaves of its crockets as slender and delicate as a child's fingers.

In short, a long weekend at the European Stone Festival is exquisite; so worth the journey. It is an eye-opening and enriching experience for muggles and wizards alike.

Ongky Wijana's winning entry.





EUROPEAN **STONE** FESTIVAL STRASBOURG 2015

