

## European Stone festival 2018 Saverne (France): Another win for the Brits!

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Alex Wenham (left) and Mark McDonnell receiving the Town and Festival Star Prizes at the end of this year's European Stone Festival in Saverne, France.

**Sharra Oram reports on her experience as a competitor at the European Stone Festival, held in Saverne, France, this year in May. Sharra is a stonemason / stone carver from Wiltshire who qualified in Stonemasonry at Bath College in 2017. She is now self-employed and working alongside Minerva Stone Conservation.**

This year's European Stone Carving Festival was held in Saverne, France. And once again the top prizes went to British competitors Alex Wenham and Mark McDonnell.

My personal experience of France has always been in the south, around Normandy and Brittany, so I was interested to see how different the landscape was at Saverne, in the north-east. It is a beautiful town, with the Rhine-Marne Canal flowing next to where we were carving.

The emblem for the town is a unicorn, because legend has it that a unicorn's horn was found in a nearby castle. This perfectly suited our given theme of "Mythical creatures: from the unicorn to fantastic creatures of modern times".

The competition was set up in the grounds of the Rohan Castle, an 18<sup>th</sup>-century neoclassical palace and a beautiful place for us to work. It really felt like we were connecting to the history around us.



*Sharra's 'Little Mermaid' during the European Stone Festival.*

I have been going to the European Stone Festival for three years now. It is organised by the European Association of Stonemasons and each year travels to a different European city. The first I attended was in Salzburg. Last year it was Hungary. It is something I look forward to the most in the year.

This festival gives me and the two college friends who accompany me the opportunity to travel and see new and interesting places. The week before the Festival we toured around Belgium, Luxembourg and France and I can honestly say that if it wasn't for the festival we would not have found an excuse to see so many new places.

British craftsman Mark McDonnell, who teaches at Moulton College after having previously been a student there (he won his first prize at the European Stone Festival in the apprentice class) took the Star Prize of the Festival again this year. Alex Wenham, who has won so many times that he says he is thinking of not going next year as it is getting embarrassing, won the Star Prize of the City of Saverne.

The level of craftsmanship was outstanding. The overall buzz of the festival was constant, from breakfast together on the benches to listening to the live music in the evening. It really felt as if we were all in this together.

We started the first day's carving at 8am and worked through until lunch was served in a tent. After lunch, back to the stone we went and worked through until about 8pm.

The nice thing about this festival is that you can pick the speed you want to work at. We were fortunate this year with the weather – it was sunny. With the temperature going up to 31° C it was a lovely change from the weather we had left in Britain. Don't forget this was in May (25-27) and the heat wave had not yet arrived in Britain when we left.

I was staying at a hostel at Auberge de Jeunesse du Chateau, which was part of the palace where the Festival was held. This meant I was only a two minute walk from where I was carving. The hostel was accommodating and I was able to meet some lovely people from Austria. They helped me learn some German.

On the final day we only had half the time as the stones get judged, and (hopefully) sold at the auction that rounds off the event. You could feel the sense of pride people had in their work when they had finished and could stand back and look at the result. For me that is the best part about carving. After all that hard work you see it all as one piece and the sense of pride is brilliant.

The themes presented to the carvers by the organisers always gives us space to come up with our own ideas. I felt that was particularly true this year. Not only could we choose from the thousands of mythical creatures from all over the world, we could come up with our own – like the 'Kissing Frog' that won a prize in the apprentice section.

This year I chose to carve a mermaid, taken from the film 'The Little Mermaid', which symbolises my childhood and reminds me of the fun I had swimming in the ocean and believing that mermaids were real.

What I really liked about the theme was that it let people's imaginations flow. It was amazing to see the versions of creatures created.

This Festival gives us the space to meet people from all over Europe and to share knowledge and ideas. I consider this as a learning experience as well as a festival and I get to see every year how I can improve.

This festival has become like a supporting family, from seeing the familiar faces every year and being able to get to know people, to meeting the new faces and getting to share stories. It is something I think every stone-carver / stonemason would enjoy.

Next year the Festival moves to Trondheim, Norway. We will be working with soapstone. For many of us it will be a chance to see a new part of the world again and meet some more new people. Maybe you? In due course there will be an entry form for next year's event on the Festival website.

[Click here to visit the Festival website.](#)

*Pictured below are all the winners at the 2018 European Stone Festival.*

