

JOHN SHAW

TEXTS THAT HAVE
TAKEN MY FANCY

*A Personal Statement
in Carved Lettering*

MONNOW VALLEY ARTS CENTRE
MMVIII

Acknowledgements

The exhibition is organised by

Monnow Valley Arts Centre

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with the collaboration of

The Harley Gallery

Welbeck, Worksop, Nottinghamshire S80 3LW

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The exhibition is supported by Patrons and
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Exhibition and Practical Demonstrations

Monnow Valley Arts Centre

Walterstone, Herefordshire HR2 0DY

7 June – 13 July 2008

The Harley Gallery

Welbeck, Worksop, Nottinghamshire S80 3LW

19 July – 25 August 2008

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INTRODUCTION

In the verdant, beautiful rolling landscape of Herefordshire, overlooking the Black Mountains of Wales, the spirit of the ancient peoples of this Border land is not hard to find.

Kilpeck and Rowlestone are nearby and both have exquisite examples of Romanesque stone carvings from the South Herefordshire school. The names of these craftsmen have not been recorded, nor where they came from, but their artistic legacy remains. A mile away from Monnow Valley Arts Centre lies the parish church of Clodock, dedicated to St. Clydawg, an ancient Celtic hermit, who lived by the side of the River Monnow. In the churchyard are numerous examples of memorials from the 17th to the 19th century carved in the hard local sandstone.

So the carving of figures and letters has a long tradition in these parts. It is with great pleasure that we welcome John Shaw to be the first of our artists in residence and the first letter carver to present a one-man show at the centre. The exhibition will travel to The Harley Gallery, Welbeck, after its showing here. I am grateful to the staff of the Harley Gallery and especially Lisa Gee for her help and support.

John Shaw in his artist's statement gives us an idea of why he became a letter carver and calligrapher and what he holds to be of utmost importance in the making. He only hints that the works in this exhibition, being "free" works as opposed to commissioned works, expose his character and his sense of humour. He chooses short, pithy quotations which have a spiritual meaning to him. His love of God and his fellow man is tempered by humour and you will find many a text to amuse you as it clearly does John.

I am not qualified to comment on John's ability as a letter cutter save to say that when this one-man show was discussed some three years ago, I had



Cat. no. 5

no doubts about his ability in that field and I am not disappointed. To my mind, John is a conservative thinker. He likes clear, clean cutting. He likes clean stone to work on. He has a sensibility to 18th-century ornament and he interprets this very well.

Rupert Otten
 Monnow Valley Arts centre
 April 2008

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

I BELIEVE THAT the creation of any work of art or craft should be an act of intended communication between the maker and its specific recipient and/or a wider audience. With a clear idea in mind and the technical skills required to convey it, it should be possible for an artist-maker to satisfy a particular need whilst ideally and simultaneously creating something which is felt to have a wider significance. With this in mind I think, like most letter cutters, my work has two main aspects, foremost of which is the commemoration of people and events, where the client's brief is the starting point and where certain conventions and regulations will apply. This is essentially a collaborative activity rather than a purely self-expressive one in that the maker will be influenced principally by the client and possibly by other parties too. Conditions affecting the choice of material and its dimensions may also apply. For me this is the most important field and, as the years have gone by, I have found this point of view to be amply reinforced in the writings of eminent practitioners whose work has been an inspiration to so many.

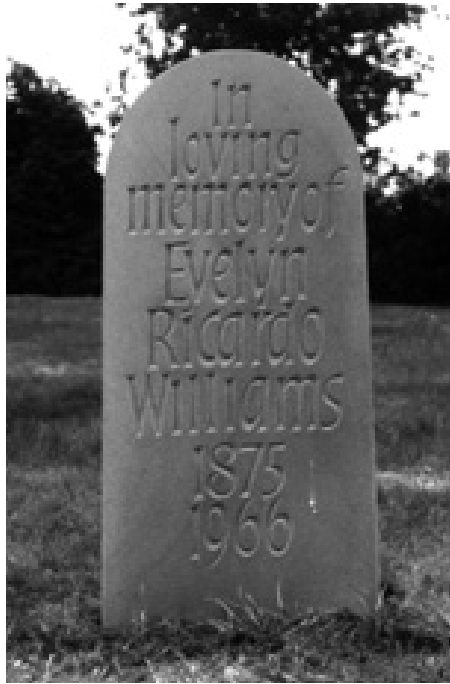
In retrospect, it seems clear that my introduction to lettering in the classes taught by Ieuan Rees at Camberwell School of Arts was a catalyst in that it brought about a fusion of things which were important to me. Above all my love of drawing and my conviction as to its central importance in Art and Craft was nurtured and given a purpose. The clean hardness of stone came as a welcome relief after much frustrating time spent modelling and casting with clay and plaster in the Sculpture School. As the only student carving letters at the time I was "Hobson's Choice" when the School was approached for a memorial to go to a churchyard in Kent. Thrilled to have this opportunity to do a real job, I saw it through and then wished only to do more.



Commemorative plaque for a church, Hopton Wood Stone



Commemorative inscription, Bradford Cathedral, Cumbrian Slate



Head stone, York Stone



Inscription for a garden, York Stone

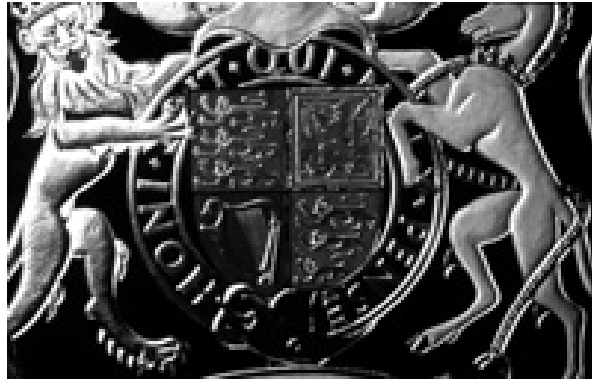
My reading simultaneously took on a new dimension as I began to discover the writings of Edward Johnston, Eric Gill and Percy Delf Smith. From this grew a sense of belonging to a tradition; that to be an artist/craftsman need not entail the pursuit purely of self expression or fashion but could be a way of connecting with the past whilst working for present needs.

Having largely forsaken my Church of England upbringing, I now found myself being drawn back to it. Holidays at home in Derbyshire led to a rediscovery of the local churchyard where, as a boy, I had often sketched and painted the trees and buildings and read the inscriptions on the headstones, drawn to their archaic language and strange imagery. Memorials now took on a new meaning as I began to look at them as much as to read them. The splendid tradition of eighteenth-century East Midlands slate carving began to reveal itself to me, and my earlier connection with the church was further extended as commissions for memorials grew.

The late Tom Wrigley ARCA, calligrapher, and by then retired principal of Derby College of Art, introduced me to the Revd John Drackley, highly energetic and knowledgeable Secretary of the Derby Diocesan Advisory Committee For the Care of Churches. Both men were particularly keen to promote young craftspeople whose skills and interests were applicable to the church, and both were most generous and helpful to me.

Largely through their efforts on my behalf I was able to take on commissions for interior wall tablets, headstones, brush lettering on wood and design for glass sandblast as my growing understanding of lettering and drawing enabled me to work in a widening range of media.

The placing of a memorial in a church involves many considerations. Having now made a considerable number, it seems to me that although they must succeed both in technical and aesthetic terms, they can only be appropriate to their context and truly of interest to those who read them if the subject matter is worthwhile and if the language used to express it is concise, grammatically correct and preferably elegant also. To this end I have often



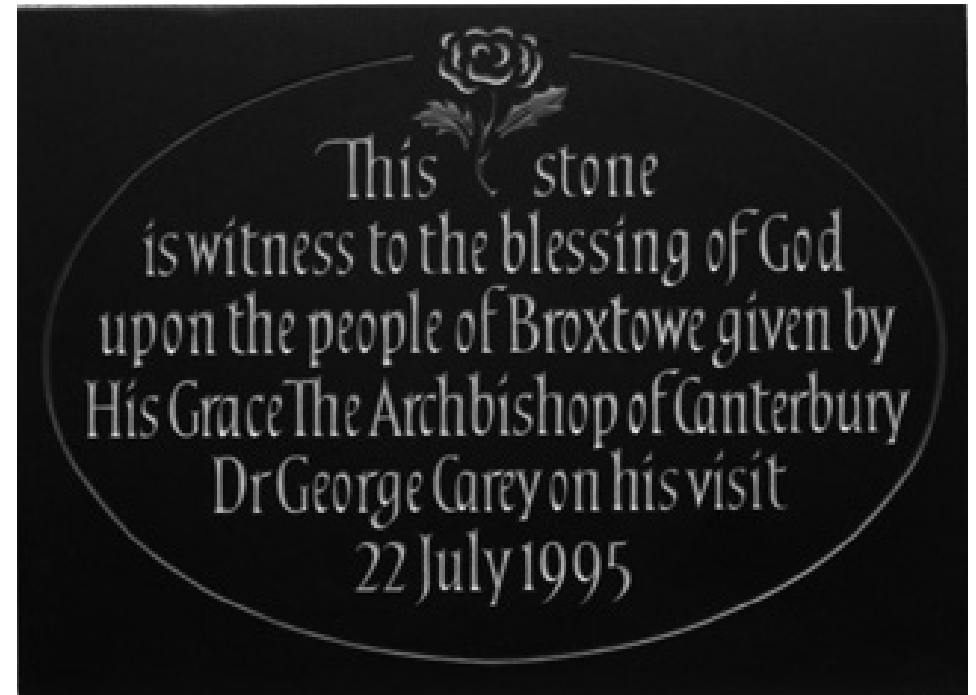
Royal Arms (detail), Manchester Law Courts, Welsh Slate

found myself called upon to comment and advise on texts. No linguist myself, and with a very scant knowledge of scripture and ecclesiastical history and customs, I have been most fortunate in having been able to call on John Drackley for his help and advice. This has invariably been given promptly, thoroughly, with great rigour, erudition and good humour.

As time has gone by I have grown increasingly aware of the wisdom of Edward Johnston's instruction to his students to "Think of the Words". Alongside this has grown my own appreciation of John's learning, his understanding and his wholehearted sharing of it. Much of what I have made is far better for his part in it than it would have been otherwise. I now believe that, ultimately, words are more important than lettering; that the words we leave behind, in whatever form they may be, speak of that which we hold dear and are our true legacy.



DURING THE LAST twenty years or so there has been a marked growth in opportunities for the materials and techniques of letter cutting to be used for purposes other than the purely commemorative. A more experimental approach has emerged, with lettering artists choosing their own texts and working freely with them. Having been from boyhood an avid and somewhat promiscuous reader, I have had ample opportunity to collect quotations, aphorisms and fragments of text which have taken my fancy. I have made a selection from these which seemed at the time especially appealing and did not have the constraints that the requirements of a commission might impose.



Commemorative inscription, Welsh Slate

In so doing I am continually aware of a contradiction in that self-motivated work of this nature runs counter to that of inscriptions of all cultures as we know them historically. Feeling my own roots in this respect to be in the precedents established by Imperial Rome, I find I am always aware of the use of stone for that subject matter which was considered to be of greatest importance, principally the commemoration of significant people and events which would be understood by, and have a resonance for, the whole community.

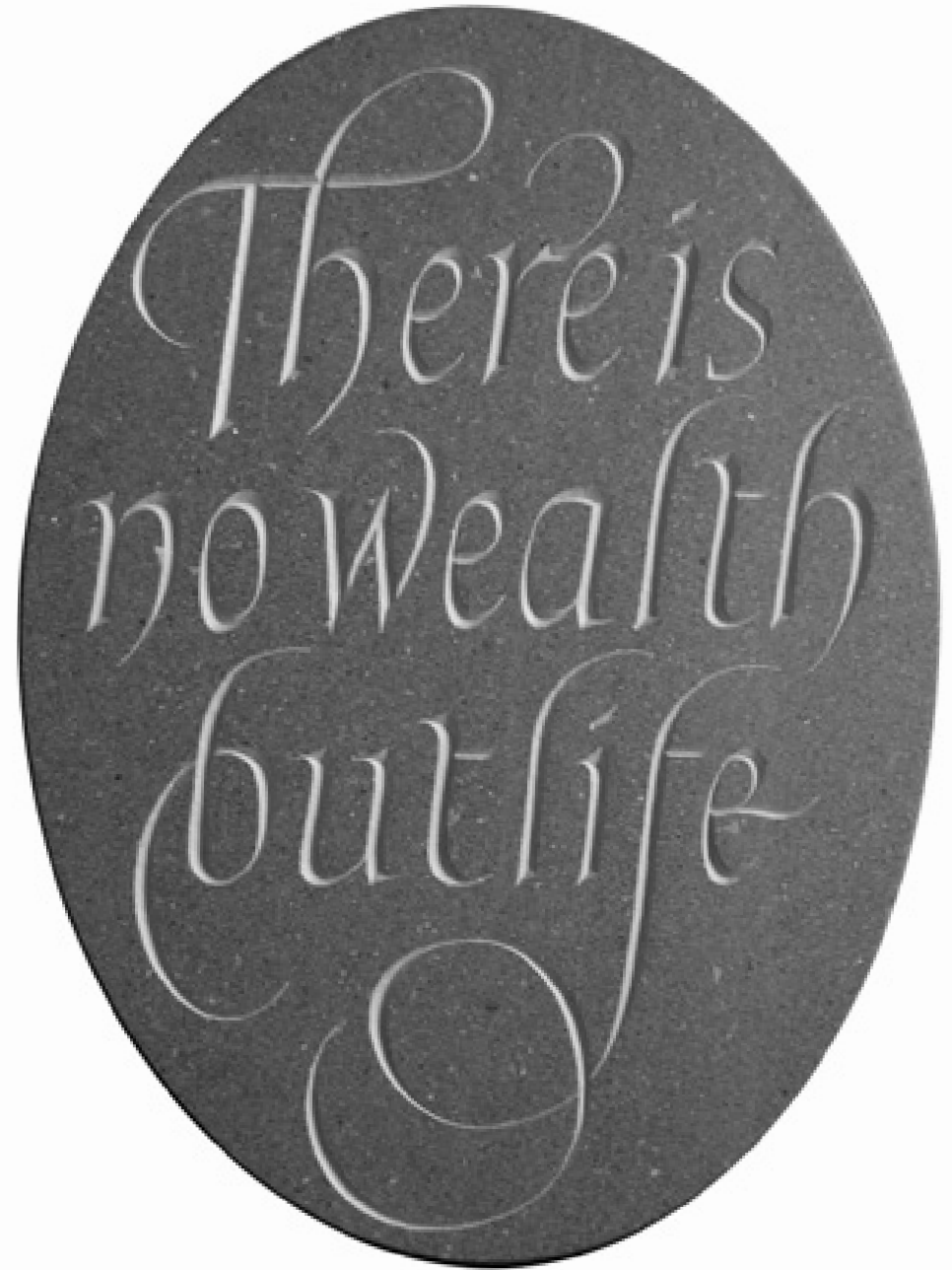
It might therefore seem peculiar to make inscriptions in stone which are an expression of matters more personal, abstract or ephemeral. However, alongside this line of thought runs another which for me is concerned with experimentation and the exploration of opportunities and ideas which are not available otherwise.

For the present exhibition I have chosen some texts where the idea or sentiment expressed seems especially pertinent to the present time. As such they might serve as objects of meditation or as reminders of something thought to be of value and worth remembering.

Other texts were chosen because they immediately suggested a particular treatment in terms of choice of material and letter forms. In such a case, the design approach might be the uppermost concern, although the intention is always to make a happy marriage of form and content.

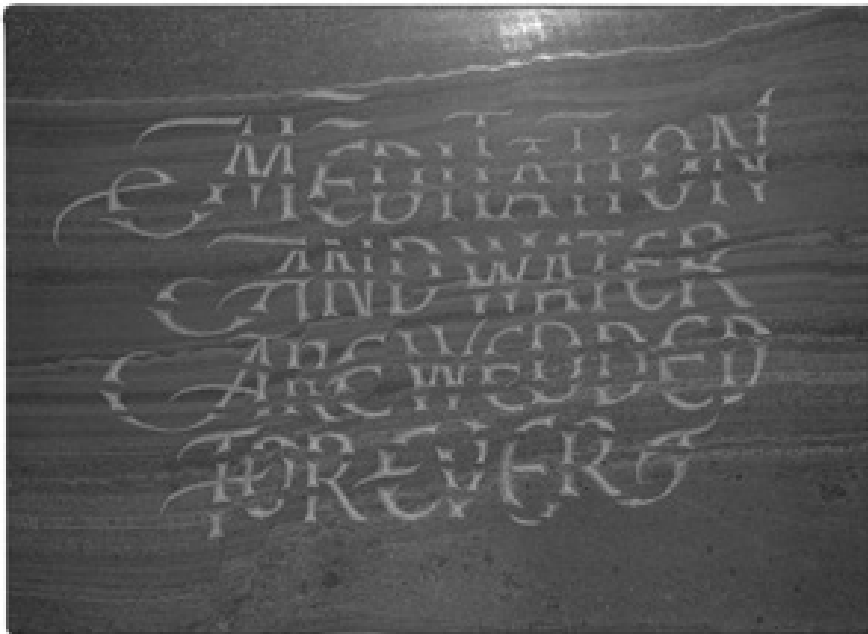
I hope that in all cases the works will be found to be neither sententious or flippant but will function rather as objects of meditation and as such be interesting and thought-provoking.

John Shaw
April 2008



CATALOGUE

1. **THERE IS NO WEALTH BUT LIFE**
Incised and painted Cumbrian slate
38.5 × 28 × 2.7 cm
Quotation from John Ruskin
(Illustrated on previous page)
2. **MEDITATION AND WATER ARE
WEDDED FOREVER**
Incised Cumbrian slate
33.8 × 45 × 2 cm
Quotation from *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville



Cat. no. 2



Cat. no. 3

3. **CARPE DIEM**
(Seize the day)
Incised and painted Welsh slate
25 × 40 × 2.8 cm
Quotation from Horace and a motto of
the Jesuits



Cat. no. 4

4. ALL THE FLOWERS OF ALL THE TOMORROWS ARE IN THE SEEDS OF TODAY
Incised and painted Welsh slate
49.5 × 38 × 2.8 cm
Indian proverb
5. CALLIGRAPHY IS MUSIC FOR THE EYE
Incised and painted Hopton Wood stone
30 × 30 × 2 cm
(Illustrated on page 3)
6. REQVIES ANIMI IN RERV M ORDINE
(Only in order can the mind find rest)
Incised and painted and part gilded
Welsh slate
10.4 × 74.6 × 1.8 cm
Quotation from Saint Thomas Aquinas

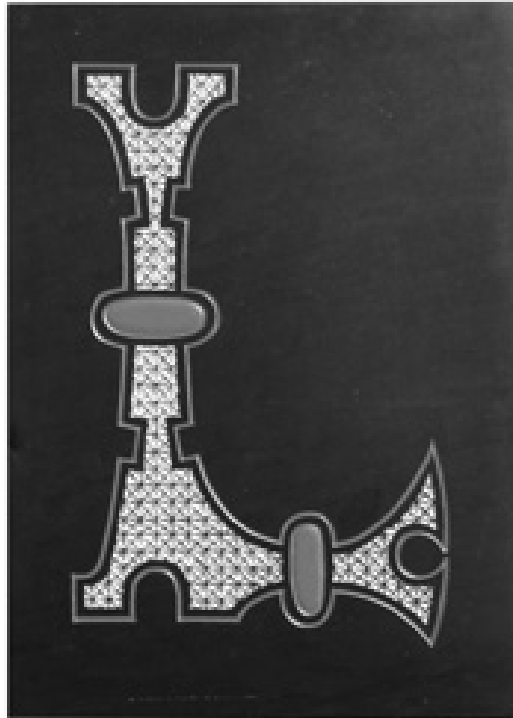
REQVIES·ANIMI·IN·RERV·M·ORDINE

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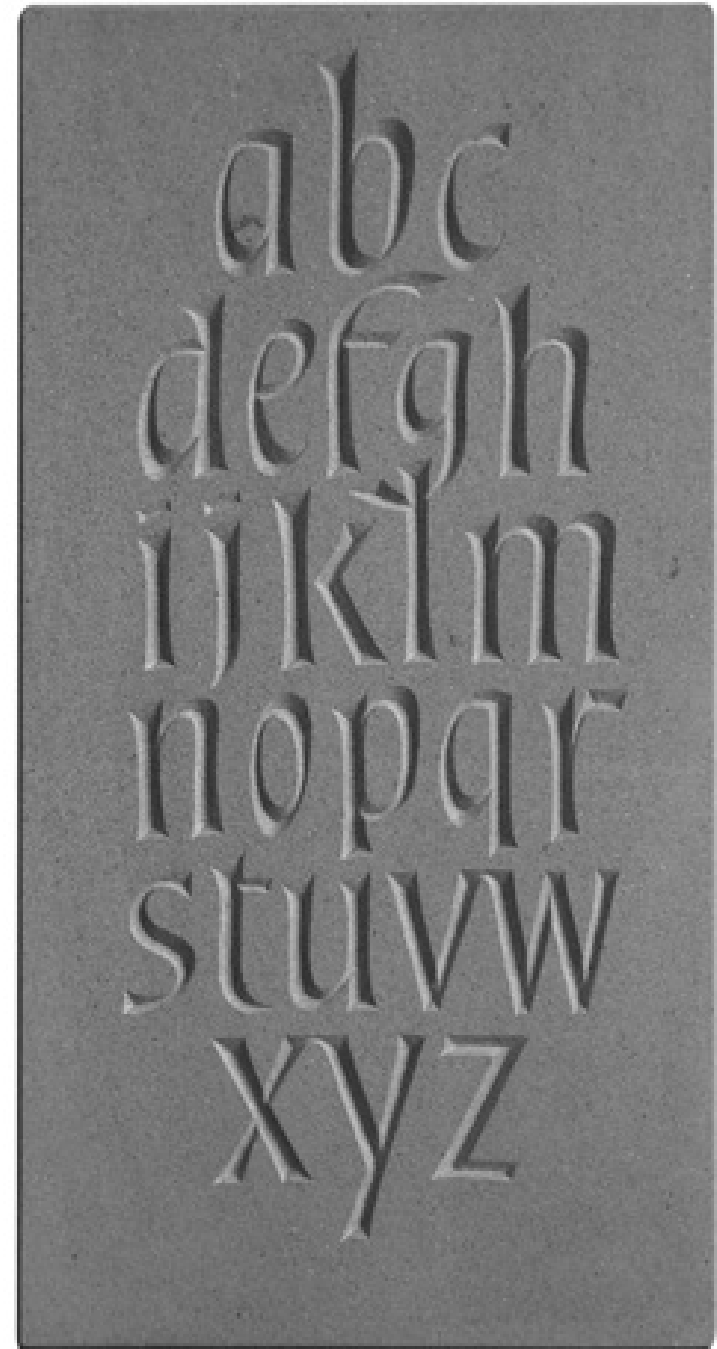


Cat. no. 7

7. **ROTAS OPERA II**
Incised Hopton Wood stone
35.5 × 35.5 × 4 cm
Early Christian palindrome acrostic
8. **LETTER L**
Incised and part gilded Welsh slate
28 × 20.5 × 2.5 cm
Exhibited: Letters of the Alphabet,
Gallery in Cork Street 1994
9. **ALPHABET, LOWER CASE**
Incised Yorkstone
51.8 × 27.5 × 4 cm



Cat. no. 8



Cat. no. 9

10. TIME LIKE AN EVER-ROLLING
STREAM

Incised and painted Cumbrian slate

91.5 × 24 × 2.5 cm

Quotation from hymn 'O God our help
in ages past' by I.Watts

11. THINK OF THE WORDS

Incised and painted Welsh slate

35.5 × 35.5 × 2.7 cm

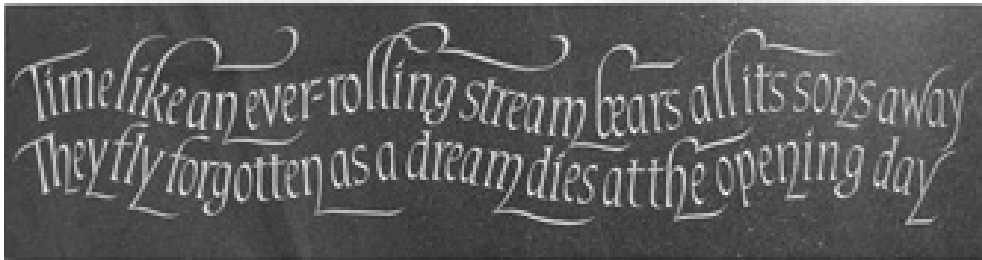
Quotation attributed to Edward Johnston

12. MELIVS LUCERNAM ACCENDERE...

(It is better to light a candle than to curse
the darkness)

Incised and painted Welsh slate with
some gilding

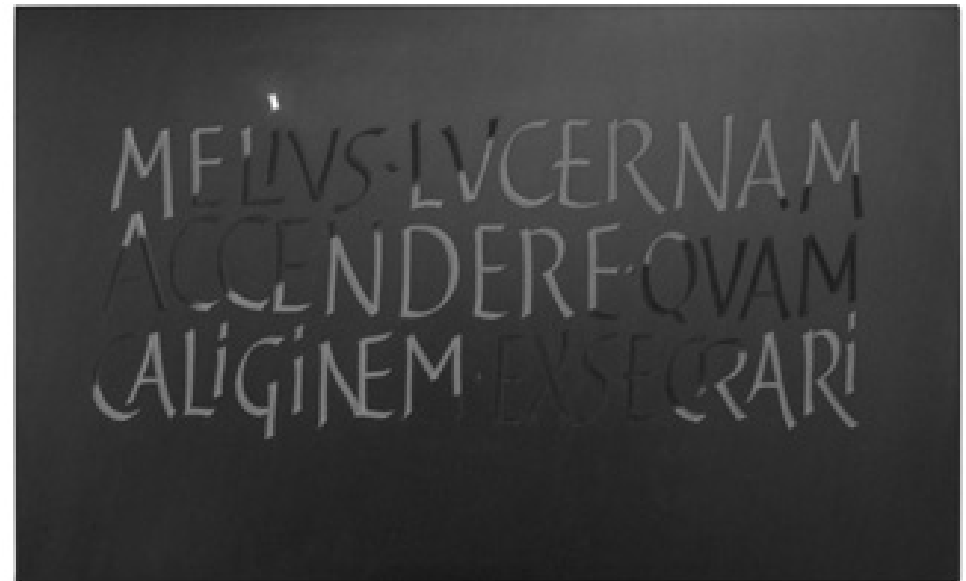
54 × 33 cm



Cat. no. 10



Cat. no. 11



Cat. no. 12

13. IT'S A MONUMENTAL BOLLOCKS
EVERY TIME
Incised and painted Cumbrian slate
Quotation from *In Parenthesis* part 7 by
David Jones
59 × 17 cm
14. ILLUMINA QUAESUMUS
DOMINE DEUS
(Lighten our darkness we beseech you O
Lord God)
Incised and painted Welsh slate with
some gilding
35.5 cm diameter
15. CRAFTSMEN SHOULD THANK
GOD FOR SCHOLARS
Incised and painted Welsh slate
51.5 × 34 cm
Quotation attributed to Reynolds Stone
(1909–1979)
16. CRAFTSMEN SHOULD THANK
GOD FOR SCHOLARS
Gouache on card, framed
59.5 × 42 cm
Quotation attributed to Reynolds Stone
(1909–1979)

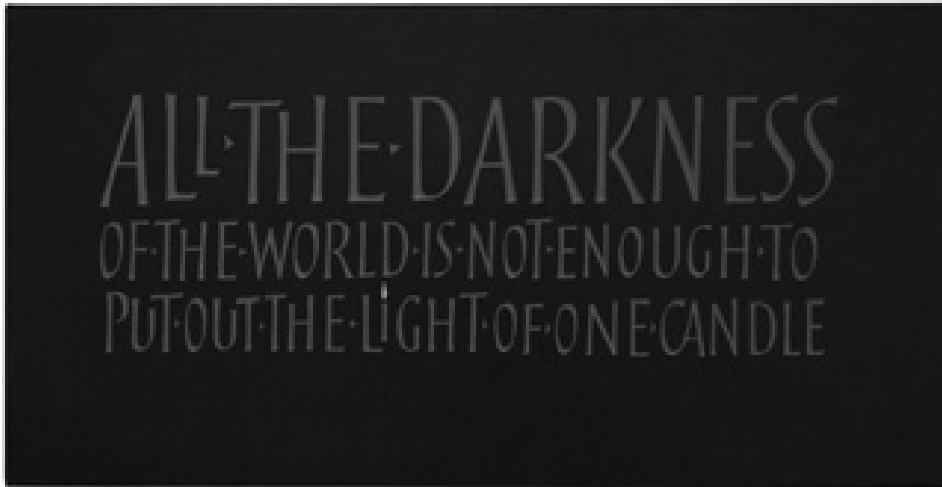


Cat. no. 13



Cat. no. 15

17. ALL THE DARKNESS OF
THE WORLD
50 × 25.5 cm
Incised and painted Welsh slate with
some gilding
(illustrated on page 22)
18. AND THE GLORY OF
THE GARDEN_s
Incised and painted Hopton Wood stone
35 × 35 cm
Quotation from Rudyard Kipling
19. LABORARE EST ORARE
(Work is prayer)
Incised and painted Welsh slate
30.5 × 30.5 cm
20. MY LANGUAGE IS THE UNIVERSAL
WHORE...
Incised and painted Thassos marble
59 × 24 cm
Quotation from Karl Kraus



Cat. no. 17

21. IN THE CIRCUMSCRIPTION...

Incised and painted Welsh slate

63 × 41 cm

Quotation from John Ray

22. IF GOD LIVED ON EARTH...

Incised and painted Welsh slate

45 × 18.5 cm

Yiddish proverb

Works in progress being cut during exhibitions

23. VACATE ET VIDETE QUONIAM EGO SUM DEUS

(Be still and know that I am God)

Incised Herefordshire sandstone, cut double sided

24. THE MOST BEAUTIFUL THING...

Incised Herefordshire sandstone

Quotation from Albert Einstein

25. ONLY IN ORDER CAN THE MIND FIND REST

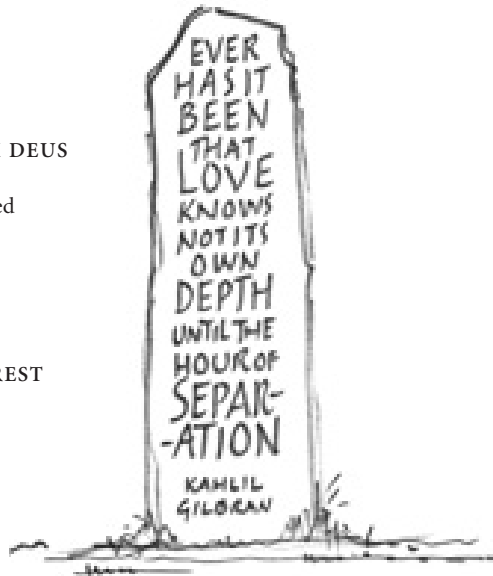
Incised Herefordshire sandstone

Quotation from St. Thomas Aquinas

26. LOVE KNOWS NOT IT'S OWN DEPTH...

Incised Herefordshire sandstone

Quotation from Kahlil Gilbran



BIOGRAPHY

John Shaw is a designer and maker of memorials, commemorative inscriptions, heraldry, decorative carving, brush lettering, calligraphy and glass sandblasting, working from his own studio in Lincolnshire since 1971. He also gives demonstrations and lectures and teaches short courses on lettering.

Born	1952
Educated	1970–71 Derby College of Arts, Earp Legacy Award Winner 1971–74 Camberwell School of Arts, B.A Fine Art 1974–75 Brighton Polytechnic, Post Graduate Certificate of Education 1982–83 Birmingham Polytechnic, M.A
Workshop experience	Seán Crampton, David Kindersley & Ieuan Rees
Membership bodies	Art Workers Guild Letter Exchange

Selected major memorials and inscriptions

Westminster	Abbey: Sir Frank Whittle
Accrington	St John's Church: Accrington Pals
Arncliffe, N. Yorks	Bishop John Robinson
Bradford	Cathedral: Valley Parade Fire Fund Raisers
Coventry	St. Thomas More Church: Pope John Paul II
Derby	St. Peter's Church: Eighth Army, Dunkirk, Normandy Veterans
Henlow, Herts	Mayflower Pilgrims
Hubberholme, N. Yorks	J. B. Priestley
Leeds	West Yorkshire Playhouse foundation stone
Lichfield	Cathedral: Bishop Kenneth Skelton
Manchester	Cathedral: Emergency Services, Commonwealth Games
Manchester	Law Courts: Royal Arms
Nottingham	Cathedral: Mary Potter Tomb
Preston	St. Wilfrid's Church: War Memorials
Rydal Mount, Cumbria	William Wordsworth Sesquicentenary
Salisbury	Cathedral: Burma Star

Selected exhibitions

Royal Society of Arts, London (solo)

Museum and Art Gallery, Derby (solo)

Sam Scorer Gallery, Lincoln (solo)

Monnow Valley Arts Centre, Herefordshire, touring to the Harley Gallery,
Nottinghamshire (solo)

The Gallery in Cork Street, Letters of the Alphabet

Wolseley Fine Arts, David Jones, Literary Quotations

Central Museum and Art Gallery, Northampton



The artist at work on a Welsh slate plaque