‘Industry and Genius’ The Baskerville memorial sculpture.

‘Industry and Genius’, David Patten’s memorial sculpture for John Baskerville, sits in the heart of Birmingham, Baskerville’s city. Beneath the slabs surrounding the five huge letter punches that make up the sculpture, lie the foundations of Baskerville’s house Easy Hill, the building that was not only his printing workshop, but also his home where he lived with Sarah, and where he created a garden. The following article, based on the artist’s recollections, recounts the labour and negotiation involved in the birth of this work of art, not unlike Baskerville’s own tortuous journey to his final resting place.

The initial impetus came from a casual conversation in the studio between Patten and Vivien Lovell, director of the Public Art Commission Agency, about the proposed redevelopment of the area around the Hall of Memory. For Patten, Baskerville is Birmingham, and when he returned to the city in 1983, Baskerville was one of five key reference points that he began working with.[1] His concern, when presented with plans for centenary square, was that Baskerville was once again ‘at risk of being overlooked by the civic elites and decision-makers then in play’, in favour of more prominent and easily recognisable figures.

Unexpectedly, the conversation led to a commission, but one already hedged around with conditions. For a project labelled as an ‘artist’s initiative’, many decisions had been made without any input from the artist; it would be a sculpture, it would cost this much, and would last for twenty years.

For Patten, the problems were only just starting. As a painter, by training and instinct, creating a sculpture meant giving three-dimensional form to his interest in, and on-going enjoyment of Baskerville; the man whose presence and ideas accompanied him on his walks around the city. In one way the site was perfect, at what is seen by many as the location of the heart of the modern city, and sitting on Baskerville’s home Easy Hill, now covered by the council offices of Baskerville House. However, that also brought difficulties, as for Patten, Baskerville ‘wasn’t like the three golden men examining wallpaper on Broad Street (as Bill Pardoe used to describe the 1956 statue of ‘Boulton, Watt, and Murdoch)’. It was, ‘a chance to reference the notion of “Industry and Genius” that is specific to Birmingham because of Baskerville at Easy Hill’. The sculpture also had to be robust enough to withstand the attention of revellers on Broad Street on a Saturday night, the ‘lusty boys’ who destroyed Raymond Mason’s sculpture outside the Birmingham Rep.

It was Baskerville’s letters that gave the solution, especially the lower case ‘g’, for Patten, ‘the most exquisite thing ever to have been made in Birmingham’. His solution was a single word containing the g, either ‘Birmingham’, ‘Virgil’ or ‘ergo’. To be accompanied by the contextualising phrases: ‘John Baskerville, Letter Founder’, and ‘Industry and Genius, a Fable’.

The committee chose the word ‘Virgil’. ‘Birmingham’ would have broken the budget, and Patten’s favourite ‘ergo’ failed to carry enough obvious resonances from Baskerville’s work. The 1757 quarto edition of Virgil, ‘went forth to astonish all the librarians of Europe’, and was Baskerville’s first experiment with a visually pleasing, uncluttered page layout, using his new type face.

The next challenge was to set the letters so that they worked with Tess Jaray’s floor design for the square, and lifting the letters up proved to be the perfect solution. Instead of staying in his ‘two-dimensional comfort zone, creating forms that would have had no more depth than letters on paper’, Patten gave them three-dimensional form. Referencing them as letter punches was the obvious answer, and although this meant using different materials and unfamiliar processes, it had the ‘benefit of bringing the letter forms closer to the eye’. The mirror image given by the punches also took the sculpture further from other uses of letters in the city, such as street signs, building names, and other signage. He was also concerned that the sculpture should not ‘look like art’, and very taken with Jack Mackie’s mantra ‘if it doesn’t look like art, you can sit on it’, which seemed a good fit with Baskerville’s humanity. William Hutton stated that ‘Birmingham displays itself in industry, commerce, invention, humanity’, and for Patten, Baskerville did exactly that, so ‘having something you can sit on is about the humanity of public art’.
When it came to the creation of the actual piece, Patten turned to the sculptor Mitch House, to give three-dimensional form to his drawings, ‘unintentionally mirroring Baskerville’s employment of John Handy to cut the original punches’. The budget was not generous enough to allow for the use of London foundries, and sculptural support services, and equivalent expertise was unavailable in the West Midlands. It was House who found a small workshop of stonemasons in Lincolnshire, mostly employed on church restoration, who could create the bases for the punches. They sourced the D-bed stone needed, worked out how best to express Patten’s drawings and woodcut models, and set the specifications for the bronze letters. Close liaison with the site in centenary square was also necessary, as the sculpture needed to be pinned with stainless steel, both block to block and block to ground, so the receiving holes needed to be in the right place.
Finally, it was the bronze letters, the crowning glory of the punches that proved most problematic, as the foundry went out of business during their completion. Patten has hazy memories of driving to a car park somewhere in the midlands, with hard cash for the exchange, receiving each, half-finished letter separately. They then had to be driven to Stoke where the bronzes were finished off, before being taken to the stonemason for fixing.

For Patten producing this piece of public art was a bitter sweet experience, and afterwards, he walked away from such stand-alone art, working on collaborative team pieces. He has worked with letter forms since however, sinking them into the floor-scape in the Stourport canal basins, and at golden Square in Birmingham’s jewellery quarter.[2] The Baskerville sculpture, for Patten, was simply about reserving a place for him in centenary square, a content marker rather than an eye-catcher for the passers-by. ‘It could only ever be something that that would keep Baskerville in mind until such time as when he would be remembered more favourably, and his achievements could be celebrated more generously.’
A few years ago, Patten sat in centenary square at evening rush hour and watched people passing the statue on their way home. A busker was playing beside it, sitting on his amplifier,

rather than on the ‘Industry and Genius’ end block which was there for that purpose. The whole experience was enjoyable, but Patten left feeling that he ‘must have made the end blocks too high if long skinny-legged buskers couldn’t sit on them and do their thing’. Maybe this just proves that no work of art is ever finished, but any flaws maybe more in the eye of the artist than the viewer; that busker obviously felt that sitting beside Baskerville added to the power of his performance.

Time has passed, the sculpture has lasted longer than its allotted twenty years, and been taken to heart by many who live in the city. ‘People tend to worry about it, and I hear from folks when the sculpture is in trouble’. Maybe this is to do with Baskerville himself, ‘that need that we all have for cultural markers in our changing built environment’. But surely this also shows that the sculpture has become more than the ‘something to keep Baskerville in mind’ expressed at the beginning of the project. It is a site-specific marker that has become part of the city and its people, a sculpture that would lose its meaning were it ever to be moved.

A statue gives its viewers a body, the memory of a likeness, a name that brings to mind some achievement. ‘Industry and Genius’ gives us an idea, it challenges, and demands thought from the viewer by presenting the actual achievement. Faced with the name Virgil as printer’s punches, but enlarged and at eye level, we are forced to consider what for many, was Baskerville’s greatest achievement, letter forms that astonished Europe at that the time, but are now read and appreciated by the world.

The editor would like to thank David Patten for his generosity and openness in sharing his thoughts and memories of what was obviously a difficult, and in many ways frustrating commission from the City of Birmingham.

[1] The other reference points were the poet John Freeth, the painter Samuel Lines, the historian William Hutton, and the missing parts of Richard Westmacott’s ‘Statue of Horatio Nelson’.

[2] See http://www.davidpatten.co.uk/pages/information_pages/working_pages/basin_letters.html
http://bpnarchitects.co.uk/?project=golden-square