



PRESERVING THE PAST, ONE STONE AT A TIME

For the first editorial in our Voices from Industry Series, we spent time with John Lister, Master Mason, on site at Merton College, Oxford. Surrounded by centuries-old stonework, scaffolding, and quiet craftsmanship, John reflected on the journey that led him into heritage restoration and what continues to keep him there today.

What quickly becomes clear when speaking with John is that he does not see restoration as simply "repair work". To him and his team, they are temporary custodians in a story far bigger than themselves, because, as he says, "this building is going to outlive all of us".

John's path into stonemasonry was anything but conventional. After an accident as a young soldier left him with a neck injury, he stepped away from the Army and found himself working for a funeral director before discovering monumental masonry almost by accident. It was there, learning lettering and stone carving, that something clicked.

From traditional apprenticeships in Leeds to banker shops in Bradford, his career has been shaped by both challenge and craft. A banker shop is the mason's workshop, where stone is prepared, shaped, and finished by hand. It is where skill is developed through repetition, precision, and patience, and where a mason learns the judgement and touch that later carry into more complex restoration work. From there, John moved from working independently to restoring historic churches and cathedrals across the UK, building a career defined by hard-earned skill and deep respect for the craft.

One of the defining moments came when it became clear that working for himself was no longer sustainable in the long term. As John puts it, "Being a stonemason and working for yourself is really hard. The stuff's heavy. The weather's against you. And when you stop producing, you stop earning."

Rather than romanticising self-employment, John speaks honestly about what he learned from it: the importance of trust, teamwork, and belonging to something bigger than himself. As he says, "I prefer working with a team. Being part of something."

That eventually led him to Owlsworth Conservation, where he has now spent 15 years helping to deliver restoration works on some of the country's most significant heritage buildings, including Hampton Court Palace and St George's Chapel at Windsor Castle. "Sometimes you have to pinch yourself with the places you get to work," he says.

KEY REFLECTIONS

“ THIS BUILDING IS GOING TO OUTLIVE ALL OF US ”

“ WE'VE GOT A PILE OF STONES AND SOMETHING TO DO ”

“ I PREFER WORKING WITH A TEAM. BEING PART OF SOMETHING ”

BUILDING MORE THAN STONE

What stands out most during the conversation is the way John speaks about the passing down of knowledge.

While overseeing repairs high above the Oxford quadrangle, he talks not only about the technical detail of stone repairs, resin pinning, lime mortars, and structural sequencing, but also about mentoring younger masons and creating autonomous teams that take pride in their work.

For John, the craft is not about status. It is about stewardship. As he put it, "we've got a pile of stones and something to do." The work lies in taking that material and making something sympathetic, something that respects what came before and will stand for those who come after.

And that is perhaps what makes heritage work so distinctive. Every repair acknowledges the generations before you, while quietly preparing the building for generations still to come. In an industry often driven by speed, programmes, and immediate outcomes, conversations like this are a reminder that some work still values patience, craftsmanship, and continuity.

That is exactly why we created the Voices from Industry Series: to capture the people behind the projects, their stories, their thinking, and the quieter conversations that shape the built environment around us.

