

Melton Calvary

Completed September 2007

Galvanised mild steel 220x700cms

The brief for the Melton Mowbray Public Art consultancy was work out how to lure people up King Street, a side street off the market place in the town centre. (The full pdf of our report can be found in 2004). The proposed timetable of completion during 2005 turned out to be woefully optimistic. I thank Catherine Hallinan and Lisa Hammond, The King Street Traders and the people of Melton Mowbray for their forbearance.

The design of the Melton Calvary was very much shaped by the consultation process and the steering group, made up of traders, officers, members and other interested parties. It was determined early on that there should be significant input by local artists and that all the significant buildings in Melton should be represented at this stage in the form of a map. Catherine Hallinan and I then commissioned four artists to undertake the drawings that would form the basis of the design - Matt Lawrence, Jodie Braine, Mike Weston and Kit Price Moss. They set about their task with enthusiasm and goodwill and I am very grateful for their hard work.

The final design was selected at a steering group meeting and subordinated the map idea totally to the artists' drawings. I think it is quite difficult to imagine from the drawing what the final sculpture would look like, simply because 'how the hell do you make that!'

It actually turned out to be extraordinarily difficult to realise both technically and artistically. The Melton Calvary begun with a major effort by Ed Goolden working with me in early 2006. I had originally anticipated an openwork wrought iron structure but quickly realised that this would leave the wall vulnerable to dirt and graffiti creating a maintenance headache so I opted for a solid structure initially constructed as a single frieze.

Ed and I drew out the design on boards life size. Then we began to fill in the pieces. We worked with 2mm sheet, which initially we tacked in place, blocking in the whole composition but when we welded it up the pieces started to distort and buckle. By now it was clear that a serious structural re-think was necessary. The whole piece filled the workshop and was becoming too heavy to move easily. It was beginning to fall apart under its own weight. So I decided to cut it into five panels. Arek Zykin then added frames to the back of the panels. By the end of the year the panels were in a stable form and we had started to add detail onto them, now working with Jarek Blaszczyk as well.

I was becoming uneasy that the styles of the artists (including my own) were becoming lost. As we refined the surface, cleaning up welds and resolving anomalies, the buckling was becoming more apparent. The galvanising would only accentuate these issues. Although the buckling was in fact more realistic, reflecting the age worn nature of the buildings depicted, it did not reflect the quality of craftsmanship I wanted. Other metal workers would know what had happened. So I decided that I would draw with the welder over the surface, to put the style of the artists back into the work. This was very risky as once done it could not be erased. It is like tattooing for steel. I then wanted to put the figures the artists had drawn into the relief so I started to add in plasma cut elements. I didn't have enough of their drawings so I used 'The Mystic Lamb of God' by the Van Eyks as a source. I wanted to reflect the 'Good Government' medieval iconography and as I had just made two trips to Ghent I used that painting.

It might seem bizarre to make such major changes to the construction of the work apparently on the hoof. But I was aware from the start that I wasn't going to be happy with a straightforward representation of the buildings. It did not feel truthful to me. It took me time to work out the solution and even then the implementation of these radical shifts felt extremely dangerous and caused me a good deal of anxiety. In my drawing such overworking would destroy any lightness of touch but here the overworking seems to have put back the delicacy and spontaneity.

Overall I think this is one of my best pieces of work so far. It was certainly the most technically challenging. As far as I can tell the people of Melton really like it too.