

FROM THE ARCHIVE

MICHAEL RENTON

Notes and observations on a commissioned job

GERALD FLEUSS

The archive of the late Michael Renton, briefly mentioned in the previous Journal contains a vast amount of material in the form of correspondence, drawings and designs, pulls of wood engravings particularly those containing lettering, lecture notes, slides and photographs.

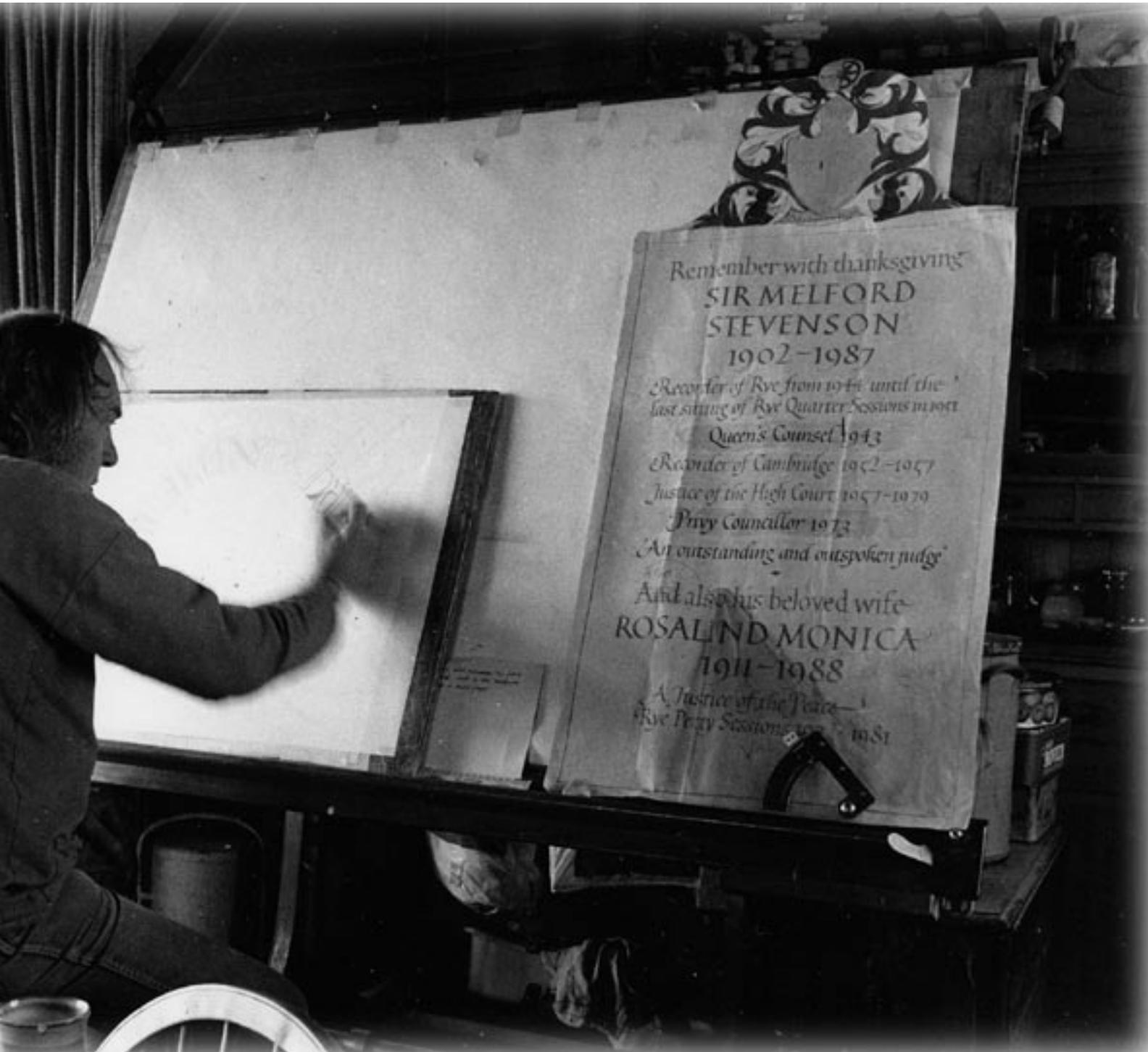
Among the latter is this superb study of Michael at work in his studio at Brook Granary, Icklesham, a few miles from the ancient Cinque Port of Winchelsea in East Sussex. Michael lived and worked in this small room in isolated countryside for thirty years. He was without the convenience of electricity hence the oil lamp on the table and he had no private transport of his own; the nearest bus stop was a mile and a half distant. Here he produced a staggering range of work which included carved inscriptions, shop and other public signage, calligraphic panels, book jacket designs and wood engravings as well as excellent paintings in many mediums. In short he was a true all-round artist-craftsman and one of the last of a small band of professional, highly-talented multi-skilled letterers.

To Michael's right can be seen the full-size drawing for a carved memorial tablet to Sir Melford Stevenson, the High Court Judge who had tried the notorious Kray twins in their first trial for the murder of Cornell and McVitie at the 'Blind Beggar' pub in East London. Lady Stevenson died soon after the initial design was finished, involving a complete redraft to incorporate her own details.

The drawing is instructional in that, together with other sketches and designs within the job file, a clear insight into Michael's method of working can be determined, in particular the influence of the broad-edged pen upon his letter making. On close inspection it can be seen that the whole inscription has been drawn out with the pen, to be modified later to suit the action of the chisel (see fig. 1 for a full-size fragment of the drawing).

For added interest we show in fig. 2 the text as received from the client and the initial scale sketch (fig. 3). After the client's approval, the full-size drawing must be submitted to





[Photograph from EJF Collection]

the Diocesan Advisory Committee for their approval, since the tablet is to be erected inside the church and the petitioning for a Faculty is therefore necessary.

The granting of a Faculty is far from a formality—whilst in this case the Committee was in general agreement as to the quality of the design and the sensitivity of its intended position, one view expressed was that the design was ‘overpoweringly pompous’. Michael proposed two colours for the lettering (red and blue) but this was thought to be excessive, whilst alterations to the text matter included the replacement of ‘and also’ with ‘Also’. Since the quotation ‘An outstanding and outspoken judge’ could not be attributed to its source it was clear to the Committee that the inverted commas would be better omitted, allowing the statement to stand by itself as a considered opinion. There was also some objection to the space below the lettering which was judged to be ‘unfortunate’ and they asked for the lettering to be more evenly spaced to avoid this. Finally, the mantling in the heraldic element received criticism for being too ‘assertive’. Michael’s response to such uninformed arrogance is not on record.

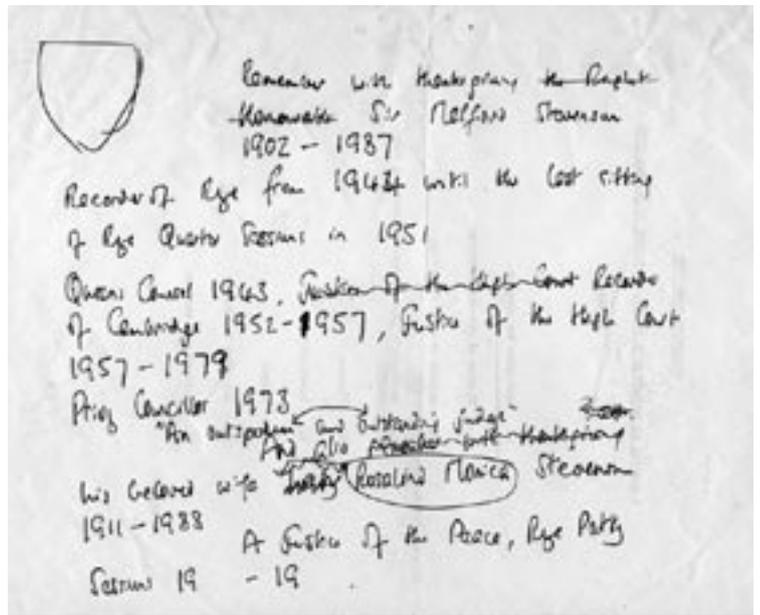
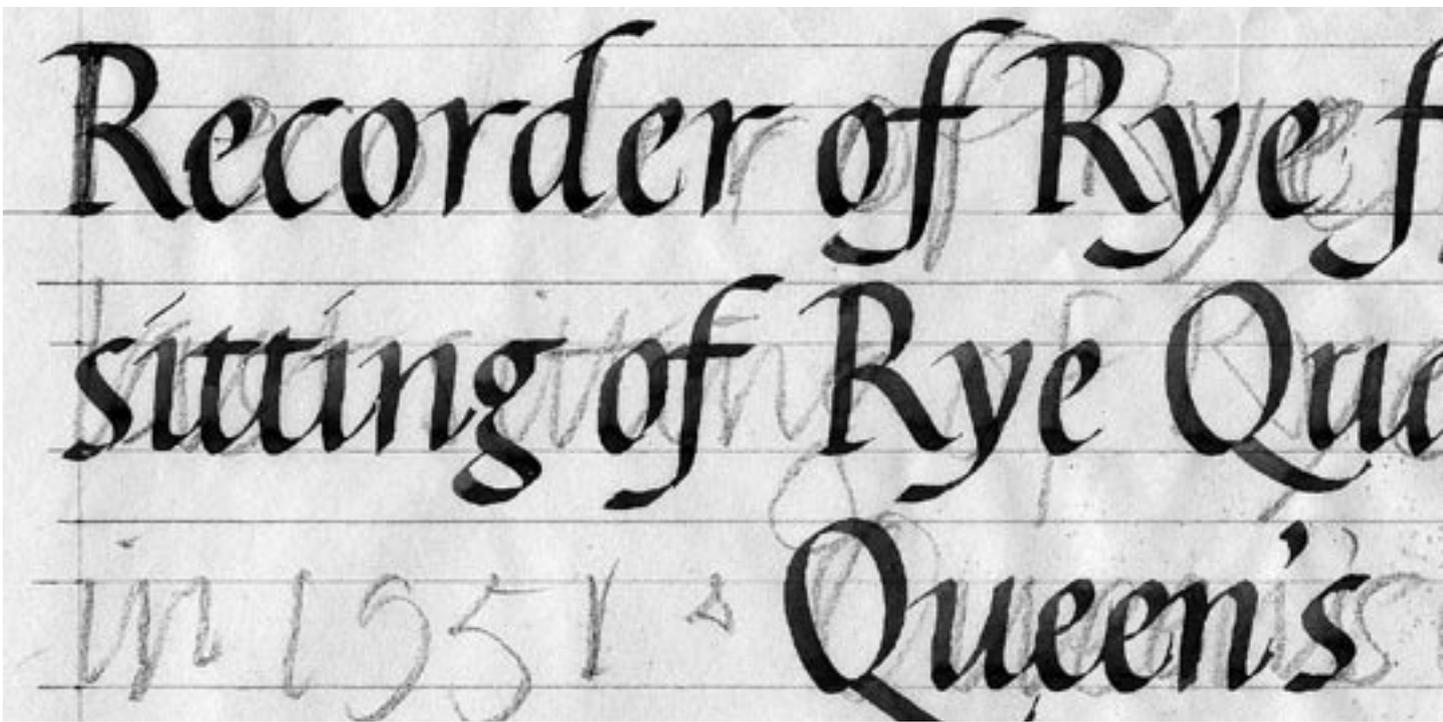


Fig. 1 (BELOW) Part of full-size trial showing detail of broad-edged pen lettering subsequently modified as a V-cut chisel-made form.

Fig. 2 (ABOVE) Text for the memorial tablet to Sir Melford Stevenson and Lady Stevenson as presented by the client.

Fig. 3 (OPPOSITE) Pencil sketch design sketch design at scale 1:4. (Drawing here reduced by 25%)







Remember with thanksgiving
**SIR MELFORD
STEVENSON**
1902-1987

*Recorder of Rye from 1944 until the last
sitting of Rye Quarter Sessions in 1957*

Kings Counsel 1943

Recorder of Cambridge 1952-1957

Justice of the High Court 1957-1979

Privy Councillor 1973

An outstanding and outspoken judge

Also his beloved wife
ROSALIND MONICA
1911-1988

*A Justice of the Peace
Rye Petty Sessions 1972-1981*

MICHAEL RENTON Memorial tablet to Sir Melford Stevenson and Lady Stevenson at St Mary's Church, Rye, East Sussex. Incised and painted lettering. Ulverston 'marble', 1991