

TO SET BEFORE A KING



Installed in the gardens of Highgrove earlier this year, Gloucester artist **DEBORAH HARRISON**'s stone carving of a lamprey pie honours the centuries-old custom of the city sending a pastry gift to the monarch

WORDS: Emma Bovill

They're parasitic flesh-eating jawless fish,' explains sculptor Deborah Harrison of the lamprey, a creature eel-like in appearance once common in the River Severn which lies at the heart of a local tradition dating back to before 1200. The city of Gloucester is believed to have first gifted a lamprey pie to King Henry I, a peculiar culinary ritual around 700 years older than the first recorded instance of the county's famous cheese-rolling event. 'Apparently their cooked flesh takes like beef,' adds Deborah with relish. 'Lamprey pies were given to gain favour from royalty or those in power.'

King Henry's proclivity for the fish would be his undoing. According to the chronicler Henry of Huntingdon, the king became unwell and died in 1135 after eating 'a surfeit of lampreys'. Despite this unfortunate outcome, the practice of sending a lamprey pie to the monarch on special occasions endured until the species declined, with the city once fined for failing to send one to King John.

The idea to set the custom in stone to mark the coronation of HRH King Charles III was thought up by Gloucester town crier Alan Myatt, holder of two Guinness World Records for his vocal craft. In March 2023 Paul James, ex-leader of Gloucester City Council, approached Gloucester-based Deborah Harrison who has her studio at



Lamprey Pie, a sculpture made from Cotswold limestone

City Works. 'We knew Paul's mother as she attended St Johns Methodist Church in Gloucester where my husband Tim was the minister,' explains Deborah. 'Tim also knew Paul through the Gloucester City Council management team. I wasn't familiar with the lamprey pie tradition and thought it a very strange request to carve a pie.'

'Once I understood what the lamprey pie was, I thought "Wow, I'm going to be part of that history".' Known for her mastery

of the direct carving method where the material informs the composition – and in Deborah's case often the subject – of the final piece, Deborah is also no stranger to responding to a specific brief. After submitting an initial design to Buckingham Palace for consideration in spring 2023, it would take until July 2024 for the royal household to confirm the King would be pleased to accept a carved lamprey pie. His Majesty had meanwhile been gifted a baked >

Deborah Harrison in her City Works studio

PHOTOGRAPHY BRAND



Valley of the Shadow,
marble sculpture

PHOTO: DEBORAH HARRISON

version on the occasion of his coronation created by students at National Star College in Ullenwood (supported by The Folk of Gloucester, Cinderhill Farm in St Briavels and Gloucester City Council) using pork and adorned with pastry lampreys.

'I didn't expect the project to come through, so I watched the coronation without it in mind,' recalls Deborah modestly. In the meantime, the creative energies of the Yorkshire-born sculptor, who was a founding member of the Cotswold Sculptors Association, would be focused on several major projects.

These included the unveiling of her poignant alabaster piece *The Hand of Fannie Storr*, in memory of the first director of nursing education in Gloucestershire, within the NHS 75 exhibition at Gloucester Cathedral in July 2023. It is now on permanent display at the Sandford Education Centre at Cheltenham Hospital.

The coronation year would also see Deborah complete *Fivexmore*, a sculpture of an infant in inky Irish Kilkeny limestone inspired by the Five X More black maternal health campaign and shocking findings of the 2018 MBRRACE-UK report. It can be seen within the maternity foyer of Gloucester Royal Hospital. She was also invited to the launch of Sir Malcolm Evans' book *Tackling Torture: Prevention in Practice* at the Bonavero Institute of Human Rights in Oxford in November 2023. Her startlingly captivating sculpture *Valley of the Shadow*, depicting a bound flogged figure, is owned by Sir Malcolm and galvanised him to write the book exploring his work as chair of the UN Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture, resulting in it featuring on the cover.

Following the long-awaited approval from Buckingham Palace for the lamprey pie sculpture in July 2024, the project got underway soon after. Deborah met Daniel McAuliffe from The King's Foundation, a charity which promotes nature, sustainability and traditional arts, and members of the Highgrove executive team on site in August 2024 to decide where in the gardens to put the carved lamprey pie. She then made a trip to Llanthony Secunda Priory in Gloucester in September to choose a stone to be upcycled into a sculpture fit for a king.

'The whole of the garden at Highgrove embodies the environmental considerations of materials so the idea of upcycling a stone came from the visit,' says Deborah. 'I began sculpting as a professional after taking part in the Gloucester Stone Carving Festival at Llanthony Secunda Priory organised by stonemason Carrie Horwood and she had been permitted to use some of the old priory stones, which are Cotswold limestone from a Painswick quarry, for us to carve. This inspired me to use one for the lamprey pie commission. Limestone has been used in building for millennia and is ideal for the outdoors. By an amazing coincidence Paul James is one of the trustees of the priory.'



Lamprey Pie presentation at Highgrove



PHOTO: DEBORAH HARRISON

The Hand of Fannie Storr,
alabaster sculpture

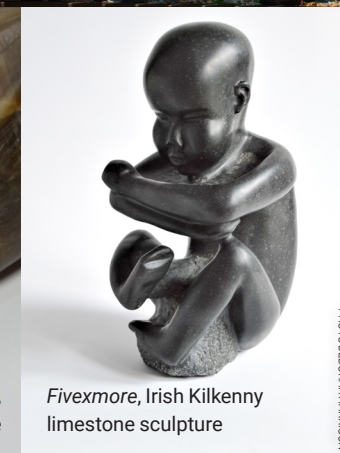


PHOTO: DEBORAH HARRISON

Fivexmore, Irish Kilkeny
limestone sculpture



Deborah Harrison outside her City Works studio.

PHOTO: PHIL SUMMERS

'The whole of the garden at Highgrove embodies the environmental considerations of materials so the idea of upcycling a stone came from the visit'



Collecting the elected stone from the priory in January 2025, Deborah completed the piece in 64 hours over 16 days working entirely by hand with a mallet and chisel using the same technique as Renaissance sculptors which date back to Biblical times.

'I had to make it square and level, carve the crown, the Gloucester coat of arms crest and the coronation year 2023, make the brick work, evoking the walls of Gloucester, and carve the lamprey,' remembers Deborah. 'I thought wrapping the lamprey around the piece, rather than just having it poking out of the top, would be interesting. It creates more drama and it's almost an anatomical study and education of what the curious fish is.'

The process wasn't without incident, reflecting the challenges – and rewards – of

working with stone as a medium, especially for an outdoor setting. 'There was a particular flaw in the shield where sand was pouring out of a hole,' says Deborah. 'I had partially fixed it but had to call on a friend to discuss how to make it an invisible repair. He did a great job. As I wet the sculpture, I also noticed that water pooled on the top of the crown and would eventually go green, so I had to decide where to put drainage holes to channel the water out and not spoil the piece.'

Over two years in the making and brought to fruition with the support of donations from local Gloucester businesses, *Lamprey Pie* was finally presented in the sunshine at Highgrove in front of dignitaries and to the booming proclamations of Alan Myatt on May 13. 'What was so special to me was

that I had a connection to all the people there, through different contexts,' enthuses Deborah. 'It was like "Team Gloucester" embodied. It was affirming for everyone and this wonderful sense of community. Gloucester is often overlooked, and it was like putting a flag in the ground for the city.'

At the time of writing there were plans underway to re-site the sculpture in a new student-built element within The Stumpery area of Highgrove Gardens, which draws inspiration from the Victorian tradition of growing ferns among upturned tree stumps. A scaled down version, produced from a 3D scan made by Gloucester Library, is on display at Llanthony Secunda Priory. ●

debsharrison-sculptor.co.uk

[@debsjharrison](https://www.instagram.com/debsjharrison)