

Romance in the stone

It's the only English quarry where you can try your hand at stone carving. Clive Fewins picks up a hammer

and high-quality teaching, can have few rivals. It also claims to be the only place in England where students can choose their own piece of stone and learn to carve it in the open air in the place that it came from.

Thomas Hardy called Portland "a peninsula carved by time out of a single stone". And it is the resonances that the quarry evokes, plus the magnificent coastal setting – a few bounds up the hill and the whole of Chesil Beach and Dorset's Jurassic Coast is laid out in front of you – that draw people back to the classes each summer.

One such habitue is 74-year-old retired architect Graham Beighton. "This is my 13th consecutive summer and I shall continue coming as long as I am able," he says, chipping away with a fine finishing tool at a meticulously formed Afro-style head.

Next to him, occupational therapy

teacher Catherine Wells, from Norwich, is working on a birdbath, with the carefully carved initials of her three grandchildren placed at the edge.

"I hadn't done stone carving before but I am amazed at what I have achieved. This is a place of extraordinary appeal – the island, the history, the brilliant skies and the overwhelming presence of stone," she says.

Another beginner was medical sciences lecturer Suzanne Edwards from London. "I took the train to Weymouth and cycled the remaining seven miles over here, so I could try and get the flavour of the place as I had heard it is so amazing," she says. "I wasn't sure what I was going to carve, but it has turned out to be the head of a whale emerging from the sea. Yesterday it

could have been an alligator or a donkey. I am really hooked!"

Course director Hannah Sofaer first came to the island 27 years ago as a Royal College of Art student and has taught at Tout every summer since then. She now lives on Portland.

"The history, the atmosphere and the pure light mean that many people find the island, as it is known here, very

HOW TO DO IT

To join a sculpting class contact the Portland Sculpture and Quarry Trust, Portland, Dorset on 01305 826 438 or visit www.learningstone.org. A five-day class, including tuition, tools and your finished carved piece of stone to take home, costs £250. A one-day course costs £50. There are places available this year until the end of September; courses begin again from May next year.

Sculpture club: from left, the tools of the trade; Tout Quarry; Clive Fewins gets to work on his stone; a previously-worked sculpture

special," she says. "Over the years we have managed to persuade a number of private and government-funded organisations of the truth of this and the Portland Sculpture and Quarry Trust – my employer – now have partnerships with a number of these bodies. This means the courses are financially secure and we are able to mount the permanent multimedia presentation in our headquarters near the quarry."

The Seeing Through Stone presentation blends the island's history with interviews. They include 100-year-old retired quarryman George Davy, who still comes to share his memories with students, and leading sculptor Antony Gormley, who carved one of the quarry's permanent pieces 26 years ago.

One of its high spots recreates "the music of the quarry". It features the work of percussionist Dame Evelyn Glennie, who created music from long pieces of sawn Portland stone mounted on a wooden frame constructed by Hannah's fellow teacher Paul Crabtree.

It is the "sound of the stone" – the clinking of hard tools on the material – that draws the attention of casual visitors. And it was the sound that led me near The Heights of Portland Hotel and followed the steep path to the large sheltered cleft where classes are held.

I had expected my 36-hour visit to the classes would be a "fly-on-the-wall" experience. However, I was wrong.

"How can you write about the experience of one of these courses

unless you actually carve something?" Hannah intones decisively.

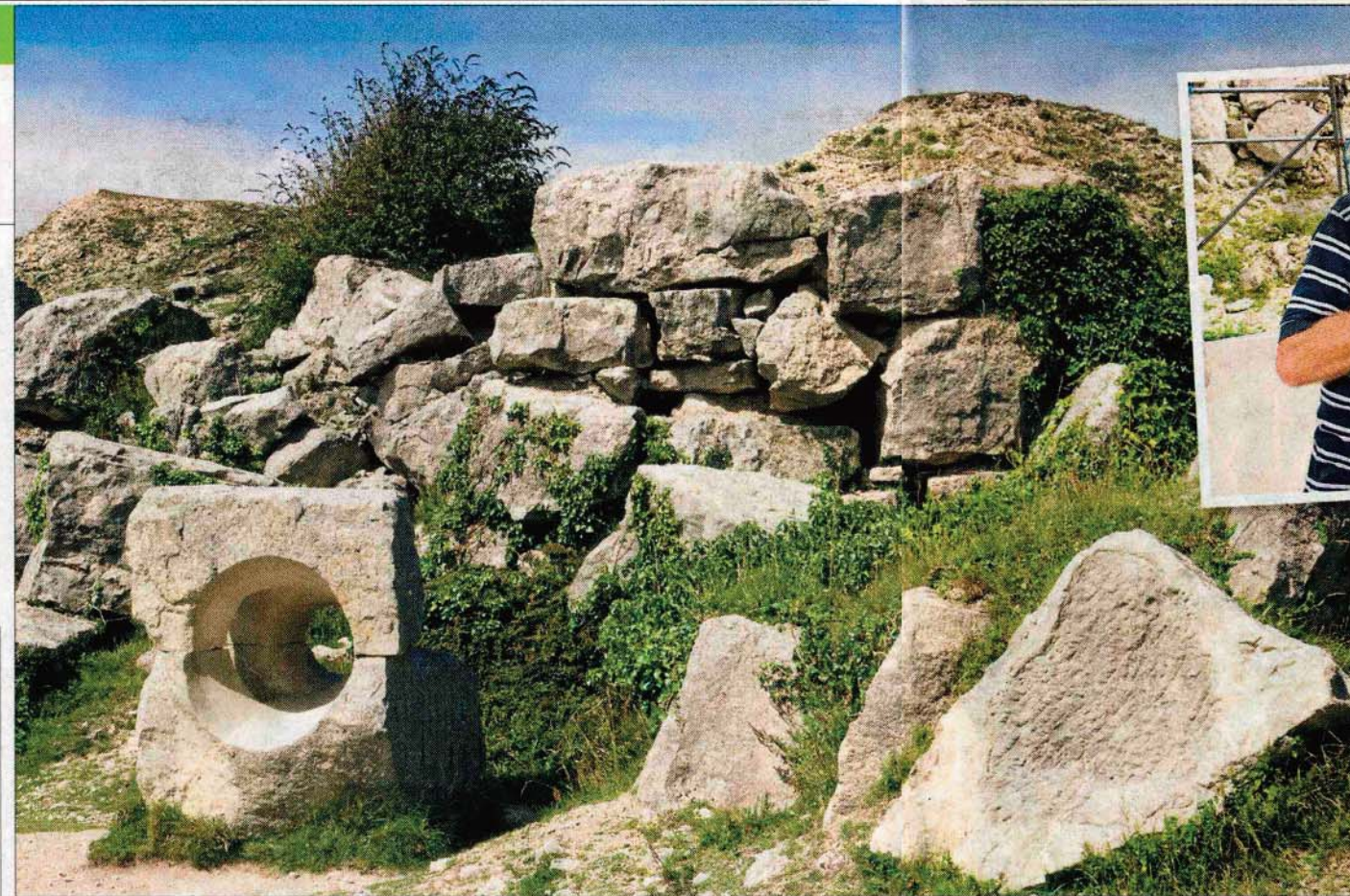
I choose a squarish block of sawn white stone and listen to Hannah's briefing on stone safety while I rack my sun-sodden brain for a subject. It doesn't take long to come as my thoughts turn constantly to my allotment. "I'll carve some vegetables," I say. With a pencil I draw a large curved leek onto the stone. Hannah sketches in some potatoes and a squash.

After a lightning demonstration of the six tools laid in front of me and a few deft demonstration blows from Hannah, I'm on my own. Within minutes the truth of her words – "you're a hundred miles from everywhere when you're carving" – prove correct. Bliss. However, one hour later it all evaporated.

"Oh, b-----, I've wrecked my potato." "Don't worry – just work on, you'll find another one: the stone will tell you what it wants to do," came the calm response of my tutor.

With a little help from Hannah another potato pops out of the stone. There are five of them in the finished article, plus a magnificent leek, complete with roots, and at the top a splendidly rotund squash – or is it a large tomato?

A week later I can scarcely believe what I managed to produce in the course of a few hours. The stone dust has finally disappeared from my hair, but a large hammer-induced bruise on my left knuckle serves as a reminder.



Telegraph online for more pictures of stone carving in Portland, go to www.telegraph.co.uk/outdoors



CHRIS JONES

