

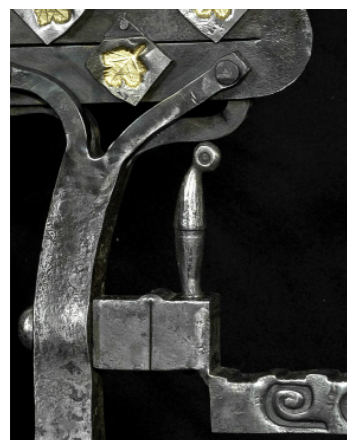
# Telling Stories

## Sam Sherborne

Each of Sam's works appear to be telling a story. The question is: "Are the details of those stories in Sam's mind or yours?"



"Lepping Stones" 1550 x 600 x 80mm Photo Sam Walker



I am an artist blacksmith from Sheffield. Since 2004, I've been based in a former pub called the Vulcan, which I converted into a forge and artists' studios. The building, squeezed between the gas works, the canal and the River Don in the heart of the old steel industry, served the dehydrated steelworkers with pints of low-alcohol lunchtime beer from the 1850s onwards.

The top floor of the pub was damaged in a nearby gas explosion in 1973 and subsequently removed. Now my workshop is in the vaulted beer cellars, with several studios on the upper floors rented out to other artists.

The forge is in an extension I constructed to house my 2cwt Massey power hammer. I had to build the extension round the hammer, and I'm not sure anyone will ever be able to get it out! The local council awarded me 'hammer rights', meaning I



can legitimately make plenty of noise.

When I purchased the Massey, there were lots of things wrong with it. I was able to mend it and understand its massive potential, particularly for making and using spring swage tools, thanks to the kindness of various smiths, mainly Neil Hinchliffe, Dave Norton, and, from Ridgeway Forge, Andrew Renwick

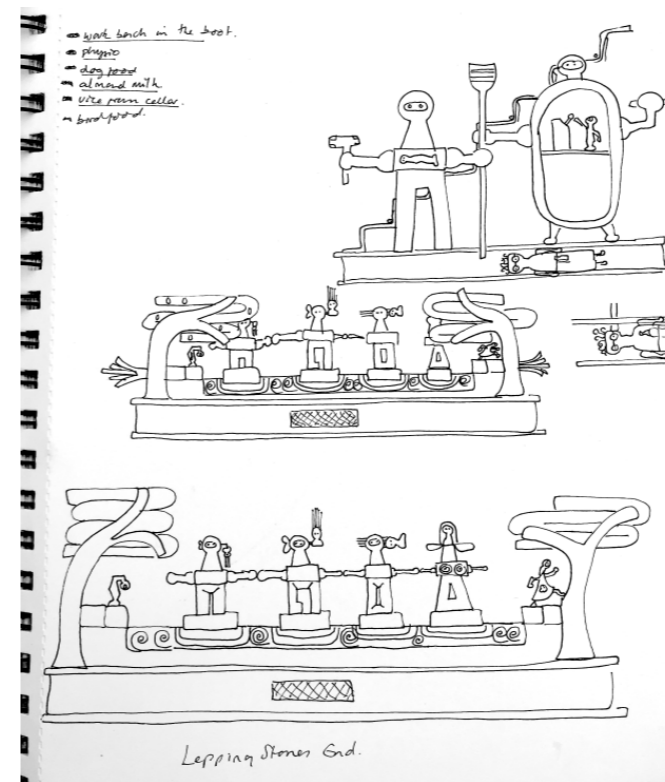
and Richard Lewis. Over the years, I've been very fortunate to benefit from contact with these smiths and their inheritance of Sheffield's blacksmithing wisdom.

Although the forge is cramped, with low-arched ceilings, it's well-equipped. Every corner is filled with machines I've collected over the years, some of them of more practical use than others! This makes it a far cry from where I started out, in a shed I constructed in the corner of a London scrapyard back in the 1980s, thanks to an amiable scrap dealer.

At the time, I was studying at the London College of Furniture, courtesy of the Greater London Council. Under their scheme for the unemployed, for the princely sum of £1 you could attend as many adult-education classes as you could fit into a week. I managed to study furniture making, sculpture, pottery, furniture restoration, metalwork and welding. The trouble was, you couldn't learn blacksmithing.

Wanting to roll some steel bar for a coffee table, I ended up at the door of the forge at Kew Bridge Steam Museum. Nick Vester, who became my first mentor, was running the forge at that time. Rather than take my commission, he just pointed at the cart tyre rollers and said, "There you are, just do it yourself."

It transpired that the 'rent' on the forge was to keep it running and operating as a public spectacle at the weekends.



By taking on the weekends, I got free use of the forge. Nick gave me initial instruction on things like how to keep a small, clean fire, how not to mark the anvil with a hammer, and how to judge when the temperature of the metal was right. Then I was left to my own devices. So, I learnt forging with an audience. Troops of boy scouts, babies in push chairs, steam engine enthusiasts, they were all there to watch me burn myself and drop things on the floor.

As I needed somewhere to forge during the week, my shed in the scrapyard gave me a place to experiment and make candlesticks and furniture. Eventually the shed was demolished to make way for a gleaming white apartment block, and I was able to move into the Museum forge full-time. Over several years, I developed a viable business, producing my own range of furniture, candlesticks and mannequin stands and also taking commissions.

Although I was able to make a living in this way, I actually wanted to be an artist. This realisation stemmed from before my time at college, when I'd worked as an assistant in an art gallery selling Hindu and Buddhist antiquities. There, I'd decided I didn't want to sell art, but to make it. However, I figured it was easier to survive financially as a furniture-maker. A move away from London in 1995 meant I could get my overheads down and have the freedom to experiment with making art.

Carrying out the change from being a designer-maker in London with a full order book to an isolated artist in rural Yorkshire was challenging. I knew I wanted to make art, but how did you do that? Was art more than making a beautiful object that didn't have a function? I needed to reinvent myself, because the happiness I'd got previously from 'flow' had dried up. By flow, I mean when time goes quickly, so you don't even notice the hours going by, you have a sense of calm and peace, losing yourself in the process. I had to rekindle that flow by making something different, with less batch production, something that had more meaning.

While I was trying to work out the way forward, what helped was remembering that even the greats could find the process difficult. I had a memory of hearing Albert Paley say in a

lecture at the first International Festival of Iron in 1988, that his workshop, his staff and the metal were all predictable, but what he struggled to manage was his own mind.

Gradually I realised that, for me, art meant telling stories about things that were important to me, processing information to model and clarify my ideas. My first successful piece of art was stimulated by finding an audio cassette tape, which my deceased father had made many years previously. He had been taping syrupy jazz from the radio and managed to capture the incidental sounds of himself breathing, typing, turning pages, sighing and lighting cigarettes. An installation, "Still Life in My Father's Kitchen", grew from this. Alongside the audio track, I exhibited wall sculptures depicting his talismanic objects, from a child's viewpoint: beer mug, typewriter, ash tray, spectacles. I 'drew' the objects in forged steel and inlaid them into wood, either with a router or pressing them in red hot with a fly press. The installation also included his manual typewriter on a table with the same bench he had sat on, and the public were invited to type their own reactions to the art. The complex range of typed responses I received was very moving. The installation helped evoke emotional memories of visitors' relationships with their own fathers, both positive and negative.



"Still Life in My Father's Kitchen"

Through experimenting with abstract pieces, I realised my work needed to be figurative, to have the figure as a tool or unit of the storytelling. I did like some artists' abstract works, for example, Chillida's monumental chunks of iron that curve and wrap around each other, but I wanted the meaning to be more obvious somehow. Abstract as an approach was too loose, asking too much of the viewer and of myself as a maker. I did go on to incorporate some abstraction, almost to set the mood, but the main ingredients of each piece were figurative.

My motivation now, alongside developing my practical skills, is to achieve flow, process ideas and memories, create something that might chime with other people's experience, and make something beautiful.

In the last seven years, my themes can be roughly categorised into either

'family' (memories, emotions and dynamics) or 'everyday', including the scourge of modern technology, death, work, impoverished modern-day ritual, and worry.

My method starts with a lot of drawing and sketching quickly, to produce sketches which are spontaneous, imprecise and lively. Then, I go through the sketchbook and anything which still resonates, days or weeks later, I draw full size in chalk on the bench. I try to incorporate the sketches' qualities in the

# Telling Stories

continued

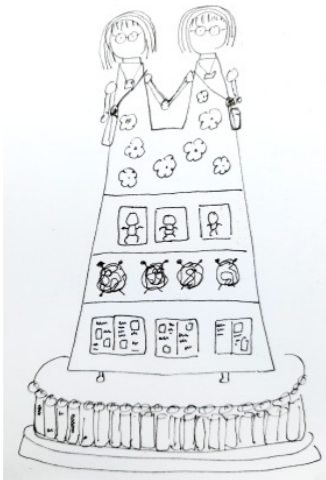
metalwork, which is made precisely but hopefully captures the immediacy of the drawing.

There aren't many truly straight lines in my sculptures because I sketch freehand. Getting up very early, sometimes even at four in the morning, is when I can do sketching most effectively, when I've got the world to myself.

I try to do all the bigger forgings in one go, with a friend, an experienced blacksmith, holding the tools under the power hammer. The gas forge is lit and is filled up with all the various components. I then make a lot of noise for most of the day but try to keep it as quick as possible for the other people in the building. Cups of coffee two floors up ripple with the vibrations! The heads and bodies of the figures are made with spring swage tools. Texturing and stamping are done with the single blow facility (high pressure) under the Massey, or for smaller versions, under a 10-ton hydraulic or fly press.

I spend many hours making punches or stamps for repeated elements, for example the balls of wool and babies in "Twins". Even though these are case hardened, they have a finite life under the Massey, as they lose their sharpness.

As well as steel, I sometimes like to incorporate some brass, copper and gilding. In my most recent pieces, I like to work most or all of the surfaces, so none of the steel looks as if it did straight from the stockholder. Often things need to be done twice, because the energy of the sketch has not made it into the sculpture. Things have become too precise, too right-angled, too straight, too laboured. Sometimes when a sculpture's concept involves a strong emotion for me, such as anger, I can use this as an energy to power through protracted intensive hours of making. Recently, I've developed a personal iconography, inspired by



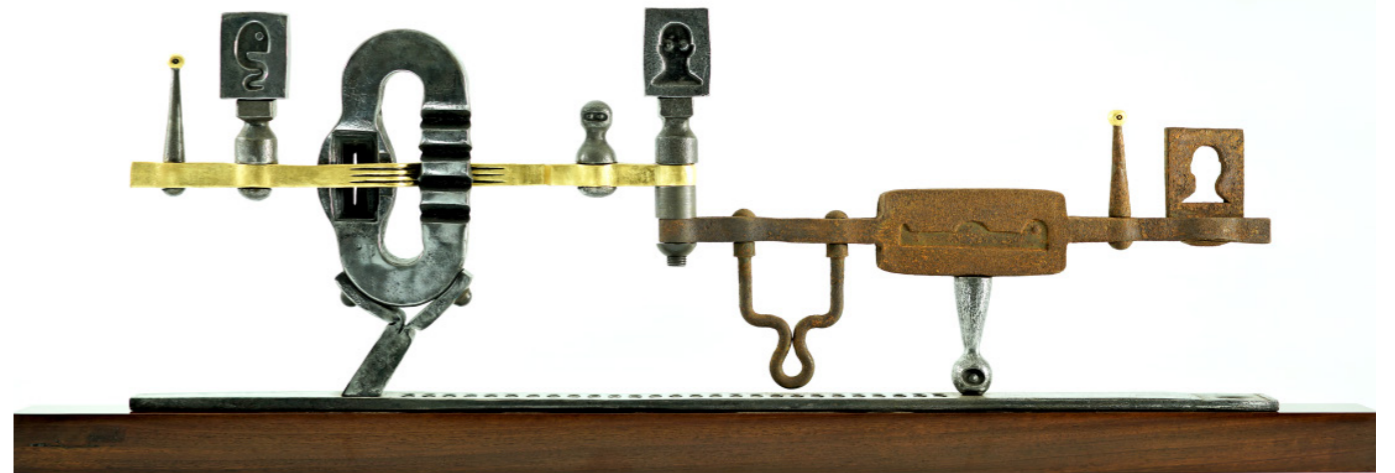
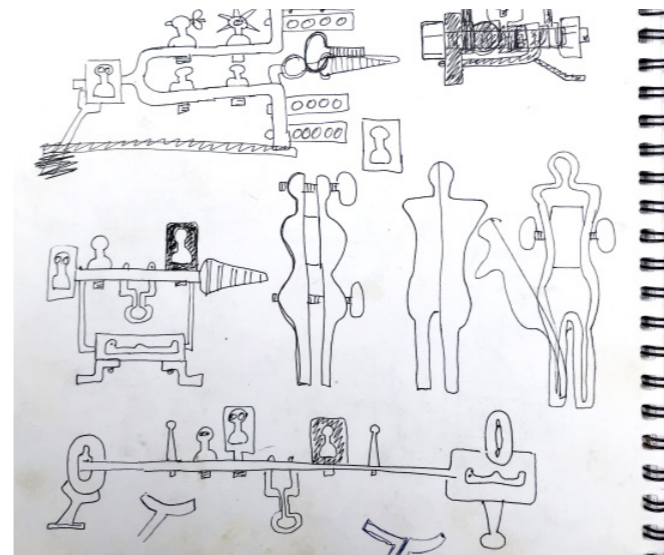
"Twins" 400 x 450 x 300mm

Photo Sam Walker

the Buddhist and Hindu bronzes I encountered in my first job. The same figures reappear in many of my sculptures. Having an element of humour is important to me, even though some of the subject matter is quite serious. Bringing together opposites, such as humour and despair, creates a tense, mysterious atmospheric alloy. I aim for the sculptures not to be too clunky, with fixed, prescribed meanings. The meaning is mostly quite specific for me, but not meant to be too concrete for the viewer; they can make their own stories up. I particularly like the work of Paula Rego, where the stories behind her paintings are not clear. In fact, when I have found out the meaning behind one of her pieces, it's lost some of its magic and power.



"Vehicles"  
650 x 400 x 50mm  
Photo Sam Walker



"Life Recycling" 1070 x 370 x 60mm  
Photo's Sam Walker



"Linkage" 400 x 400 x 170mm

Photo Sam Walker

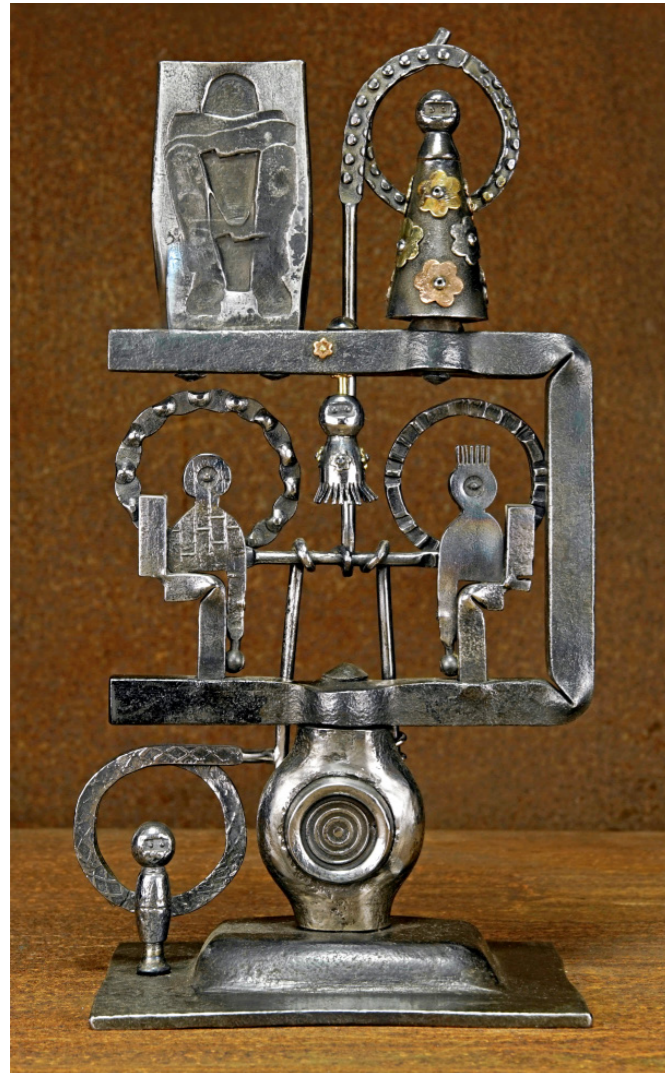


"Linkage" detail, "Pram Babies"

Photo Sam Walker

# Telling Stories

*continued*



"Talking Frame" 180 x 350 x 140mm Photo Sam Walker



"Migrating Soul" 140 x 370 x 140mm Photo Sam Walker



"Self Portrait" 470 x 300 x 150mm



"Wife and Welder" 320 x 370 x 100mm Photo Sam Walker

My most recent reinvention of myself is as a memorial maker. My inspiration has come from wayside shrines in India, which appear as you turn a corner, giving a sense of history and place, bringing unexpected mystery and energy, and honouring the dead. My first memorial commemorated the soldiers of the Sheffield Pals regiment who died in World War 1. Street trees were planted for them by their local community a hundred years ago, which Sheffield City Council controversially planned to cut down at the time of the centenary. I made and installed a 'guerrilla' memorial to highlight the fact that each beautiful plane tree represented the life of a young man. My next memorial is located on the exterior wall of my studio block. This remembers the six workers who died in the nearby 1973 gas explosion: two welders, a crane-driver, a degreaser, and two workmen. The wording, entreating a passer-by to pay homage to the dead, echoes the epitaph of the fallen Spartans at Thermopylae. My plan is now to create further memorials around the city, starting with a memorial to William Plommer, who was killed standing up to a violent gang in 1920s Sheffield.



"Sheffield Pals" 150 x 35 x 35mm each



"Sheffield Pals Memorial"



"Gas Explosion Memorial" 400 x 450 x 40mm

