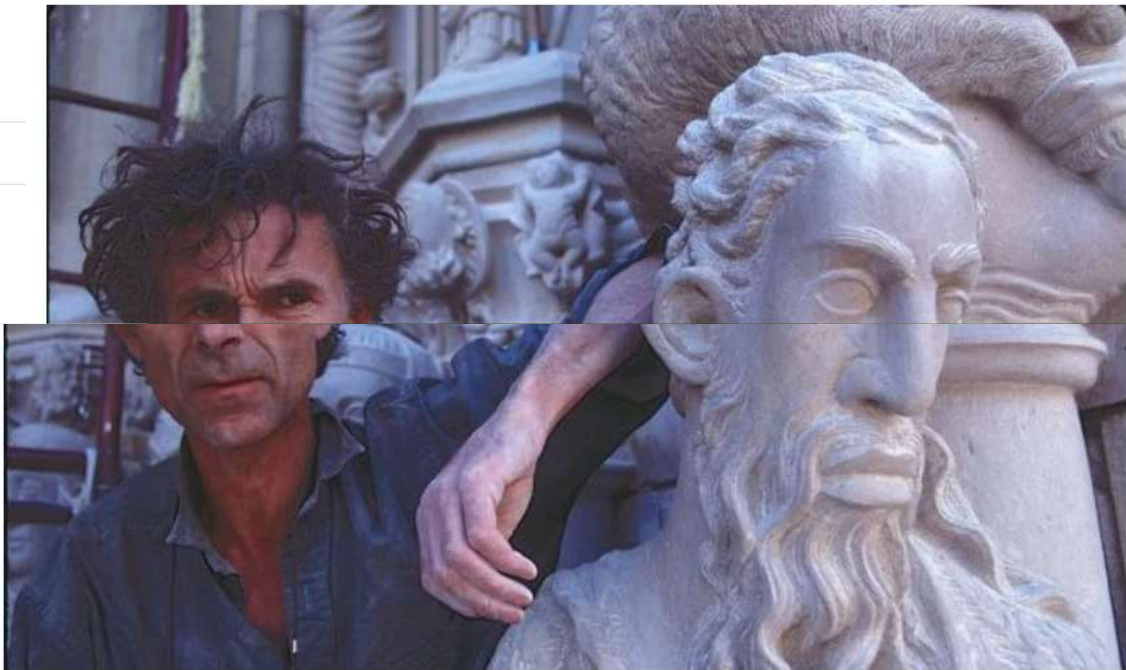


# Simon Verity, master sculptor who added to Gothic cathedrals and revived the rococo art of grottoes – obituary

'Distracting tourists, the bone-chilling feel of a chisel in December, pigeon dung – all these stonecutters have known from time immemorial'

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Simon Verity with Moses on the Portal of Paradise of the Cathedral of St John the Divine, New York, 1995 | CREDIT: Robert F Rodriguez

Simon Verity, who has died aged 79, was a master conjurer of stone.

As a sculptor he contributed to cathedrals both old and young, from survivors of the middle ages such as Exeter and Wells to the unfinished 19th-century behemoth of St John the Divine in New York, as well as country churches and dozens of great gardens.

He also resurrected the art of grotto-making, dormant since the 18th century, creating headily sublime aqueous caverns out of tufa and shells, pearls and quartz, feathers and ferns, cameos and masks, knitted together with cheaper scavengings: fragments of mirror, common coal, antlers and mares' teeth.



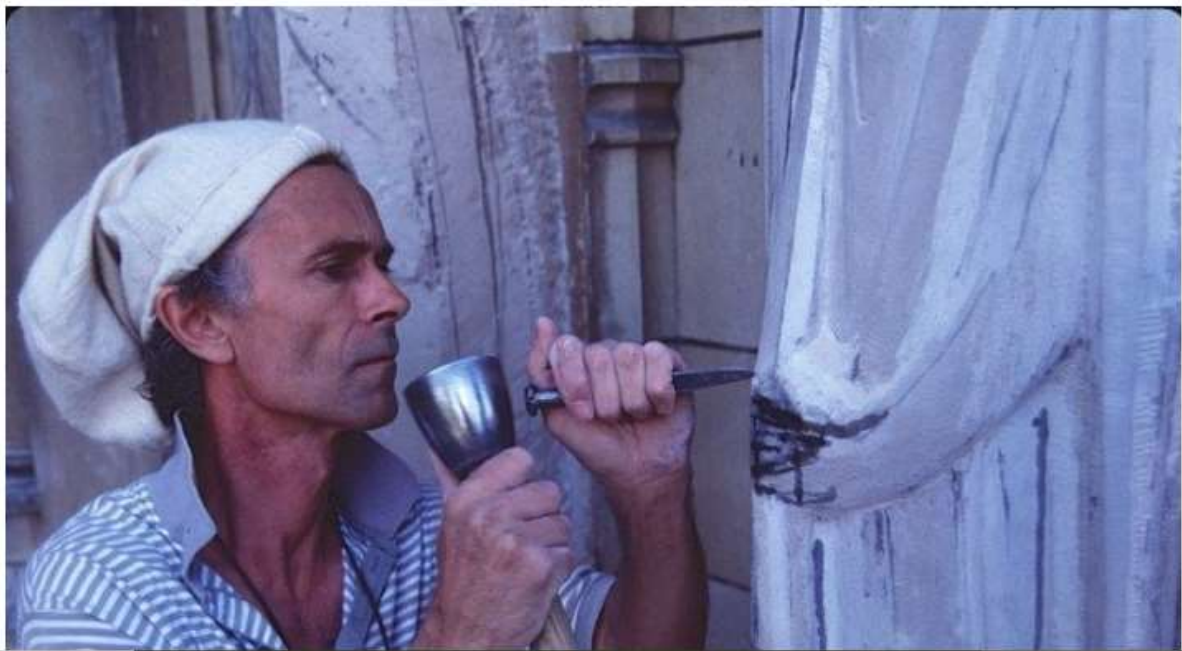
The grotto at Goldney Hall in Bristol | CREDIT: SWNS

He made memorials for the notable long-dead, like Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral – carved in front of some 10,000 daily visitors – and Lancelot Andrewes, as well as such eclectic 20th-century figures as John Betjeman, Lady Diana Cooper, Nancy Mitford, Lady Walton (to whose Ischian garden La Mortella he contributed), James Pope-Hennessy, Lynn Redgrave and her mother Rachel Kempson, Rosemary Verey, and “Master”, the 10th Duke of Beaufort.

Various, to boot, a concrete poet, mosaicist, graffitist, sometime quarry owner, teacher, polemicist, calligrapher and “peculiar” printer, Verity was one of the most protean artists of our time.

He was also counter-cultural. Stone was not then fashionable, concrete and resin being in the ascendant, so Verity became his own apprentice, with “the rich and varied geology of Britain” his incentivising “carrot”, he said.

He disliked power tools, preferring to make, he estimated, “many millions” of blows with an arc-shaped hammer, just like the one depicted in the hands of a stonemason in a 13th-century stained-glass window at Chartres. “What a welcome lack of progress one enjoys in the arts!” he told *The New Yorker*.



Stone dust was in his hair, in his ragamuffin clothes, and in his blood. The Verities hailed from Beauvais, famous for its cathedral, the highest nave ever built, and it was into a three-generation dynasty of architects that Simon was born on July 1 1945 in Amersham, Buckinghamshire. His father Terence also worked as an art director on films by Alfred Hitchcock and Guy Hamilton.

Elfin in build and puckish in temperament, Simon emerged from Marlborough a turbulent, “green-faced” youth, he recalled, and slipped into an informal apprenticeship to his great uncle, the architect Oliver Hill, at Daneway, his idyllic 14th-century manor deep in the Golden Valley outside Sapperton in the Cotswolds, where the Arts and Crafts movement was then in its final flowering.

Verity was invited for the weekend and stayed for five years, emerging indelibly stamped with what the critic Alan Powers called Daneway’s “distinctive conjunction of gaiety and piety, perfectionism and improvisation”.

Hill had been a protégé of Lutyens, and had worked with Eric Gill, Eric Ravilious, Edward Bawden and Frank Pick. He and his younger wife Titania (who was also Verity’s second cousin) set Simon to work mashing up fibres in the bath to make paper.

They encouraged his letterwork and propelled him into such formative company as the Welsh poet and artist David Jones; Professor Robert Baker, the pioneer stone conservationist at Wells Cathedral, where Verity would later carve a king; the Arts and Crafts architect Norman Jewson; and Pamela Tudor-Craig, medievalist, mystic and scholar, who called Hill’s setup at Daneway “magic on a scale as never before or since – bizarre, magnificent, crazy, culturally unbelievably rich”.

Others who made a lasting impression on Verity were Michael Schneider, the sacred geometer who taught him the “guild secret which had spread like the internet across Europe in the 13th century”, and the concrete poet Dom Sylvester Houédard of Prinknash Abbey, who received him into the Catholic church, when he thought of becoming a monk.

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It was the garden designer Rosemary Verey who commissioned some of his first works. "I was flattered by princes," Verey would later say, and soon counted among his patrons Prince Charles (for whom he carved "whales for the Waleses"), Jacob Rothschild, Elton John and Roy Strong (who commissioned him to carve the tendril-sprouting lettering for the V&A's Henry Cole Wing), as well as architects and designers, local gentry, and many a mourner looking to commission an eloquent tombstone.

Verey would fetch Purbeck stone on his BSA motorcycle, wedging his prize on a straw cushion on the petrol tank "with me hanging on horizontally like a steeplechaser", he recalled. He befriended the Purbeck quarryman Trev Haysom, whose family had passed down the rights to dig stone for 11 generations.

Verey had inherited from Oliver Hill and Eric Gill a Gothic respect for craft and communitarian work; when he laid his chisel on the fabric of a cathedral, he knew he was "stepping in the footsteps of giants". At Wells he learnt how to think like a medieval mason, striving "for simplicity, for legibility". At Exeter he added, 90 feet up, a nude figure of St Peter the Fisherman with his net. "The higher the figure, the less the muscles were to be apparent, as they bunch like sausages," he noted.

He was equally at home in the perversity of the rococo. His fascination with grottoes was kindled in the late 1970s by a 17th-century one at Schloss Hellbrunn, made for the Prince-Archbishop of Salzburg. With the shell artist Diana Reynell, his own children and a shifting band of other collaborators ("come and play," was his typical invitation), Verey conjured up new grottoes at Leeds Castle in Kent and for millionaire villas at Fort Worth and Corfu, and resurrected abandoned ruins, at Painshill, at Hampton Court House, at Goldney in Bristol, and at his old school of Marlborough, for which he fortuitously found a giant clam shell, essential for the fountain, on sale in Harrods for 50 pounds.

In a rare moment of boastfulness, he claimed that his one genius was for tracking down strange materials. He was also thrilled with the acquisition of a Putzmeister gun, which shot gloops of concrete, Wallace and Gromit-style.

The heart of his practice was the Arts and Crafts schoolhouse in Rodbourne, near Chippenham, where he lived with his wife Judith, an artist and craftswoman, and their children. There was no divide between art and life: gravestones, lathes and printing presses littered the house and everything, even the bread, was covered in stone dust.

The garden designer Isabel Bannerman recalled it, agog, as the ideal of a William Morris life, attained under a high, barge-boarded roof, with their “elfin children ranging like marmosets... they made and drank from horn beakers” and Simon wore “dung-coloured jumpers” knitted by Judith out of yarn from their sheep. The Verities “were hard to pin down, obtuse, always making a joke of everything, never pompous or boring about what mattered. Everything was vital and simple and charged with the energy of making things.”

His later work embraced both public works, like the fountains in the American Academy in Rome, and spiritual, witty, humble, inventive private commissions, for statues, gravestones and sundials. He also designed labyrinthine interiors with secret gib doors, sliding screens, mirrored illusions and ladders, “like a bird’s nest,” he would say.

In despair after the rejection of three of his statues from the pediment of the neo-Palladian Henbury Hall, in Cheshire, Verity “foundered into a morass of self loathing” and departed suddenly for New York in 1989, never to return – except to die.



Verity in New York, with his carving of Deborah, 1996 | CREDIT: Robert F. Rodriguez

There he was engaged on the “Portal of Paradise”, the central doorway of the Cathedral of St John the Divine on the edge of Harlem, unfinished since the 19th century. With his team high on the scaffold, Verity became “the most photographed person in the world,” he recalled. “The distractions of tourists, the bone-chilling feel of a chisel in your hand in December, the dust and pigeon dung blowing endlessly in your eyes in the fall winds – all these stonecutters have known from time immemorial.”

His patron was the humanist Dean, Jim Morton, who “intended to change the world, and very nearly did”. Morton had marched with Martin Luther King, and was a friend of Nelson Mandela; his vision was to employ youths from the surrounding New York ghettos to cut stone under the supervision of English masters. Verity and his masons “assiduously read our bibles, which gave us an unwarranted reputation for saintliness”.

Noah’s face was modelled on Dean Morton’s, with his Welsh corgi at his feet; the fall of Jerusalem was figured as New York City, with mushroom clouds over the World Trade Center, prefiguring the September 11 attacks by a decade. (Later, in the memorial garden to the British victims of 9/11 by Julian and Isabel Bannerman, Verity would carve the lettering: a ribbon of English county names.)

But the 1990 slump left Dean Morton’s dream harried by “financial furies”. Down to one assistant, Verity toiled away for years, delivering millions of hammer blows with his surgeon’s assurance, striking gaiety, winning charm and creative obstinacy, until in 1997 the Portal of Paradise was complete.

Simon Verity is survived by his second wife, the graphic designer Martha, née Finney, and by a daughter and two sons of his first marriage to the living artist Judith, née Mills.

**Simon Verity, born July 1 1945, died August 11 2024**