

Kenneth Eager - obituary

16 December 2013 • 17:34 pm

Kenneth Eager, who has died aged 84, was a carver in stone and wood, and one of the last craftsmen to have worked in the famous guild established at Ditchling in Sussex by Eric Gill.

Gill (1882-1940) was associated with the Arts and Crafts movement, and in 1907 moved his letter-cutting workshop from Hammersmith to Ditchling, a village at the foot of the South Downs. He was soon also sculpting and engraving, and in 1920 — with his assistant Joe Cribb, and two other craftsmen, Hilary Pepler and Desmond Chute — he formed the Guild of St Joseph and St Dominic. This was an attempt to revive the spirit of the medieval guilds; only Roman Catholic men could join, and they had to be lay members of the Dominican order.



Kenneth Eager in his workshop at Ditchling (MICHAEL HARVEY)

Over the next few years the founders were joined by other craftsmen such as a

carpenter, weaver and a silversmith. In 1924, however, Gill and Pepler fell out, and Gill decamped to Wales. Ten years later Pepler himself was asked by the community to leave after he had installed electrical machinery and employed someone who was not a Catholic.

Kenneth Eager arrived in 1945, becoming one of two assistants to Joe Cribb. The letter-cutter Michael Harvey, who came to Ditchling nine years later, wrote a memoir in which he recalled that “the cluster of workshops on Ditchling Common [was] a rather subdued place, with various elderly craftsmen seemingly engaged in quite routine work. Some were quite dotty, like Philip Hagreen, a very tall Bernard Shaw-like figure whose bicycle needed a double crossbar. He went on at length about the evils of linoleum (I must have innocently mentioned linocuts to this wood-engraver).”

The appearance of the stone shop, Harvey recorded, was ageless: “There was no machinery. The tools were all the traditional kind used by stone workers down the ages. Only the presence of an electric light bulb gave a clue that this was the 20th century. Around the shop, stones were in various stages of completion, examples of finished work hung on the whitewashed walls; an alphabet, a panel from one of the 14 Stations [of the Cross], the head of a saint.”



Stations of the Cross, carvings by Kenneth Eager

It was in this spartan environment (there was no running water) that Eager plied his trade. Although his commissions were civic as well as ecclesiastical, his bread-and-butter work was tombstones and memorial stones, and his handiwork can be seen at churches across Sussex. As well as carving all the letters, he also specialised in heraldic devices. Church restoration was another source of income (among other projects, he assisted Cribb on repair work at Canterbury Cathedral).

Eager did not live at Ditchling — the Guild was not a commune — but travelled daily to Ditchling from his home in Brighton, on the other side of the South Downs.

Among other notable projects, he carved the headstone for Sir Norman Hartnell, the Queen’s dressmaker, who is buried in the churchyard at Clayton, West Sussex. He also worked on the Pelham Memorial in Falmer parish church, which names the dead from the two World Wars; and he carved a baptismal font for Telscombe Catholic church. He contributed to the Stations of the Cross (carved

in sycamore and walnut) for St John's Seminary at Wonersh in Surrey .

Kenneth Eager was born in Brighton on January 2 1929, one of three children of the town's registrar of births, deaths and marriages, and educated at a local private school, the Xaverian College, where he converted to Roman Catholicism. His headmaster, perceiving Kenneth's artistic talent, suggested that he apply to the Guild, which he joined on leaving school aged 16.

Eager remained at the Guild after Cribb's death in 1967, and was still there when it was finally wound up in 1989. By then he was working alongside a silversmith, signwriter, carpenter, calligrapher and weaver.

On retiring, he and his wife lived for 11 years at Uzès, a town near Nimes in southern France, where Eager occupied himself tending a beautiful garden overlooking a valley. When this became too much for him, they moved to Malta, where at the time their son was posted by the Diplomatic Service.

Kenneth Eager married, in 1954, Audrey Sumner, who survives him with their son.

Kenneth Eager, born January 2 1929, died September 22 2013