

Chapter 5

Carved Gauged Brickwork

It is unfortunate that very little external brick carving is worked on our buildings today. Heavy patterning and moulding is now all but obsolete. There has been something of a revival of the carving of standard stock bricks laid in a normal gauged cement:sand:lime mortar by such eminent sculptors as the late Arthur Ayres, Eric Gill and Walter Ritchie and, in recent years, by Richard Kindersley. This, however, has been mainly of the sculptured low-relief variety and rarely the architectural carving of days gone by (Figure 5.1).

Gauged brickwork was, and still is, a most admirable medium for carving. As demonstrated in Figure 5.2, the soft effect produced is



Figure 5.1 A very fine example of a carved gauged brick frieze on a public house in Glasshouse. (F. Lynch)



Figure 5.2 Gauged tablet carved by Gerard Lynch.

equal to that of modelling. Only the very best ‘rubbers’ were used and having been perfectly squared, were usually set in a mixture of dried or baked white lead and liquid shellac, or whiting (crushed chalk) and patent knotting after being rubbed together to form the tightest of joints. This matrix set very rapidly and soon became very hard. The *in situ* carving could then be accomplished without fear of any bricks dislodging or any small corners falling out where the carving cuts across the joints. This bedding material was in fact so tenacious that the brick itself would part before the joint would give way. Mixing it usually took place on a flat stone or slate, ensuring all the ingredients were well mixed in, with no grit being left, till it was the consistency of cream. The bricks would then be dusted clean and soaked as normal, and the brick to be set given a thin butter joint and laid by being rubbed down as tight as possible to the brickwork. Some craftsmen, alternatively, preferred to spread this matrix out onto the preceding brick. This type of mortar, once it sufficiently stiffened, cut away cleanly and hardened quite quickly.

The joints were extremely fine (1 mm or even less), the object being to make a homogeneous mass of bricks to carve. The joints though form an interesting pattern and care had to be taken to accommodate the design to suit the bricks; the bonding of which must have called for considerable forethought and ingenuity to avoid exposure of the

vertical joints where carved back. The bricklayer had to be careful to ensure he made every joint full so that there would be no weakness in the work and such that it did not affect the aesthetics of the finished carving. The architectural design of the feature, its overall size and how the work to be carved was to be built into the surrounding brickwork would determine if the work was to be ‘bench-set’ as a ‘lump’ for later bedding into place like a large unit of masonry or built *in situ*. Carved brickwork could be made to stand out in relief by as much as 450 mm though, in this case, it was often preferred to use large ‘brick lumps’ since their use allowed many joints to be eliminated (Figure 5.3).

Brick carving was rarely the work of the bricklayer, but was generally the preserve of the ‘trade carver’, who could work in brick, stone or wood. Carving requires the ability to naturally think and create three-dimensionally, which is part of the training of a carver. Here was a most prestigious artisan and highly skilled craftsman with whom the virtuoso bricklayer enhanced many an ambitious façade. Working to drawings, the carver chiselling and filing these soft bricks



Figure 5.3 An excellent example of seventeenth-century gauged work: the head and wings of a cherub, or ‘Amorini’, in the hood of a niche, surmounted by an egg and dart label course. The carving is from a window pediment originally from a house in Enfield (d.1675) and now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. (Board of Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum)