

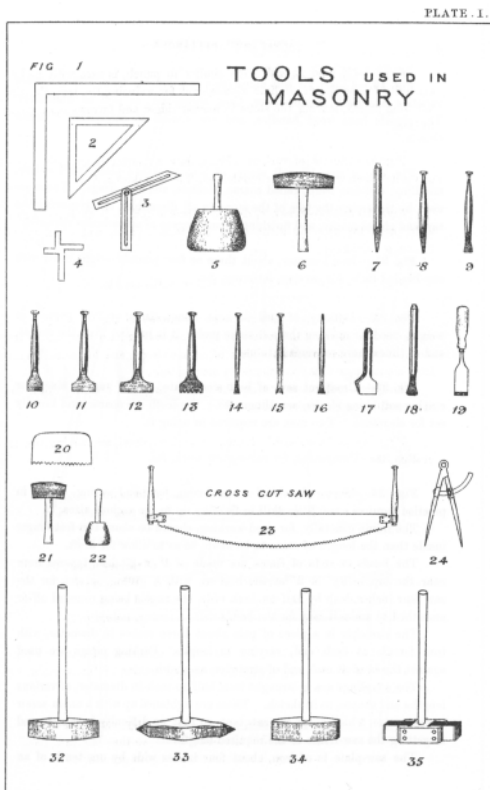
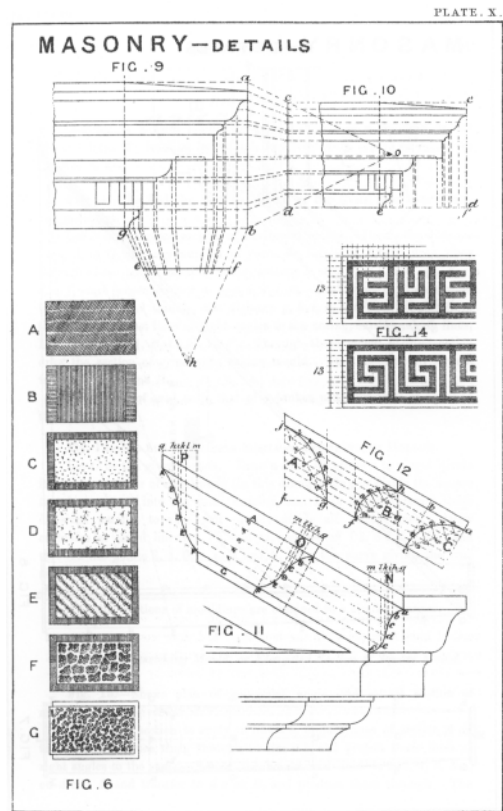
Book Review: Practical Masonry by William R. Purchase (1904)

Reprint published by Donhead Press, £35.00
 www.donhead.com
 ISBN 978 1 873394 86 1

This is not a review in the usual sense. I am by no means a practicing stone mason and definitely not qualified to comment on the accuracy of the work. Donhead specialise in reprinting classic works in the building/ architecture/ conservation field at prices well below the cost of the originals. As such the value of this work to trainees and apprentices is already well established.

My comments are aimed at TATHS members and other well informed members of the public who wish to increase their knowledge of the subject without breaking the bank in the process.

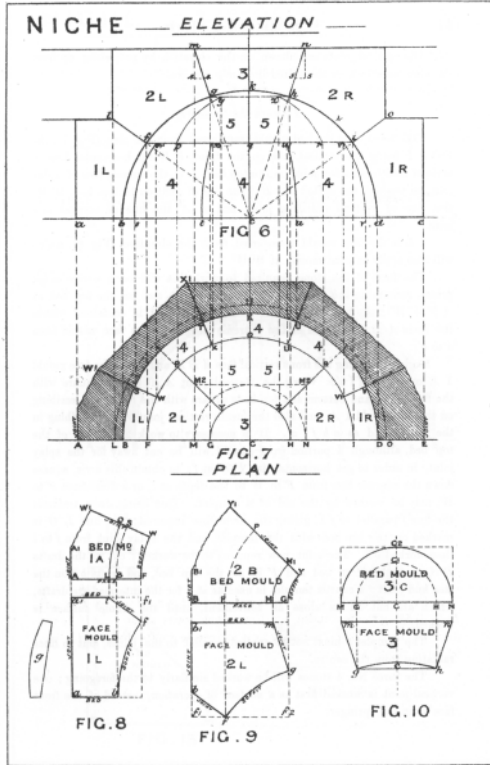
This book effectively falls into three sections and a supplement. The first is, as always, the shortest. Seven pages and three full page plates cover the tools. Plate 1 is shown at approximately quarter size below and covers virtually all the tools used. The descriptions on the accompanying pages are



detailed and give clear, concise instructions as to how to use the tools. Plates II & III add a couple of new ones- lewises , a framed saw and splitting wedges but also give clear details as to how they are used. You have to bear in mind that powered saws and diamond drills were still in the future for most masonry work when this book was first published

The second section is plates IV to VIII (Arches & Joints) and IX to XI (Masonry details) Again clear diagrams are backed up with plain simple text, although the diagrams are beginning to get a little like old school geometry texts.

The third section does get rather technical (= a bit boring) It covers all the complexities of constructing Spiral Staircases; Circular work (Ramps & Twists); Arches; Domes and Pendantives; Vaulting; Tracery Windows and all the other parts of a baronial castle or mock Gothic Cathedral. All very useful if English Heritage have reclassified your house as Grade 1 Listed but a bit beyond what is needed in my 1930s semi. This section really is for serious students and conservators.



The plates go from XII to LII and the explanations cover around 50 pages. To be fair, if you did want to build a scale model using wooden blocks, all correctly jointed you could probably do so using these instructions, they really are that detailed and easy to follow.

The supplements are mainly concerned with Masonry Estimating and Quantity Surveying. There are thirty three pages devoted to a model quotation, based on an architectural drawing of a stone portico and balustrade. Prices are circa 1900.

There is a very good summary of building stone selection and best practice in quarrying and maturing them. It is followed by a thirty page list of specific building stones, their properties, sources and comparative prices - all down to the individual quarry level. In some ways it is the best bit of the book. It is divided into Limestones, Sandstones, Alabaster, Marbles (Foreign, British & Irish) and Granites. The exact details given vary from quarry to quarry but one useful piece of information for many of them is the relative difficulty of working the stone, compared to Portland stone. This is given a rating of 1.0 and other stones

are related according to the time needed to cut the same amount of carving. A rating of 2.0 means that it takes twice as long. Finally there is a very useful glossary of terms in use in the stone cutting and quarrying industries.

The following is a straight scan from page 156. It sums up the book perfectly.

The mason is a methodical man, who has been instructed, from his apprenticeship in the first instance, how to hold the chisel and to use the mallet with the greatest possible effect, so that every stroke tells, with the result that in carrying out work the most complicated piece or section of masonry is completed within a given time readily estimated beforehand, and with a nice exactitude that leaves nothing more to be required. The mason stamps his banker mark upon the block, and it then takes its seat in the crutch of a groin or crown of a dome with perfect composure.

Over the last few years I have taken to searching secondhand bookshops and book fairs for books like this. Because both my wallet and bookshelf space are limited I have evolved an evaluation technique around the following considerations.

- 1) how much relevant information per inch of shelf space is incorporated in any given book,
- 2) do I want to pay that much for what is often so little information.

This book passes both tests. The information per shelf-inch is high and the cost less than I have paid in the past for books of much worse information level. If I had come across an original copy at this price level I would have grabbed it with both hands. Donhead are to be congratulated on giving such good value for money.