

Weaseling:
the making of a lost word

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the making of a lost word**

Michelle de Bruin and Mark Noad

Thinking

This project began on a rainy Edinburgh day in August last year. We had arranged to meet up and visit the exhibition of artwork from the Lost Words book at the Inverleith House Gallery in the Botanic Gardens. Outside the gallery was a crafts fair, we stopped at the Lettering Arts Trust stand where they were demonstrating letter cutting.

Two days later, an invitation arrived from the Lettering Arts Trust to take part in an exhibition based on the Lost Words book, how could we refuse?

A quick look at the list of available words, weasel has promise...

The words in the Lost Words book – and many others for that matter – while maybe not yet completely lost, are certainly becoming less visible threatening the poetic richness and depth of our language. Likewise cutting letters into stone by hand is not as commonplace as it once was to the detriment of the richness and depth of our visual environment. If ever there was the opportunity for synergy of medium and message, it is this.

In the course of our research we encountered the verb form of weasel meaning: 'to deprive (a word or phrase) of its meaning'.

This seemed to embody the idea behind the Lost Words project and became a catalyst for our ideas.

The best collaborations work because of differences not in spite of them. With a London-based graphic designer (Mark) and a sculptor working in the Scottish Borders (Michelle) this collaboration had plenty of differences to thrive upon.

Initial correspondence was by email and phone talking about the directions we could explore with our chosen word. By the time we met for our first proper brainstorm in the conveniently half-way venue of York, our individual ideas were starting to fold into the collaborative space where they take on their own momentum.

Drawing and cutting letters into stone by hand takes time and dedication to master, patience and skill to execute. Typesetting words is quicker, sandblasting them is easier. With both approaches, the job gets done but our emotional engagement with the outcome is very different.

Our idea was to equate the loss of words from our language with a physical loss of hand-drawn and hand-cut letters. Over the shadows of the original words we sandblasted a new message in the most ordinary and ubiquitous of typefaces, Times New Roman.

The resulting palimpsest questions the relationship between craft and technology, between content, appearance, and meaning.

At every stage of the process we were unsure if it would work: would the sandblasting destroy the remains of the hand-cut letters; would the gilding look right; would we be able to get all this done in time?

But isn't that the point of doing projects like this, to test the limits of imagination and your ability to produce something that has not been seen before?

Whether you work in stone by hand or with vector files on a screen, if you are writing a novel or a strapline for an advertisement what is most important is brilliantly executed originality. After all, without poetry and craftsmanship, meaning is lost.

Michelle de Bruin and Mark Noad

WOSSAT!
EEK!
A RAT!
IS IT?
WHO CARES?
KILL IT!

AW!
CUTE
ANIMAL
WOT IS IT?
WHO CARES?
LOL!

FADING TEXT IS STILL CONTEMPORARY

WE WANTED
TIMES NEW
ROMAN
BECAUSE
EVERYBODY LIKES
A CLASSIC

Part of a
Small Stud,
a we easel

Weasel (verb)
to remove meaning from a word



WE	TIMES NEW ROMAN
WANTED	HELVETICA
CLASS	TRAJAN
SO CHOSE	COMIC SANS
TIMES NEW ROMAN.	CENTURY
LOVELY!	ARIAL

Not lost, just less visible
What's lost is the poetry of the language

LO

LOST LOST LESSER
LAST LEAST PAST

LOST LEAST LAS
LESSER UNKN

WITHOUT
POETRY
AND
CRAFTSMANSHIP
MEANING
IS LOST

Sketching

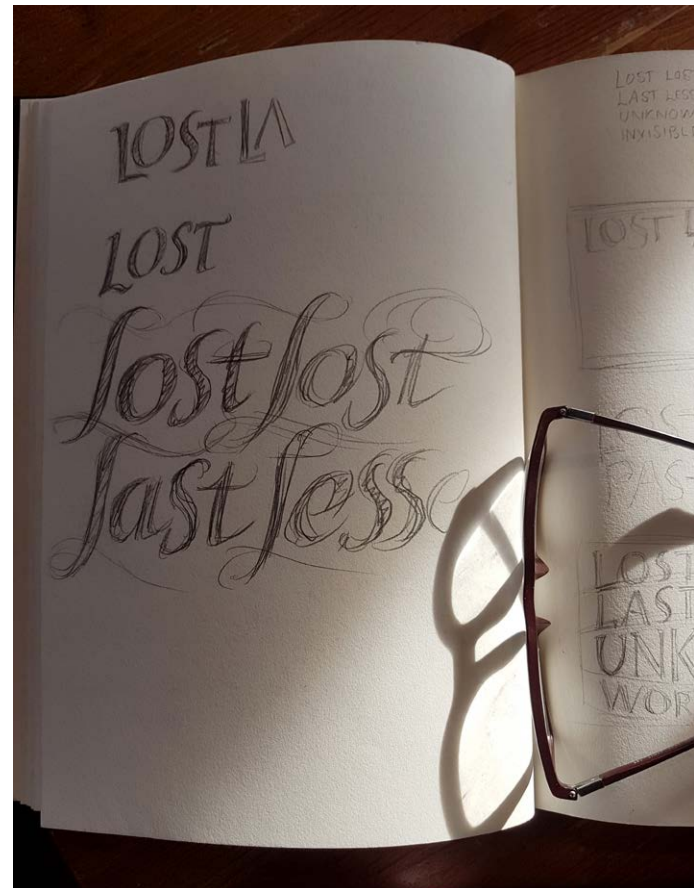
Early alternative ideas for the mesostic and experiments with different letter styles for the first-stage lettering.

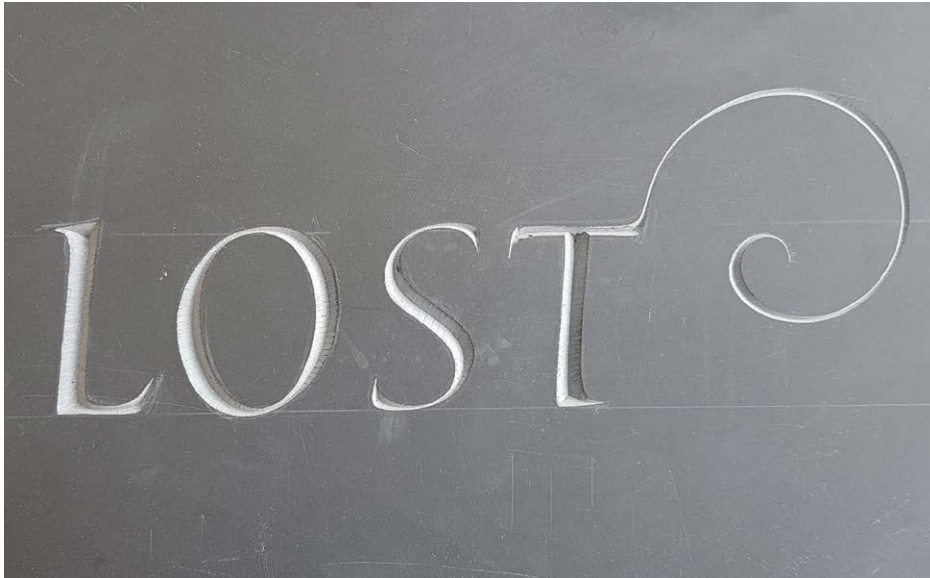
LOST LEAST LAST 15
LESSER UNKNOWN 14
INVISIBLE PAST 14
WORDS WHO CARES 15

LOST LEAST LAST
LESSER UNKNOWN
INVISIBLE PAST

LOST LEAST LAST
LESSER UNKNOWN

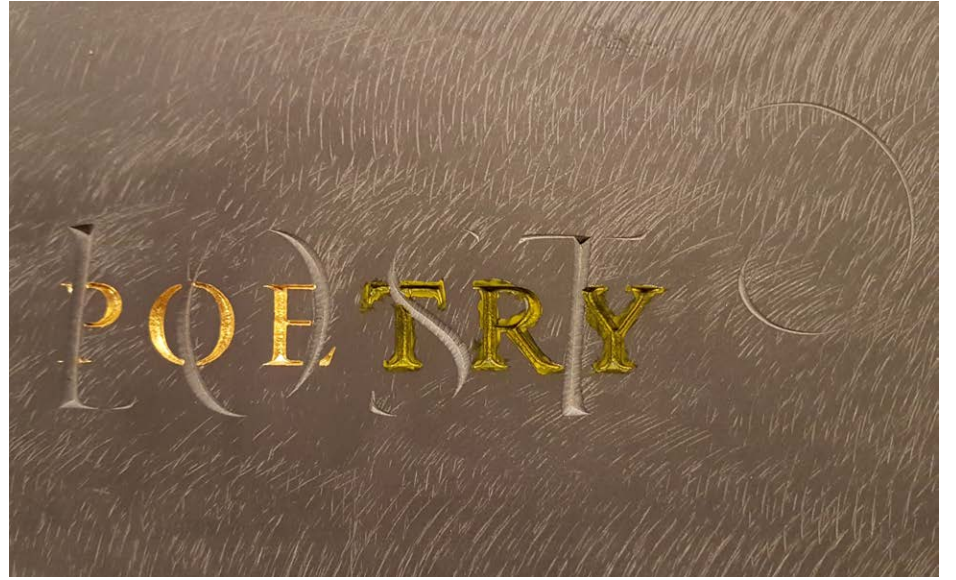
LOST LEAST LAST
LESSER UNKNOWN
INVISIBLE PAST

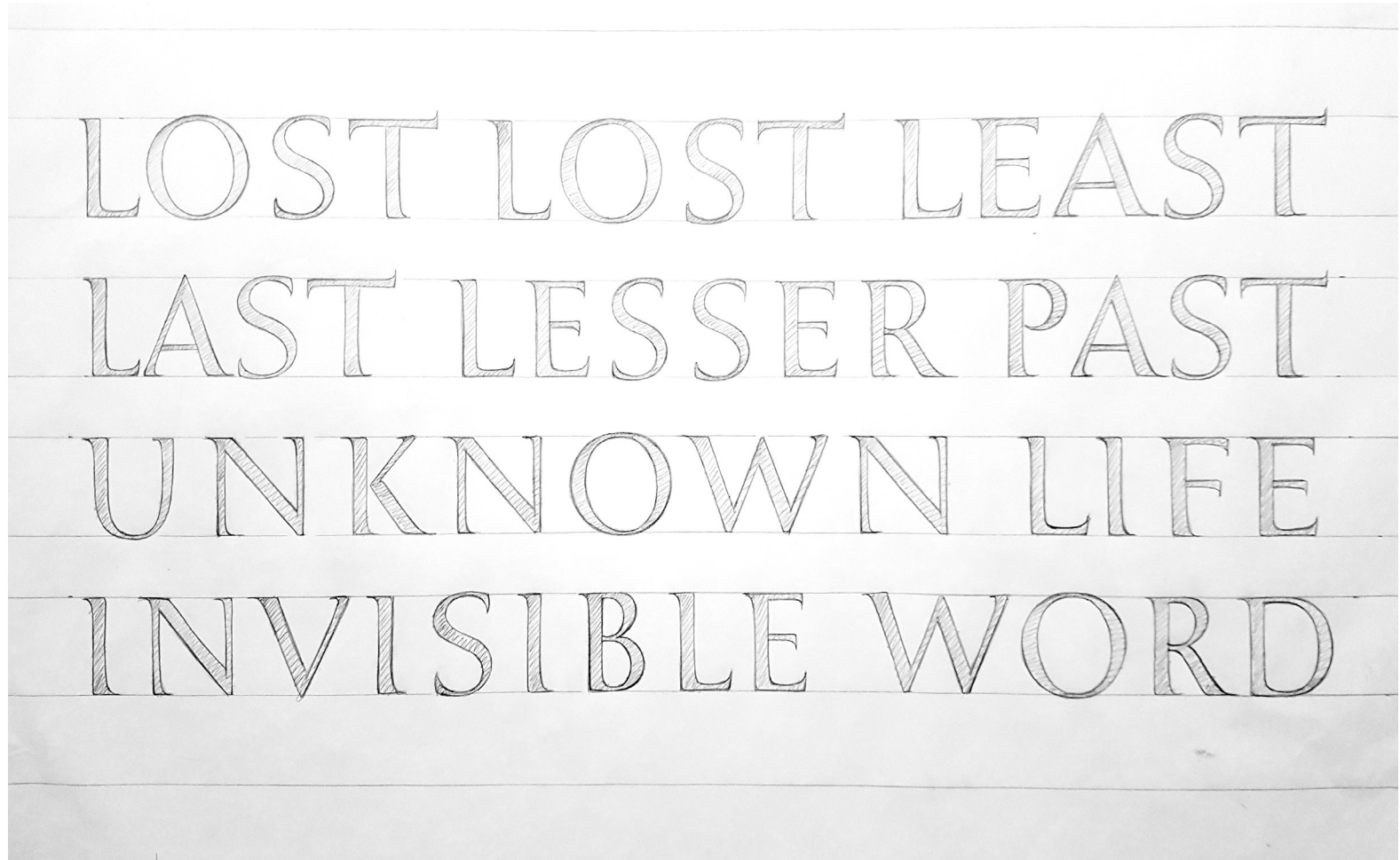




Testing

We produced a test piece to see how far we should grind back the first-stage lettering and look at how the sandblasted lettering interacts with the carved letters.

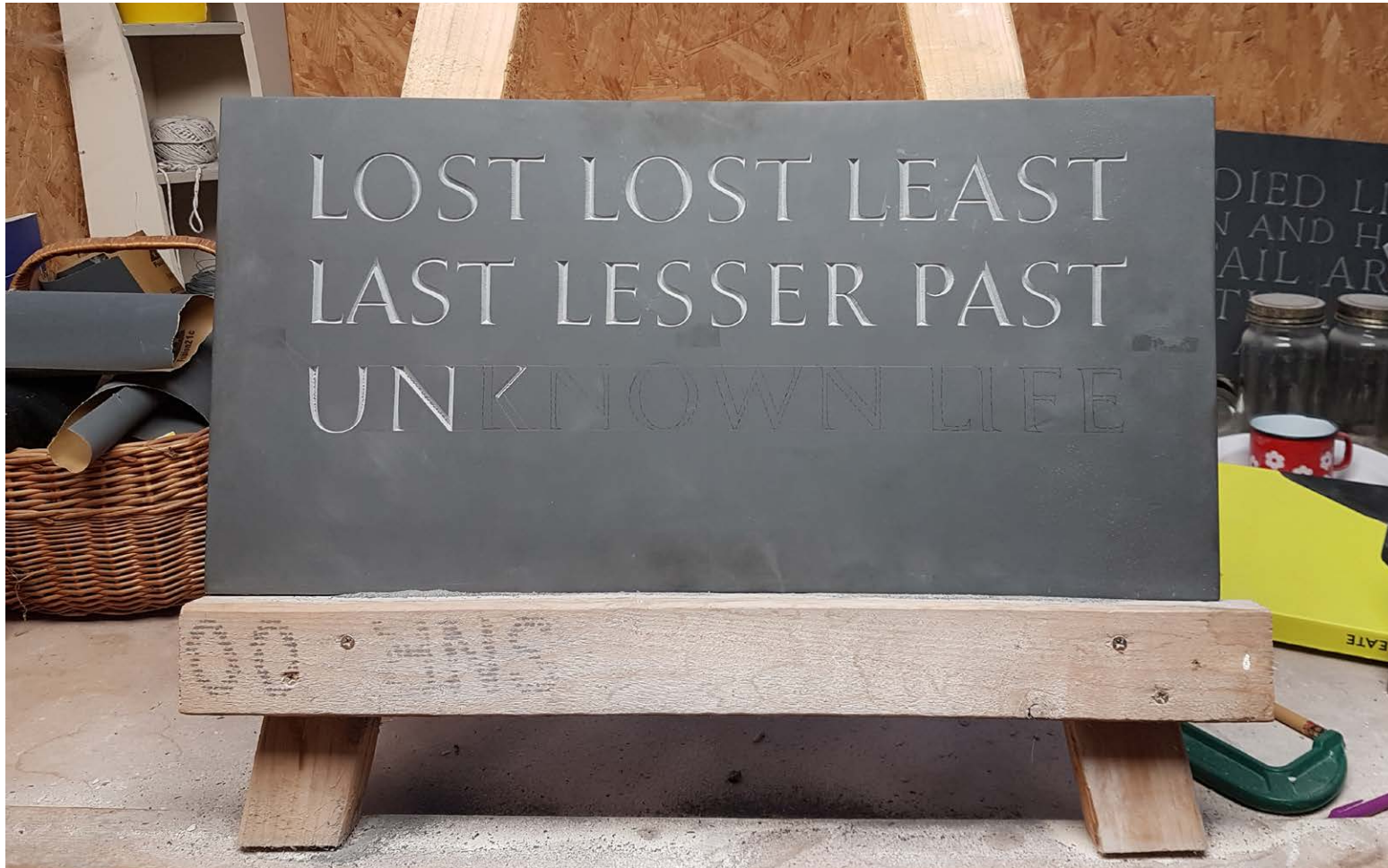




Drawing

Michelle's working drawing the hand-cut lettering and a tracing paper overlay of Mark's typeset lettering.

LOST WITHOUT
LAST POETRY
UNKNOWING AND
INVISIBLE LIFE
MEANING IS LOST
LEAST PAST
WORD



Cutting

Work in progress on the hand-cut letters in Michelle's studio.

LOST

LAST LESSE

KNOW

Waiting

The finished first-stage lettering awaiting its fate.

LOST LOST LEAST
LAST LESSER PAST
UNKNOWN LIFE
INVISIBLE WORD



Grinding

Mark and Michelle grinding back the first-stage lettering with an angle grinder at Michelle's studio.









Detailing

Mark picking out letters for the template (right) on Michelle's kitchen table with old friend Richard, Michelle's assistants Jo and Luke, and dogs Connie and Pippin.

LOST WITHOUT
LAST POETRY
UNKNOWABLE AND
INVISIBLE CRAFTSMANSHIP
MEANING IS LOST

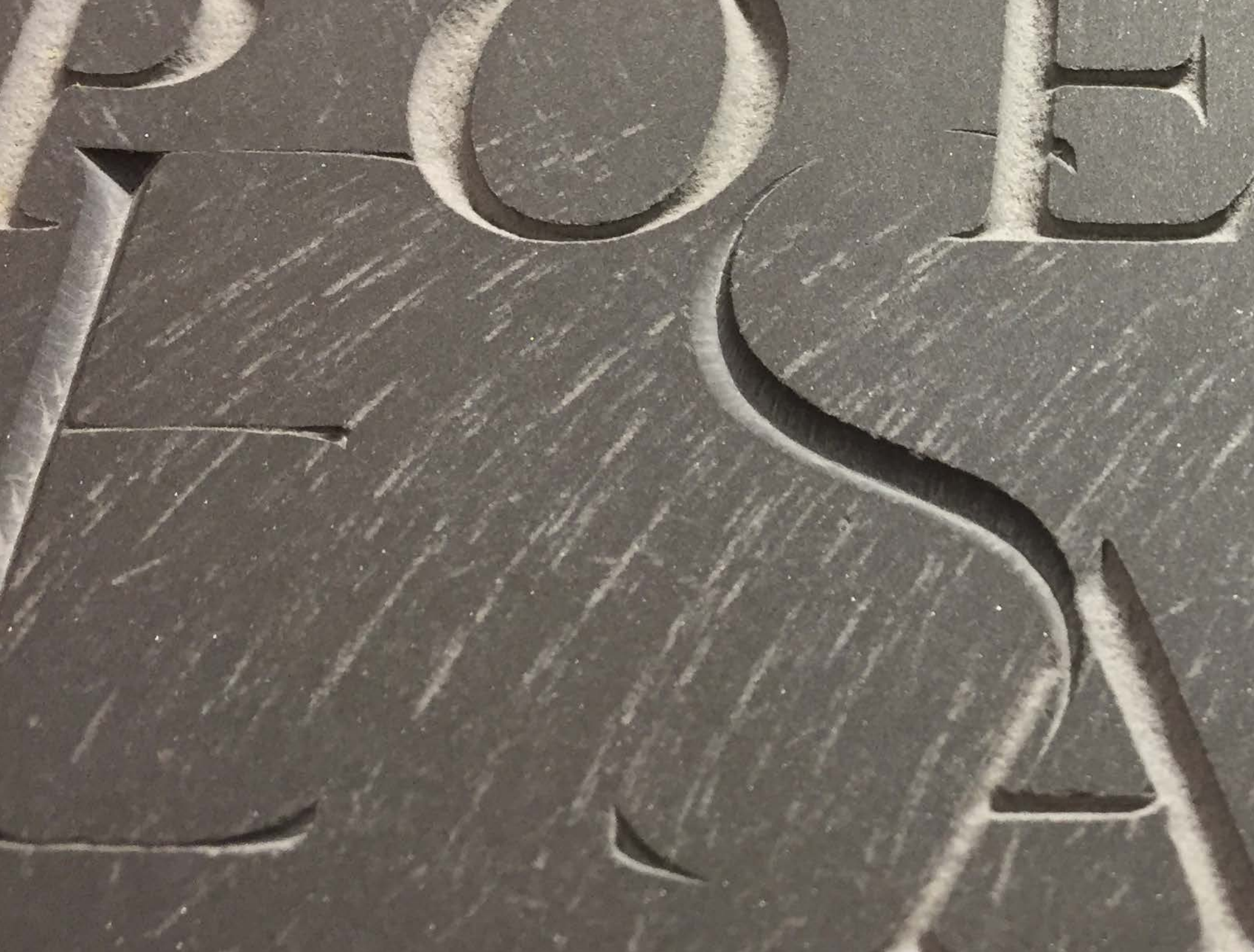


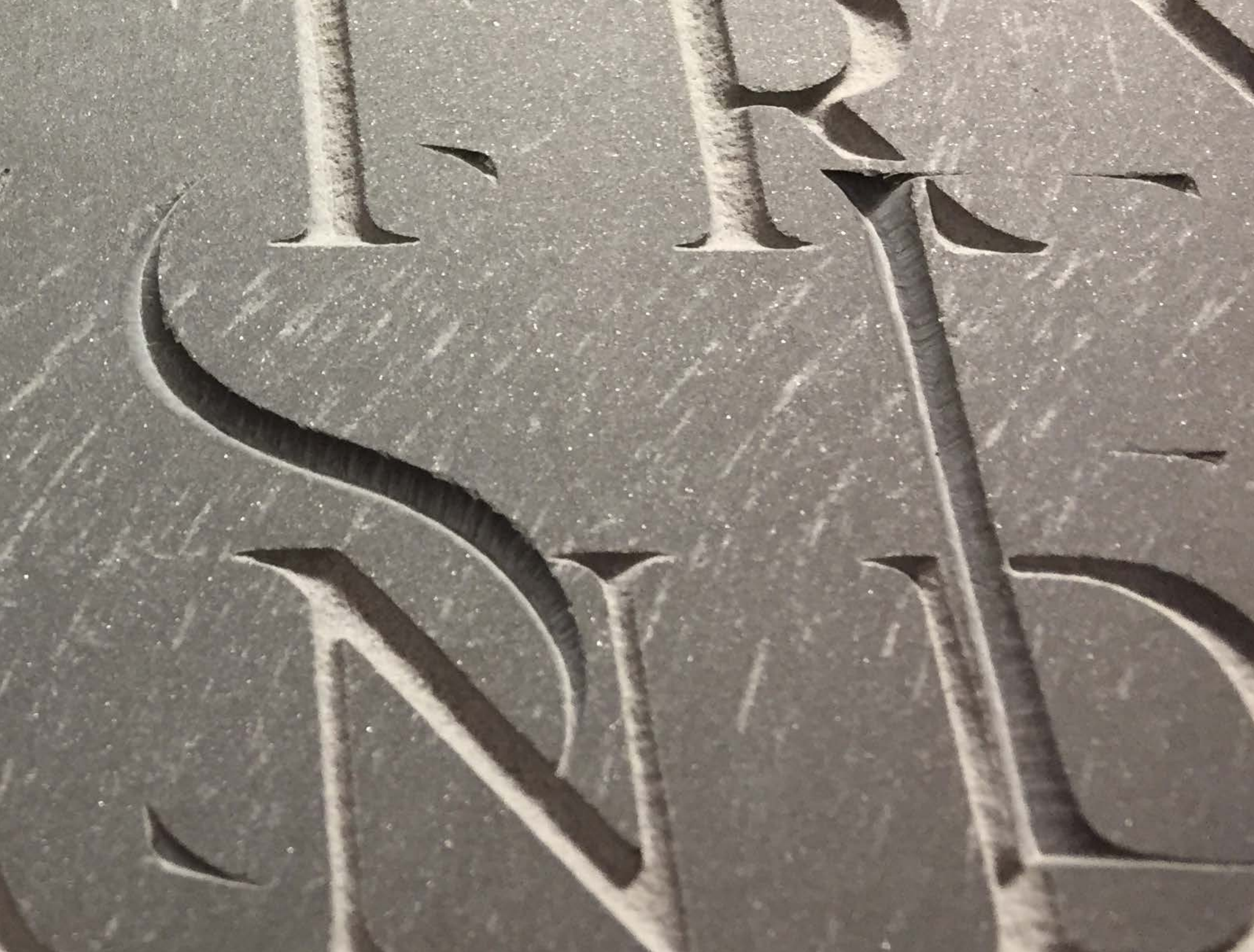
Blasting

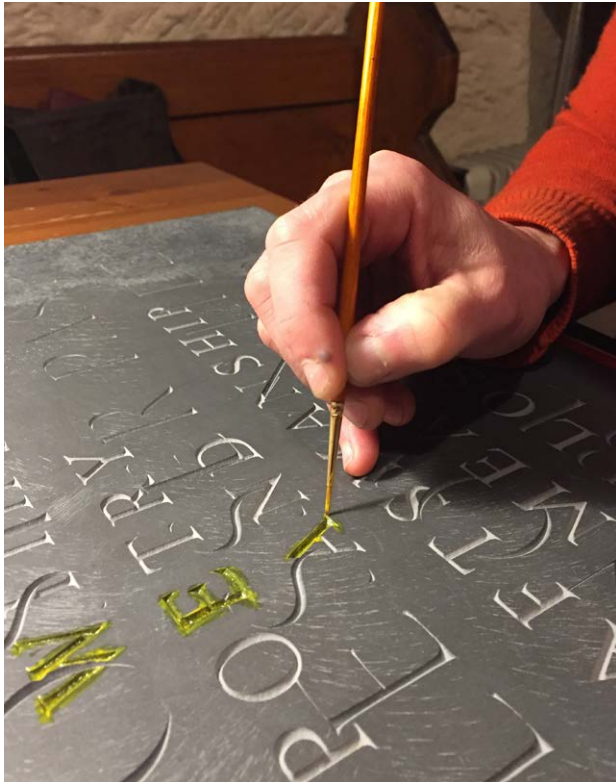
Working with Scott at Thomas Brown and Sons in Melrose who did the sand blasting. Once the rubber mask was in place, we added extra bits to protect the remains of the hand-cut letters. Scott did the blasting in stages checking for an even depth across the whole stone.

WITHOUT
POETRY
AND
CRAFTSMANSHIP
MEANING
IS LOST









Gilding

Back at Michelle's kitchen table applying the size then the gold leaf before sanding back and touching up the details.







Exhibiting

The final piece as it appears in the Lost Words exhibition.

LOST LOST WITHOUT EAST
LAST LOST AND R PAST
UNKNOWNSHIP MEANING
INVISIBLES TWO WORD



Thanking

Thanks to the Lettering Arts Trust for giving us the opportunity to produce this work and to Robert Macfarlane and Jackie Morris for providing the inspiration.

To everyone at Thomas Brown and Sons for your help and expertise with the sand blasting.

To Jo Crossland, Luke Bachelor, and Richard Budd for keeping us company (and bringing lots of wine).

Thanks again to Jo for photographing and videoing the grinding stage. All other images are by Mark and Michelle except the photos of the finished work which is courtesy of the Lettering Arts Trust / Doug Atfield.

