The Mason

Masons were key workers in the Rossendale quarries, shaping by hand such products as building stones and kerb stones. These hardy men worked out in the open close to where the stone was quarried.

The traditional **stonemason's tools are hammers and chisels**. Often in the Rossendale quarries hammers were used directly on the stone to shape it. These were the principal tools that a skilled mason would use to cut or split stone and to give it its desired shape.

Stone was shaped as soon as possible after it was removed from the quarry face. It is easier to work when it contains 'quarry sap', a natural moisture which dries out when the stone 'seasons' and hardens on exposure to air.

Larger blocks of stone from the quarry face were conveyed to the masons on a railway wagon and lifted onto their work place with crane. The first task was to split the block into workable pieces. The 'cutter' or 'lumper upper' would then use the same technique as the rock-getter, cutting a row of tapered holes into which wedges were hammered (nicking). The wedges were tapped in sequence until tight, then harder still in sequence until the rock split. In effect the wedges forced the stone apart, rather than cutting it.

Jim Caygill holds a square pick. A big pick is used to make a groove, then the small or 'bottoming pick' to ensure the wedges did NOT touch the bottom (ie. Wedges forced stone apart). Two iron wedges lie by his foot.

A partially finished kerbstone showing the dressing marks on the top surface.

This partially finished kerbstone clearly shows one half of a row of three tapered wedge holes used to split the stone.

A mason then took over, removing stone with hammer and chisel, to produce the final shape. A 'scappling hammer' was used first to remove pieces of excess stone and bring a piece roughly to shape. The resulting offcuts were known as scapplings.

The mason would have a steel 2 foot rule or some sort of measuring stick to mark out the face to be squared off. Templates were used when shaping curved pieces to ensure the correct radius of the curve.

A collection of curved templates

Often 2 to 3 masons and a rock-getter worked together as a team – clearly seen in Lee Quarry in the 1940's and 1950's. They were paid according to their joint production. The more accurately and skilfully the rock-getter could prepare a stone, the less stone a mason has to remove and the sooner a piece was finished.

A partially finished curved kerbstone in Fecit End Delf.

The mason's workplace can still be identified in the quarries by the 'banker' benches they left behind surrounded by the 'hillocks' of scapplings. A labourer would go round shifting the scapplings from under the mason's feet. Banker benches are large blocks of stone used by masons as work benches, their chamfered edges worn smooth and round as the masons moved their stone work pieces on them. In some cases it is known that sacks or clothes were used on top of the bench. Quarry masons were often known as banker masons.

Mason using probably a pitching tool first and then a punch chisel. Work piece is propped against his banker bench.

A banker bench in Fecit End Delph with chamfered edges

Often these work places were clustered around cranes used to help the masons handle heavy stone blocks.

Because the Rossendale stone was so hard the masons steel hammers and chisels needed frequent sharpening. The blacksmiths shop was an important feature of all large quarries and was

where tools were sharpened and other metal equipment repaired. One of the jobs usually given to young boys in the quarries was to collect blunt tools, take them to the blacksmiths for sharpening, then return them to the masons.

Some masons were paid by the 'lump' and would have to pay for their own tools to be sharpened. The smith charged by the 'point'. A punch would be 1 point; a ¾ inch chisel maybe 2 or 3 points; a 4 inch nicker maybe 6 points; a pitching tool maybe 8 points; little pick 8 points; big pick perhaps 10 points etc. Scappling hammers would be expensive to reface as the cutting edges were the arrises.

To find out more about the life of a stonemason watch **the Skills of a Stonemason video** produced by a group of young people as part of the **CAR Video Unit Project**.