



**THE OTTER MAN OF SKYE:**  
Laurence with one of his  
many otter sculptures

# A sculptor's life of stone, otters and Skye

## LISA FALCONER profile



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**A chance meeting in the 1970s brought Laurence Broderick to Skye, as LISA FALCONER found out...**

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**L**AURENCE BRODERICK never intended to become a wildlife sculptor but is now known as the "Otter Man of Skye", with his sculptures of the mammal to be found around the world and his fascination with them looking unlikely to end.

That his work is appreciated around the world is readily understandable when he shows me maps, first of the UK and then of the world, with a pin marking everywhere one of his sculptures is located. America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand... these are just some of the places where almost 2,500 sculptures are distributed. "It's incredible, really," Laurence says. "Ingrid bought the maps for me one Christmas. She said 'one day you won't know where they all are otherwise'. Thankfully she puts the pins in!"

After training for five years at the Regent Street Polytechnic and the Hammersmith School of Art in London, Laurence illustrated children's books, painted and sculpted, before accepting a teaching post at the Haberdashers' Aske's School in Elstree. He would remain there until 1981, having become the school's director of art in 1965. "We were the only school in the country that taught stone carving and I was the only one who could examine it! I enjoyed it but deep down inside me I didn't think I should be a teacher but should be working for myself. After 21 years I gave in my notice."

A direct sculptor – meaning he carves straight into the stone with no drawings or guides – Laurence was invited to take part in the first living craft exhibition in Britain in the early 1970s, carving stone in public over four days – an event which he would take part in for several years.

"In 1978 I was approached by a man called Richard Fowler who said he and his wife had been impressed by my work the previous year. He had just bought two islands off the coast of Skye and he would like me to go up and carve using the stone from these islands for the rest of my life. There was a house on the shore at Isle Ornsay we could use called Tides Reach and we ended up renting it for six years."

Laurence and his wife Ingrid and three young sons, Graham, Robert and Oliver, came to Skye in a VW campervan during the summer holidays that year, and began an

association with the island which continues to this day.

"This was my introduction to the work of Gavin Maxwell. I started reading his books, then I looked at Phillip Wayre who kept otters in Suffolk and realised I had never seen an otter. Well, I thought, I am never ever going to make an animal. I didn't want to go into that area, I was a sculptor of shapes, modern, abstract shapes. I did not want to go down the road of being a wildlife sculptor. But then I thought if I am going to make an animal sculpture I'll only do one, the otter, because it's so agile and makes the most peculiar shapes. I was looking at Maxwell's drawings and thought yes, so I made a very compact form of an otter – maybe 18 inches long, in Cornish soap stone – which you could move this way and that."

Laurence took the sculpture to Skye with him on his next trip up and a chance encounter while working on it would lead to the creation of An Talla Dearg gallery at Isle Ornsay. "A man came up to me, who I knew owned the hotel, and said 'I like your otter there, what are you going to do with it?'. I said finish it off and exhibit it and he asked if it was for sale. I said yes and told him it would be £200, which was a lot of money then. He agreed, so we stayed on Skye for another week! The man was Iain Noble, before he was a Sir."

"Later I asked Iain if could hold an exhibition in his old barn, An Talla Dearg, in two years' time and he said yes. He told me to do the publicity and he would pay for everything else. So we had our first show in 1980. I wanted to be the first sculptor on Skye to control the natural stone and also to highlight otters as they were being mistreated around the country – shot by fishermen, that type of thing. I wanted people to come and see the otter and how beautiful it is."

"The response was just incredible, I earned a year's salary in six weeks and took orders for more otters. People even bought stones – they were prepared to pay £3,000 for a stone before I carved it!"

After this Laurence decided to quit his teaching job, a decision which provoked the head teacher to call him "a bloody fool".

"But that gallery made me, I thought I would stop exhibiting after 25 years when I was on top. But then I came back for a show

during the Highland Year of Culture in 2007 and I sold 40 sculptures in two weeks – it knocked me sideways."

His love of otters also led to another role, as joint president of the International Otter Survival Fund which was founded by Paul and Grace Yoxon from Broadford in 1993 – a role he continues to fill to this day.

"At one time in the 1980s there were only 100 otters left in England. I thought, well I'll create a specific otter sculpture and donate a portion of the sale of it to the fund which I still do today. I created an edition of 100, and we have now got up to about 50 sold and I give £340 to the IOSF for every one."

"Now I make otters and otters and otters, I have made well over 300 or 400, and they are all over the world."

**L**AURENCE was born in 1935 and brought up at Portishead near Bristol by his grandparents after his parents, Jack and Cynthia, divorced when he was two. Cynthia joined the Wrens and would see her son when she was on leave, while his father visited once a week.

"It was an incredible time really," he recalls. "My father was a very clever engineer who later worked on the first Concorde engine and he used to make me little toys like tanks, which had an engine and tracks. I used to play on the beach, which was covered in stones and mud, and we would see the ships coming up the Bristol Channel and see German planes bombing Avonmouth in Bristol. The biggest daylight bombing raid in the UK was in Bristol and I was in the dentist at the time! I actually saw the planes from the cellar."

An artistic flair was evident from a young age: "I could draw naturally, and was drawing perspective at the age of four." An early love of tennis was also fostered at school, and in 1991 another fluke meeting led to Laurence's involvement with the International Tennis Federation.

"I love tennis and one day I was in the gallery and a couple came in saying they were lost but ended up buying an otter sculpture. About six months later he phoned and asked me to make a head of Philippe Chatrier, the president of the International Tennis Federation! They asked me to take six examples down to Wimbledon to show him. We had an exhibition of the heads in the car

park which was just hilarious, and they commissioned three of the heads."

Seven years later Laurence was asked by the new president, Brian Tobin, to design a Grand Slam trophy. The federation liked all three of his designs so created another two awards, including the Philippe Chatrier Award – the federation's highest accolade. Among the players who have been presented with one of Laurence's awards are Roger Federer, Serena Williams, Martina Navratilova and Rafael Nadal.

"I used to think I would be known for my Mother and Child sculpture of a nude breastfeeding woman, which was bought by Bells Whisky in Perth – the gardener used to take people around and try to avoid it as it embarrassed him. Then the otter sculptures took off, and unknown to me they nicknamed me the Otter Man of Skye! Sculpture is like that, though, it keeps taking you from one idea to the next, like all art. Then the tennis thing and then out of the blue the commission to create the Birmingham Bull, which is now the third most photographed image in Britain apparently."

The Birmingham Bull is indeed one of Laurence's best-known works, a six-tonne twice life-size bronze sculpture of a Hereford Bull which is situated in Birmingham's Bullring commercial area. "We thought last year we would take the entire family to see it and get a photo of us all with it. We couldn't get near! There were people taking photos, jumping on its back, sitting on its head. But I like that, I want people to touch my sculptures. In my early shows I would put signs up saying so, I want people to relate to the work and not feel inhibited."

Laurence has extended his portfolio of animal sculptures to include various creatures including badgers, turtles and polar bears and is still very much in demand as a sculptor. His work has been selected as part of the Scotland's Islands Festival Exhibition which opens in London at the end of the month, and continues to be exhibited in galleries around the world.

Splitting his time between Skye and Cambridge, Laurence's other interests include a recently-purchased 1924 Bullnose Morris and going out in his boat in Camuscross. As for sculpture, he says: "I just couldn't stop, ever."