

An authentic design for a landmark hotel

Classic design meets modern materials

By Shane Durnford

While discussing this sign with us, Shane said, "It would seem that this kind of signwork doesn't fit into today's culture of instant gratification and mass production. That's not to say there's not a place for it. It's just a little harder sell." —Editors

When we initially sit down with a customer, we educate them on the value of a well-designed sign. This gets them into the mindset of thinking investment as opposed to expense. Once the customer understands the difference, and is interested in what we can offer, I start considering the design. But before I start trying to think of

any design, I list criteria. That information comes from the client and the location. I ask a series of questions so that I can better understand their business. The more I learn the better I can communicate their message in the sign design.





1. I start off by gluing up a 4½-by-10-ft. panel of 2-in. thick Sign•Foam [Sign•Arts Products, 800-338-4030, www.signfoam.com] high-density urethane board (HDU), and then cut it to shape. In this photo I'm using a template guide to route the groove that runs around the outside edge.



2. Next comes transferring the pattern for the scrollwork. I refine a rough pencil sketch in Illustrator, then make a printout for transfer.



3. After transferring the pattern, I begin carving—I cut in the centerlines with a knife, then V-cut it with a gouge

In this case, the sign was to be for The Queen's Hotel, which has been in Barrie since the beginning of time, practically. The owner wanted an authentic sign that would communicate something very specific: *This is not just a place of business, but an establishment.* The owner wanted customers to sample a bit of history, and feel like they're part of that history.

This involved some research into the hotel's history and the era of its beginnings. I wanted to stay away from a new age interpretation of an old sign. I really wanted to maintain authenticity. Marketing strategy, placement on the building and history were my essential criteria. The temptation here is to make the sign 'look old' with special effects rather than design.

Since it was so important that the sign be as authentic as possible, it had to be designed into the architecture rather than look like an afterthought. I decided to place the sign in an archway. It was a natural fit and helped form the entrance. The lowered height made it more interactive with pedestrian traffic.

Research and design Before I started sketching, I went to my reference library and did a lot of research on the era when The Queen's Hotel was built. It was the mid 1800's, and I wanted to learn what was popular and why in terms of color and decoration at that time. At that time in Canada, we were a very young nation and it was a very idealistic time—so they named the hotel in honor of Queen Victoria. I felt it was appropriate to use a lot of Victorian symbolism. The crown on the sign

is an adaptation of Queen Victoria's crown—I had to make a few stylistic changes so that it would be practical to produce. The banners and the colors were typical of the era.

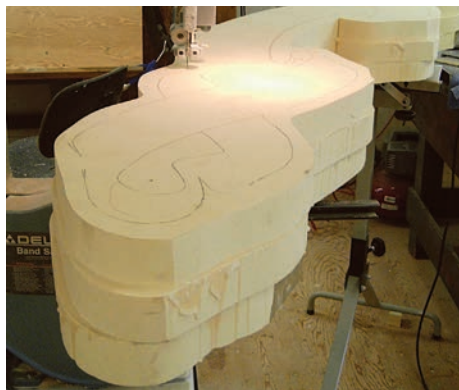
This sign is not complex or heavy into design. Rather than impose my own vision of what the sign should be, I tried to get into the mindset of the period with the hope that the final piece would be as genuine as possible.

I like this sign because it's traditional and lavish yet it still has a simple charm to it. It's not overstated even though it is elaborate and it still has warmth. It has the banner and the gold crown, but it also has that nice, fine, scroll work in the background that is played down to a textural element. I designed the ironwork with a bit of quiet decoration to harmonize with the swirl of the banner. The loose open feel of the banner (high relief), the piercing on the crown (a lot of undercutting), the loose open swirls in the background scrollwork and the space between the sign and the curve of the archway give the design an nice relaxed, open feel.

The steps After gluing up a 4½-by-10-ft. panel of 2-in. Sign•Foam [Sign•Arts Products, 800-338-4030, www.signfoam.com] high-density urethane board (HDU), I cut the panel to shape (photo 1). I used a template guide to route the groove that runs around the outside edge and frames everything. Next (photo 2) I hand-carved the short, curved portions of the edge groove and laid out the scroll. For the scroll, I did a rough sketch in pencil then refined it, at actual size, in Adobe® Illustrator® using



4. I finish up the scrollwork, and then rout the edge cove.



5. For the banner block I glued up of three levels of 2-in. HDU. In this photo you can see that I've transferred the computer-generated drawing to the block.



6. When I begin rough-carving the banner, I use the highest point for reference and work back to the lowest point.

the pen tool, and adjusted all of the scroll elements so that it would fit together properly. From there, I printed it out for transfer.

In photo 3 you can see that I've started carving the scrolls. It's just done like chip carving—centerlines are cut in with a knife, then the design is V-cut with a gouge. In the center of a few of those scrolls, you'll see a Tudor rose. Again, it's an English design element from that time period. The scrolls are organic, sort of vine-like, so the Tudor rose is an appropriate decoration to use with them. The final step on the back panel is routing a deep cove in the edge (photo 4).

Next I glued up three levels of the HDU to carve the banner from, and cut it to shape on the band saw. In photo 5 I've transferred the computer-generated drawing. I usually transfer patterns by marking the back of the pattern paper with a Stabilo pencil. In the next photo I have started carving. If you've never done any carving, what's going on here may look terribly complex—but it's really pretty simple. I just start with the highest point on the object and work back from there, referring to the high point for the rest of the carving.

Instead of looking at the whole thing and being overwhelmed with it, you start with a reference point and carve back from there—you can see that happening in photo 6. I've worked all the way down to the lowest point at that one part of the carving. It's just roughed-in, but all I'm trying to do is establish those reference points, the highest and lowest parts of the carving. Once I have those points, I carve the in-between areas and slowly work it down from there. There's a flow to it, and

once I'm to this point I'm feeling it. The banner took a while, actually, but that was OK—I didn't want to rush it. I didn't want it to end up looking stiff and tight.

I use power tools for my carving whenever it's possible. I have a number of different tools that I use, from a Dremel right up through my belt sander, and I use them all. But even though they're great for some things, they can't do it all, and that's where the files, riffers, and sandpaper come in. All the little folds in the banner, and the scroll in the background, were done with hand tools.

In photo 8 I'm stippling the edge of the banner with the Foredom [www.foredom.com] tool—that little bit of texture just finishes it off nicely, and gives it an edge, without being too much. And it's easy to do. It would have taken far too long to do a V-cut line there. Note that in the same photo you can see the sketch pinned up on my easel—I referred to it constantly. Looking at the finished drawing, you can almost see the depth, and how things should go together. When I carve I'm continually referring back to the drawing.

I don't carve for hours on end. If you work too long, you start to not see your mistakes; you get to where you can't see your work anymore. I'll work for an hour, take fifteen minutes, come back to it, and work for another hour or so.

I enjoy the process of carving and sign making, but mostly I like seeing things come to life from the picture in my head. The hardest part for me is getting started, when I have to look past all the mess. Once you see what's in there you can begin to remove the excess. You have to picture the object and not see



7. Here you can see the carving is much more defined. I use power tools as much as I can, especially for removing large areas of material.



8. I use the Foredom tool to stipple the edge of the banner. That little bit of texture finishes it off nicely, and was easier than adding a V-cut line at the edge.



9. This is a standard Benjamin Moore color, a warm burnt orange, and for the carved lettering I used black warmed up with a lot of red and yellow.

that big block of material. A big part of this is training your eye, and simplifying the process down into steps. It takes time to get to that point, and a lot of carving. For me, after sixteen years of carving, it's getting a lot easier.

After all the carving was finished, I brushed on a latex primer and 3 coats of Benjamin Moore exterior acrylic latex paint. In photo 9, I'm putting on the finish coat. Benjamin Moore has some great colors now and this one I used right out of the can. It's a warm, burnt orange color that's quite brilliant. Once I finished the background color, I painted the carved lettering with a warm black—not just straight black, but black with a lot of red and yellow added to it. Straight black looked too harsh and artificial. Warming it up helped it harmonize with the banner. It covered better, too.

Carving the crown came next. I began by gluing up a block of HDU (photo 10), and then I cut it roughly to shape with the band saw. To remove the bulk of material on the sides of the block and give the crown its rough shape, I used a grinder with an Arbortech disc (www.arbortech.com) and my belt sander.

Once the arcs and angles were right I screwed the block to a sheet of plywood from behind so that I could suspend it in front of my easel. I like working on an easel because it helps me see the object more naturally in terms of shadow and perspective. In photo 12 you can see that I've transferred some of the pattern to the HDU, and have started carving with my Dremel and a straight bit. I continued to transfer image elements to the surface as the carving progressed.

The arcs that span the top of the crown,

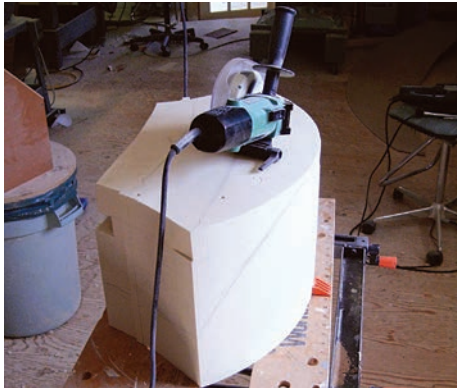
and support the orb and cross, are adorned with a row of beads. In order for it to look right, all the beads had to be the same size and the same distance apart. To do this I used a technique that I'd learned from an architectural carving book, and it's pretty simple. First, mark down the width of the strip where the beads will be, then remove the material on either side. Then round the edges of the strip. Mark the raised strip with each mark showing the width of one of those beads, which is the width of the strip. Make straight cuts down through these marks (photo 13). Then use a straight gouge (the same radius as the beads) to shape the beads going from the top to the side, and use a hook file do a final clean up.

You can see in photos 14 and 15 that I'm using a light as I'm carving—I'll turn the light around and move it so that I can really see the shape of the bead. If you don't use a light, you'll see how improperly formed each of those beads really is when you start painting. I use the light a lot, no matter what I'm carving.

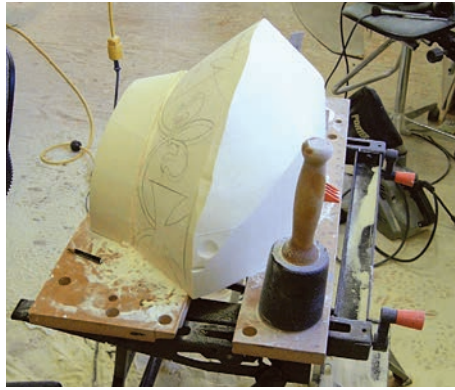
I might have taken a little too much time with the beads to get them nice and round, but once I gilded, it was all worth it. Even though viewers can't see all of them from the ground, I know they're there, and it was worth taking the time to do it right, and it's part of the commitment to quality and authenticity.

Once the beads were complete, I carefully removed all the material between the arcs and the headpiece of the crown. That took a while because I couldn't really get power tools in there. I also had to get in underneath the arcs in order to sand the surface smooth because it was visible from the ground looking up.

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10. For the crown, I glue up 7 layers of 2-in. HDU, and roughly cut it to shape on the band saw.



11. Here you can see that I've continued to refine the shape of the HDU; the finish you see here was achieved with a belt sander.



12. Once all the angles are right, I screw the carving to a sheet of plywood from behind and transfer the image to the block. Then using my Dremel and a straight bit, I just start working my way back.

The biggest challenge of the crown was symmetry—it turned out to be more work than I expected. I couldn't go in there with my tools blazing.

After shaping the headpiece, I went in with the Foredom and textured its surface (photo 16). It created a nice contrast to the smoothness of the gold. I wasn't trying to emulate cloth, only to create some interest through textural variation. The stippled finish on the headpiece helps define it, too. Next I detailed the headband (photo 17) and finished up carving the crown. The last thing I did was carve the cross and turn the finial on the lathe—I glued them together, and then glued the piece to the top of the crown. All told, carving the crown took about 60 hours.

All components were successfully carved and completed on the first attempt. People ask me if I make mistakes and have to start over, and I explain to them that I don't, because I plan out my carving and go slow. I usually start by choosing a portion of the carving where I know exactly how I want it, even though I don't now how the rest of it's going to go. I'll get that part going, then go on to start the next element. I don't really finish any one thing at a time. Once I get about three or four elements going in a carving, I'll begin refining them a little bit more.

Now that I've got physical dimension I choose colors to accentuate the dimension. Cool and muted colors receding and warm bright colors advancing on the color plane. What brings this whole sign to life for me is the bright red in the crown. It makes the crown the focal point.

The entire background of this sign is a base,

and all of the other colors are tied to that. That makes it hum. There are only three colors, and the gold. I generally don't use more than use three colors on a sign. Same with type—usually not more than 2 type styles on a sign. Each element of a design has to have merit unto itself, and they all need to harmonize.

Even though the ironwork doesn't stand out, it is still a very important part of the design. I designed it and had it fabricated. I drew it out on the computer, and transferred it onto an actual trace-out of the arch, then drew it out in pencil. Even though I left a little bit of play in it, I wasn't completely sure it was going to fit. I remember that as we put the sign up, it got stuck a little bit, then just slid right into position. That was a good feeling.

So when you see the sign in its setting, even though it's fresh and clean, it looks old without looking tired. It projects warmth, intimacy and refuge on a busy downtown street. •❧



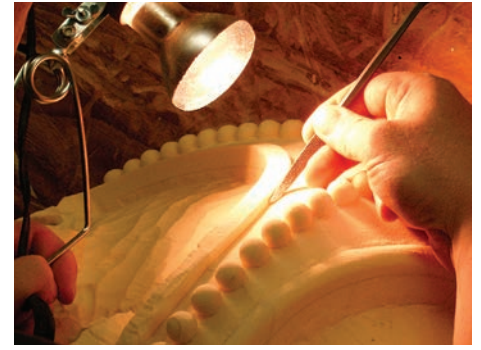
Shane Durnford's shop, Shane Durnford Designs, is in Creemore, Ontario, Canada. To see more of Shane's work, and to learn more about the workshops he plans to offer in the fall of 2006, visit his Web site at www.shanedurnford.com.



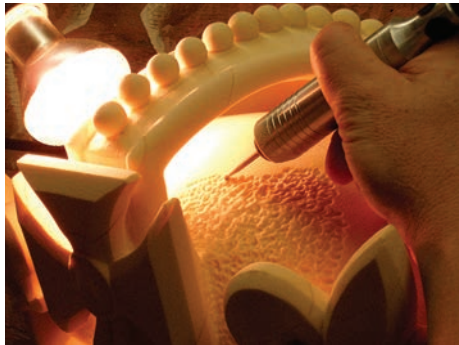
13. I use gouge and an assortment of hand files to rough in the beads that run along the top of the crown.



14. To get all of the beads the same shape, I make incremental cuts and final shaping with a straight gouge.



15. Using a light is a good idea no matter what you're carving; it reveals shadows and shapes you won't see until you start painting



16. Carving underneath the top arcs of the crown was time-consuming because it was hard to fit power tools in there. Here you can see I'm using the Foredom tool to add texture to the inner portion of the crown.



17. Here I'm detailing the last part of the crown. After this was complete, and the crown had been applied to the sign, I carved and added the sphere and cross at the top.

A sign for The Queen's Hotel rear entrance

I like the sign for the rear entrance almost more than the one out front. The one in the front has all the bells and whistles, but this one has more design qualities and isn't quite as overstated.

It's a simple, straightforward design—a square with rectangles through it, and the logo. We used shadows and lines to create interest. The raised projected satin brass letters that make up the logo tilt downward to connect with people coming in the door. It's a subtle thing, but it's something we all understand on an archetypal level. The same is true of the curved cap—it has an enveloping gesture as you approach the entrance.

The entire sign is made of HDU. The cap was done on a table saw. It's a neat trick I learned from a woodworker. You first cut the angle of the cap, then you set it down and get your blade up so high, then you set up a slider jig that will let you slide it on an angle—that lets you determine the radius of your cut. You slowly make passes until you get that nice cove.

It all goes back to simplicity. If it's designed well, and all the proportions are right, it will resonate with people. It isn't because it's fancy or it's over-the-top, but because they're connecting with it. You can think of it as the rhythm to a tune, and the melody plays over the top of it. Texture and shadow enhance a design without letting it become boring or plain. In the case of this sign, the nice, smooth curve of the cap



complements all the straight lines in the design. Even though it's simple, there are many interesting things going on. —S.D.