

Four hearts of poppy sculpture say it all...

Tina Clarke meets Mark Humphrey, a sculptor with a special gift for Bassett.

AS DUSK falls over Wiltshire a huge blood-red poppy appears at the gateway to the town that welcomed home 355 fallen servicemen and women during the Iraq and Afghan conflicts. This memorial, installed last month, is a gift to Royal Wootton Bassett from a sculptor whose iconic artwork was displayed in Trafalgar Square last year for the Royal British Legion's nationwide Every Man Remembered campaign.

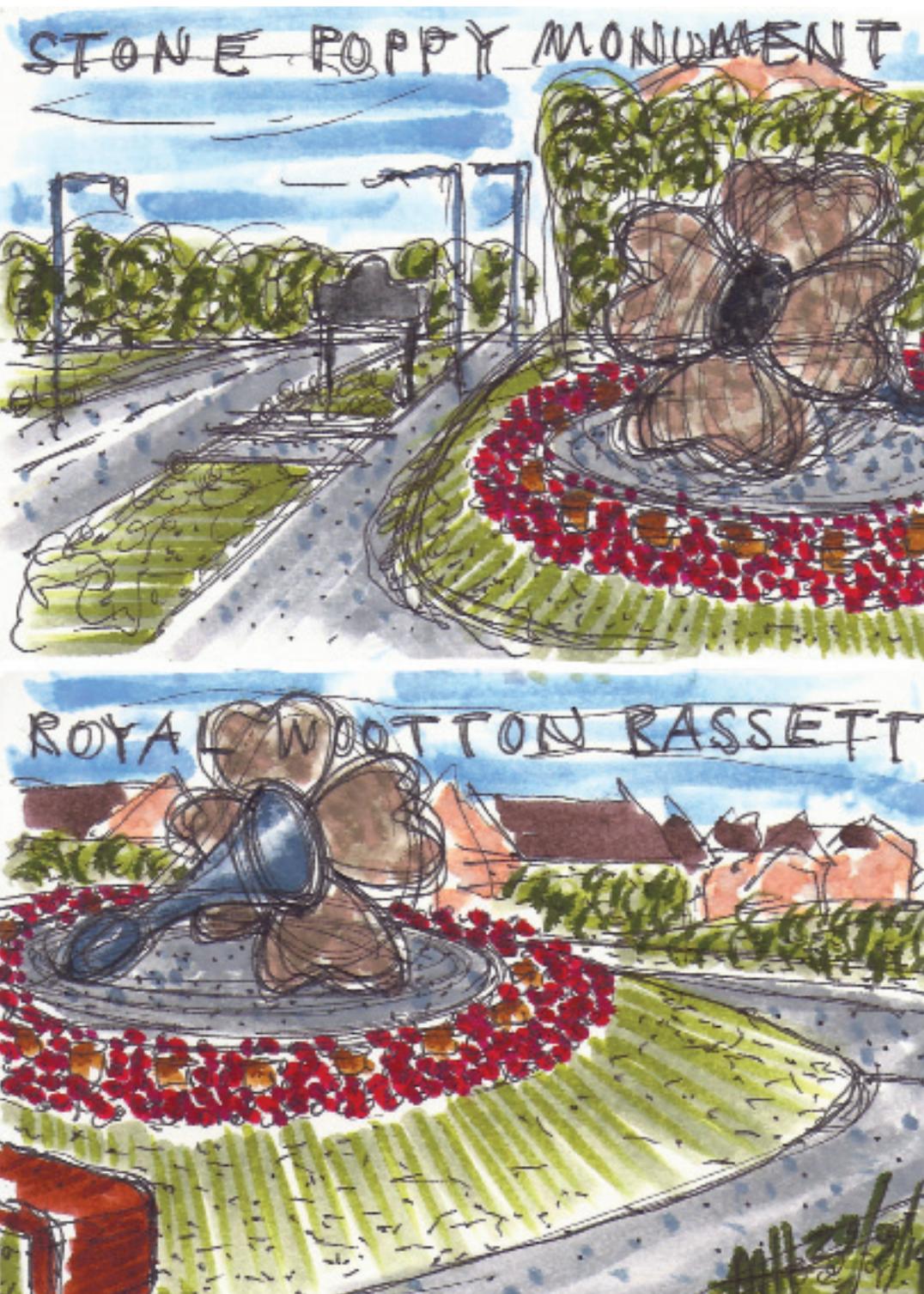
Born in 1970 in the RAF Princess Alexandra Hospital at nearby Wroughton while his father was based at Lyneham, Mark Humphrey feels an affinity with the area and wanted to give something back; not just to recognise the fallen servicemen and women who were repatriated, but also for those who lined the route and honoured the dead.

The town already has a war memorial, which provided a focal point for the repatriations over four years, and it was made a royal town by the Queen in recognition of its role. But until Mark took his design for an illuminated poppy to the town council last year, there was nothing solid to mark such an emotional period in its history and the effect it had on the whole country.

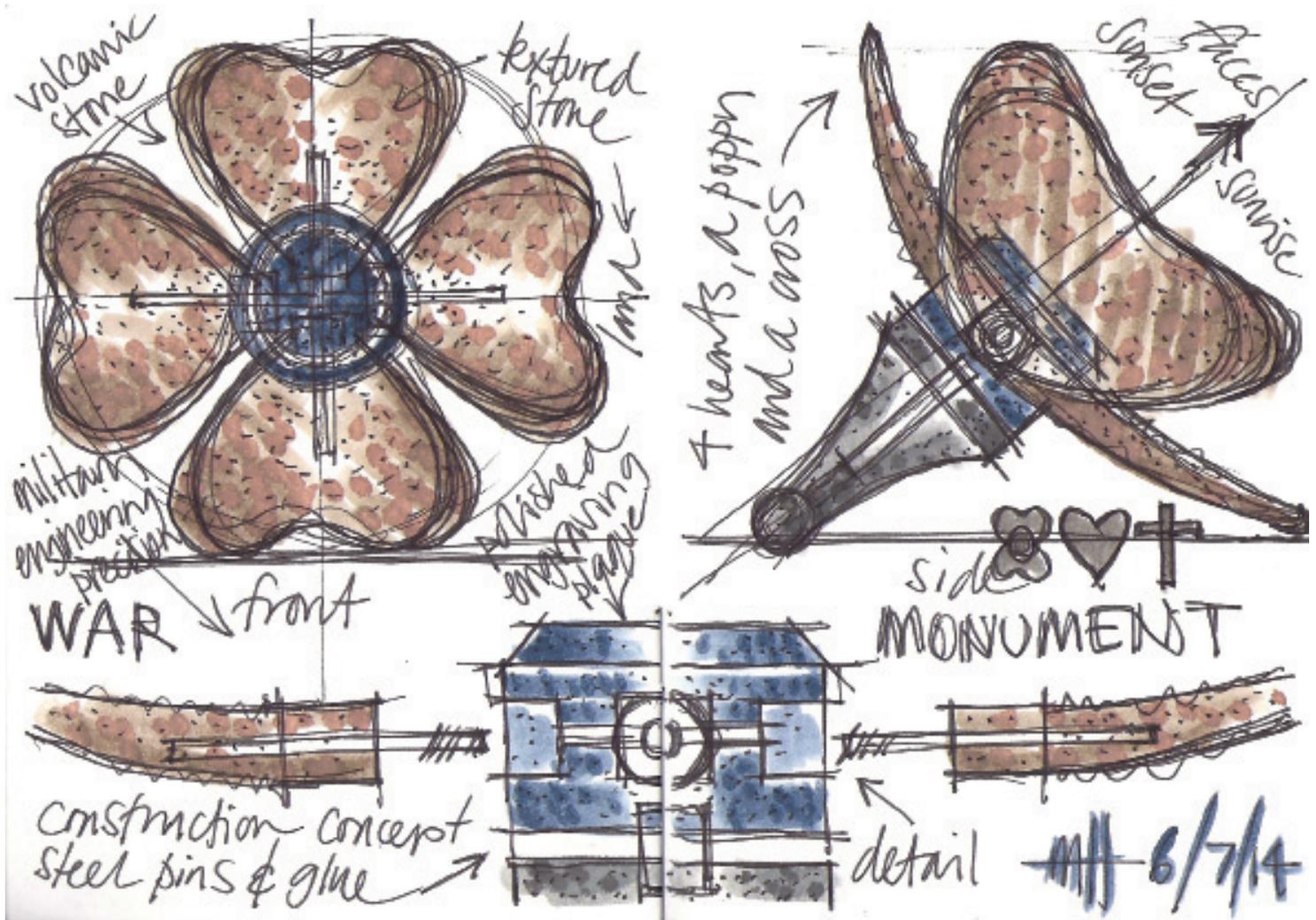
What started as a few members of the Royal British Legion gathering in the High Street in April 2007 grew with each cortege. Residents, shoppers and workers began to line the road. Shops shut their doors and roads were closed to allow the hearses and their police escorts through with quiet dignity.

The repatriations had been diverted to nearby RAF Lyneham because of a major project to upgrade the runway at RAF Brize Norton in Oxfordshire. But even before that, the townspeople had shown they knew how to welcome home the country's war dead.

Back in 2005 the Lyneham base suffered the loss of six crew members and four passengers when Hercules XV179 was shot



Left: Drawings by sculptor Mark Humphrey to show how he envisaged the poppy in the town



‘I’m dedicating a work of art to the town as thanks’

down in Iraq. It was a devastating blow, not just for their families and colleagues, but also for their friends in the wider community. As their cortege was taken through the town many turned out to pay their respects.

Two years later, as more bodies were returned, more families, more fellow soldiers, more veterans and more ordinary members of the public would converge on the town from all over the country, drawing the

attention of the world’s press and television cameras. By 2011, villages along the route from Royal Wootton Bassett to the mortuary at the John Radcliffe Hospital in Oxford were following the town’s example.

Like many, Mark, who counts the Beatles’ George Harrison and Ringo Starr among his clients, saw the repatriations in the media and felt he had to respond. “I’m not a military man; I can’t go to war or protect the country. But what I can do is create things. So I used my knowledge and experience to do something,” he explained. “I decided I was going to wholeheartedly dedicate a work of art to thank the town that did so much for those in the Iraq and Afghan wars.”

Not long after the last flight into Lyneham he was chatting to Lady Lucy French, the great-granddaughter of First World War British Expeditionary Force commander Field Marshal Sir John French, at the unveiling of

his staircase sculpture in St James Theatre in London, when she told him about plans to mark the centenary of the conflict. His own great-grandfather had been at the Somme and it struck a chord. “I just felt compelled to do something,” he said.

Mark’s first project in 2013 was a series of artworks that could be placed in shopping centres, providing a focus for annual Poppy Appeal collections in the run up to Remembrance Sunday.

He funded it himself, but the Royal British Legion was impressed and endorsed the sculptures. It then asked him to submit an idea for its Every Man Remembered campaign, which aims for every single serviceman or woman who died in the Great War to be commemorated by someone alive today.

Mark’s proposal for a sculpture of a young soldier, encased in perspex and surrounded by fluttering poppies, was chosen. But he was so keen to do the subject justice he decided that instead of the sculpture being a metre tall, as laid out in the brief from the Royal



Above: A working diagram by the artist
Left: The poppy is made up of four heart shapes in white Carrara marble



British Legion, it would be eight metres. The difference in cost, he made up himself.

Installed in Trafalgar Square for Armistice Day, it had a powerful effect on many who recognised the significance of the poppies gradually gathering in the soldier's arms. Hundreds of thousands saw it before it was sent on a tour of the country. "When it was unveiled in Cardiff there was a soldier in civilian clothes who shook my hand with half an arm and said: 'I've just got to thank you.' That's what I can do with my work; give something back to make people remember and commemorate the dead."

He gained the town council's support for his poppy gift, and a site was found at the junction of Marlowe Way. Wiltshire firm Heritage Restoration was brought in to create a suitable base for the three-metre sculpture weighing more than four tonnes.

The poppy itself was crafted in Italy at the studio of business colleague Nicola Stagetti in Pietrasanta, close to the spot where Michaelangelo carved David. "Without him this would not be possible," said Mark. "He has given so much love and attention to it."

Mark explains the hard Carrara marble represented the harshness of war while its white colour was for peace, illuminated by red light for remembrance.

"Its delicate petals show the vulnerability of human life, shaped into four hearts to express gratitude, honour, love and respect. The petals meet to form a cross as a symbol of sacrifice and forgiveness," explains Mark.

As well as being a focal point for anyone to pay their respects, he wants it to be for all servicemen and women involved in the Iraq and Afghan conflicts, not just those who died, but those who were physically or mentally injured and those who came home unscathed.

Mayor Ian Ferries, who served in the RAF for many years, including a spell at Lyneham, said: "People that I've talked to in the town are very supportive of the idea. Hopefully they will see it as a memorial to all that happened. One of the things all the repatriations through Wootton Bassett [effected] was that the rest of the country changed its mind about how it regarded the military, especially the people who are killed serving the country."

But while the cameras were focused on events in a little town in Wiltshire, away from the glare of publicity seriously injured personnel were also being flown back to the UK. "I think Mark's memorial poppy is even more poignant because for every single body that came back, there were others that were wounded – and there were lots of them."

The sculpture will also act as a focal point for families, friends and anyone wanting to remember the fallen. The mayor says: "I hope what it is going to do is draw a line under that phase of the town's existence." WL

Left: Sculptor Mark Humphrey at work; Centre: Mark Humphrey with his staircase sculpture in St James Theatre, London; Left: At the Italian studio