

Tributes to acclaimed artist Fenwick Lawson

By **DAVID HUNTLEY**

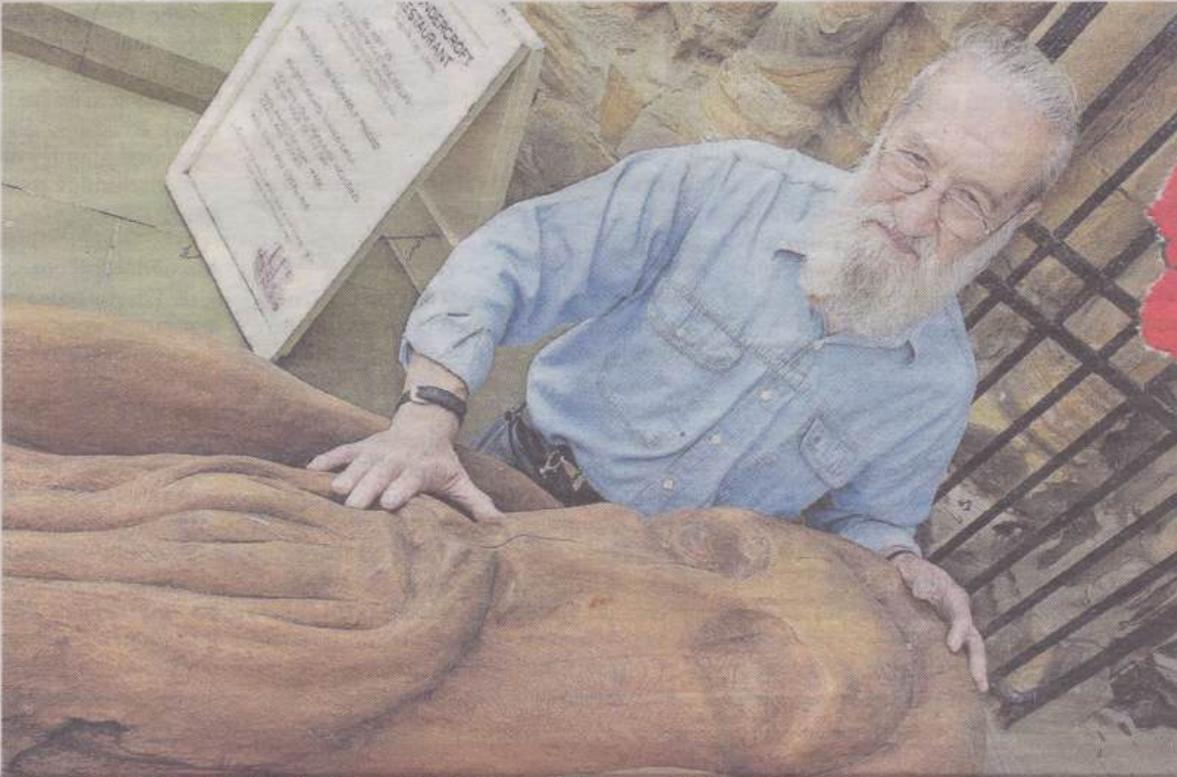
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A NORTH East sculptor who is renowned for depicting the Northumbrian saints has died at the age of 93. Dr Fenwick Justin John Lawson carved many sculptures from trees in Durham and was a familiar and much-loved figure.

His work was rooted in the landscape and history of the north of England and he was particularly well known for his depictions of the great Northumbrian saints, Cuthbert and Bede.

His works can be found across the country, as well as in Rome. Two his sculptures are at the The Pontifical Bede College.

The main concentration of his work was in Durham city. These include 'The Journey' in Millennium Square, 'The Pieta' and 'Sarcophagus' in Durham Cathedral, 'Cuthbert of Farne', 'Gaia' and 'Jacob and the Angel' in St Mary-le-Bow, and 'Cry For Justice', 'The



Sculptor Dr Fenwick Lawson who is renowned for depicting the Northumbrian saints

stage, 'Young Bede', 'The Burning Bush' 'Celtic Spirit' and 'The Wheel Cross'.

Funding for the bronze casting of 'The Journey' was raised via public donation and was unveiled by The Princess Royal in September 2008.

Born into a coal mining family on May 19, 1932 in South Moor, County Durham, Fenwick spent much of his childhood in the neighbouring villages of The Middles and Craghead.

On leaving Stanley Grammar School, he was assigned as a pupil architect to Durham County Council. He studied art at Sunderland College of Art and the Royal College of Art, London under John

Keeping, where he was inspired by the sculptures of Sir Jacob Epstein and the medieval tombs in Westminster Abbey, experimenting with wood, clay and mixed media.

In 1958 and 1959, having been awarded the Sir James Knott Travelling Scholarship, Fenwick completed his studies travelling in France, Italy and Greece, being inspired by the sculptural masters such as Michelangelo and Donatello and by the simplicity of form in Cycladic art.

He taught at St Aidan's and St Joseph's from 1959 to 1961 before being appointed Newcastle College of Art's first sculpture lecturer.

When the college merged into

Newcastle Polytechnic in 1970, he became a principal lecturer and head of sculpture before retiring from teaching in 1984.

At the time of his first one-man show at the Laing Art Gallery in Newcastle, Fenwick was established as one of the emerging generation of 'neo-brutalists'.

His work, largely in welded and distressed scrap metal, was powerful and uncompromisingly non-figurative, inspired by Auguste Rodin's definition of sculpture as 'the art of the hole and the lump'. In the 1970s his focus returned to wood carving and to figurative work, initially exploring religious themes.

During his career, Fenwick had many exhibitions including being the invited artist at the Humanism in Contemporary British Sculpture exhibition in 1985, in Oxford, followed by exhibitions at the Royal Festival Hall, South Bank, London, and the Glynn Vivian art gallery in Oxford and Swansea, where he was also the invited artist in residence.

He was chosen as the invited sculptor at the Royal Academy Summer Show, in 1994 after exhibiting there in 1992. Fenwick was also visiting lecturer at many colleges, including the Duncan of

Jordanstone College of Art, Dundee, Scotland and at the Royal Academy in London. He worked with architects on various projects including Ralph Pattison, but most notably, between 1965-97, with his friend, Vincente Stienlet.

They were able to work together as artist and architect on six new churches and three alterations for the RC Dioceses of Hexham and Newcastle, Middlesbrough, Leeds and Hallam. As part of his collaboration with architects, he produced other elements including altars, stained glass screens and windows, ambones and lecterns, baptismal fonts, processional crosses, paschal candles and stations of the cross.

Fenwick was awarded a Doctor of Letters (honoris causa) from Durham University in 2008, a year in which he was

also made an Honorary Freeman of the City of Durham. The family house in Bow Lane, his studio from 1977, was recognised with a blue plaque in 2024.

Fenwick shared his life with Joan. They were married for 74 years. They had four children, five grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. He passed away on January 23, 2026.



Fenwick Lawson with his sculpture The Journey in Durham city centre