

Queen Elizabeth II: 1926-2022



Steve Swales, from Frome, working on his lifelike bust of the Queen in 2012

Picture: Madame Tussauds/PA

Sculptor's memories of a model monarch

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A talented and accomplished artist from Frome may be one of the only people in Britain to have told our late Queen to shut her mouth.

Steve Swales, the former technical director of Madame Tussaud's in London, has taken at least a part of the responsibility for three waxworks of the late Queen between 1988 and 2012 and it is the 2012 sculpture that is the most lifelike.

Mr Swales, who has lived in Frome since 2016, spoke to me from his shed at the end of the garden, which also functions as a workshop, and during the conversation he had to be comforted by his wife.

Sculptors from Madame Tussaud's use giant callipers to make dozens of measurements of a subject and take hundreds of photos from every angle in order to build up a picture.

The first time he attended a sitting with the Queen, he was only an assistant and he didn't have a great respect for monarchy so he thought that meeting the monarch wouldn't be a problem.

"It was an involuntary reaction," explained Steve, who was an employee of the waxwork museum in Marylebone Road for 30 years. "I took this great big gulp in my throat and it really affected me."



The figure replicating the Queen's Diamond Jubilee portrait at Madame Tussauds Picture: Mirrorpix

Steve had seen the Queen before. Aged three, he dressed up as a jester and travelled to the coronation.

As an assistant, Steve wanted to capture the beginning of the Queen's smile as she just began to move her lips, so while photographing her, he asked her majesty to close her mouth.

"I bet not many people get to ask you that," he quipped. Fortunately our late monarch was most amused and graciously complied.

Later on in his career, Steve spent

a lot of time at Madame Tussaud's teaching. The museum employed two full-time sculptors and four or five freelancers.

The second bust of Queen Elizabeth that Steve produced was all his own work, involving sittings at Windsor Castle and Balmoral.

After he had been waiting a while at Balmoral, his subject walked in wearing a tweed skirt, a scarf and carrying a stick.

"Oh, I'm just going to feed the dogs," she said.

Then in 2012, Steve produced his masterpiece - a reworking of the clay head he had created ten years earlier with updates from photography, and it is the final waxwork made from that clay head which is the most skillful likeness of the subject.

Steve is still fond of our late monarch. "She is just so professional," he said. "I can't believe she was still working the other day."

"I was a republican, but I'm not any more," he said, his voice breaking up again. "I'm finding it a little bit hard to talk about this," he admitted.



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Steve Swales



Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II leaving the Roman Baths on May 2, 2002, as



The Queen visiting Hauser & Wirth Somerset gallery at Durslade Farm in Bruton, in March 2019
Picture: Toby Melville/PA