

Foundation Diploma in Letter Carving

Programme Specification and Unit Descriptors

Awarded by West Dean
2 years, part-time



Programme Specification

The West Dean Foundation Diploma in Letter Carving is awarded in recognition of the successful completion of the two-year, part-time programme of six, three-day units, self-directed study and making, with a final 1500-word essay.

This diploma course aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the craft, enabling you to gain insight and practice in drawing, designing lettering, layout, and various carving techniques. You will learn about different materials and how to design for unique projects, as well as about the history of letterforms, which will give you the building blocks to develop your own personal style. You will be supported throughout the course, enabling you to create work based on your own research and interests.

Our Diploma in Letter Carving is suitable for carvers who have had some experience working with stone, either at West Dean or elsewhere, and are looking to commit to an extended program of study to develop confidence in their own personal approach and inspirations. Within each unit, the tutor will introduce an in-depth practical process as a springboard for exploring techniques with individual direction to aid your development. The importance of health and safety, as well as the management of a studio, will be introduced alongside these units. There will also be talks on historical and contemporary issues in lettering. Each unit will be held in the College's stone carving studio, which has offered regular short courses with well-known lettering makers for many years.

Self-directed study

Between each unit, you will be expected to practice what has been taught in the previous unit and work on a set project. This might be observation and drawing practice or carving. You will bring this work to the start of the following unit for discussion and dissemination. Therefore, between courses, you will need access to an upright letter carving easel and a well-lit space to do drawing and design work. You will be expected to spend several days a week evolving your own work.

A tutorial session will be planned with the program tutor between each course on the published date.

It is expected that you will also keep a journal of your studies alongside a sketchbook, visual research and technical journal for your own records and interests for the duration of the Letter Carving Diploma programme.

By the end of the first three units, you will have built your proficiency and confidence in observation, hand-drawn lettering and classic design, as well as strengthening your carving technique. This work will inform your own pathway in units 4-6, where the work will evolve through self-directed development, progressing into designing your own lettering and learning intermediate carving techniques such as raised lettering and low relief carving.



Essay

You will also be required to submit an essay following the successful completion of the requisite six units of study. The essay must be completed within two months of completing all six courses, for submission on 4 September 2027.

The essay will consist of a 1500 word reflective account that underpins your own development and research, and demonstrates the link between your overall experience of the Letter Carving Diploma and your future pathway, with evidence of historical and cultural research relevant to your own practice.

The Programme Tutor will discuss how this written work may be presented.

Exhibition

An exhibition of selected completed work will be planned at the College to celebrate your achievements.

Completion

The Foundation Diploma in Letter Carving while not nationally validated, nevertheless aims to provide students with the ability to identify themes within their practice and to identify the kind of work they are looking to produce and be able to communicate this confidently.

Candidates will be awarded the Diploma on completion of all units of the programme on the dates listed, submitted the 1500 word essay on time and contributed work for the exhibition of work held in the College after the final unit.

Course tutor

Lisi Ashbridge is an internationally recognised letter designer and carver with a background in visual Neuroscience. She is an elected member of the Lettering Arts Trust, The Master Carver's Association and a QEST scholar (Royal Warrant Holder's charity). She recently featured as a Master on Bill Bailey's Master Crafters TV programme (Sky Arts). She also teaches at Highgrove Craft's Centre and the King's Foundation course.

Entry requirements

The diploma is open to beginners who have had some experience in letter carving on a minimum of a two-day beginner's course, or those with some experience who require a structured course. You must also have:

- Access to a home or community area for letter carving and drawing/design work
- A firm commitment to attending all six units at West Dean on the dates published for this enrolment, since it is not possible to offer alternative dates
- Apply with evidence of your current work, skills and interests in letter carving
- Confirmation that you have the following tools to bring to each unit: Dummy and marble/slate tungsten letter carving chisels 4mm, 8 mm and 10 mm minimum*



Please note: You are required to provide your own tools to bring to each unit (*as listed above). The College will have a wider selection of tools to try and sharpening blocks. You will also need to have access to a letter carving easel in your home studio to work between courses.

Course fees

The course fees are payable in advance for each year of study

Year 1 course fee: £1,650 (non-residential, covering all three units)

Year 2 course fee: £1,650 (non-residential, covering all three units)

The course fee (£3,300 in total) includes Portland and Slate tablets supplied for use during the carving three-day units held at the College (with the exception of unit 6), and includes the virtual interim tutorials.

Accommodation is available at an extra cost at our Sussex campus. Please see the website for more details.

We may routinely increase our course fees from year to year for one-year courses as well as courses lasting two or more years and may review and change such course fees without notice.

How to apply

There is a selection process for this course. Students must complete and return the Application Form by Tuesday, 7 April 2026.

Shortlisted applicants will be invited to an informal interview on Teams with the Programme Tutor and Head of School of Art on Tuesday, 14 April 2026, before places are confirmed soon after this date. Following confirmation of your place, the Bookings Team will contact you to arrange for payment of the course fees for the first year of study.

Please read our standard Terms and Conditions for short courses on our website. A specific condition of enrolment is a commitment to attend and pay for all six units, by the due date.

Any questions?

Email study@westdean.ac.uk; call us on: (01243) 818 300 and select option 1



Unit Descriptors

Year 1

Unit 1: Introduction to Letter Carving

10-13 May 2026 | 3 days

This unit will support the foundation of knowledge, with an introduction to different types of stone, and how to design for them, with practice on V-cut carving in stone.

A series of demonstrations will provide hands-on experience of working and techniques of carving uprights, diagonals, curves and serifs; chasing and chopping technique; discussion and demonstration of different techniques for different material and size of lettering; and tool sharpening. You will also gain an understanding how to set up a studio and health and safety within the studio; a history of classical and contemporary forms in lettering; and an introduction to looking at and analysing design, layout and spacing.

The tutor will discuss plans for the self-directed study and to develop a framework for your research and making over the intervening weeks to bring to the next unit.

This will include:

- Theoretical study, to find and visually study examples of different letter forms through the ages. Draw them in your journal, compare different letter forms, why should they have been produced like this, how were they produced, materials, purposes
- First draw out a design on paper, transfer it, carve it in Portland Stone
- Practical work, to carve whole stone verticals, horizontal, curves, different sizes

The brief is set to guide you through the processes, which in conjunction with your own interests, will begin to inform your creative ideas. These skills will be adapted to levels guided by individual students' needs and personal achievements.

A short one-to-one tutorial is designed to mentor your ideas, to help time manage your self-directed study and to develop a framework for your research and making over the intervening weeks to bring to the next unit. This tutorial will be held during the time at West Dean College. In between each unit, an interim tutorial on a set date will be allocated to have a 40 minute virtual tutorial on Teams with the tutor.

Interim virtual tutorial for Unit 1: Friday 19 June 2026

Unit 2: Observation of letter forms and drawing

19-22 July 2026 | 3 days

The second unit will begin with a group discussion on one piece of work brought in by each student which they have made in the intervening weeks. This is an opportunity to discuss and share ideas, and any technical hurdles or achievements.



In this unit the tutor will give demonstrations and presentations to give an understanding of different traditional Roman lettering; How were they made; What is the difference between typography, calligraphy and hand drawn lettering? Italics, lowercase, uppercase etc. and a look at different international letter forms and writing systems – each will be followed by practical sessions so that you learn how to:

- Design and draw your own classical alphabet (Roman brush inspired)
- How are shapes formed, why are there specific shapes?
- Thumbnail sketches
- Layout
- Spacing
- Carving practice of letter forms with the new knowledge of how they are formed, while carving in slate in this unit
- Practice carving certain letters with the understanding of how they are formed or carry on drawing

Towards the end of the course the tutor will discuss the self-directed study project to work on during the intervening weeks to the next unit.

Interim virtual tutorial for Unit 2: Friday 4 September 2026

Unit 3: Carving

11-14 October 2026 | 3 days

Following the group discussion on the project work set on the previous unit, this unit will focus on carving, this time you may choose to work in either Portland stone or slate as you will design and layout a design for your own classic Roman brush inspired alphabet.

The unit will cover:

- How to transfer a full-size drawing
- Transfer design and start carving
- Carving design
- Discuss how to come up with speculative wording – and discuss copyright
- What to do if something goes wrong, e.g. chip fill, rub back

By the end of the third unit, you will now have a greater understanding of lettering design and carving to move through the stages of the production process at both technical and aesthetic level. The unit will end with further discussion as to help you to work independently over the next months and look towards finding your own creative voice.

Interim virtual tutorial for Unit 3: Friday 4 December 2026

Year 2

Unit 4: Design for a job/project/commission and raised lettering

17-20 January 2027 | 3 days



In this unit you will expand your approach to design and what to consider when designing for a project; and also an introduction to carving raised lettering, working in either Portland Stone or slate.

Design aspect will cover:

- Client interaction
- What to consider when designing for a project
- Different scenario to work on over the two days (garden art, memorial, house name, different material, lighting conditions, purposes).
- Class Crits and discussion

Introduction to raised lettering:

- Design
- Carving

Interim virtual tutorial for Unit 4: Friday 5 March 2027

Unit 5: Design your own lettering for a project/text

11-14 April 2027 | 3 days

Unit 5 will centre around designing your own lettering project, working with your own choice of text, in Portland Stone or slate. Additional considerations will be introduced, such as discussion and demonstration of the use of colour and gilding in your carving, with a practical session; considering the importance of what the text says.

You will present your project to the others in the group for discussion.

Interim virtual tutorial for Unit 5: Friday 4 June 2027

Unit 6: Self directed making with tutorials

4-7 July 2027 | 3 days

This is a chance to have one-to-one tutorials focused on techniques and self-directed study. You can bring in pieces to work on, discuss drawings or work on a final piece. It is an opportunity to explore challenging methods and to work in a supported environment. You will have the chance to take part in group discussions to generate further ideas. There will also be a discussion about marketing, establishing your practice and how to present your work outside of the studio.

There will be an assessment of the research and technical journals that you will have worked on throughout the programme of study; and selection of letter carving, sketches, samples for the exhibition within the College on completion of the programme.

The final essay must be submitted following the successful completion of the six units of study. The essay must be completed within two months after completing the final unit on 4 September 2027.

Final virtual tutorial with Tutor following essay submission: 4 October 2027