



Geoff King - Artist in wood

Go north to Tain by train to visit Geoff King, who works in wood on a miniature scale, making jewellery. It is high spring, going on summer, so the world is full of fresh greens and rogue bushes on the railway embankment are white with hawthorn flowers or yellow with gorse spears, clad with blossom thicker than I can ever recall seeing.

Geoff and his wife, Fuggo, are refugees from Bruton in Somerset. They have been on the Portmahomack peninsular for 13 years, enjoying the peace, the proximity of the sea and the real isolation from traffic and pollution. They had wanted a place where their

son, Robert, could walk to school and they had hoped for somewhere near to a rail network. They got the lot but it came with a huge challenge: a two-acre plot and a farmhouse that had gone to rack (which means couch grass!) and almost to ruin.

Geoff was already a woodworker when he came to Scotland. He had given up formal employment to make toys and had developed enough skills to take on the house renovation himself.

The state of decay was advanced, so lintels, window frames, floors, stairs, all had to be replaced.

Wherever possible, Geoff used Scottish oak, learning as he went along, making something that would last longer than the original.

Even more impressively, he also raised the wall-heads of the house by three feet. A short course at the Scottish Lime Centre, Charlestown, in Fife, enabled him to use traditional build with lime mortar so skilfully that you would never





know that the elevation of the building has changed. Instead of low garrets, the house now has proper bedrooms – a huge improvement.

The plan was for Geoff to complete his own house and then move on to do major renovations for other people and earn a living that way. His body had other plans. The sheer grind of the labour, intensified by the pressure continually put on him by the home renovations grants inspectorate, made him ill. He succumbed to ME, made worse a few months later by a more acute and debilitating illness, which was eventually diagnosed as Lyme disease.

It took three years for Geoff to recover enough to resume much in the way of work. Major exertions like house construction now seemed out of the question so he had think hard about how he could slow his pace of life yet still be productive. He looked at the little pieces of wood he had saved from his toy-making days, all the bits he could not bring himself to burn. "People treat wood as disposable", said Geoff. "They do not give it a high regard. But I have always treasured it, enjoying the enormous variety of textures, grains, colours and properties that different species have. I wanted to put all my little off-cuts to a use which would give them value. Although people often prefer precious metals for jewellery, I decided to try making earrings and brooches, to see if I could persuade them to look differently at wood."

Small works of art

The results are stunning. Geoff works with finesse, carving, cutting, finishing and oiling every piece, using a minimum of power tools. He sometimes creates Art Nouveau-inspired filigree scrolls that would be complex in metal but are extraordinary in wood. He borrows from traditional jewellery by setting stones. Amber is set in brown walnut, turquoise in cream-coloured box, polished beach pebbles in pale holly. He started by making animal forms. Box wood lizards and walnut dragons still appear in his repertoire, though he says that his designs are always evolving. Trees figure large. One of his

classic designs, I realise, I have seen on the ears of many a tree person: a stylised tree silhouette with fine winter branches. Tiny bog oak tree brooches with a fan of little oak leaves, set with red amber, are another favourite. The bog oak came from Somerset years ago. Geoff would like a piece from Scotland but even though he could make many items from just a small section, no one has yet offered him any.

Other designs draw on Classical palmate forms, which are pleasingly regular, or organic ones, which are pleasingly irregular. Celtic knotwork figures occasionally but re-interpreted by Geoff to make it his own. Nothing that he does is purely derivative and much is really inventive. For necklaces and pendants, Geoff has devised a small, neat wooden fastener. It consists of a tiny toggle that fits through a wooden ring, both turned on a small lathe. The strings are usually waxed linen thread, which looks like fine leather but does not offend the vegetarian customer.

Another line of business is wooden combs, both those for combing the hair and those for holding it in place. Box is the traditional material for these, though Geoff uses walnut, ash, elm, yew and holly, finding all of them sufficiently hard to take the fine cutting that the teeth of combs requires. Plastic is so much the accepted material for combs that it is a revelation to handle a wooden one. Why put up with the tacky by-products of the oil industry for something you use every day, when a viable and beautiful alternative exists? When I am feeling rich I will treat myself.

Not that Geoff's prices are really high for what he is producing, though he apologises that they are. Each piece represents hours of hand-labour in his caravan workshop, which looks out towards the sea. And each piece is consequently unique, a small work of art. You should not expect to get such for a few pounds or less. It is interesting how we understand this in relation to jewellery, which has always commanded a high price, but for functional objects, where a cheap alternative is the norm, it is more difficult to make the leap of acceptance.

For tree people

Brooches, combs, earrings, kilt pins and pendants are all to be seen on Geoff's website, though it is craft fairs, festivals and events, from as far apart as Skye and Devon, rather than the internet, that are the major outlets for his work. You will find him at Treefest in Edinburgh and the Festival of Trees at Westonbirt Arboretum in Gloucestershire.

I ask him about galleries but Geoff explains that they usually require a CV that shows evidence of art school and formal exhibitions. "I think I feel more affinity with tree people", he comments.

It seems clear to me that tree people



will, and do, feel affinity with his work. And there is the added sense of affinity with a family who are planting trees around their holding, weaving willow fences, digging duck ponds and growing admirable vegetables to feed themselves. When oil-based society finally sickens and dies, they should be all right. Let's hope, for their sake, that there are still people wanting to adorn themselves!

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