



Making wooden jewellery

HELEN JOHNSON

Geoff King's passion for wood has led him not only into making furniture, toys and now jewellery, but he has also created his own woodland.

His jewellery designs are intricate and delicately carved.

"Close-grained hardwood is stronger than you think," Geoff explains. "A lot of it lies in choosing the right piece of wood, carefully studying the grain and checking for weak points."

It's part of a deep knowledge and love of wood that began in his mid-twenties, when Geoff started making wooden toys.

"It was an idea that came from nowhere. I was in a job that I didn't really enjoy, and one day I just thought 'I have to leave and make toys'."

He had no previous experience, and says, "When I left the job, there was a whip-round. I used the money to buy

tools, and experimented with scraps of wood in the spare room.

"Then, a friend and mentor who was a cabinetmaker said I could use one end of his workshop. He'd come over and look at what I was doing, and gave me handy hints. He also let me use his machine tools, and showed me how to use them safely.

"He was making big things, and I was making little things, so I started to accumulate his offcuts. He still saves for me now. Every time I go to see him, he gives me a box of nice pieces — he uses quality wood for cabinetmaking."

At that time, Geoff was living in Somerset. With his friend's help, he

became adept at furniture making, high-class joinery, turning and carving. He won prizes for his toys, and supplemented his earnings by working in high-class joinery.

However, having become interested in wood, he also became interested in growing trees. With his wife Fiona, says Geoff, "We'd started growing food in the garden, and I was collecting and planting tree seeds in pots. There wasn't enough room to plant them all, and we thought we'd like a bit more land. We looked at places where land was cheaper, and ended up in Scotland. Fiona had family connections there, and we'd visited and loved it.



Geoff at work in his studio at Tain in north-east Scotland. Photograph by Amy Copeman.

Above, Swirls brooch, in oak and yew, by Geoff King. Photograph by Ewen Weatherspoon.

“There’s a town called Tain about thirty-five (55km) miles north of Inverness, on the north-east coast. From Tain is a flat peninsula, out into the sea, and we live on that.

“We came here in 1995, and bought one and three-quarter acres (0.7ha). It had a few Scots pines and old fruit trees. Since then, we’ve planted loads of trees and now have an established little woodland. We grow food as well, in a polytunnel and greenhouse.”

Geoff restored the house, and worked locally as a joiner and general woodworker.

However, ten years ago, while recuperating from a serious illness, he

began carving off-cuts into jewellery. Friends loved it, and ever since, he’s been kept busy making jewellery.

“My work and my lifestyle are linked by the same philosophy, to tread lightly upon the Earth. My friend knew about rainforest destruction, and the value of trees and forests. He made sure he used British hardwoods, and sought out storm-felled trees.”

Geoff is careful about his sources of wood, preferring his friend’s off-cut box, storm-felled trees and, latterly, coppiced hazel from his own plantation. One of his favourite woods is bog oak.

“As the Somerset levels are drained for farming, oaks that died 4,000 years



Geoff carving another of his delicate pieces of jewellery. Photograph by Amy Copeman.



Left, tree necklace in bog oak and amber. Photograph by Ewen Weatherspoon.

Above, rowan leaf brooch in rowan wood. Photograph by Gordon Allison.

Below, wood age comb in bog oak with blue amber. Photograph by Ewen Weatherspoon.



ago come to the surface. One caught in a farmer’s plough, and my friend rescued it. I love the fact that it’s been buried for thousands of years, but once it’s been carefully dried, I can still carve it. I like combining it with amber, which also comes from trees, but is much older. I get the amber

from a supplier in Lithuania, who collects it on the beach. I buy it rough, then shape and polish it myself.”

Some of Geoff’s creations feature wood alone; sometimes he likes to combine it with other stones. He buys Fair Trade stones, as well as collecting his own on the beach.

“I choose a stone for its shape and colour, and find wood to contrast or complement it. There are so many colours in woods.”

Geoff’s inspiration comes from many sources.

“I put aside time for designing when I sit down and sketch. They might be variations on an existing design, or I might develop something in a different way. Sometimes I’ll get out stones that I’ve bought or collected, and use them as a starting point for a design.

“Also, living in a lovely landscape and beautiful place is an inspiration. It’s away from the hills, an open landscape with a big sky — I really like the big sky. A lot of it is rough grazing for sheep, and wild beach. It’s fairly treeless in the immediate vicinity.”

However, Geoff and Fiona have planted enough trees on their land to shelter their vegetable garden from the wind, and create a small woodland.

“I walk out of the workshop into our own little nature reserve, and see the birds and insects.”

Every morning, he heads out into the wider landscape.

“It allows the mind to be free and allows the creative flow. I go pretty much whatever the weather. I find it quite refreshing to walk out into the elements.”

Inspiration also comes from wood itself.

“Sometimes, I’ll just be in the workshop and be inspired by a piece of wood — I’ll see something in it.

“Two favourites are walnut and yew.



Dragon pendant, in hawthorn.
Photograph by Gordon Allison.

Walnut’s not really native, but it’s been grown here for many centuries.”

For the future, he says, “I intend to continue developing. Not necessarily more elaborate, but I do like a challenge. For instance, one of my most popular designs is a tree shape with a stone behind. It’s challenging because of hollowing out the back of the tree to take the stone — it must be a perfect fit. I’m now making the tree flow out onto the surround as well.

“I’m planning new designs that are more elaborate, bigger and bolder. And I will continue making the popular designs.” ■

More information about Geoff’s work at www.woodlandtreasures.co.uk.