



Holly comb

Geoff King

by Helen Johnson

Woodland Treasures

Geoff King makes finely crafted wooden jewellery, carved in delicate filigree patterns. It's the culmination of a dual love affair, of working with wood and growing trees.

Geoff's forest garden, where he grows food as well as wood, is an important part of his life. He says, "Throughout all of my business practice I'm mindful of the environment - for instance, all the packaging is recycled, and web sales mean I travel less."

His jewellery, which is made from scrap wood, is part of this sustainability. But although 'waste', the woods he uses are high quality, saved from furniture making workshops. Geoff also likes bog oak, and describes his source: "My cabinet maker friend, Pete, lives in Somerset. As the Somerset Levels are drained for farming, oaks that died 4,000 years ago come to the surface. Pete found one caught in a farmer's plough. The farmer was trying to burn it, so Pete rescued it."

Pete carefully dried the oak, explains Geoff: "There's so much water in bog oak, that as it dries, it shrinks, cracks and twists. But Pete managed to get a few pieces of furniture out of it, and saved the off-cuts for me. Another friend rescued a bog oak near Culloden - a similar story."

Geoff's Woodland Treasures evolved from many aspects of his life. He says, "From a very young age, I was interested in nature. I studied Zoology, but dropped out because I realised that academia wasn't for me."

After a series of odd jobs, Geoff decided to make wooden toys. He says, "I left my job, used money from the whip-round from colleagues to buy some basic tools, and started making little cars and animal shapes." His cabinetmaker friend offered him workshop space, and Geoff says, "He'd look over my shoulder and offer advice, and I gradually added to my skills base."

When his wife became pregnant, Geoff supplemented his income by working for another friend who was a high class joiner, making staircases, doors and so on.

Meanwhile, Geoff recalls, "We were living in Somerset, and I filled our small garden with trees grown from seeds collected from the wild. Then I ran out of space."

So they moved to a Scottish croft, with plans to renovate it, grow their own food, and for Geoff to work as a joiner-cum-general woodworker.

He says, "We chose our lifestyle as a priority. Over the years, I'd grown to love wood: it was a medium I was happy working with. Here, 'on the edge of somewhere', is an inspiring place to live, with big skies, hills, the sea, and our two acre garden."

They renovated the house, planted trees and vegetables, and kept chickens for eggs. It was all perfect - until Geoff contracted a serious illness and couldn't work.

He says, "I was unable to work for a long time. I'd always been active and I became frustrated and bored. So I thought I'd potter with something small and began carving jewellery. I have a strong creative drive, and I pushed the designs and the skills. I like to stretch myself and my work is continually evolving."

The work fitted beautifully with Geoff's ethos, as, he says, "I like to see value from 'waste' that is too small for others to use. I'd kept off-cuts of wood from when I was making furniture - I love wood so much, I couldn't bear to throw it away. And friends working with wood put aside nice pieces for me. They're happy to see it used, rather than going on the fire."

And, fifteen years since planting his forest garden, Geoff says, "I've started using coppiced wood from my garden. It's nice to know that I planted it myself."

Many of his designs are fine and delicate, and Geoff says, "A lot of it lies in choosing the right piece of wood, carefully studying the grain, and checking for weak points. And close-grained hardwood is stronger than you think."

"I love working with wood because it's natural, and has such incredible variety of grain, colour and texture. And I've had so much experience working with it, that it does what I want it to do - or I do what it wants me to do."

As his designs became increasingly sophisticated, Geoff experimented with adding stones. He says, "I don't like them in all pieces, but in some pieces, stones contrast with, or complement, the wood. One of my favourites is amber and bog oak. I use sustainable amber that's been washed up on the beaches of the Baltic."

Geoff says that he learned business skills in the same way as his woodworking skills: "In tiny steps,



'Waves' brooch in oak & yew



Geoff King



Rowan leaf brooch in rowan

learning as I went along. Networking's good, and I've been to Cultural Enterprise and Crafts Scotland workshops, that have been helpful."

One of his important business decisions, he says, "Was NOT to borrow a lot of money. We grow a lot of our own food, so we have a low-cost lifestyle."

Like everything else in his life, Geoff's sales grew naturally. He says, "I gave jewellery to friends. One friend did workshops at music festivals, and suggested I brought my jewellery along."

"To begin with, I sold at every opportunity I could find. At first, I sold cheaper than I should have done, but I soon realised that wasn't a sustainable way to survive. So I've been creeping upmarket. Now I've got my work in a very nice gallery in Perth."

Likewise, Geoff set up a website after people kept asking for one. He says, "It's a good website, made by a professional designer, and I update it regularly. It's getting more and more successful over time. Not many people make wooden jewellery, so on a search, I come up on page one."

"At every event, I hand out business cards to everyone who looks at my work. At a fair, there's too much to buy. But I know that people come back to the website and buy later, when there are birthdays and Christmas."

"I've only ever done one advert, a little classified in Permaculture magazine. That resulted in a lifestyle feature in the magazine. I got a lot of work from that - it was a turning point."

Nowadays, says Geoff, "I'm mostly recovered, but I still can't do heavy work. Some people end up in a wheelchair, but I'm lucky: even though I'm still weak, I can walk to the beach. My wife - who is a treasure - does the heavy work, and we have WWOOFERS."

WWOOFERS are volunteers who trade labour in return for experience in organic food production. Geoff says, "They're a nice way for me to meet people, as, working from home, I don't go out much."

As web sales grow, Geoff attends fewer fairs, and says, "I'm getting more choosy."

For the future, he is developing new products and aims to continue moving upmarket. Now, he says, "My lifestyle, of sustainability and craft, is all connected by love of nature and concern for the environment. I count my blessings: I'm lucky to live in a wonderful place, lucky to have a wonderful wife and lucky to scratch a living from something I love doing."

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www.woodlandtreasures.co.uk

Geoff's work is available at:
Jardine Gallery Shop, 45 New Row, Perth PH1 5QA
www.julianjardine.co.uk/shop.html

See Geoff & his work live at
'Exhibitree' at the 'Festival of the Tree'
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(including carving demonstration).
www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/infd-6xclux
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www.forest-festival.com

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