

Carve out a new beginning

IN THE dappled sunlight filtering through the canopy of the trees, on a rare bright day in a woodland in the Tamar Valley, lies a pile of roughly cut branches. They look like firewood rejects, the pieces discarded as too misshapen to be easily chopped into usable lengths.

I can see thick, twisted boughs, gnarled, diseased trunks and great knotted chunks on which the old bark is folded in deep scars.

But Dave Bradshaw sees pieces of art with graceful curves and impossibly smooth edges. And after hours of patient work in this woodturner's hands that is what the rejects will become.

The shelves of his Art in the Wood workshop at Harrowbarrow, near Callington, are lined with the proof of his vision and skill.

The name expresses exactly what he does – makes art from wood – and where he does it: his workshop is so much a part of the woodland it might have sprung from the ground.

Dave, too, might have been fashioned from wood as he has spent virtually all of his life working with trees and timber.

More than that: trees have reshaped a life that was once as twisted and battered as the rough branches that now provide his living. He believes the material he works with has repaired him in mind and in body.

A visitor might stroll past and scarcely realise a man is at work. The only sounds are the songs of the woodland birds and there is no machinery to catch the ear.

For Dave, that is the only way to work. He puts down a chisel, takes a sip of red bush tea and explains: "I don't like working with power tools of any sort."

"For a start they're expensive and I like to work with the wood. I need direct contact with it to work with the natural shapes."

"I don't want a machine to impose a shape on it."

As he pauses, a thrush is singing, repeating its phrases above the bees buzzing among the flowers on the edge of the woods. Digby, Dave's rescued beagle, dozes at his side.

"I use a sharp axe to strip the bark – easier to do when the wood has just been cut and is still growing – and chisels and sandpaper. Lots of sandpaper!" he explains. "Then they are finished with natural oils and waxes. If it's got an orange warning about hazardous chemicals on the bottle or tin I won't use it. And I don't even like using the car to collect a piece of wood. If it can be carried, I'd sooner walk and pick it up."

His green credentials go further than that. A solar panel powers his phone and the laptop which he uses to produce the leaflets publicising his work.

Much of his supply of wood comes from tree surgeons near his Harrowbarrow home, where he lives with his partner, Debs. They know the problem trees – misshapen, diseased or gnarled – which they tackle can be given new life as objects of beauty in Dave's skilled hands.

At first he made rustic furniture but more recently he has moved on to create jewellery, ornaments and sculpture.

"It just seemed to grow in that direction," Dave says.

"I'd been making the furniture and then a friend asked me to make a sculpted piece for somebody to give at a wedding. That was a new start."

His pieces range from £12.50 for a pendant to perhaps £600 for a large sculptured bowl. If he priced a piece by the hours spent on it each tag would gain a prohibitive zero on the end. But for Dave money is not the object.

"I enjoy working with a living thing in this environment," he says. "Although the tree may be dead, it still lives as I work on the wood and when I've finished, changing with the moisture, the temperature and the sunlight."

"Part of my work is to reawaken people's

DAVE BRADSHAW'S work revolves around fashioning wood. But wood has also shaped his life, he tells MARTIN FREEMAN in his Tamar Valley workshop



Pictures Steven Haywood



WOODEN ART: Above, Dave Bradshaw with some of his pieces at his workshop near Callington; right and left, Dave at work at different stages of the crafting process; facing page, two of Dave's finished pieces. Examples of his work go on show through the Drawn to the Valley group, various galleries in the area and on his website



appreciation of real wood. There is so much chain-store tat and MDF out there."

Dave's work has not made the high streets yet, but he is finding an appreciative audience with a series of exhibitions this autumn in Devon and Cornwall. He is a member of the Drawn to the Valley group – which brings together artists, designers and makers who live in Plymouth and the towns and villages close

to the Tamar – and took part in their show at the University of Plymouth's Cube3 gallery in the summer.

He has just completed an 'open studies' stint, inviting visitors to see him at work in the woodland workshop, and has two exhibitions beginning this month, one in Calstock, the other at Delamore near Cornwood in the South Hams.

Even if he did find fortune, he says he

could never leave his woodland setting for a larger site in a town.

His workshop is cold in winter, too hot when the sun shines in summer, and in the notoriously wet Tamar Valley, is damp all year round, but, as Dave says: "I couldn't work any other way. I couldn't work in some unit on a business park on the edge of some town."

And the discomfort is worth it: deer, foxes and rabbits are regular visitors, birds are ever present and in the early spring the tree bases are hidden by a carpet of

daffodils – the site was once commercial bulb fields.

The surprise is that somebody so skilled admits it took time to gain the confidence to contact galleries.

The explanation lies in his past. Dave was born in Yorkshire and grew up in the Midlands. His first job was as far removed from wood as it is possible to be: inside a metal tube, deep in the ocean as a Royal Navy submariner.

He later worked as a mechanic and trained in carpentry and forestry, drifted

through a series of jobs throughout Britain and began green woodwork in the early 1990s when he discovered Mike Abbot's book of the same name.

Decades of heavy manual work took their toll on his body – he has arthritis in the base of his spine – and then on his mind. While teaching countryside skills at Duchy College, Stoke Climsland, in 1998 he had a nervous breakdown.

He turned his back on the rat race and, with the permission of the woodland landowner, rebuilt a dilapidated workshop

and began woodturning. The species he works with are as varied as his own background: cherry, holm oak, English oak, apple, hawthorn, laburnum and elm.

The twisted, contorted shapes are essential to Dave's method of working.

"I like to work with the natural shapes that the tree makes in its struggle to survive, where it grows over an injury from a storm or an animal or a disease," he says. "They get damaged, lose a branch or some bark, but they heal themselves. I was damaged physically and mentally,

too. But the work I have done has been my way of repairing the damage."

Art in the Wood is about half a mile from the village of Harrowbarrow on the road to Cotehele. Dave's work is included in the autumn show at the Lime Kiln Gallery, Calstock (01822 834654), at Delamore Gallery, near Cornwood (01752 837719) from September 20 to December 22 and at Mount Edgcombe from October 18 to November 2. You can contact Dave on 01579 351444 or learn more at www.artinthewood.co.uk.