



PEOPLE

Martin Freeman meets a craftsman in the Tamar Valley

Something arty in the woodshed

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 that have been 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 a part of the woodland that 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.

A visitor might stroll past and scarcely realise a man is at work. The only sounds are the songs of the woodland birds. 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 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 summer 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.



A Dave Bradshaw sculpture

Lots of sandpaper! Then they are finished with natural oils and waxes. If it's got an orange warning 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."

Much of his supply comes from tree surgeons near his Harrowbarrow home where he lives with his partner, Debs.

At first he made rustic furniture but more recently he has moved into 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."

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 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 summer in Devon and Cornwall.

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 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 that 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 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 suffered 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 work.

"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 Bradshaw will be taking part in the Draxon to the Valley artists' group open studios event on August 30 at Cotehele Quay, near St Dominick, and then in his workshop until September 7. His work is also on show in the Lime Kiln Gallery, Calstock. Call 01579 351444 or visit the www.artinthewood.co.uk website.



Dave Bradshaw at his workshop in Harrowbarrow with some of the pieces he has crafted from various woods, including cherry, holm oak, English oak, apple, hawthorn, laburnum and elm