

CHAINSAW SCULPTOR

CHAINSAWS don't have a very good Press. From weapons of mass murder in the movies to machines that inflict terrible accidents on the unwary, chainsaws are the big, dangerous beasts of the tool world. *By Gail Cooper.*

But in the hands of an expert, like Phil Dunford, the chainsaw can become as biddable and subtle as the artist's brush or the embroiderer's needle.

Phil Dunford is a chainsaw artist.

He admits he was "rubbish" at art at school, yet he has an innate capacity to "see" a three-dimensional sculpture trapped inside a rough block or branch of wood. His forestry skills enable him to release it from its wooden prison and turn it into an object of beauty.

Owls, bears, crocodiles, mushrooms, even human faces emerge from a rip-roaring welter of noise and sawdust as he works.

Regular travellers between Ruthin and Mold may have noticed his two-faced sculpture in Douglas firwood at Loggerheads Garage. It's a sculptural "take" on the old Loggerheads inn sign, where the third loggerhead is the viewer.

"My wife thinks it looks a bit like Freddie Mercury," laughs Phil, as he recalls the epic struggle of a group of men to move it into position at the garage.

Phil, his wife, Karen, and their two daughters, live in the hills above Betws Gwerfil Goch in the Vale of Clwyd, near Clocaenog Forest.

He came to his current passion for chainsaw art in circuitous ways. A B.Sc. in geography from Aberystwyth was followed by an M.Sc. in forestry at Bangor. Eight or nine years ago he was working as a self-employed forestry worker in Clocaenog, one of 30 or 40 freelancers handling chainsaws every day.

"But big harvesting machines were brought in, and the jobs went. It was a matter for me of diversifying."

His wife Karen, was teaching, and he opted to work from home so he could cope with school hours for the children.

"With chainsaw carving, some people have come to it via art training, but not many are very skilled with chainsaws, like someone who has worked with them every day. I'm one of those who are, and I'm lucky that I can just see the sculptures inside the wood, and see which bits to take away," he says modestly.

Pictures by Stéphanie Durrant

His skill is such that he can create complex and beautiful pieces that need to be cut to within a hair's breadth, like the woodsman's axe on a block of wood, cut from yew and sanded and oiled to a gleaming high polish.

Phil was the UK Chainsaw Champion in 1999 and 2001, and Welsh Tree-felling Champion five times between 1997 and 2005, and has been a member of the Welsh Axe-racing Team since 1994. His success in competitions has taken him abroad for trials of speed, safety and accuracy.

His contacts in the industry provide regular information on rare and interesting wood waiting to have the sculptures released from inside it.

"Yew and walnut are quite scarce. New oak is quite soft, but blackthorn and hawthorn are

dense. The hardest to work is yew, but it takes the best finish, with wonderful grain patterns emerging as you work. It's all done with the saw and a sander, but I don't use chisels."

His sculptures sell at several outlets, including a craft centre in Llangollen where 12 Wales-based artists in wood, paint and jewellery display their work. He also sells owls, other animals and mushrooms at Loggerheads Garage. Owls range from £25 in softwood to around £50 in yew, while mushrooms start at as little as £5. A commission from Portmeirion led to an army of huge animal figures for the adventure playground there.

Now in his mid-thirties, Phil is aware of the long-term industrial disease of the forestry worker, vibration white finger, and is turning more to instruction and artwork instead of daylong logging.

"Many people are moving to the country and men love the idea of a big macho chainsaw to cut wood for the fire. But it can be so dangerous without proper instruction. You need the basics of safety and equipment before you start."

Ironically, Phil's worst accident in the forest wasn't caused by the chainsaw, but by an innocent-looking sapling that sprang up and cut his neck.

"The doctor who stitched it said I was very lucky. He could see my jugular vein pulsing away through the cut. Another half inch and I would have been dead." ■

