



# Meet the MAKERS

Time-honoured tradition and forward-thinking flair are the hallmarks of the modern artisan. We meet the craftspeople taking new strides into the future

**B**ritain's craft heritage is as rich and varied as its history. A tradition of craftsmanship stretching back centuries has left a legacy of everyday items shaped both by functional necessity and artistry. Today's fast-paced consumerism, along with the challenges wrought by the past-year's events, makes preserving our traditional craft skills more important than ever. To help ensure this

happens, in February of this year The Crafts Council launched the 2021 edition of its Endangered Crafts Fund for enterprising projects, with support from The Heritage Crafts Association amongst others. Meanwhile, across the country, craftspeople are working hard to keep the fires burning bright. We hear from some of the makers combining a respect for traditional crafts with innovative methods.



## JULIE GURR – WILLOW BASKETS

Crafting willow baskets by hand is a heritage art woven into the landscape of Britain in more ways than one, as archaeological finds dating from the Iron Age can attest. For East Sussex-based willow weaver Julie Gurr, proud bearer of two decades' experience from the tutelage of makers in England, Scotland and Ireland, the prosaic functionality of baskets is heightened only by the poetic artistry inherent in both their material and skillful creation.

"I am continually fascinated by the variety of ways natural materials can be turned into three-dimensional baskets," she explains of her medium of choice. Having grown her own willow on Romney Marsh since 2017, she produces work borne of creative experimentation and freedom of autonomy – a marriage much like her customers' very modern appreciation for the craft with a reverence for its traditional form. "These days people are more appreciative of the time and skill involved in making a basket, and are attracted by the use of natural, sustainable materials. My favourite thing to do is creating new designs by trying out the different traditional techniques I have learnt over the years.

Lockdown was great for me as it really gave me time to play with the willow and try out different combinations of techniques. I also love all the colours the different varieties of willow have and enjoy combining them in my work."

Her studio near Rye, close to the coast in Hastings, provides inspiration from the nearby natural environment, and a base from which to work on her further enterprise, Marsh Willow, which she runs with partner James to focus on willow growing and the production of artists' charcoal from offcuts which would otherwise go to waste. Her thoughtfully holistic approach also extends to future design plans, reflecting the context of her coastal setting and beyond: "What I would really like to do is to be able to spend more time creating my own unique designs," she says. "So my plan is to make sure I carve out regular time to do this. I'm also learning how to make coracles, which are small boats with a woven structure covered with a waterproof material. This is just for fun at the moment – but who knows, I might teach courses one day."

[willowweaver.com](http://willowweaver.com) ▶

### OPPOSITE PAGE

Julie's mindful approach to both material and craft sees designs take shape at her East Sussex workshop near Rye.

**ABOVE RIGHT** Each basket is woven with respect to the qualities and colours of the willow, creating a shape and pattern unique in its design.

**ABOVE LEFT** A selection of Julie Gurr's willow baskets (clockwise from top left): Large Sculptural Log Basket £495; Organic Freeform Basket, £350; Large Hanging Basket, £135.



## DOE – LEATHERWORK

When the doors of her great-great-grandfather's leather business W Pearce & Co in Northamptonshire closed almost 100 years after its 1908 inception, Deborah Thomas saw a visit with her father Michael Pearson to the listed art deco factory building take an interesting turn. The discovery of a number of the old master pattern sample books dating back to the 1920s provided her with a plethora of inspiration, featuring colours and textures that had served a client base including Dunhill, Mulberry and Smythson, amongst others.

Deborah put pen to paper to design an initial collection of bags and zip pulls, later expand the range to include accessories and homeware, including collaborations with Bamford, all showcasing contemporary objects suffused with history and heritage.

In 2013, Deborah founded Doe – so-named as a neat counterpoint to the stag motif long-associated with the traditionally male leather industry – and today has as a design studio in Suffolk, with production at a traditional family-run factory in the West Midlands. A commitment to traditional skills

and a strong UK workforce was key for Deborah, who over the years had held numerous roles at W Pearce & Co, with a belt manufacturer and a handbag brand. "I'm most proud of growing the business slowly and staying true to our core principles," she explains. "We've never deviated from small-batch, made-entirely-in-England production using the best fully traceable materials."

Every Doe piece is a genuine limited edition, made from top-tier bridle hide, fashioned through a slow natural vegetable-tanned process designed to eliminate toxic chemicals. Both sides are finished with waxes and oils, allowing the leather to age gracefully over time, developing a unique patina through wear and use.

"It's incredibly satisfying to feel I'm continuing a family tradition," Deborah explains. "I love the very simple task of sorting through the old swatches and choosing colours and prints for the collection. My plans for the future are really just to carry on growing the business organically, and to design more accessories that will give pleasure and stand the test of time."

[doeleather.co.uk](http://doeleather.co.uk)

**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE FAR LEFT**  
Old master pattern sample books uncovered by Deborah at the Doe studio.

A selection of Doe's designs (clockwise from above right): Spectacles holder in bridle leather, £120; Doe x Bamford parchment leather home accessories collection, from £165; Hand-painted notebook and cover (produced with fine artist Charlie Lee Potter), £155.





## FOREST + FOUND – MIXED MEDIA

Working with raw materials such as wood, textiles and natural pigments sourced from evolving rural and urban landscapes, Chelsea College of Arts graduates Max Bainbridge and Abigail Booth originally set up their studio practice in London in late 2014 to create artworks and homeware, including vessels, sculptures and canvases, alongside installation works for exhibitions.

Where Max's focus lies with woodcarving and turning, Abigail's traditional textile methods encompass quilting and the use of natural dyes and pigments. The pair use their skills to root their work in both heritage and environment – a combination which has been honed by their subsequent move to rural Somerset in late 2020.

Amongst other avenues, the couple's sustainable approach has seen them work with the Forestry Commission and landowners to source local wood from their surroundings, where oak, birch and sweet chestnut exist as raw materials for Max, in addition to earth, flowers and plants as pigments for Abigail. That the natural element of their work was first offset by its provenance within the initial context of a capital city only serves to highlight their creative process, itself

further amplified by their new setting.

"We both use a wide range of materials and techniques in our work," explains Max. "It can be quite physically demanding, working whole sections of tree trunk or grinding large quantities of natural pigment, but the love of the process and the connection it then gives us to the landscape is really rewarding. We both love being outside, immersing ourselves in the natural world and taking time to allow ideas to develop. Both of our practices are so intrinsically linked to nature, not only through the materials we use to make the work, but also how we engage with it and the influence it has on us."

With recent works including those created for their show at Make Hauser & Wirth Somerset in Bruton ("probably the largest single body of work we have ever produced for a solo exhibition," says Max), the couple aim to evolve their work in a manner very much befitting their philosophy of symbiosis. "We feel proud of the drive and energy we have to push our practice and work forward. We are always looking at how we can adapt, change and take risks within our practice, and it's that energy that keeps it exciting."

[forest-and-found.com](http://forest-and-found.com) ▶

### CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE RIGHT

Using foraged wood such as the spalted beech of this land jar exemplifies Forest + Found's ethos.

Abigail and Max's installation for 2020's *Common Thread* exhibition at New Art Centre, Roche Court, near Salisbury.

Max and Abigail in the studio.

Unseasoned sycamore was used to turn this vessel which was dried slowly to develop a natural warp. Similar works are available on commission (EPOA) and as part of the studio's current show at Make Hauser & Wirth Somerset in Bruton.

## CRAFTSMANSHIP



## MARQUE SUSSEX – FURNITURE

As a collective of three award-winning designers – Ben Fowler, John Weaver and Simon Pengelly – who have between them worked for Ercol, Heal’s, John Lewis, and Marks & Spencer, Marque Sussex was founded in 2021 to bring together maximum craftsmanship and minimal tree miles.

The idea behind the brand – to create small-batch pieces using sustainable, traceable timber from the hand of the highly trained artisans – came about when a pertinent question was posed to co-founder Fowler. “A few years ago, I was asked what my future business ambitions were. I replied that I had dreams of building a viable British furniture manufacturing company, making products for the new age, addressing climate change with high-quality furniture that lasts a lifetime and is truly sustainable. I’m so proud that with my team we have achieved that.”

The clean lines, elegant forms and classic joinery that characterise Marque Sussex’s work are produced in the brand’s mid-century workshop and showroom at the foot of the South Downs in Newhaven, East Sussex. Here, skilled cabinetmakers and apprentices employ techniques such as steam-bending to bring out the best in materials used for sensitively deployed designs.

The brand’s location also provides space for nurturing new talent. “The workshop is fully equipped and is shared-use,” explains Weaver. “We run it

collaboratively, so it gives fellow craftsmen the same opportunity to enable prototyping, all the way through to production.”

Much like the ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement – that objects in the home should be useful, beautiful and stand the test of time – the brand’s philosophy extends to the planting of new trees for every piece of furniture made, to support reforestation and rewilding projects. Safeguarding heritage skills and the environment from which they and their source material emanate is second only to the delight brought about by these future heirlooms in customers’ homes, says Pengelly: “Seeing people use and enjoy the things we have created is one of life’s great pleasures,” he says. “We love what we do, and working so closely with the team and with clients is very rewarding. We very much hope for more of the same in years to come.”

[marquesussex.co.uk](http://marquesussex.co.uk) ■



**ABOVE** Native English Ash forms the focus of the Orb range of furniture (from £800).

**ABOVE LEFT** The Marque Sussex designers (clockwise from top): John Weaver, Simon Pengelly and Ben Fowler.

**BELOW** The Manx stool is made from British Alder with a three-segment circular top to highlight the grain (from £450).



**LEFT** The Teise Organic Mirror (£499), with its shapely steam-bent curves, was created for Heal’s.

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