

Tribute to DAVID ORCHARD
woodcarver, pyrographer and cabinetmaker
Display of work (birds/objects)
10-11 October 2009
Sat 11am-4pm Sun 11am-3pm

For over 30 years, David Orchard has been best known in the South of England for his carved and pyrograved bird sculptures in wood. Following his death last November, "*The First*" Gallery, where he exhibited regularly for about 25 years, presents this tribute weekend, revealing to even those who may have known him quite well, the hidden breadth of his talents. Cornish roots, combined with a natural modesty, meant that most people never heard of his other achievements directly from this most unforward of men.

David Orchard was born in 1926 and spent his early years in and near Camborne, apprenticing as an engineer and working there until the early 1950s. During a post-war slump in demand, he emigrated with his family to Canada for six years, returning because his wife Gwen couldn't stand the way of life there. He could see no working future for him in Cornwall, so remained in Southampton, where they had docked. He soon secured a job on the technical side of the University's Civil Engineering Department, where he remained, rising to become Chief Technician, until his retirement in 1987. Subsequently, until he fully retired, he taught in the workshops of the St Dismas (now Two Saints) Centre for recovering alcoholics, imparting craft-skills to aid inmates' employability.

It was at Southampton University that he was first alerted to the possibilities of wildlife carving. Among his many roles was making scale models for testing various aspects of engineering projects (Hammersmith Flyover and Sydney Opera House were two such). The offcuts of these jobs furnished a ready supply of wood, especially a timber called jelutong, which is very stable and has minimal 'grain'-markings, which later proved ideal for the techniques he exploited in his bird sculpture.

His first forays were some mahogany hedgehogs made in 1974 when he was asked to contribute something for a University charity craft fair. Ever the perfectionist, he took so long over them that they couldn't possibly ever be financially viable, but he later discovered by accident that, by burning the spines with a soldering iron, he could create a more realistic effect quickly than he had achieved in hours of polishing and individual colouring! David quickly saw the potential in this method and, using much finer tools on the newly-found jelutong, he developed his hallmark pyrogravure texturing to depict birds' plumage. This technique is commonly called "pokerwork" — in fact, David himself so described it in his promotional literature, probably to convey the method to lay people. However, it's an all-embracing term that grossly undersells the skills and sophistication his own approach required. Tools and kits for this sort of technique are commonly marketed under a "Hot-Needle-craft" label, which is closer to the mark, and self-explanatory.

True pokerwork is rustic in origin, and involves scorching wood, leaving a mark which can't be smaller than the tip of the tool (a red-hot poker). This ancient method produces high-impact decorative designs but has limited capacity for subtlety, especially when viewed close-up. It probably wasn't David's idea to use a heated needle as a tool, but it seems he was the first to apply it to animal sculpture, and he took the craft to an extremely high degree of mastery. The 'arty' word is "pyrography" (= drawing with fire) which covers all such disciplines, whatever the tools used, and however coarse the result. In David's

hands it truly warrants a label of its own. It may not be possible to detect in the photographs how delicate the markings are (the goose photo shows them quite well), and how appropriate the technique is for depicting natural fur- or feather-markings. His range of subjects was surprisingly broad, encompassing people, fish, cats, dogs and sea mammals as well as the widely-known wrens, grey wagtails, owls, etc. He didn't simply use the hot-needle technique for speckled patterns: blackbirds, cormorants, guillemots, magpies, and house-martins (all dark, thus needing a lot of burning!) were equally grist to his mill. One his last projects was an example of each specimen of New Forest mammals, where the Red Deer and her calf (see end) is worked all over. His love for the material in its pure state is demonstrated in his abstract sculptures. He could also turn his hand to more off-the-wall pieces: one commission for the British Dental Association was for a gavel (to call meetings to order) with the head of the little hammer in the form of a large molar!!



Greylag Goose



Heron

As a confirmed non-purist in art terms, he turned another facility, that of laminating timber, to good use. Purists would insist on carving from a single block; David used to build simple 'armatures' of the more challenging stances so that the grain ran in the direction most suitable for carving the extremities (long thin bills, outstretched wings, etc.) Jelutong is so fine-grained that this artistry doesn't show, yet it enables the wings of the tern, or long pointed beaks like the avocet's or heron's to be created at this small scale (the heron is about 8" / 20cm long), while still allowing the dramatic S-bend of the neck, without

compromising the timber's strength.

Laminating was a skill probably already in his armoury when he joined the University in 1959, but the style of architecture and engineering then just coming to prominence would have meant that curved forms were the 'bread-and-butter' of such model-making as David and his team were expected to carry out: he would have had plenty of opportunity to practise and develop the technique.

The legs and feet in his sculptures are shaped *in situ*, made of steel rod and epoxy putty (another material he'd have used in the Civil Engineering Dept.).

During his multi-faceted career, David must have met many thousands of people, either through work or his craft channels: the University community (staff and alumni, and through their annual craft fair); Romsey Art Group (another venue where he exhibited regularly, and was frequently mentioned in reviews); numerous craft sales and demonstrations around the South of England (the Duke of Northumberland bought several pieces, due to David having shown at Syon Park House; David was even invited to an arts festival in Louisiana); tutoring at St. Dismas and his wood-carving evening classes at Thornden School, Chandler's Ford. Others may have heard of him due to his book *Techniques of Wood Sculpture*, published by Batsford in 1984 and printed in many languages (there's a copy in Danish on show at this event).

This weekend, with exhibited bird-pieces from several private collections, as well as furniture, etc. from his own home (made by him, of course!), will probably be the only opportunity to see so much of his work gathered together in one space. There are several

books of photos. cuttings and a copy in draft of his own autobiography, made for his family.



Golden Eagle



Tern



Red Deer Hind and Calf

Note that none of the pieces photographed here are in the show.