

The shoemaker

Bill Bird is a shoemaker who cannot make shoes fast enough for his growing number of customers – and he charges more than £300 for a pair! Customers travel hundreds of kilometres to his London shoe clinic or to his workshop in the countryside to have their feet measured. He makes shoes for people with feet of unusual sizes: very large, very small, very broad or very narrow. The shoes are at least as fashionable as those found in ordinary shops.

Mr Bird says: 'My problem is that I cannot find skilled workers. Young people all seem to prefer to work with computers these days. We will lose the necessary skills soon because there are fewer and fewer shoemakers nowadays. I am 45, and now I want to teach young people everything I know about making shoes. It's a good job, and a lot of people want to buy beautiful shoes specially made for them.'

He started in the business 19 years ago and now he employs three other people. His customers pay about £500 for their first pair of shoes. He says: 'Our customers come because they want comfortable shoes which are exactly the right size.' Extra pairs of shoes cost between £320 and £450, as it takes one employee a whole week to make just one shoe.

THE SHELL ARTIST

At the age of 83 Peter Cooke has become a master of his art.

There are still many things that Peter Cooke would like to try his hand at – paper-making and feather-work are on his list. For the moment though, he will stick to the skill that he has been delighted to perfect over the past ten years: making delicate and unusual objects out of shells.

'Tell me if I am boring you,' he says, as he leads me round his apartment showing me his work. There is a fine line between being a bore and being an enthusiast, but Cooke need not worry: he fits into the latter category, helped both by his charm and by the beauty of the things he makes.

He points to a pair of shell-covered ornaments above a fireplace. 'I shan't be at all bothered if people don't buy them because I have got so used to them, and to me they're adorable. I never meant to sell my work commercially. Some friends came to see me about five years ago and said, "You must have an exhibition – people ought to see these. We'll talk to a man who owns an art gallery".' The result was an exhibition in London, at which 70 per cent of the objects were sold. His second exhibition opened at the gallery yesterday. Considering the enormous prices the pieces command – around £2,000 for the ornaments – an empty space above the fireplace would seem a small sacrifice for Cooke to make.

There are 86 pieces in the exhibition, with prices starting at £225 for a shell-flower in a crystal vase. Cooke insists that he has nothing to do with the prices and is cheerily open about their level: he claims there is nobody else in the world who produces work like his, and, as the gallery-owner told him, 'Well, you're going to stop one day and everybody will want your pieces because there won't be any more.'

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THE CABINET-MAKER

Charles Hurst makes a living from perfectly crafted furniture.

Charles Hurst gives the impression of being a man in a hurry. I arrive at his workshop, tucked under a railway arch in East London, and am greeted with a quick handshake and the words: 'Well, fire away then!' Whether this brusqueness is real or a front hiding a shy streak is not immediately apparent. But a glance around the workshop reveals that Hurst is obviously busy, with good reason not to waste a minute of his time.

The arched space is full of half-made pieces of furniture and planks of wood in an amazing array of natural colours. Hurst has been a cabinet-maker for ten years and has built up a very nice reputation for himself. His order book is always full for several months in advance, despite the fact that he does not really promote himself. Word has spread that if you want a decent cupboard or table, bookcase or kitchen units, Hurst is your man.

Of course, finding a furniture-maker is not that taxing a task. Wherever you live in the countryside, the craft is alive and well. But finding a cabinet-maker who prides himself on making beautifully crafted furniture with clean, simple lines is less easy. 'There are few real cabinet-makers now. People call themselves furniture-makers,' Hurst says wearily. As a craftsman who sets himself exacting standards, he is continually disappointed by some contemporary furniture. 'I am amazed by what some furniture-makers get away with, and saddened by what people will put up with.' He rails against shoddy, mass-produced furniture, and craftsmen who churn out second-rate pieces.

Bill Prince-Smith

Bill Prince-Smith was a farmer and a teacher and a dentist before he became a writer of children's books at the age of 60. Now, thirteen years later, he has written more than 80 books. Every day, he goes into his office and writes. In the evening, he gives the work to his wife to read. 'She tells me when she doesn't like something,' says Bill. 'My ten grandchildren don't live near here but they also read my stories and say if they are good or bad.' And so Bill has learned what young children want to read.

Bill writes about the life in his village and on the farms near it. His fifth book is his favourite: *The Sheepdog* is about a farmer and the dog that helps him. 'I have always liked animals,' says Bill, 'and dogs are so clever, they learn very quickly.'

Last year, the book was made into a film with real animals and actors. The film-makers used the latest computer technology to make people think that the animals are speaking. Bill was very pleased with the film. 'Sometimes film-makers change books, but they didn't change mine and I love the film.'



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Niveaus der Texte:

„The Shoemaker“: PET (B1)

„The Shell Artist“: FCE (B2)

“The Cabinet-Maker”: CAE (C1)

“Bill Prince-Smith”: KET (A2)