

Ancient art with modern appeal

Andrew Gallon visits the studio of stained glass creator Caryl Hallett



Caryl Hallett felt “born again” on attending a weekend course in stained glass making. More than a decade after her first exposure to this traditional craft, she runs a successful business from a Harrogate studio, creating bespoke stained glass installations for clients across the UK.

“I’d tried a few different things,” Caryl recalls of a time in her life when she sought a role more fulfilling than an advisory job in education. “But working with stained glass was wonderful. It was practical, aesthetically pleasing and I loved manipulating the materials. I cannot imagine doing anything else now. I love it.”

Caryl continued attending courses and the tutor, an experienced practitioner, soon spot-

ted her talent. “She was looking to retire in a year or so and suggested I work for her two days a week. She offered to teach me what she knew. That was fantastic – an informal apprenticeship, really.”

Over two years, Caryl acquired the skills necessary to contemplate small commissions for friends and family. When these were well received, she decided, in 2004, to go it alone. “I was very apprehensive,” she smiles. “The phrase ‘in business’ brought me out in a rash. My husband, Shaun, had more faith in me than I did. I didn’t push myself into the arena

Caryl Hallett restoring Victorian glass in her Harrogate studio, above. Right, “Leaf Litter”

but, gradually, I got a few decent projects under my belt, gained confidence from those and I'm reasonably established now. I hope that when people choose me it's because they're happy to trust me with their vision."

In many respects, Caryl's life has come full circle. Raised near Prestatyn, a resort on the Irish Sea coast of North Wales, she was taught to sew and make things by her grandmother. A passion for art developed alongside an interest in nature. A Denbighshire upbringing provided opportunities to be outside. She explored the coast, along with the woods and lush pastures of Prestatyn's idyllic hinterland. "I had plenty of scope to make collections and draw. I always did that as a child."

At eighteen, Caryl, who was initially intent on going to art college, opted for what she describes as the "safe route into something solid". After completing a psychology degree at Loughborough University, she taught in primary schools for the best part of twenty years. "I loved it because I was with very young children and it was all about setting up creative environments."

In 2001, Caryl's husband relocated to Yorkshire through his job and the family set up home in Harrogate. "I found myself in advisory work, far removed from the classroom. Being in an office, writing reports and going to meetings just wasn't me, so I went part-time and got back to basics. What did I want to do?" Stained glass was the answer. Caryl uses time-honoured tools and techniques to create traditional and contemporary installations whose largely abstract designs are inspired by nature and the qualities of glass. Her work is found in private and public settings, including homes, schools, museums, offices and gardens.

Her most accessible Yorkshire piece commemorates the Tour de France's July 2014 visit to the county. Commissioned by Harrogate Council, it is sited at the top of Harrogate's Montpellier Hill. "I tried to put as

many techniques in as I could to show the range of using glass pictorially," says Caryl, a cyclist. "The Grand Départ was such an occasion and I'm pleased there's something to remind people that it came here because a transient event like that is easily forgotten."

Depicting the many glorious natural aspects of the Harrogate borough, the figurative result is atypical of Caryl's output. Explaining the appeal of the abstract, she says: "I like the interpretation of something, whether it's prose or poetry or a feeling. There's more depth to that than just seeing what you see."

Caryl concedes the connection between nature and glass is not obvious. "But I sometimes find a piece of glass that reminds me of a feeling I had - like running in the sand with the wind against me or hiding in the woods from my brothers when they were searching for me. My inspiration comes from a feeling of being in the countryside. Moving to York-



shire, a beautiful county, was lovely because there's real synergy with the landscape here and where I grew up."

The tools Caryl uses are similar to those employed 600 years ago by stained glass pioneers. They include a glasscutter (a diamond wheel on the end of an oil-fed pen), a lead knife (to cut the lead) and grousers and snippers (to work the glass and the lead round each other). "The only modern things I use are a grinder, to fashion glass into very accurate sizes, and a soldering iron, which has been around a long time. I like the fact it's quite simple in the necessary tools and not very different from how it's always been. I've tried working with new techniques, which I find interesting, but I'm drawn back to the old ways."

Some of the glass Caryl works with is bought ready treated and coloured but much is donated, retrieved or recycled. "I like to use a bit of both," she says.

A striking feature of Caryl's work is her creative use of lead, which is far more flexible than many imagine and comes in varying widths, with a channel down the middle to hold the glass. Caryl's lead augments her pieces rather than, as with much ecclesiastical stained glass, detracting. "I use the lead as the drawing line," she explains. "It becomes part of the design, not just a structure to hold the bits together. If I'm working with horizontal or vertical lines, I can get steel supports into my lead line as well, so I don't have all the external bars and things that you sometimes see on church windows. There's a method to my madness!"

Caryl applies finishes to enhance the look of some of her pieces. This can entail

Caryl Hallett's stained glass piece at Montpellier Hill, Harrogate, commemorating the Tour de France's visit to Yorkshire in July 2014. Courtesy of Graham Roberts





painting, etching and sandblasting, and fusing, where the glass is fired in a kiln.

The appeal of stained glass is timeless. "I often take samples with me when I visit a potential client," she says. "Once they've seen the glass up against the light, the way it sparkles and plays with the light, they rarely decide it's not for them. It is very seductive. People feel lifted by stained glass and, once it's in place, they love it. The finishes and the way it is constructed mean there's lots of movement in the glass. It's purely the play between the light and the qualities within the glass."

In addition to commissions, Caryl produces collections of art pieces that she has exhibited for North Yorkshire Open Studios and at the Great Yorkshire Show. "It's like a portfolio," she says. "People can see what's possible in glass and the pieces help them decide if it's something they would want in their homes."

Original features in houses dating from the Victorian and Edwardian eras are now highly prized. Caryl does a limited amount of repair work to stained glass of those periods. "It's nice to feel that you're looking after something that's part of the heritage of a house because, in the past, people were keen to get rid of it once it was damaged. It's a shame because it can be mended and saved."

Caryl's pieces might be stunning but the process is dirty and demanding. "Often I'll go out, having touched my face, to the shop and look like I've been down a mine. It can be mucky. That side of it puts people off but not me. You've got to be strong. Stained glass is a physical job - there's lots of pulling the lead, lifting, moving stuff around, flipping pieces over to work on the other side once it's built together. You can't be a weak little country maid. You've got to be a bit robust and not worry about your nails or your hands." Whatever the privations, for Caryl, stained glass sure beats office work, report writing and meetings! ■