

TIPS & TECHNIQUES FOR CARVING A WELSH LOVESPOON

# WOOD CARVING

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# Jason Townsend

## *in profile*

We meet self-taught woodcarver Jason Townsend

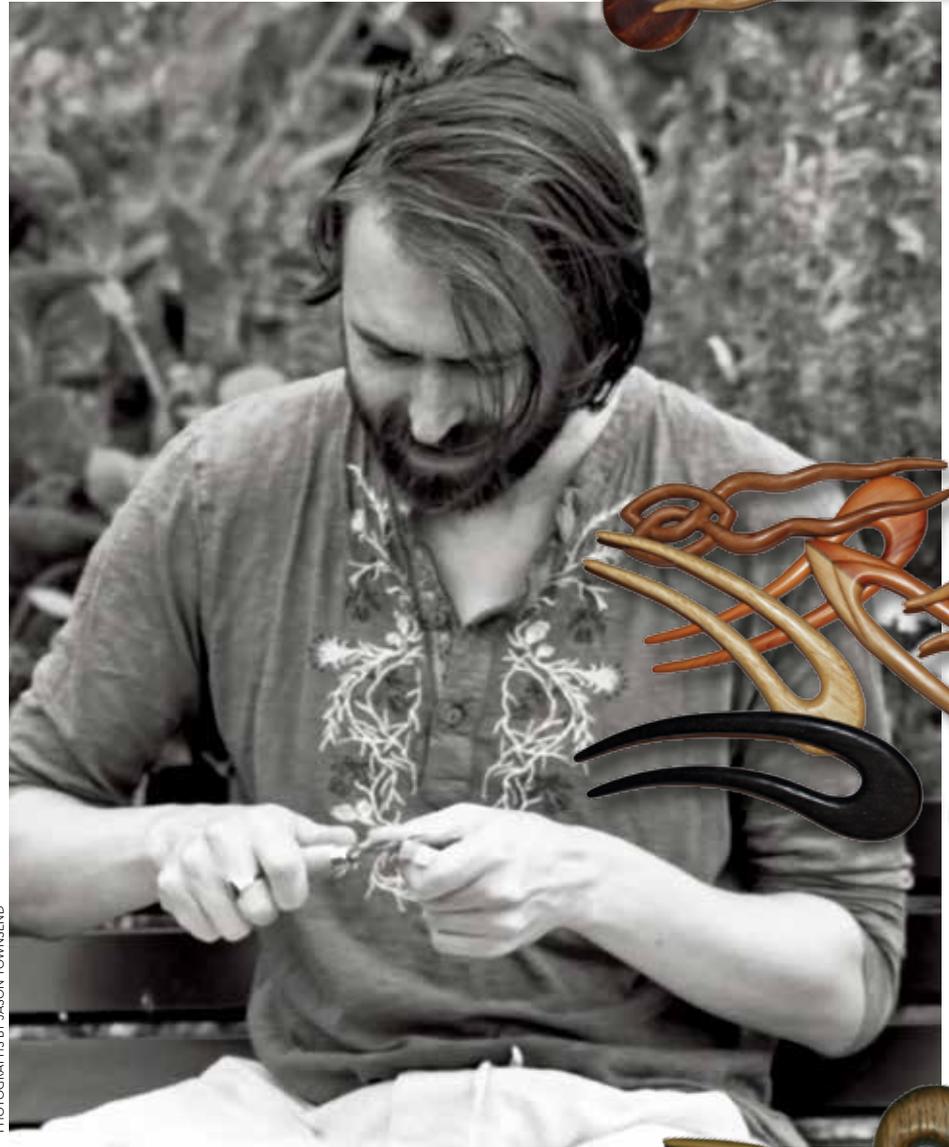
Having studied computer science at university, the question of how Jason Townsend got into woodcarving springs to mind. Having been carving for five years now, Jason was always fascinated by wood and woodcarving. However, while at school Jason and his fellow students weren't allowed access to real wood, only using MDF in their design and technology classes, so Jason had no experience in working with tools and how to use them properly. Even now, Jason explains: "Learning what tools to use and how to use them is a journey that will take me a while yet."

It was because of his girlfriend that Jason first looked into the craft of woodcarving; as he tells us, she often likes to wear her hair up, using hair sticks to hold her hair in place rather than clips and bands. This provided Jason's initial inspiration, with the idea of making a hair stick for his girlfriend, rather than having to buy Far-Eastern imports from Camden.

Not long after making his first hair sticks, Jason was invited to a friend's wedding. As a wedding gift to the couple, Jason took inspiration from some Welsh lovespoons he had seen near the time. Jason had now taken his first steps in woodcarving, but he tells us that his early attempts were 'crude'. After carving a few pieces and a few mishaps, he quickly found himself bitten by the woodcarving bug.

### Favourite carvings

"As an art-form, woodcarving can be quite daunting when you look at some of the incredible work done by the many talented woodcarvers out there," he tells us. Most of Jason's carvings are simple and a great many of them are hair sticks and hair forks, which he sells online and at craft fairs. Humble about



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JASON TOWNSEND

his talent, Jason tells us it still surprises and delights him every time someone buys one of his items.

One of his favourite carvings thus far is a wavy hair stick, which he designed a few years ago. The design proved to be very popular and Jason has now carved the same design in at least 20



Jason's lovespoon design – a wedding gift to his sister and her husband



Jason's many varied hair fork carvings



Jason's winning piece at the 2014 International Woodcarvers' Congress

different types of wood. When looking at transferring his work to a larger scale, Jason explains: "I struggle when it comes to scaling up my carving, so I find it very challenging to make larger items, such as lovespoons." However, Jason was very happy with a lovespoon he carved for his sister's wedding last year. It was approximately 430mm long and "had quite a contemporary feel about it," as Jason describes it. To personalise the piece, he included in the design the first initial of his sister's name and her husband's name, a pair of martini glasses – "because they like drinking cocktails," he tells us – and a pair of palm trees, to represent their ceremony, which took place in Aruba. Jason also decided to include a pair of, what he had intended to be, swans. "Unfortunately, at some point when designing the spoon they got a little mixed up with doves, so their necks seemed too long to be doves and too short to be swans," he explains. Nevertheless, he was pleased with the result and felt the piece of silver birch (*Betula pendula*) he used to make the spoon looked great.

#### Awards

"My carvings are so small and simple – for the most part – that I'm not sure they are particularly suitable for competitions," he tells us. He did, however, win a blue ribbon in the 2014 International Woodcarvers' Congress in the 'Jewellery' category. Jason's winning piece was a necklace he had carved from a piece of plum (*Prunus spp.*) wood "that had some wonderful purple figuration in it." On paper, Jason thought his design looked quite interesting and had

intended the necklace to look like a piece of crumpled and twisted metal. As with many of his projects, he found the translation of 2D design into 3D work rather difficult. "I often forget to think about the 'sides' of a carving or the 'back' and this leads to significant problems when working in-the-round," he comments. "In the end the necklace looked OK and reminds me of a piece of Plasticine with different coloured streaks running through it." As Jason learns to tackle larger and more complex projects, he hopes to enter more competitions.

#### Work ethos

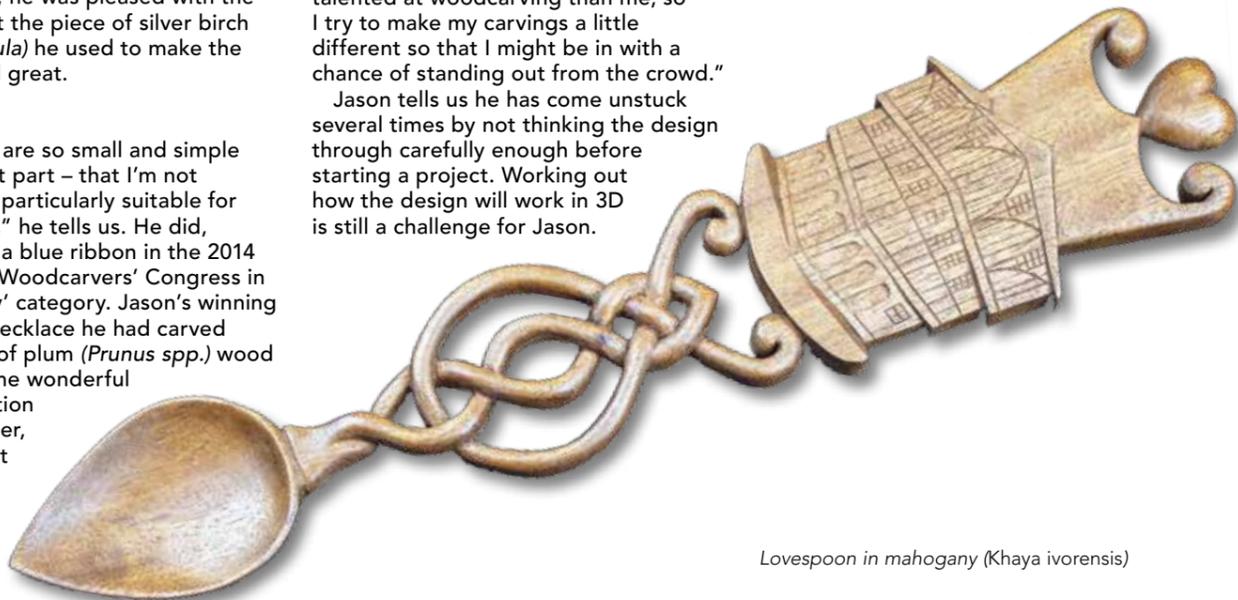
Jason feels the design of a piece is the most important consideration when starting a project. He tells us: "I like my woodcarvings to have a contemporary feel to them and I try to avoid using other people's designs. There are so many people who are much more talented at woodcarving than me, so I try to make my carvings a little different so that I might be in with a chance of standing out from the crowd."

Jason tells us he has come unstuck several times by not thinking the design through carefully enough before starting a project. Working out how the design will work in 3D is still a challenge for Jason.

A perfect example would be the palm trees on his sister's wedding spoon, which looked good on paper – the fronds were drawn at angles so that you could see they were palm trees. On the actual carving, though, he soon realised that the fronds ought to be carved quite differently when in 3D. Having already used a scrollsaw to cut out the design, he had to cope with this mistake as best he could, but he points out that a bit more thought about the design "would have created a much better carving."

Jason is self-taught and is still learning all the time, subsequently his approach to carving is constantly evolving. He is fascinated by wood and trees and loves to try carving different types of wood. He admits that early on he didn't think too carefully about the properties of a wood before trying to use it in a project, but this led to him spending a lot of time on carvings that did not turn out as planned, because of his choice of timber.

One piece of his work that Jason is pleased with is a 430mm lovespoon he carved from mahogany (*Khaya ivorensis*), that depicts the Guildhall in Thaxted, Essex. However, this wood – possibly sapele (*Entandrophragma cylindricum*) – couldn't hold the detail that he wanted to carve into it, so the result was therefore disappointing. He also tried carving a few lovespoons from a plank of elm (*Ulmus procera*). While the plank looked nice, Jason soon found that elm was not ideally suited to the carvings he was trying to do, as the grain of the elm and some punky areas from spalting meant that he couldn't get the detail he wanted or a nice finish, telling us: "They looked crude." Jason now makes sure to pay careful attention to the wood he chooses for a project, because each project is a significant investment in time.



Lovespoon in mahogany (*Khaya ivorensis*)



'21st Key' in silver birch (*Betula pendula*)

#### Inspiration

"I admire the work of so many woodcarvers. The carvings that people are able to produce are a constant source of wonder and amazement to me," Jason tells us. Being a member of the British Woodcarvers Association has opened his eyes to the many possibilities out there, but also to the "staggering array of talent" that people have. Jason is a great fan of David Western's lovespoons, saying: "I really like his contemporary approach to the subject. If I could carve lovespoons half as well as that, I would be very happy!" Jason has found David Western's books on the subject to be quite inspirational.

Since school, Jason has been a big fan of Analytic Cubism from the early part of the 20th-century, by the likes of Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso. He also mentions liking Andrew Thomas' carvings and is a particular fan of a series of cubist musical instrument carvings Andrew made. In another area of carving, Jason tells us: "I really admire carvings that are incredibly intricate or are on a very small scale, so I like a lot of Netsuke pieces."

#### Distinct carving

"I'm not sure that I have yet developed a distinctive approach to my carving," Jason wonders. Always experimenting with new design elements or

techniques and trying to increase his woodcarving vocabulary, Jason tells us that he is still very much at the stage of 'finding' his technique and style in woodcarving. There are some distinctive elements to his carvings, though: "I use a lot of different woods and am always experimenting with different kinds. I also like to sand my carvings; I like to be able to see the details of the grain and I feel that an item is incomplete until it has been sanded." Having said that, he hates the process of sanding, saying: "It takes me forever and can bore me to tears." Although, as Jason points out, if he's carving an item to go in someone's hair, he can't really get away with not doing it. Jason tends to mainly use knives in his carving, but that is most probably due to the small scale of most of his work rather than a preference. He tells us that he can't really work on small items like hair forks in-the-round with anything other than knives.

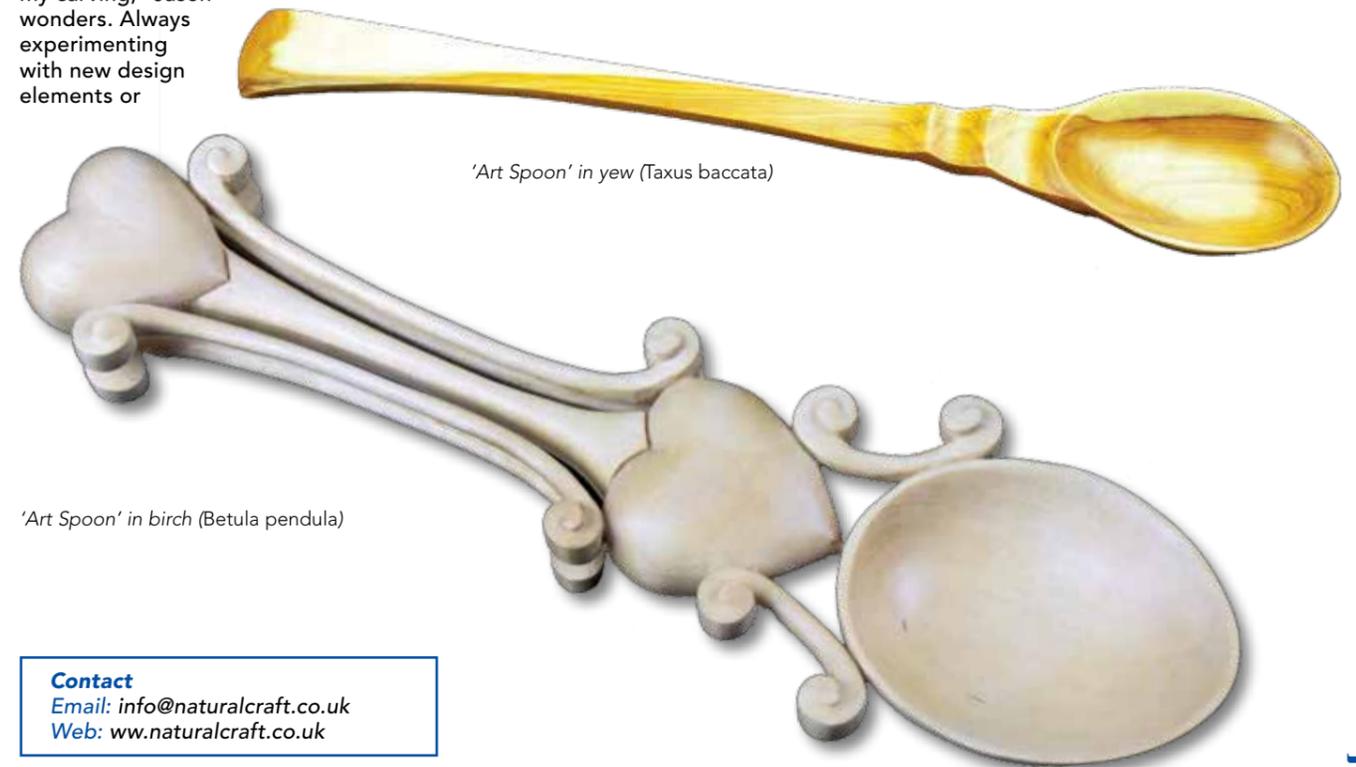
#### The future

Jason tells us he has many carvings waiting for him to sand down and many more carvings in progress. He works on a steady stream of hair sticks and hair

forks and has currently finished nearly 500 hair sticks so far! "Repetitive items," Jason tells us, "give me a chance to refine some of my skills."

Other projects he has on the go include a variety of lovespoons and art spoons at various stages of completion. Jason is also trying his hand at a series of sculptural pieces using London plane (*Platanus hybrida*) and burr elm. The sculptural pieces are quite a challenge for Jason, because he has had to scale up his carvings, but it has certainly been a learning curve for him.

Jason would like to try tackling larger carvings, with greater details in the future: "I like to be challenged, so I am always looking to undertake more and more ambitious projects," he explains. He is hopeful that he will have been able to carve some items for the next International Woodcarvers' Congress and the BWA carving competition at the 2015 European Woodworking Show. ▶



'Art Spoon' in yew (*Taxus baccata*)

'Art Spoon' in birch (*Betula pendula*)

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