

A window on the turning world

Company director Paul Hilton-Tapp started woodturning as a creative outlet over a decade ago. He tells Jade Beecroft how his hobby evolved

When he's walking his dog Dudley in Ecclesall Woods, near his Sheffield home, Paul is always keeping an eye out for wood – and often takes a log home in the boot of his car. His passion for woodturning has developed as a hobby and creative outlet around running the family business selling window blinds. Paul bought a second-hand lathe, turned his cellar into a workshop and is entirely self-taught – but his one-off pieces sell in the Sheffield Makers Shop, his woodturned snowmen are in high demand locally every Christmas, and a wooden pig holding a pint graces the shelf behind the bar in his favourite micropub. Despite this success, Paul says he hopes his woodturning will always remain a hobby that offers him the freedom to be creative, rather than a business. Here he shares his journey.

Tell us about your background.

I was one of those kids who was always drawing, or making something out of wood or cardboard. I loved art and woodwork at school – that was back in the days where you could take three different art subjects. I went on to do a BTEC at Park Wood College in Sheffield in 3D design, and then to Loughborough College to do a degree in furniture making. That's when I first had a go on the lathe. After graduating I had all good intentions of setting up a furniture workshop, but instead I ended up working in two Sheffield theatres – the Lyceum and the Crucible – for about a decade as a set builder and assistant stage manager. Then I did a stint in York for a company that made exhibition and conference sets. My dad had his own window blind business in Sheffield, Charisma Blinds, and he asked me to work for him temporarily when someone left. That temporary job has been going on for over 30 years. When Dad retired, my brother and I took over the company, so now I'm one of the directors.

How did you get into woodturning?

About 15 years ago I started to feel a bit frustrated creatively and I was looking for an outlet for it. The garage of the house I was living in at that time was too small for a full workshop, but it was big enough for a lathe. I remembered how much I'd enjoyed working on the lathe at Loughborough College, so I went on eBay, found an old second-hand lathe and that's how it started.

Describe your workshop.

I'm in a different house now; it's a former corner shop with a really big cellar that was probably once the stock room. It's pretty dry, it has a window and is split into three different rooms, so I have one room for my lathe, one room as a wood store and the other has a metalwork bench because I like to do a bit of that too. I kitted it out with some decent lighting and now that's where I spend a lot of my time. Before I got my dog I used to come home from work and literally go straight down into the cellar to start working at the lathe – I was turning out a new piece most nights. But now I have Dudley, my miniature labradoodle, I take him for a walk in the evenings after work, so I do most of my woodturning at the weekend.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY PAUL HILTON-TAPP, EXCEPT WHERE INDICATED



How do you like to work and what are your favourite tools?

I'm completely self-taught. I just made lots of mistakes, learnt from them and kept trying new things. I follow a lot of people who inspire me on Instagram and YouTube, like Glen Lucas from Ireland, Dave Dalby from Heckmondwike, and Jason Wilkins and Anthony Lorton, both from Wales. I think one of the lovely things about the woodturning community is how everyone is really helpful and supportive of each other. People are happy to give out tips and advice to other woodturners – which you don't always see in other creative fields. One of the things I did right at the beginning was buy a decent set of tools, and I think that's really important. Obviously living in Sheffield it's easy to get a good set of tools – mine are from Robert Sorby. I have various gouges and chisels but tend to only use about three of them.

Which woods do you most like working with?

I'm lucky that Sheffield is one of the greenest places in the UK – it's a city full of woods and trees, so I get most of my wood while out walking Dudley; I just see pieces and pick them up. I often go home from a walk in Ecclesall Woods with a log in the boot of my car. But it's important to say I never take wood that is being nested in by wildlife – I only pick up freshly felled or new-fallen trees. I also use the occasional skip find and people donate wood from trees they've had cut down in their gardens. When this happens I always make them a bowl for free as a remembrance to their garden tree. The woods I most like working with are oak, yew and ash. I used to have a real interest in Medieval history and Robin Hood, which is why I think I love working with traditional English oak so much – plus, it smells amazing. Yew is a very traditional English material too, they used to make long bows out of it. And ash smells great too.

What sort of finishes do you prefer and why?

I quite like green woodturning, which means starting from fresh, then setting the piece to one side for a bit and seeing what happens and how the grains come out. It's a really tactile process. Most of the time I finish my pieces with a plain satin-finish oil, but I have recently started polishing and adding a higher shine to some pieces, which seems to work particularly well for yew, oak, sycamore and beech wood.

How does your design process work?

I always say that, because this is not my job – it's a hobby – I can do what I like. I don't have to have a production process or make a certain number of bowls to fulfil an order, so almost all of my pieces are one-offs and I love the freedom of that. I like to keep the wood as natural as possible and work with the knots, splits and cracks that are already there. You might not end up with a bowl you can put soup in – it might have a great big hole in the middle. But it might be a really interesting one-off display piece.

You also do portrait art. How does woodturning compare?

My portrait art evolved around the same time as my woodturning as another way to be creative, and I mainly work with charcoal and pencil sketches. I love going to gigs so a lot of my portraits are of musicians and people from that world. But I'm definitely in different moods and different frames of mind when I'm drawing and when I'm woodturning. I actually do a lot of sketching and charcoal drawing in my office at work, between phone enquiries and order inputting. I can't just sit staring at the computer all day, doing things with numbers – I still need that bit of creativity. Whereas when I go down to my cellar workshop and start working at the lathe, that's it. Nothing disturbs me unless the dog starts barking.





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What inspires you and where do you get your ideas from?

Being an artist as well, I have tried sketching ideas before going to my lathe but it doesn't really work – I don't get into the flow in the same way. I much prefer to just take a piece of wood and not really know what I'm going to do with it until I start working, because you can get a couple of inches down and then find a knot that you need to work around, or a crack that could be dangerous if you don't do something about it. I've started off with a piece of wood bigger than a steering wheel and ended up with a tiny bowl. It all depends on what happens when you start working through the layers. Sometimes they turn out a bit bonkers – you just don't know what's going to happen until you get started.

Tell us about the piece you're most proud of.

My favourite micropub is The Itchy Pig at Banner Cross, so I made a woodturned pig for a mascot, and he's got a little pint pot in his trotter. He's on the shelf in the pub now, which is really lovely. I would say I'm proud of a lot of my stuff, which is a good starting point. But recently I've been working on a couple of bigger pieces because someone I knew was downsizing his house and giving away some wood bricks and I've made a really huge oak bowl which I'm chuffed about. I also quite like making things with live edges, where you still get that impression of the bark. It can be quite sharp and difficult to work with, but the effect is pretty cool.

What advice would you give to a new woodturner?

First of all, buy the best set of tools that you can afford. If you don't have much money you can get a second-hand lathe and scavenged wood, but spend the money you can on tools. You want a good sharpener and a good gouge. Then of course you have to think about safety and make sure you have the right protective equipment. But apart from that I'd just say experiment, and also, as long as you're not doing anything dangerous, you can try new things and take risks. Don't follow the rules – you can make up your own rules as you go along. And remember that every mistake you make is a way to learn and then do things a bit differently next time.

What are your aspirations for the future in woodturning?

I sell from Sheffield Makers Shop at Hunters Bar and I also do the occasional craft market. I've developed a bit of a reputation in Sheffield for my woodturned snowmen. I make a batch of about 25 every Christmas and they always sell out. I get a lot of really positive feedback and people messaging me saying how much they like them. Every Christmas for the past five years I've made tiny snowmen and Christmas trees and hidden them in Sheffield's Endcliffe Park for a family treasure hunt on Christmas Eve morning. It's quite well known and I've become known locally as the Woodland Elf.

But that said, I really want my woodturning to remain a hobby, because as a hobbyist I have the freedom to do whatever I want, rather than fulfilling orders and turning out batches of the same thing. Even my snowmen get a bit repetitive – I set aside a week to do them every November and do get a bit tired of them by the end. I love woodturning so much – my biggest fear is that if it became a business I would end up resenting it.

What do you like to do when you're not at your lathe?

Pubs, dog walks and gigs. I really like guitar-based, alternative punk and rock music, and of course I have my portrait art too. I'm always doing something – I'm one of those people who likes to stay busy.

Find Paul's work on Instagram @selftapped



10 Natural-edge burl bowl **11** Natural-edge, green-turned laburnum vessel
12 Oak with ripple and curl feature **13** Spalted beech, ebony and zebrano finial box **14** Paul's popular snowmen and trees **15** Vase with carved legs from an old table leg **16** Paul in his workshop with his dog (Photo by Tom Hilton-Tapp)
17 Paul with one of his favourite pieces, huge bowl (mentioned above)

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