

BLENDED BY NAME, BLENDED BY NATURE

Jade Beecroft meets Louise and Simon Taggart, the hardworking husband and wife team, who have turned their passions for woodturning and pottery into a business inspiring other would-be crafters

When a first-time woodturner leaves Simon Taggart's workshop, he hopes he's instilled the same creative spark and sense of satisfaction that he felt after his first time at the lathe 16 years ago. Simon fell in love with woodturning after his wife and fellow-creative Louise gifted him a beginners' course in 2010. Louise herself is a talented ceramicist, potter and artist, and two years after Simon's first experience at the lathe they founded their partnership, Blended Monkey, to bring together their skills. After beginning as a side-hustle, selling their work at artisan markets, their passion project has now evolved into a full-time business providing woodturning, pottery and unique 'two-in-one craft experiences' from their home in the village of Upwell, on the Norfolk/Cambridgeshire border. Louise says: 'We love it when people leave our workshops bouncing, smiling and happy.'

Creative beginnings

Louise found her passion for ceramics after attending Falmouth School of Art & Design, but she travelled and spent time working in Germany before starting to turn her interest into a career. She and Simon met in 2006, married in 2009, and a year later she sent him on the woodturning course that changed everything. 'He was working in IT and it was such a corporate, office-based world, travelling into London,' she explains. 'He'd mentioned to me once or twice that he loved the smell of wood, so I bought him a beginners' woodturning course as a creative outlet, just to push him out of his comfort zone and see what happened.'

What happened was that Simon enjoyed it so much he went out and bought his own lathe! He picks up the story: 'I came away with a bowl that I'd made, thinking "I can do this". That feeling has always stuck with me – it's now what drives me when I'm tutoring. I try to kindle that interest in my students and make sure they leave my workshops with that

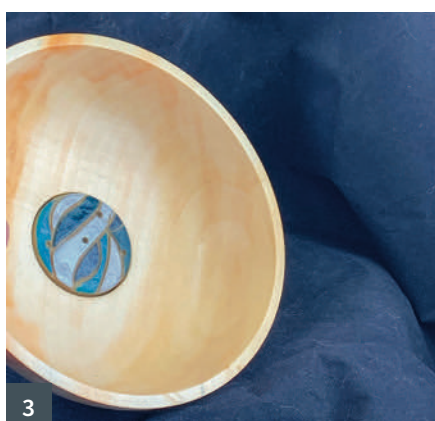


sense of pride too.' In the early days, as his own interest grew, Simon attended workshops with Richard Findley and Mark Sanger. In 2012, he and Louise founded Blended Monkey – with the name a nod to their collective talents. 'The name actually came from my favourite cocktail in Germany,' Louise laughs. 'We wanted something fun and upbeat.'

Developing their style

Louise and Simon moved into their current home in 2014 and turned it into their creative base, with a brick-built studio for Louise's wheel and a separate workshop, in a converted garage, for Simon's growing collection of lathes, tools, shave horses, spoon mules and axe blocks. They each take inspiration for their pieces from 'The

PHOTOGRAPHS BY RUTH TOWELL



1 Louise and Simon founded Blended Monkey in 2012 **2** Louise at the potter's wheel **3** Beech wood bowl with ceramic seascape insert **4** Spoon carving workshop; the students are seated on spoon mules **5** Ceramic honey pot with wooden lid and wooden honey dipper

Fens and coast near their home. Louise makes a botanical range of vases, coasters and pots, with local fenland grasses and flowers rolled into them, meanwhile Simon pyrographs the same local plant silhouettes into his bestselling fenland bowls. They also love to create pieces which bring their two media together. Louise explains: 'I make a seascape range of pots and

Simon does the wooden lids, I create ceramic inserts for Simon's wooden bowls and we make honeypots for a local beekeeper, with a ceramic base, wooden honey dipper and lid.'

Simon loves working with indigenous and sustainable woods, and he also does a lot of green woodturning after building his own pole lathe. He explains: 'I love the whole process,

from taking a log using an axe, working on the shave horse with a draw knife to pull all the lovely shapes out, then moving to the pole lathe and turning it into the final piece. It feels like a really natural cycle and I work with a lot of donated wood. I also have a freezer in my workshop, because it's great for preserving fresh wood until I'm ready to start work.'

BLENDED MONKEY COCKTAIL RECIPE

2 parts each: vodka, white rum & peach schnapps

1 part each: apple, orange, passionfruit & raspberry juice

½ part: crème de banana

Mix all the ingredients together. Pour over ice. Enjoy!



6 Ceramic salt pigs with wooden scoops 7 Simon spoon carving 8 Examples of carved spoons 9 Lunch is provided at the day-long courses 10 & 11 Simon turning at the pole lathe and a powered lathe

A move into teaching

The couple first started offering workshops in 2019, and after a hiatus during Covid, the concept really took off in 2021 – with Simon able to leave his IT career and move into Blended Monkey full-time. He built his own shave horses, spoon mules and axe blocks, so he can teach up to half a dozen students in his workshop at a time. One of their unique selling points is their offer of ‘two-in-one craft experiences’, where students can spend half a day trying their hand at ceramics with Louise, and the other half woodturning with Simon. Louise says: ‘I really enjoy being at the wheel with people, and throwing and hand-building, and just having fun with the clay. I encourage them to leave their fingerprints and thumbprints in their work, because those so-

called imperfections are what make the pieces unique.’ Simon’s youngest pupil so far has been a 10-year-old boy, who went home clutching his own hand-turned bowl, and his oldest was 92. ‘I think humans are about imperfection, and that’s what sets handmade pieces apart from mass-produced stuff,’ says Simon. ‘We love to encourage people to make something with rough edges – because those are the talking points.’ Simon also likes to provide notes for his students, including information on ‘what next?’ if they want to pursue woodturning further and details of local woodturners clubs. ‘I guess it’s the information I didn’t have when I left my first course,’ he explains. And he offers a half-day tool sharpening course too, because ‘you can’t get into woodwork if you’re working with blunt tools’.

The couple also offer creative therapy workshops in woodturning, pottery and silk painting, and have a large covered outdoor space for some green woodworking, stone carving and large canvas painting. And they invite guest tutors, with a full schedule for 2026 with experiences including leatherworking, printing, textile art, wet felting, copper foiling, willow weaving, mosaic and many more.

The lunches they provide are often a talking point during full-day experiences, with sausage rolls and other goodies provided by Fanoggins Bakery, which is handily owned by their daughter Zakiya, who is also one of their guest tutors, putting on junk journalling and book binding workshops. ‘It is a bit of a creative melting pot,’ laughs Louise. ‘This has made us into a crafts



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12 Students enjoying a silk painting workshop taught by Louise **13** Zakiya Taggart teaching a junk journaling workshop **14** Wooden platter with ceramic seascape insert **15** Wooden turned bowl with ceramic insert

hub really. We're always adding and looking for new and interesting artists to come and teach their crafts.' There's also an on-site luxury cabin at the bottom of the garden, called the Crafter's Retreat, for 'stay and craft' packages.

Giving back

Simon and Louise like to use their skillset to 'give something back' and spread the joy that handmaking a piece can bring. 'We love using our skills to do some good and add value,' explains Louise. 'We have one student who has been coming to us three times a month for four years. He suffered a stroke 12 years ago, he loves woodturning and pottery with us, as a means to help his hand and brain coordination, but also to chat and develop

his speech again.' Blended Monkey are now in their third year of hosting their seasonal spring, summer and autumn artisan fairs in the village of Upwell, bringing together high-end artisans from the area, with profits going to Norfolk and Waveney MIND. 'We've raised £5,000 so far,' says Louise. 'Simon and I are both due to take courses on mental health first aid with MIND too.'

Staying inspired

Although around 90% of their income is now generated by their workshops, Louise and Simon still find time for their individual creative ambitions and selling their own pieces. Their work can be found in the Welney Wetland Centre gift shop, not far from their

home, with Louise explaining: 'I use botanicals from [Welney's] environment to create the botanical coasters you see in the shop.' Louise loves silk painting and throwing on the wheel, and says she and Simon will often take a course together – in something new to them like glassblowing – in their downtime. Meanwhile Simon is developing his interest in off-centre pieces and 'artistic pieces' like his woodturned flowers. 'I'm playing with multi-part pieces and I'm more interested in form than colour,' he explains. 'It seems to be quite a fashion at the moment to add colour, but I don't think it needs it. I think wood is a beautiful material just as it is.'

www.blendedmonkey.co.uk

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