

## How I Live

# Blott Kerr-Wilson, Shell Artist

*They say it's an ill wind that blows no good, and when the hurricane of 1987 blasted through England, it gave someone who'd been a "disruptive pupil" at school, an idea that would transform her life for good.*

*As told to Virginia Ironside*

"I STILL CAN'T GET over how incredibly beautiful the mussel shell is. With its pearl-like translucent interior and its blue-black textured and often coarse exterior, it's a fantastic piece of design. And yet people don't appreciate it. They just eat the inside and chuck the rest away."

This is Blott Kerr-Wilson talking, a 59-year-old shell artist from north Norfolk. She started "shelling" in 1987 ("I hope to make 'shelling' into a verb which can be found in all dictionaries") when she was a student living in a council flat in Peckham.

Brought up in north Wales, she spent her childhood going from school to school (she was constantly expelled for "disruptive behaviour") and left with no qualifications. She was "absolutely useless" she says.

To keep body and soul together, she did anything that came her way – flower-arranging, gardening, making mirrors for the Conran Shop, even working as a garage

mechanic. In her spare time she decorated her bathroom with shells she'd found on Margate beach. (Realising, after the great storm of 1987, that the beach would be overwhelmed with shells, she drove there in her trusted Robin Reliant and scooped up as many as she could.)

When, in 1992, she spotted an international competition in *The World of Interiors* magazine to design a room, she photographed her bathroom and sent it in as an entry. Much to her amazement, she won.

"The late Min Hogg, the editor at the time, changed my life," she says. "I was asked to decorate a shell house at the Irish cookery school, Ballymaloe – yet to be built – and of course I said yes."

To begin with she gathered most of her shells from beaches and nightly rummages through bins at local seafood restaurants, turning up clams, razor clams, scallops, mussels, oysters and snails. These



days, with commissions from all over the world, she buys most of her shells wholesale. "Because of the paperwork complications and huge costs caused by Brexit, the importing of waste mussel shells from the Spanish paella business was a no-go but by incredible chance The East London Canning Co contacted me and asked if I wanted their 'wasted' Cornish mussel shells, so now we have a true British mussel affair from start to finish.

"I have shell dealers who I buy from – mainly shells from the Indian Pacific area. All the shells I

use are classed as 'in abundance' or farmed for food at the time of buying.

"And of course some of my clients have their own beaches to gather from."

That last quote shows how wealthy a client can be, and Blott is in constant demand to shell everything from exotic bathrooms, superyachts, follies and grottoes, to loos, beach houses, dining rooms and lodges.

"I decorate whatever space I'm offered as every job is such a great adventure," she says. "I always feel vulnerable when I start a new one

because I never think I'm up to it. And then as the work progresses I find I can relax and the worry lifts. Every job has to get past the 'ugly stage' before I can truly relax."

Blott does a lot of work from her studio, making individual pieces to go on people's walls, but she usually works around five months of the year abroad or away from home.

Shelling is gruelling work, needing not only a good design eye – she usually works as she goes along, without a master plan – but great physical stamina. She often takes her assistant Sarah Gaskin with her, because glueing masses of small shells onto large walls or rocks is a lot more fun with two and they bounce ideas off each other. She has no idea how many shells she's using because she buys them by the kilogram – big ones and small ones for the gaps. "It's creating a tapestry – embroidery with shells.

"Now I'm getting older I don't think I've got much more than five good shelling years left in me to do the really big jobs. I'm not as strong as I was."

For 20 years Blott lived near La Rochelle in France, and her jobs were a family affair with her children fitting into schools in different countries.

"They seemed to love the adventure," she says. (Auguste and Tanguy are now 22 and 24 and working in Paris.)

She uses lime mortar or tile

cement to stick the shells onto the various surfaces. "I'm not such a shell purist as I used to be, I add rocks and minerals and I'm happy to incorporate clients' objects... within reason," she says. "I have twice been given good chunks of jewellery that were 'too old-fashioned' to wear, to add to the cocktail of shells."

When working in France, a day in Blott's life could typically involve jumping out of bed, gulping down strong coffee and a croissant and going off for a couple of hours to look at local quarries to find red stone and minerals. "One day I found a really good mineral dealer and asked if I could buy his unsellable stock. Of course he was delighted. 'Oh, the English are so crazy,' he said with a big smile, and showed me boxes stuffed with treasures which were perfect for the grotto I was creating."

But as there was no red stone, she returned to base only to find what she needed in the clients' gravel.

While working she listens to audiobooks, good murder stories in particular, though she's recently got into Philip Pullman's trilogy *His Dark Materials*. To relax in the evening she sews, knits or does jigsaws.

Her favourite example of shell work is the Shell House at Goodwood. It was designed and created by women and features masses of different designs and



#### NOTES FROM THE COUCH

patterns. "You have to ring up in advance to get to see it."

She's also a great fan of the Margate Shell Grotto, which she says is brilliant. "Nothing fancy. All local shells."

And of course shell design has always been very big in Italy. "There are always shell grottos in the gardens in Italy. One learns from all of them."

She now lives two fields away from the charmingly eccentric Glandford Shell Museum near Holt, Norfolk, which is the oldest purpose-built shell museum in the United Kingdom. Blott is on the board there, and describes herself as a "gatekeeper of the donations offered by kind people" – shells or shell pictures or objects.

She believes very strongly in preserving the wonderful random and bonkers spirit of this tiny

beautiful museum.

"Recently someone just popped by and donated an elegant shell-surrounded portrait of Queen Alexandra and Edward VII, behind a heart-shaped piece of glass. The frame is beaten brass with shell relief. These donations are recorded for provenance.

"There are so many wonders in the cabinets. There's a walking stick made from a shark's spine. I certainly don't pretend to be an expert on shells. I know my little shell world, but if you want an expert you have to go to the National History Museum." 🐚

*For contact details and to see more of Blott's work, go to [blottkerrwilson.com](http://blottkerrwilson.com). Blott's work is also featured in a new book, *The New Naturalists: Inside the Homes of Creative Collectors* by Claire Bingham (Thames & Hudson £25.00).*

