



Far left: Alice working on her quick-carve owl at Carve Carrbridge 2018.

Left top: Alice pictured back in 2005, when she won the Novice Cup at Carve Carrbridge.

Left below: this year's APF Show carve.

'The Queen of the Owls'.

Carving with an aim

SINCE 2005, Alice Buttriss has demonstrated her chainsaw skills to the crowds that flock to the annual Carve Carrbridge competition. Up till 2005, Alice had never used a chainsaw before – she only got involved because the organisers held a one-day workshop to help advertise the competition. Having moved to the village in 1991 Alice and her husband Jeff felt they would support the workshop and went along to help make up the numbers.

"We each managed to carve a toadstool, so at the end of the day – and after a glass or two of wine – we were both persuaded to take part as novices. After only a few hours' practice with a chainsaw I entered and won the novice cup. I really enjoyed it and it seemed natural to continue chainsaw carving and I have taken part in the competition every year since."

Alice attended a chainsaw course at the Inverness School of Forestry to develop her skills and in order to gain her chainsaw certificates. She had always enjoyed working in 3D with clay, sculpting and modelling, so she found it relatively easy to sculpt with a chainsaw. She was quick to say, though, that it has taken a lot of practice to develop the skills required to use a chainsaw as a carving tool.

Moving to Carrbridge initially enabled Alice to open her own pottery studio, allowing her to work from home while bringing up her two children, David and Amy. For around ten years, part of the family home was turned into a pottery studio and when the opportunity arose to buy the old ski school on the main street of Carrbridge, Alice and Jeff bought it and turned it into the Carrbridge Artists Studio. Today Alice, her husband Jeff, who is an established full-time artist, and her daughter Amy, who is a ceramic artist, sell their works from the studio. Son David works full-time in the computer games industry but is also an artist, keeping up the family tradition!

I asked Alice what had influenced her carving over the years. She said, "Joining the Scottish Potters Association years ago and attending their workshops has been a great help in learning new techniques and processes. The carving community is very friendly, other carvers are always willing to help regarding queries and giving advice. There is also a chainsaw carvers Facebook page which is really good if you have any questions. Also, you can see other carvers' work, which can give you inspiration to try something new."

When she first started out carving, Alice only had one small saw and her speciality carve back then was green men. Over the years she has added to her collection of saws and now has eight. Alice specialises in wildlife carves – her favourites being owls, red squirrels, birds of prey and bears. Given the location of Carrbridge, in the middle of the Cairngorm National Park, Alice is not short of influences for her work, surrounded with the wildlife of the Scottish Highlands.

All the saws Alice uses are by Stihl. When she first started carving she had difficulty starting up chainsaws; Stihl made an easy-start chainsaw so, having got one, she just stuck with them. This also has the advantage of being able to interchange parts.



Alice explained that most of her saws are just the basic models but the smaller ones have special carving bars. "This allows you to carve with the tip without kickback, although they can still cut your leg off if you are not careful!"

Alice continued, "Over the years I have added to my collection of chainsaws with power tools, dremels, angle grinders and sanders. Many have come from Jeff as Christmas presents, much to the amusement of friends. I often get quite excited about getting a new tool. One of my favourite sayings is 'A girl can't have too many chainsaws you know!'"

I wondered if there were any carves that Alice is particularly proud of. Her answer was the Carrbridge 300 Art Sculpture which sits in the centre of the village next to the main car park. It regularly attracts the attention of the many tourists and visitors to the village. It is a fascinating carve, with so much detail on it. Indeed a local resident at this year's carve event told me that he is still discovering things on it about Carrbridge and the surrounding area despite that fact he has viewed it many times before.

"Jeff and I completed this carving last year to commemorate the Old Bridge in Carrbridge being 300 years old. It was commissioned by the Carrbridge Tourist Association with additional funding from Sustrans and the Cairngorm National Park. I tried to incorporate all the history, flora and fauna of the region in the two pillars, while Jeff carved the centre 'bridge' piece and did all the foundations and site work. I also included a ceramic 'river' in tiles under the bridge, which adds further dimension and colour to the piece."

After interviewing Alice I had to go back to check out this carve again, to discover that a carve of herself, complete with her trusty chainsaw, is to be found on one of the pillars - that is if you know what you are looking for!

Alice also has an 'old man' carve on a traffic island in the village and a family of owls carved on a tree at the side of her house which attracts attention and is well loved by her and the locals.

Alice told me that Pete Bowsher, who had been a great help to her and supported her in her early days with ideas and advice, has nicknamed her 'Queen of the Owls' as a result of her passion for carving owls of all shapes and sizes!

It was also Pete that pointed out to Alice - at her first carve workshop - that she didn't have to make 'sawing movements' with her chainsaw but rather just let it cut through the log. He also shared this advice that he had given her with all the other carvers at lunchtime, so they had a good



▲ The Carrbridge 300 Art Sculpture - which Alice is proud to have carved alongside her husband Jeff.

▶ The section of the pillar where Alice has carved herself at work.



laugh at Alice's expense! She well remembers her first carve as a novice at Carve Carrbridge. "It was an

early green man and won me the Novice Cup. Back then I had one saw and I carved lots of faces or 'relief carvings'. As I got more saws I was able to develop and expand my carving repertoire."

Her favourite carve in a competition was at the APF Show four years ago, which really showed how her carving had developed. It was a bench which comprised a fawn and an eagle, with a central feature of a squirrel and an owl with two baby owls.

Alice has carved at the European Chainsaw Carving Championships, held at the APF, five times, Carve Carrbridge fourteen times, Tweed Valley Festival three times and on the day I visited in September she was getting ready to travel down to Beith in Ayrshire to take part in a new competition called Garnock Valley Carves (see page 28 of this issue for a full report). Alice explained that this new event involved ten carvers and was being organised on similar lines to Carrbridge, providing a valuable addition to the carvers' calendar.

Alice then spoke about each of the events she attends. "The APF is different to the other shows, being a smaller part of a massive forestry and arboricultural show. The logs there are Giant Redwood which I find softer, durable and nice to carve. The end carves have a deep gold colour and it is my favourite wood to carve with. At the

APF you carve a main piece plus a series of quick carves over the three days of the event. You can also use power tools which allows you to finish off your carve to a high standard. An added attraction of the show comes after the day's carving is complete, sitting around the camp fire with fellow carvers discussing the day's events and catching up with the carving community."

The Tweed Valley Festival, Alice explained, is a friendly, two-day event, held on the green in the centre of Peebles, where again you can use power tools and you can also take finished stock to sell as well as the carvings from the event.

Clearly, as it is her home village, Carve Carrbridge holds a special place in Alice's heart. "It is a great competition with a great atmosphere; it is run by local volunteers with all the proceeds going back into the community. It is really well organised and they go out of their way to help visiting carvers enjoy their stay. The carvings produced have always been impressive but the standard continues to improve year after year. A lot of carvers return each year but there are always a few new competitors. Over the years I have become well known to the other carvers, but occasionally new carvers and spectators are a bit surprised to see an old lady pensioner competing alongside men!"

At this year's carve, Alice, like the other carvers, had to deal with working with Douglas fir rather than the usual Sitka spruce. She said, "The Douglas fir was a lovely wood to carve with, it gives a good colour and quality to the carving.



▲ Alice's favourite carve was this one which she carved at the APF Show in 2014.

▶ Pictured here in 2006, the green man carvings were Alice's stock in trade carve when she first started.



However, as it's a harder wood it was very tiring on the arms. I was really pleased that I managed to finish my bench carving in the allotted four hours."

Alice's bench comprised a tree and what she described as the 'happiest bear ever'. She was really happy that she was able to get the expressive bear's smile just with the use of the chainsaw. "The standard of carves has moved on tremendously over the years that I have been competing. It never ceases to amaze the crowd what can be achieved using only a chainsaw and then a blowtorch to add some colour."

Alice is determined to keep carving at Carve Carrbridge and is looking ahead to Carve 2021 - when she plans to be carving when she is 70! "I thought I would retire at 65, but when I got to my birthday, still fit and well and still enjoying carving, I decided to keep going."

That said, despite this aim, Alice is not guaranteed being at the event as she explained. "Carve Carrbridge entry is based on a draw each year, with the previous year's winners and some new carvers getting a spot, while the other carvers are pulled out of a hat. Last year I was on the reserve list but I got in, thankfully. At this year's event Jeff was a reserve but didn't make the final list. At the carve now I feel that I need to up my game and 'step out' of the box with my carves. I perhaps need to think more about carving something special, rather than carving to sell the end carve."

As we sat in Alice's studio, I asked her how she decided what to carve and

When Alice first started, fellow carvers nearly all came from the forestry or arb industry but Alice feels that more carvers are now coming from an art background, with carving being seen as a form of art. Alice remembers, in her early days of carving, she was exhibiting at an art exhibition with her ceramics. "I asked if I could exhibit some of my chainsaw carvings as well, and got some very sceptical looks at the time. Nowadays, chainsaw carvings are appreciated and accepted, and it often surprises people that such delicate work can be done with a chainsaw."

Spectators at this year's Carve Carrbridge will have noticed that Alice signed off her finished carve with a signature mark. This mark is also used on her pottery pieces and was recognised in 2015 as a British Studio Potters' Mark and is recorded in the book of such marks. This recognition is not her only claim to fame - she has appeared on the BBC show *On the Road* with Kate Cube where she was filmed carving. At last year's Carve Carrbridge she was interviewed for *CBeebies* and asked what it was she was going to carve at the event. Some of her pottery pieces have also appeared in the *Monarch of the Glen* BBC TV series.

It is clear that Alice is quite at home either carving or working with clay. Her carving career started in her back garden but she soon realised that she'd have to find somewhere else to carve when her tolerant but weary neighbour told her one day that he wished she had taken up fly fishing! It has not always been plain sailing and she told me of a near disastrous occurrence with an angle grinder and a high-vis waistcoat.

"I was operating an angle grinder with a sabre tooth disc, sanding an owl carve and as I was bending over it to sand under the tail, the front of the waistcoat got caught up and the grinder was pulled up to my throat. It was a real scary moment; I could not move my hands to switch it off as it was taking me all my effort to keep it from cutting my throat. Luckily I shouted my daughter and she rushed out and pulled the plug out to stop the grinder. The lesson I learned that day was never operate a grinder or a chainsaw when wearing loose clothing."

Alice clearly enjoys carving and indeed wishes she had taken it up years earlier than she did. "It's the adrenalin rush that I get when I get into a competition carve that is hard to explain. That's what keeps me wanting to turn out at the various carve events."

I would put money on her making her 2021 target to be at Carve Carrbridge. I hope the draw is kind to her and I look forward to seeing her there and reporting on it for *Forestry Journal*.

James Hendrie

You can see some of Alice's work on Facebook by searching for Carrbridge Artists Studio.