

“DOWN IN THE VALLEY”

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Can you distinguish between art and craft? Where does one end and another begin? Would you call someone who lives close to nature and according to its rules, who uses his hands to produce things both useful and beautiful, an artist or a craftsman, or maybe both?

Life is about perpetual tussle, striving for higher goals, a daily laborious laying of the landscape with scattered grains of sand. Life is more than wealth, wallet size, beautiful home or the latest model of an expensive car. Life is the art of survival, art of understanding, assimilation and empathy towards everything living. Life is a path of compassion and comprehension, all the rest is merely a footnote to our own personal story.

Imagine secluded valley near Scarriff in County Clare. It is autumn, trees are exploding with colours, and tall grass has a deep, dark, green shade. Sun struggles its way throughout the dense cloud, fog is lifting up, revealing the outline of close-by waterway. We walk through a small grove, trees in all tones of yellow, green, brown, purple and red give way to a wide meadow, lazily stretching toward clump of younger trees flooded by the swollen waters of a nearby river. We're entering the grazing land, surprised goats are looking at us curiously, and tired sun finally releases itself from the pillory of dark clouds. Jack stops to string a 45lbs English longbow he made himself. Sun rays flow around his silhouette, clearly outlining archer's profile. In the background beguiling hills raise their ridges towards the sky. I'm taking few photos at the meadow and by the river. My shoes are completely wet, but I don't mind, Jack cautiously wore wellingtons, we're slowly heading towards his house, which stands maybe 300 meters away from the banks, and goats walk as back with an unwavering gaze. The house is small inside, but it has that charm, something to feel, something intangible. We sit at the round table, the logs in the fireplace crackle, the room smells of burning wood and black tea.

I'm asking Jack if making bows is the only thing he does right now, he looks at me seriously and without a word nods confirming my question. His story as many other begins with a dream, only difference is Jack had enough guts to pursue it. Sometimes fate tempts us to go all in, and against all odds we're doing it. In this sense and in his own way Jack is a risk taker. But the ability to make such choices works only in his, and indirectly, in our favour. We're leaving the warm cosy interior and heading to workshop, which is located next to the house.

Finally, I get to see his kingdom. Upon entering, we're immediately overwhelmed by the characteristic smell of sawdust, glue, resin and wood. On the long, heavy and well-worn bench lies an unfinished bow with clamps along the limb, next to it we see a scuffed stand and on it a few half-finished bows. At the back, against the wall, on the right-hand side, on a narrow countertop, rests medieval gauntlet gloves and a battered helmet, underneath stands a wicker basket full of differently fletched arrows. On a wall opposite the workspace, a dozen different bows hang on a simple rack. The bows include those regarded as traditional, some as historic and some historically accurate. We see yew self-bows, two or three laminated ones or we can imagine whatever we wish for, made to our specifications by Master Bowyer Jack Pinson.

We leave by the back door, and walk around the workshop, my attention is caught by a colourful pile of different types of wood stored on a makeshift shelf. Opposite I see benches for making bows, a large wooden hammer, an old, hand carved, wooden bow rack and a lot of completely exotic tools and things I simply cannot name.

A little further back, I see garden hidden behind the house and in it partly outside, partly in the greenhouse everything you'll need to live on: vegetables and fruits of all kinds; in one sentence - a self-sustaining house in the middle of nowhere.

We're back in workshop; Jack can't help himself and starts to whittle one of the unfinished bows. It is obvious that work with wood brings both comfort and joy to him. At the very same moment he picked up the tool and touched the wood, his face brightened, and the eyes glowed. No matter how you put it, the view of a craftsman at work is not much different than a picture of artist in the middle of the creative process. I think Jack is both, and much more. He loves what he is doing, and he does it with full devotion. When I watched him work, it seemed to me that I was witnessing something special, at the same time very intimate, one would have the impression that wood, as of its own will, gave in to his skilful hands. As if he had power over inanimate matter, or if he could establish a bond with the object he creates.

His dexterity and ability to sway items he shapes goes hand in hand with something that many of us lack today, a vision of the future arising from deeply rooted traditions, respect for the knowledge and experience of old Masters, thoughtfulness and nostalgia for a world that is no more. Jack's biggest advantage but also a curse is that despite his young look, deep inside him bears an old man, or as some people say: he is an old soul. One thing is for sure, in today's busy, soulless, profit and career-oriented world, Jack is the anchor that holds us in the right place. Without misfits like him, people would have long forgotten where to, and where from we are heading.

Maybe a month before my visit here I witnessed bow making classes he gave to a diverse group of participants. Several people gathered at Clonkeen Woods on the outskirts of Portlaoise, where Laois Archery has its range. Interestingly, many of the students were older than the tutor. When we think about Master and apprentice, our imagination immediately drives us towards the picture of an aged man training some young fellow. Don't fall for Jack's young look. Take a moment and peek closely, maybe then you'll note an experienced Master bowyer hiding behind the veil of youth.

I was particularly intrigued by the tools they use during the course. Many of those had substantial signs of wear, but not in a negative meaning, one would rather say that with certainty Jack inherited them from his Master Don Adams, and Don from his, so besides being useful they also bring cognitive value as historical objects. Even goat-shaped benches (forgive my association) caused a feeling of involvement in a venture out of this epoch. Participants planed their bows themselves, while learning the secrets of craftsmanship, which most people believe is a thing out of the past. But no, the past reaches out to us only when we allow it, when we give up and when there is no more hope for us. Or, we can always be struck by tomorrow.

As things stand now future is gaining at us and yet we still remain in the day when the world has shifted on its pivot, and nothing since seems at its place, only lonesome bowyer from undisturbed valley in Clare is continuing to make bows in his workshop. And however twee it sounds, believe me - hard times had come upon him. Most of Jack's sales were generated through people handling and shooting his bows, at archery shoots, markets and historical events. With all those venues being cancelled or postponed sales eventually stopped.

On the other hand, the material aspect, however necessary, in this individual case, is of secondary importance. Simple decency and fairness require that apart from sympathy, we also offer the hero of this story respect, because without hummingbirds like Jack today's busy world would be an even more difficult place to bear. Let's give him a moment, time is expensive, we all know it, but not in the sense that it might seem, in some respects time is the work of our hands and the consequence of choices, so why this would not be the moment we succumbed to the charm of someone who put his future at risk to save vanishing virtues of the old ways.

One drive links for picture catalogues:

Living Longbow <https://1drv.ms/u/s!AhOqmqRpf1FvgcBtH2E6NLlf8Cn8sA?e=dwwPkv>

Bow making classes <https://1drv.ms/u/s!AhOqmqRpf1Fvgbtf-rNUvI5n0Nti9A?e=CVqnsx>