



Left: Hazel leaf print using hazel leaf and bark inks. Below: Oak gall ink bottle. Overleaf: Lucy and Edward in their studio. All photos: Old Mill Arts.

cherry or birch. The latter also yields a tar which can be a robust and effective glue that may well have been used in prehistoric times.

Lucy and Edward rejoice in the versatility of materials they forage locally. Their enthusiasm is infectious and their desire to be self-sufficient strikes a real chord. I notice that the paintbrush they give me to experiment with birch ink appropriately has a birch twig handle and the charming little ink wells are hand-fashioned.

“The clay is a wild one, remarkably pure, dug from a local riverbank. We fire them ourselves, not in a kiln but overnight in a fire, a bit like making charcoal,” says Edward.

Charcoal is another product they like to produce. “Different trees produce different charcoals,” says Lucy, “if we are working on hawthorn, the long thorns make extremely fine sticks that can be used for delicate drawing, for example.” She shows me hazel leaf prints made from hazel charcoal-based printing ink, deeply sooty and satisfyingly black.

Who are these people who have come to see a way of making a modest living out of enticing people out into nature through the creation of paints, inks, dyes, clays and pigments? They are still young but seem to have done many things and are well-travelled.

Lucy started out as a ceramicist (though it's Edward who makes the clay inkwells) at Wolverhampton College of Art. She tried several disciplines but found that she loved working with materials foraged from the landscape. She also loves working with people and quickly saw the potential such foraging has to draw them in. “It's a potent way of reconnecting people with nature,” she comments.

## Natural colour

*What would you use if industrial paints were not available? Fi Martynoga visited Lucy Lee and Edward Campbell from Old Mill Arts to find out about pigments made from locally foraged materials*

My May drive from mid-Borders to a woodland south-west of Dumfries was a rhapsody of fresh greens. Colour was very much on my mind since Lucy Lee and Edward Campbell run a business making colourful art materials from rocks, roots, bark, leaves, flowers and seeds they can collect from the world around them. Curiously, greens are the most elusive of the hues and those procured from plant matter tend to be muted, though beautiful in a different way from the riot of spring.

Nothing was muted about my delight when I entered their workshop. It's a long, wood-lined room on one side of an old stable yard. A narrow shelf all along the back holds jars, bottles and pots of many sizes and colours, a veritable alchemist's den. On the wall, pieces of handmade paper display gorgeous colour charts. One of these, a subtle flower with petals coloured by madder, weld and woad – orange,

yellow and green – has become their business logo. These three plants are also the subject of a first publication which describes their botany, history and cultural associations and explores the surprising range of colours they can generate.

It's in this room that Lucy and Edward hold many of their workshops. They had just hosted a day on ‘Pigment, Paint and Pastel’ making, followed by one on ‘Natural Binders for Paint Making’. A binder is the glue needed to bulk up a pigment and make it stick, whether as an ink or a paint. Gum arabic, itself a tree resin, is commonly used, but at Old Mill Arts binders are made from trees nearer to home such as





In her workshop she is surrounded by handmade items: baskets, lovely little turned bowls, hand-thrown pots, which bear witness to her pleasure in creativity. Her own, when not fully taken up with preparing for and delivering workshops, uses many different media.

Edward was born into a creative family and first sold his painting skills when he was still a teenager. He didn't come through a conventional art education, although he is now doing a BA with the Open College of the Arts. It was in the spring of 2020, during the first lockdown, that he started to develop ways of using plants and pigment-rich stones to create art materials.

"Things usually start with books," he says, "and that time it was *The Organic Artist* by Nick Neddo." It made him reflect on the artificial, toxic and polluting nature of many modern art materials. He was keen to do better and so the experiments started that have built his experience to a point where he can share it.

The couple seem to co-operate closely on everything. An outstanding project that has excited them and the

many people who have been attending their sessions is Trysting Trees. They select a species such as hazel to investigate in depth, starting with the etymology of its names in different places, and leading into its broader cultural associations.

Along the way they examine the tree more scientifically and see how it is integrated into the web of life, as well as describing how it can be propagated and reared. Lastly they will talk about its many uses, for food (those vitally important nuts in this case), drinks, medicine, timber (straight coppiced stems for building shelters or supporting plants), craft products (basketry) and, of course, art materials (leaves for dyeing and charcoal).

This gives the opportunity for the really hands-on part of the project as people create inks, paints or dyes, use them and have their own entirely locally sourced and handmade products to take away with them. You can see why the sessions have already proved popular, and there are many more species to play with.

There is so much to intrigue anyone in all this. What more potent way of getting people outside to look harder

than by tapping into their creativity and inviting them to mess about making potions! It's not just our inner child that is addressed but our roots: think of all those prehistoric cave paintings and what we know about ancient body paint and tattooing.

Lucy and Edward are encouraging people to delve deep, using all the creativity and ingenuity of their ancestors who could not go on the internet to buy industrially prepared tubes of paint or pots of ink.

They would like to have a bigger centre to do this, where people might be accommodated over weekends or for longer, and other tutors could also deliver workshops. For now they have this lovely room, a small bookshop full of unusual art books, most of them practical, and Mabie Forest just outside their door where sessions can be delivered, weather permitting, under the greenwood tree. Have a look at their website to appreciate what wisdom and fun is to be had with them.

[www.oldmillarts.com](http://www.oldmillarts.com)

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