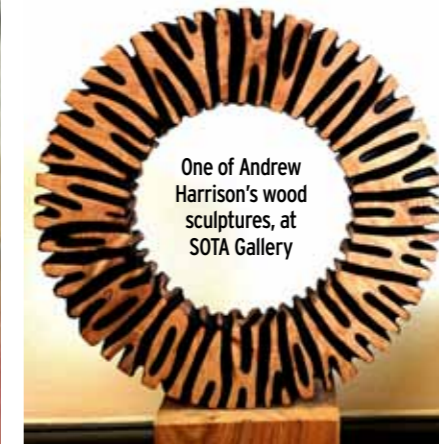




Witney High Street in mixed media, by Jane Hathaway, at SOTA Gallery



'Fields of Gold', by David Willoughby, at SOTA Gallery



One of Andrew Harrison's wood sculptures, at SOTA Gallery

Sue Tucker, weaver
After buying a mixed flock of sheep to graze an ancient hay meadow at her smallholding, then thinking she really ought to do something with the wool produced, Sue Tucker investigated the crafts of spinning and hand weaving, using a traditional spinning wheel and an Ashford loom. She also taught herself to dye the wool, using natural plants. "Most things you ever need to know are in a book somewhere," she says.

Sue is an admirer of the Arts and Crafts Movement, which she feels ties in with the partially self-sufficient lifestyle she enjoys. About six years ago Sue reconnected with her hobby, which she had put on hold because of family and work commitments. Then, as luck would have it, she was offered a Harris loom, once owned by an accomplished weaver who was too elderly to use it, which would otherwise have ended up being thrown into a skip. Her first commission was to make bespoke textiles for Windsor chairs at Jesus College in Oxford, and now one of her wallhangings graces the home of the curator of interpretation at Tate Britain. Sue also creates bespoke handwoven textiles, runners, rugs, cushions and scarves and is the artist in residence at Cogges Manor Farm in Witney, where she hosts regular workshops. She has created a range of hand weaves to present at the Artweeks exhibition at St Mary's Church, Charlbury, this year.
www.TheRamsdenWeaver.co.uk



Rug & cushions at The Ramsden Weaver

Off the beaten track

One of the many joys of Artweeks is an invitation to follow a sign off your usual route and make a turn towards an artist's home or studio, or a gallery. Sandra Kessell goes exploring around Witney

A journey down a country lane that might otherwise not be visited, to glimpse an alternative view of a well-known landmark - be it tree, hill or church tower - is a delicious pleasure in itself even before the artist's door is opened. In and around Witney, an artist's work might incorporate a picturesque aspect of the River Windrush or hark back to an ancient craft or industry.

There are commercial galleries and amateur artists' groups around the town where, all year round, but particularly through Artweeks, work is brought

together like a honeypot for the appreciative. Some artists and craftspeople are professionals, making a living, (sometimes precarious), from their skills and talents, other exhibitors paint or make items for the sheer pleasure of being creative. Screwing up the courage, or finding the fee to become a member to show off a year's work can mean a fraught few days before curtain-up. But Artweeks was never intended to be just the preserve of the most commercially successful - simply a celebration of creativity across the county and Witney has fine examples of the many forms art can take.



One of Lisa Marie Smith's beautiful pendants

Meet the makers...



Lisa Marie Smith, goldsmith
Designer and goldsmith Lisa Marie Smith's enthusiasm for all aspects of her work shines through as she talks about the process of creating

fine jewellery. Some of the pieces she makes are bespoke, designed alongside a client's own ideas, style and preferences; some are collections that Lisa Marie designs from inspirations of her own. Such jewellery can be so personal, precious items representing big moments in life - an engagement and marriage, the birth of a child or a significant birthday. Not only is the kind of jewellery Lisa Marie creates worn next to the skin, it's often worn every day and so becomes intimate.

"A client told me that the jewellery I made for her is part of her," says Lisa Marie. "When she's putting that ring on, it's like getting dressed."

Some of Lisa Marie's commissions involve an inherited ring, for example, that is dated or too worn to wear and she is adept at recreating the piece, or at taking the gems and remaking them into something more contemporary and wearable. She prefers working with recycled gems, gold and silver as a way of ensuring that the sources of her materials are ethical, though the end result may be a brand-new design.

To celebrate Oxfordshire Artweeks Lisa Marie and her husband James, a fine furniture restorer, will be hosting other artists and makers at their home, from which they also run a bed and breakfast. They are offering a lunch stop-off for visitors at the same time. Besides being available through her website, www.designergoldsmith.co.uk, Lisa Marie's work is also offered for sale at the SOTA Gallery in Witney.

Venue: Gorselands Hall, Boddington Lane, North Leigh, Witney, OX29 6PU.



'Chapter 01',
at The Cuckoo's Nest

Not part of Artweeks, but worth a visit...

The Cuckoo's Nest

Artist Graham Rice and his partner jeweller Sheila Raven (with help from their sheepdog Bryn) run their own gallery and framing workshop in North Leigh. Though this year they've decided not to join Artweeks they do open the studio daily and share their space with other artists year-round. Graham's creativity was encouraged at the knee of his artist grandfather, Norman Hayes, and over time Graham's talent evolved and he became a 3-D artist in the computer games industry. His skills in this field are echoed in his strong printmaking, but he also paints portraits and landscapes and creates collages, working with different media. One of the reasons he felt he had to sell his own work was because he likes to experiment and so is difficult to pigeon-hole in the way many commercial galleries prefer.

Sheila dovetails her jewellery-making with a career as a highly respected freelance archaeologist. It was a desire to find out more about the methods ancient fine metalworkers and jewellers used - whether prehistoric, Celtic, Saxon or Roman - that led her into jewellery-making as she found herself fascinated by the processes, some of which have barely changed. Before long, she was hooked on creating her own pieces and her work continues to aid her understanding of archaeological finds. Inspired by the studio's woodland location she often incorporates wildlife into her pieces and over the years, has also become interested in felting, creating fabric brooches alongside her copper and silver work.

The Cuckoo's Nest, Cuckoo Lane, North Leigh, Witney, OX29 6PW, www.the-cuckoos-nest.com

SOTA Gallery

In the heart of Witney, this bright modern gallery shines like a gem as you pass its windows, since it encompasses the best local art and craftsmanship - originals and one-offs made by British printers, painters, photographers, ceramicists, jewellers and sculptors. Sourcing work direct from makers was key to the gallery owners, Jennifer Crowshaw and Andrew Harrison, who are artists themselves, when they came to set up the business. Their own creations grace the walls and floorspace, alongside the ceramic bowls and jugs displayed on oak stands (made by Andrew), limited edition prints, photographs and original paintings. Jennifer's multi-layered mixed media lino-print and paint wall art features bold seedheads and flowers, trees and landscapes inspired by the Oxfordshire countryside. Though she originally trained and worked as an interior designer, Jennifer always longed to express her creativity through paint and print. Meeting Andrew and setting up the SOTA gallery (SOTA stands for State of the Art) has allowed them both to pursue their dreams. Andrew's unique wood sculptures, which are both organic and structural at the same time, lend a striking aspect to the gallery. He trained in carpentry and joinery, joining the Army as an apprentice, then became a diplomatic courier before finally settling into his role as both a sculptor and co-owner of the gallery.

The couple enjoy being a hub for local artists and art lovers and act as co-ordinators for Witney's Artweeks. They will happily signpost visitors towards other interesting exhibitions.

"We wanted to encourage people to get involved," explains Jennifer.

Venue: SOTA Gallery, Langdale Court, Witney. OX28 6FG, www.sotagallery.co.uk



Mixed media and linoprint,
by Jennifer Crowshaw, at SOTA Gallery

Art every day

Even if you're not a fan of visiting artists' studios, Witney boasts several examples of public art that can be seen daily. Commissioned for particular buildings or areas around the town, funded by developers and encouraged and overseen by West Oxfordshire District Council, the art takes the form of sculptures, fencing, paving and murals and commemorates different aspects of the town's heritage. There's the Buttercross Needle by sculptor Michael Fairfax - its design referencing well-known local landmarks such as the spire of St Mary's Church in Church Green and the roof of the Buttercross, and, close-by, contemporary cycle racks. Beautiful railings at Bridge Street Mill by Anne Gingell - their shape echoing the bulrushes in the River Windrush below, prettify the walkways of one of several new housing developments that have revitalised the town. The inspiring Witney Yarn mosaic by Rob Turner in Marriotts Walk, plus the series of pebble mosaics by Maggy Howarth along Woodford Way, serve to highlight not only Witney's former industries, but an ancient art that dates back millennia.

"We believe that public art contributes to making parts of West Oxfordshire unique and we work with artists to ensure that their creative designs enrich our open spaces and community areas, whilst reflecting the district's picturesque landscape and rich history," explains Cllr Warwick Robinson, cabinet member responsible for public art. ■



Buttercross Needle and bicycle racks

Inspired?

Want to do more or hear more about other artists? Here are a few of the art and craft groups around Witney that meet regularly. More details can be found on the West Oxfordshire District Council website.
www.westoxon.gov.uk

Buttercross Quilters Group ranges from complete beginners to more experienced quilters who aim to share their skills and make new friends. They meet on the second Tuesday of each month at The King's School, New Yatt Road, Witney, OX29 6TA.
www.buttercrossquilterswitney.co.uk

Buttercross Art Society is a group of friends who enjoy painting as amateurs and want to learn more from professional artists. They meet on the first Tuesday of the month in the Wesley Room, Ground Floor, High Street Methodist Church, Witney, OX28 6HG, from 7.30-9.30 pm. www.buttercrossartsociety.weebly.com

Charlbury Art Society is open to people interested in art as well as practising artists who want to exhibit. Besides demonstrations and talks, the society organises trips to exhibitions and galleries and holds workshops. The group meets on the second Wednesday of each month at 7.30pm in The Memorial Hall, Charlbury.
www.charlburyarts.co.uk

Eynsham Arts Group includes members who are college trained and self-taught. They work in a number of media and styles and exhibit regularly in the village. The meetings on the last Wednesday of each month include talks and demonstrations, starting at 7.30pm in the ground floor room of the Bartholomew Rooms, Eynsham.
www.eynshamartsgroup.co.uk

West Oxon Decorative & Fine Arts Society encourages interest in the arts through talks by top-class lecturers and outings to exhibitions and places of interest. Members meet on the second Thursday of the month at the Methodist Church, High Street, Witney, OX28 6HG. Doors open at 6.45pm, lectures begin at 7.30pm.
www.wodfas.org.uk

West Oxon Woodturning Association (WOWA) is a chance for woodturners whether novices or professional to get together. New members and non-members are welcome. The group meets on the first Tuesday of every month 7.30-10pm at Elderbank Village Hall, Brize Norton, OX18 3PR.
www.wowa.org.uk

Witney Photo Group aims to help and encourage all members to take better photographs and to exhibit their work, whether they're a beginner or an advanced practitioner. The group meets Tuesday evenings at 7.30pm at Madley Park Hall, Northfield Farm Lane, Witney, OX28 1UE.
www.witneyphotogroup.co.uk