

Love letters



Picture Stewart Grant

On the hunt for a hobby to make gifts extra special, LAURA CARTLEDGE falls head over heels for calligraphy.

Kirsten Burke's calligraphy skills may have seen her work with the likes of Estée Lauder and Harrods, but she still insists 'my handwriting is as awful as the next persons'.

"I don't give it any thought - I'm always in a rush," admits Kirsten. "But calligraphy is not about writing really, you are not thinking about what to say when creating it as you would be when writing a note or letter.

"Instead, your mind is focused on the form of the letter, the strength of the mark you are making," she explains. "Think of it more as painting than writing."

While I'd argue I've never been great at either, my love for stationery meant I couldn't resist the chance to have a go with nib and ink.

Little did I know a Christmas card workshop was all it would take to see me catch the bug and find a new favourite hobby.

However hearing Kirsten's story it sounds like she might have fallen for the artform just as quickly...

"It was seeing the work of calligrapher Donald Jackson on the cover of a magazine that ignited my interest in hand lettering," she recalls.

Studying graphic design at the time, Kirsten was frustrated that computers meant 'suddenly everything was done on screen' so she was on the search for something 'that would satisfy my need to work with my hands'.

Later, while working as a waitress at All Bar One in London, Kirsten's skills were called upon to help promote the branch which was being run by her soon-to-be business partner, Jill Hembling.

An exhibition of artwork was put on which then toured, ending up in Richmond where it caught the eye of a company working for the Globe Theatre who commissioned a 30-metre timeline depicting Shakespeare's life and plays.

The poster version is still one of Kirsten's best sellers.

Having moved into a new studio, a Birdham substation beautifully converted by Jill, the company has been able to spread its wings - and pass on the passion.

"I taught adult education classes way back

Laura practicing the letters



Kirsten

Picture: Stewart Grant



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One of Kirsten's Mother's Day cards

Laura's Mother's Day design

The design by Laura's sister, Charlotte

when I left college. It was fun, and I enjoyed doing it but other calligraphy work took over and soon I didn't have the time for it anymore," Kirsten reveals.

"Now with hand lettering being very much back in vogue, I wanted to go back to teaching, but to offer something different - a relaxed informal approach."

The result sees themed sessions in the Witterings at the Old House at Home.

"We want the atmosphere to be relaxed and fun, somewhere friends can come together and at the same time learn a new skill," she enthuses.

"We have a cup of tea or a glass of wine at the start, and share our designs at the end with each other.

"It is a really lovely feeling to see people so engrossed in what they are doing, completely focused on their work and, with a little luck, ending with a sense of satisfaction when they see the results of their work looking amazing."

I know I, and many of the other students, surprised themselves with what they created.

Especially as, having first watched Kirsten at work, I have to admit I began by staring at the page of blank paper for a while feeling daunted.

But with a bit of coaxing and some simple

tracing tasks this soon shifted until I found myself entranced.

So much so, when I came away clutching my creation I felt blissfully relaxed, with only the ink smears down my arm to remind me where the time had gone.

"I have been asked to do workshops for workers in busy workplaces as calligraphy focuses the mind on one task, the art of beautiful writing," Kirsten reveals.

"And it gets our hands and fingers a bit of pen practice rather than just simply scrolling and typing."

As well as tapping into the mindfulness trend, Kirsten's classes also tick the ongoing interest in craft.

"Personalisation is the next buzzword and so being able to handwrite a personal message on a gift makes it so much more special," she agrees.

"It is a fantastic time to be a traditional craftsman - craft is finally getting the recognition it deserves and people are desperate to upscale/personalise things that they buy, from furniture to gifts and presents."

For my second workshop, a Valentine's session, I took my newly acquired pens and inks along with my sister - partly so we could make

something for the parents, but mostly because I wanted someone to share my addiction with.

I suppose it was also a bit of a test to see if calligraphy had just hooked me because of my love of words and art, or if its powers stretched beyond that.

Proof it was the latter came when we had gone our separate ways and I realised my inks had gone home with her.

Kirsten's upcoming workshops:
 Mother's Day March 2, 10am - 12.30am
 Father's Day June 8, 7pm - 9.30pm
 The first two weekends in May, including the Bank Holiday Monday, will see Kirsten taking part in the Chichester Art Trail where people can see her at work and have a go themselves.
 Doors open at 10.30am until 5.30pm, on April 30, May 1, 2, 7 and 8.
 For more information or to book call 01243 512845 or visit www.kirstenburke.co.uk