



# The Great Essex *Craft Off*



If it's homemade, recycled or made using traditional skills, it's bound to be part of the recent revival in all things crafty and in Essex you will find anything and everything to delight you

WORDS BY CHRIS PENHALL

**O**UR television screens are full of people creating things, whether it be cakes, gardens, dresses or decorations, and programmes such as the *Great British Sewing Bee* or Kirstie Alsopp's *Homemade Home* reflect what is going on all over the country. In Essex the craft scene is also booming. Shops, classes and exhibitions about everything from tapestry to tassel making can be found up and down the county and earlier this year a newly-formed WI group in Chelmsford had so many women attend its first meeting that people had to queue in the street to get in.

It's clear that as a county and a country we value these traditional skills, and the experience and knowledge that has been handed down over generations. Women

buttons, beads, books and haberdashery, also offers workshops on crafts such as knitting, felting, crochet and jewellery making, plus an informal Meet and Make session once a month. Having started her career at Liberty's in London, Jane left to have a family, but after 20 years of working in landscaping, she realised she missed colour, texture and creativity. So when the opportunity came up to start her shop, she took it without hesitation, opening on November 3, 2011. She has never looked back.

'People like to have individual things, from what they wear to what they have in their homes. And recycling and upcycling are more popular concepts too, partly due to the economy and partly because people don't want to throw things away.'

The social interaction of classes is also a big incentive, believes Jane. 'Sharing ideas and talking is as important as the



Right: Lynne Sharpe (standing) and some of her applique workshop students at The Make It Room in Howe Green



**'Sharing ideas and talking is as important as the making. It is sewing that seed of creativity and watching that grow and blossom. It's wonderful'**

in Essex have always shared their knowledge with others, whether it be through workshops, informal knitting and crochet groups, or simply teaching their friends and families in their own homes. So what has been the reason behind the recent surge in all things arts and crafts?

'The difference now,' says Jane Shaw who runs Craft Days in Saffron Walden, 'is that people enjoy the process as much as the end result, whereas in the past people performed these skills because they had to.'

Craft Days, which sells yarns, fabrics,

making. It is sewing that seed of creativity and watching that grow and blossom,' she says. 'It's wonderful.'

That desire to encourage a new generation of crafters is what also drives Lynne Sharpe, who runs The Make It Room in Howe Green near Chelmsford.

Having been the PA to a professor of neurosurgery for 30 years, Lynne, who had always sewn and made her own clothes, did some interior design courses when her children were young. She then took a PETAL teaching course, which >>



Essex has seen a rise in people crafting and recycling due to the recession

continues: 'You can make something individual that lifts a room with the right piece of fabric. It's all about the techniques – learning them and having confidence.'

Not all crafters are content to contain their projects within the home, however. Yarn bombers decorate public places, sometimes anonymously, with their woolly decorations.

'It's like knitted or crochet graffiti,' explains Helen Thomas, an expert yarn bomber from the Craft Club in Southend, where they are currently preparing a Yarn Bomb Secret Garden for Little Havens Children's Hospice. The Craft Club began yarn bombing in 2013, when they decorated a bench on the town's seafront.

'We ran away and hid like giggling schoolgirls and waited to see people's reactions!' says Helen. Their next piece

led to a stint teaching interior design. Acquiring a studio at Hylands House in 2009 meant she could start her own workshops on felting, sewing and furniture painting, as well as offering children's sessions too. She now has her own premises, but continues to teach all over Essex with her most popular classes being in sewing, dressmaking and making lampshades.

So, what does Lynne put the resurgence in the homemade culture down to? 'The younger women who come in often haven't learnt these skills at school,' she says, 'and they want to make individual things for their homes. People are fed up with the disposable nature of shops and they want better quality without extortionate prices. I like things to match, but to be my own. I wouldn't dream of buying a cushion off the shelf, for instance.'

And if you have the patience and willingness to learn, you can make something completely unique. Lynne

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was a garland of poppies wrapped around the lynch gate of a local church for Remembrance Sunday.

'After that we yarn bombed a post box for Christmas,' continues Helen. 'We went out at night and decorated it. We got a massive reaction – we have photos of families taking photographs of their children posting letters into it.'

'We love crochet and making stuff,' she explains, 'but it's a lot of commitment, time and yarn to make clothes, which you may only wear once. With yarn bombing you can make something warm and fun, and also find new creative ways to make things. And once we've planted the yarn bomb, it's someone else's. That's when it becomes art.'

But it's not just the communal and sociable aspect of knitting, sewing or felting that is appealing; it is relaxing and therapeutic, whether you are with people or working on a project alone.

Making your own homeware or clothes

means you can create things from scratch and go as far back to basics as you want to. If you need an unusual colour and you can't find it, you can make dye from things such as onion skins, for example, which is what Audrey McNeill from Great Dunmow does.

Audrey has recently bought a spinning wheel which she uses at home to make yarn from materials such as merino silk or even plant fibres such as nettles. She then either knits or crochets the yarn, into scarves for example, or uses it to weave into fabrics.

'I think people want more of a connection with their things these days,' says Audrey, 'and what I make is mine and completely individual.'

So, whether you want to make a Queen Anne footstool, work on a patchwork blanket or make pyjamas for your children, somewhere in the county there will be a community of crafters who want to do the same. ■

## FIND OUT MORE

**Craft Days**  
27 High Street  
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CB10 1AT  
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**The Make it Room**  
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