

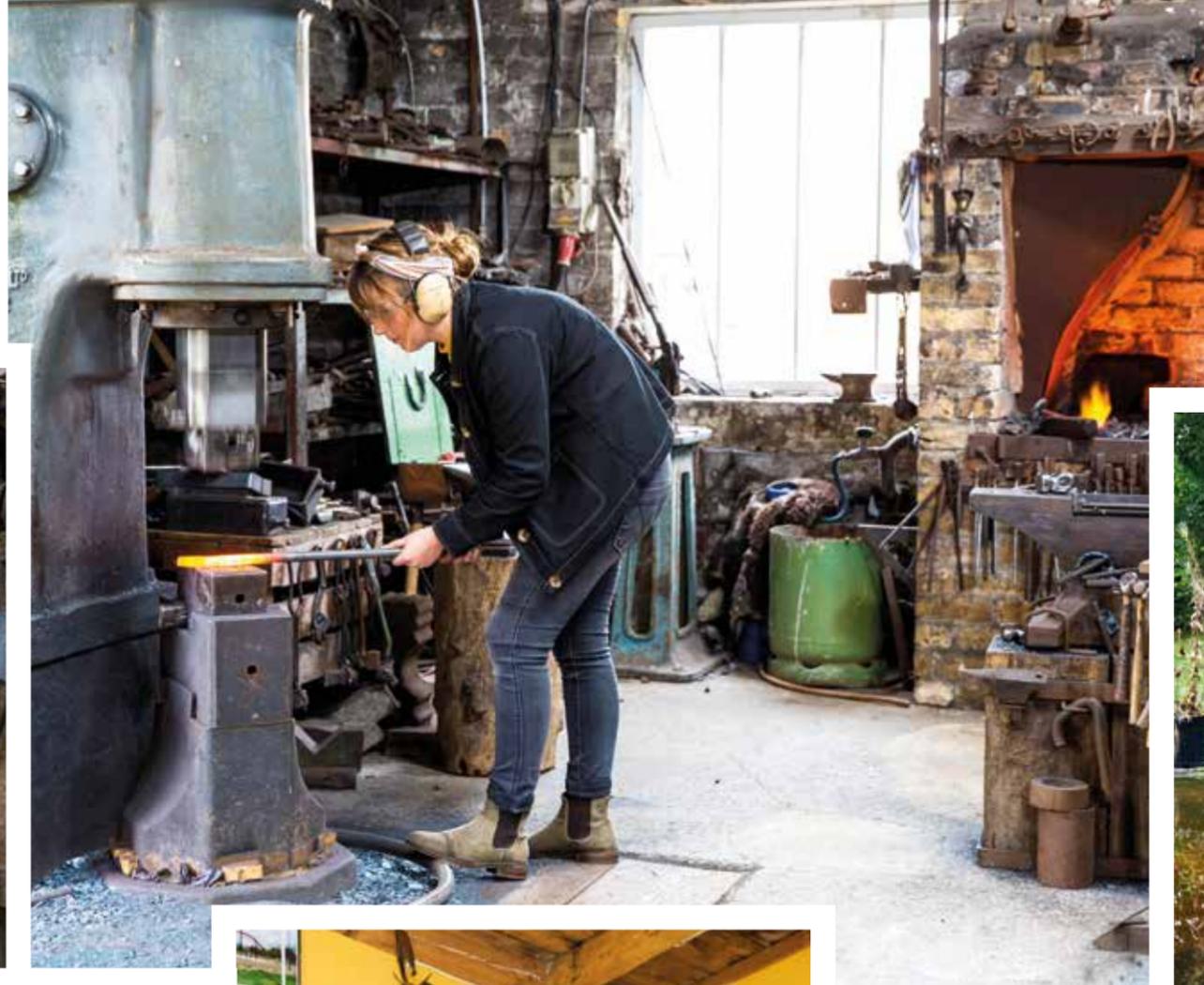


*“I want to pay homage to my ancestors. I work as traditionally as possible and people value that”*

Blacksmith Ashlee Donaldson is inspired by her family's heritage, the slow, mindful process of metalwork and the beauty of nature

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*"My work has become my hobby as well as my job. I love it. Working for myself and alongside my dad, I have flexibility, but it can be hard - torn between my two loves: my children and the forge"*



BELOW Ashlee's children are always close by; the family created a wildlife pond in her childhood garden

RIGHT Ashlee can often be found on the coast looking for inspiration while walking her dog, Woody



*"I am inspired by natural forms. When I'm designing, I draw my ideas from the beaches and sea life, the countryside and the trees; everything around me"*



LEFT AND RIGHT Everything is designed and created by hand. Ashlee enjoys making small interiors pieces that a customer can easily incorporate into their home

ABOVE The forge has barely changed since Ashlee's grandfather took ownership



Ashlee Donaldson has fond memories of childhood holidays spent travelling around the UK in her family's campervan and visiting events for blacksmiths. 'We'd all pile into the van and my dad would spend the day in the forge with the other blacksmiths. I remember him dragging me in to help and we'd compete to make pieces. That was how summers were spent,' she says.

Despite her creativity, Ashlee never pictured herself working as a blacksmith in her family's forge in rural Northumberland. 'I'd always been in and out of the workshop making little bits as a hobby, but it was never something I saw myself doing as a career,' she says. That changed when Ashlee went to university in Newcastle upon Tyne to study fashion marketing. 'I experienced a total U-turn. As part of my studies, I spent a year working for a jewellery company and decided to create a few samples with my dad in the forge. I began to think, "Actually, I can do this." Graduation day came and I realised that I could either try and get a job or give the forge a go. It was risky but I knew that if I didn't try at

that point, I might never come back to blacksmithing.' That was five years ago, and Ashlee now works alongside her dad, Stephen Lunn, while also building up her own portfolio and attending craft fairs. 'My dad and I work really well together because we are both quite laid-back. The workshop is based in a small village and everyone knows us,' she says. Every piece of work they create is unique. 'I begin each day in the forge by starting the fire and then hammering the metal. We design all of our own pieces, which the client chooses and then we draw it out to scale. It's all hand-forged. A recent project producing an archway, for example, took 10 weeks to complete.'

### Showing mettle with metal

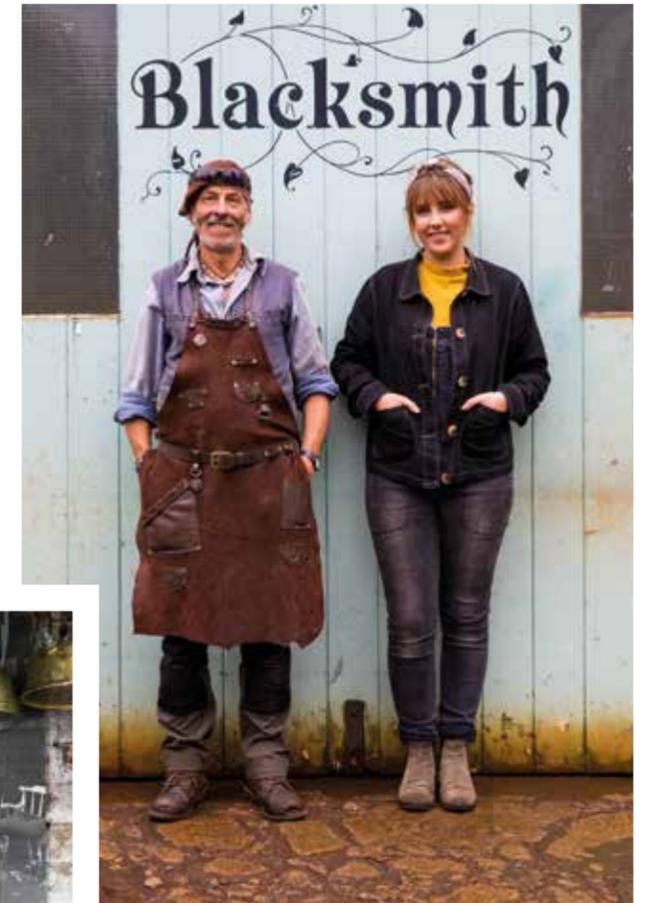
Initially, Ashlee thought she wanted to specialise in jewellery, but she loves crafting sculptural and small interiors pieces. 'I like how delicate and flowing the metal looks, from such a robust material, once it has been forged. Every little bit of the metal is hammered. There are quicker ways of doing it, but we work as traditionally as >>>



*“There seems to have been a revival of metalwork recently. People are starting to appreciate craft and traditions again, to want something different and special”*

ABOVE AND LEFT Ashlee takes inspiration from nature, like this frond of seaweed. Each piece is first sketched to scale, then forged and finished by hand

*“My dad and I work really well together because we are both quite laid-back. The workshop is based in a small village and everyone knows us”*



ABOVE AND LEFT Ashlee's family has been working at the forge since 1921. Her father, Stephen Lunn, joined the business in 1975

LEFT Family trips in the little blue campervan to visit forges around the country are a longstanding tradition

possible. Instead of welding the metal together, we rivet it; and we punch the holes instead of drilling them. Things like that take longer but are worth it.

### Generations of farriers

Ashlee's family has a long history at the forge. 'My great-grandfather trained as a farrier and worked on the front line during the First World War. When he came home, he got a job with the local blacksmith. When the forge came up for sale, he decided to buy it. He taught his son, my grandad, who taught my dad and his brother.' The forge has been in Ashlee's family since 1921 and she is the fourth generation to continue their work. 'Looking back at old photos, the forge looks exactly the same. The atmosphere and environment that they would have worked in is unchanged.'

But the future of the forge didn't always look certain. 'When my father started, the business was focused on repairing machinery and farming equipment for local

industry. He saw that his trade was starting to die out. People were buying new rather than repairing. However, he found another side of blacksmithing – creating artwork – and he's been doing that for more than 40 years.' The family has seen this side of the business grow in popularity. 'We're really busy and the work keeps coming. There seems to have been a revival of metalwork recently. People are beginning to appreciate craft and traditions again; to want something different and special.'

Her heritage is important to Ashlee. 'I want to pay homage to my ancestors. They've given me this career and without them I might never have come across it. To work in the same way as they did makes it more special and pushes me to continue. I think, "If only they were here now and could see that we are still working at the forge." That fills me with inspiration to keep going. I feel lucky. I think my dad thought he was the last in the line!'

Nature also drives Ashlee's work. 'I'm inspired by

natural forms. We live in the ideal location here in Northumberland, with the beautiful coast and countryside. When I'm designing, I draw all my ideas from the beaches and sea life, the countryside and the trees – everything around me. We pass lots of time outside and spent last summer learning to paddleboard.' Ashlee's children are also part of the team. 'When we're out on walks, we search for bits I can take back for inspiration. I get my children to help me, combing the beaches and watching the trees. We look for things like stones, driftwood, seaweed, shells and shapes in the sand.'

### From 2D to 3D creations

Each piece is sketched first. 'It's lovely to design something on paper and see it come to life – and to have somebody who wants to buy it! There are always ideas bouncing around in my head. Every piece I make is different. From its inception on paper, I have to figure

out the tools to use and how to hammer it to create the shape I want. It can be stressful but it is also therapeutic. Once I heat the metal, it goes like plasticine and I can hammer and shape it exactly as I want. I love watching people forging; it is truly mesmerising.

'My work has become my hobby as well as my job. It was never something I thought I'd do, but I love it. Working for myself and alongside my dad, I have flexibility, but it can be hard being torn between two loves – my children and the forge. I cherish family life, being at home and picking up my children from school.' Luckily, Ashlee's parents live in the family home next to the forge and the children are never far away. 'I've just taken my eldest daughter to her first "forge in" event for blacksmiths. My kids love coming into the workshop, looking around and causing trouble!'

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