

Blown away

Paul Mackenzie is given a master class in glass by one of the world's best designers

Photographs: John Cocks



AS ways of lighting a cigarette go, it's pretty impressive. Having created a stunning iridescent vase of shimmering colour out of a blob of molten glass, John Ditchfield leans forward and uses the red hot finished product to light up. If only he'd made an ash tray; but they're just about the only thing he doesn't make at the Fylde workshop where he produces some of the world's most sought-after glassware.

It's all a far cry from the days when he was forced to wash cars at weekends in a desperate bid to make enough money to afford the £5 weekly rent on the caravan he called home. And having sold the family's Blackpool seafront hotel after his mother's death he plunged his share of the money into a glass factory in the town, which was

closed down by the council after just three months for breaching noise regulations.

'I had lost everything, I was heartbroken. I hadn't paid my gas bill and they took my last pound off me and then demanded I pay them £1 a week for 12 years until the total bill was paid,' he said. 'It's paid off now,' he added with a smile as he gazed across the massive plot of land attached to his home.

John has always been an ideas man and now he's got plans for sculptures to be erected in the grounds and a huge lake to be dug as a carp fishery. Previous schemes haven't all paid off but there's no doubting the success of Glasform, the company he formed 24 years ago that has put him in demand with collectors and celebrities all over the globe. The names of the superstar owners of Ditchfield

originals read like the bill for an A-list gala variety show and among the famous collectors of his work is television antiques expert Eric Knowles.

And it's easy to see why his work is so popular. The pieces themselves are staggeringly beautiful and the process by which they are made is hypnotic for the visitors who can tour the workshop and watch him in action. But if he offers you a drink, don't expect to sup it from an ornate original. 'I buy drinking glasses from car boot sales,' he said.

John has been making glass for almost 40 years but started out by chance when a friend persuaded him to answer an advert asking for art students to work during their summer holidays. 'I couldn't draw but my mate said it didn't matter, he'd got a job there and he couldn't draw either. I went along and it was a glass factory; I got a job and all these students weren't interested but I was fascinated.'

John went on to be taught the finer points of the craft by an Italian maestro and began to experiment

Above: The furnace burns at up to 1400 degrees centigrade all day, every day



with different techniques and styles after discovering the Tiffany collection on display in Accrington. 'I was gobsmacked by it,' he said. The career path from novice to expert took a tortuous route and included jobs in Holland, Germany and Switzerland, at one point sleeping in his Citroen 2CV when penniless near Hamburg.

He returned to the UK with a plan to set up a workshop in the Lake District but his scheme was thwarted when planning permission was refused. After a stint running a grocery shop that failed, making hessian beach bags and running a market stall selling ladies underwear, he returned to glass and eventually went it alone.

Glasform opened on Talbot Road in Blackpool in the mid-1980s and John moved to his farm near Singleton, a few miles north of junction three on the M55, five years ago. 'The public couldn't come into the old workshop,' he said. 'It's good for us to be able to demonstrate what we do.'

And it's good for us, too; the

FACTFILE

Glasform, Pointer House Farm, Fleetwood Road, Singleton. 01253 893020. www.glasform.com.

The workshop is open to the public Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm and items are on sale in the shop.

demonstrations are as fascinating as they are impressive. The raw material for the glass comes in the form of orange pellets, made in St Helens to John's special recipe, which are melted in a furnace that burns at temperatures of up to 1400 degrees centigrade all day, every day.

John collects a dollop of gloopy, molten glass on the end of his iron – a long, sometimes hollow, metal rod – and starts to blow, turn and roll. It's like watching Rolf Harris at work but before you can guess what it is, a vase appears. Or a frog. Or a mushroom... or any number of other ornate and intricate designs, including lights and larger architectural pieces.

Colours come from Germany, in the form of glass sausages, and are ground down and kept in sweet shop jars along one wall of the workshop. They are added to the creations, which John constantly turns as he plunges in and out of the furnace. A blowtorch adds an iridescent sheen to the work which must then cool for 12 hours before

it is smoothed, polished and put on show in the studio. His work has also been exhibited and sold at galleries all over the world.

'The tools haven't changed for hundreds of years,' said John, as he tweaked the neck of the vase with giant over-sized scissors and tweezers. And he has found a novel use for a local newspaper, using a soaked edition to protect his hand as he turns the vase in his palm.

'The mushrooms, apples and pears are our bread and butter but we produce a very wide range, including some with hallmarked silver, and we have recently started making cats as well.'

And John tries to make it crystal clear exactly which items have been made at his workshop, to avoid problems with fakers who copy his work and sell their products at inflated prices. 'It's a real problem,' he said. 'We number and photograph everything we make so if anyone has any concerns about a piece they should contact us and we will be able to tell them if it is a genuine Ditchfield or a fake.'

Below: John and Karen Ditchfield in the studio

