



making room

Tanya Blake meets Jonathan Swan at his beautiful old jewellery workshop in Lewes and discovers a building full of stories waiting to be told.

When you first enter Jonathan Swan's jewellery shop, based in Lewes, East Sussex, you are greeted by glass cabinets filled with shimmering, tantalising necklaces, rings and bracelets that will be sure to bring out the magpie in anyone. As I began to be drawn towards a particularly tempting cabinet my gaze instead wanders into the next room, which is filled with an array of intriguing looking tools, weathered looking cabinets and an imposing wooden workbench. This is the first of four rooms that make up Jonathan's rather incredible workshop. As I walk into the first room, referred to as the upstairs workshop, I'm greeted by Jonathan emerging from the basement, and his apprentice of two years Jamie (wearing a rather dapper bowler hat) who is stood at the imposing wooden workbench fixing a box of bracelets. Jonathan informs me that the solid looking bench where Jamie is working, and where they both make jewellery during the day, is in fact made from rock maple that used to belong to none other

than Winston Churchill. The wood from this amazing looking piece of furniture once lived another life in the grounds of Churchill's house at Chartwell but was blown down in the 1987 gale, and by some fortuitous turn of events was saved and given to Jonathan by an acquaintance to then repurpose in his workshop.

It turns out that there isn't much in the workshop that doesn't have some sort of story attached to it, and Jonathan has a marvellous way of relaying each one's personal tale to me as we move from one interesting object to the next. We stop at a (possibly Victorian era) ring sizer that Jonathan inherited from a fellow jeweller, which is all black metal, wheels and brass. After a quick demonstration on how the delightful contraption works we find ourselves stood gazing at an impressive array of files of all sizes hung on a wall on a huge wooden board, which Jonathan informs me is quite possibly his favourite thing in the entire workshop. He begins telling me

the delightful story of how he and his wife discovered it in a closing down shop whilst in Paris on their honeymoon. They managed to strike a secret deal with the owner's wife to purchase the entire set for only £15, as long as they left the shop quickly before her husband realised! We then turn our attention to a wonderful collection of hammers under the infamous workbench. Jonathan promptly picks up his favourite, whilst regaling me with facts about the beloved tool. He tells me how it was given to him by a vicar who came from three generations of jewellers, and explains how the hammer's handle has been worn down over the years to fit perfectly in the hand, and as such lays at just the right angle when hammering metal. He points out the marks present on the wood that were made by each previous owner. The hammer feels steeped in history, in fact everything in Jonathan's workshop feels this way, having been discovered, or handed down through generations before ending up there. The

best part is that there isn't anything that is kept that isn't used; everything has its own unique purpose. Even his father's old medical equipment has its place, with Jonathan showing me how he often uses an old head-circumference measuring tool to help him judge distances when making his jewellery.

Jonathan spends his days surrounded by artifacts waiting to reveal their past; even the building itself is ancient, and comes complete with an original Roman brick. In fact, history plays an integral part in Jonathan's own jewellery designs. It is clear that he is inspired by things, people and places that offer up their own intriguing personal stories, and he reflects this in each piece of bespoke jewellery he makes. Creating only to commission, he works closely with each client to find out exactly what they want from the piece, what person or particular memory they want to evoke every time they or a loved one wears the item. It can take months of planning and designing, before a piece is completed.

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He shows me a stunning ring he has just finished working on, that sits in an exquisite hand turned wooden box. It is part of a set made for a Swedish client, who it turns out Jonathan has been working with for years and will be visiting in Sweden next spring. He aims to witness first hand the wild flowers particular to the next piece in the collection. This ring, also a wild flower, is going to join a bracelet and necklace based around the same floral theme. The necklace in particular he is extremely proud of. It is made up of 18 different Swiss wild flowers, each one separated by a leaf. Made out of platinum with small fine gold accents on some of the flowers, every link is set with a diamond. Jonathan also made the box for it out of tulipwood and boxwood, with silver hinges, which he had engraved with the Latin names of each of the flowers.

He tells me that one of the most regular commissions he receives is for wedding rings, but these are of course no regular, run of

the mill, plain gold bands. It is of the utmost importance to Jonathan that each wedding ring has to speak to the couple, and must reflect their own shared history. One of his favourite stories is of a couple that met whilst both working as sound engineers. After weeks of musing they came up with the idea of recording their voices, and then visually recreating the sound waves on the rings, that if played would say 'I do'. Having spent the past 33 years creating such unique and intimate commissions such as these wedding rings, has meant that Jonathan has too become a part of the history of those items he made, and tells me that there are now children of previous clients seeking him out to make their own wedding rings so many years later. Beautifully cyclic in nature, it is a testament to the work Jonathan does and the passion, skill, care and creativity he puts into each piece of jewellery.

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