

CELTIC STUDIO ~ A STYLISH LINK WITH THE PAST

A gleaming gold ring with the crest of the royal and ancient Stewarts shares a busy workbench alongside an Irish Celtic Cross letter opener, an English coat of arms pendant and other symbols of a heraldic past all waiting to be boxed and labeled.

On another bench more rings and other pieces of jewellery in various stages of creation from green wax molds to oxidized shapes, the precious metal still hidden from view while waiting to be polished.

Throughout the workshop are banners of ancient family symbols, bits of paper with rough pencil sketches of coats of arms, piles of books on the world or heraldry and bins and boxes of rings, pins, brooches, wooden wall plaques, and tankards all waiting to be fixed with the specific symbol that links them to a name that has been in use for centuries.

For Louis Walsh of Maple Ridge, British Columbia, Canada dealing in the past has created a busy present and future. One of the only large scale manufacturers of heraldic rings and other jewellery, the Economics and History major from the University of Western Ontario is kept busy manufacturing the personalized items for thousands' of customers across North American, Europe and even Africa all desiring a visible, and attractive bonding, with their past.

While the ancient symbols of Clan and family are no longer used to identify rallying points in battles, heraldry is in the middle of a renaissance around the world. And it has created, for Walsh, something more than a thriving business.

"We're creating heirlooms" states Walsh while carefully removing the dull oxidization from a gold clan MacGregor ring with a small, delicate polishing tool, exposing the gold sheen underneath.

"These are jewellery pieces symbolizing families with centuries of history," he says. "It's all part of belonging, or being linked to that family and that history."

Each day letters and e-mails responding to advertisements in various publications come in from all corners of the world. Many are straight forward, asking for a specific item and giving the name. Others are more involved.

One person writes giving his name and saying that he believes the name actually belongs to a Scottish clan of a different name. Walsh will check it out in the many clan and 'sept' books (a sept is a Scottish name owing allegiance to another specific clan) and will let the writer know the results.

Another sends in a pencil sketch of what he believes is the family coat of arms from an old European name. He wants a 14 karat gold ring with this coat of arms. Before filling the order Walsh will research the family name to make sure the arms are correct before proceeding.

Research plays a major role in this business venture and it is an enjoyable task for Walsh who claims that each new client researched provides its own interesting lesson in history.

While heraldry and family histories are lost in the mists of time, this business only goes back to the mid 70s in London, Ontario, Canada.

Wandering through a shopping mall in November, Walsh decided to rent some space and. sell distinctively



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Scottish items over the holiday period.

Because of his Scottish-Canadian background and that he had attended school in Scotland combined with the fact that his mother had once had a gift shop in a small Ontario town, Walsh had a pretty good idea of what he was doing. Besides, he was always a bit of an entrepreneur from his early childhood. He was just born with that Scottish way of independent thinking.



The Scottish retail gift store for Christmas worked so well that he never did close down. In fact, after six months he opened another outlet, this time adding a new theme, "Diamonds among the Heather"... custom made exquisite diamond jewellery with a celtic flair. Jewellery in the \$2,000.00 to \$5,000.00 price range. The customers loved it!

It wasn't long before people were asking for specific clan jewelry and requesting specific items in silver or gold rather than just the standard pewter. Nobody was producing these items so following the old adage of finding a need then filling it, Walsh set up a small manufacturing operation to make all of the individual clan names. The first in the world to do so! Not even in Scotland, the "Home of the Clans" were these special Clan items available!



It quickly became apparent to the young businessman that there was a large demand for heraldic items.

From the 300 plus Scottish clan names, it was a natural extension to Irish, Welsh, English and European names.

Moving to the west coast of Canada, British Columbia in 1981 Walsh left the retail stores behind so he could concentrate on the manufacturing wholesale business and large retail mail order business.

Advertisements were placed in a number of Scottish and British magazines throughout North America and each day orders arrive at the small, utilitarian office/workshop.

To keep up with the demand requires an extensive stock list. Celtic Studio, as the business is called, has about 18,000 items in stock including the 300 plus Scottish names with about 100 items available for each name. Add the Irish, English and other names and include rings, kilt pins, necklaces, spoons, tankards, tie pins, cuff links, brooches, kilt belt buckles, key chains, engraved glasses, wall plaques and more and the numbers become impressive. And all, or most, are available in different styles and

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materials including pewter, sterling silver and all colours and karats of gold.

Shelves and storage bins are filled with thousands of the basic pieces, all waiting for individual cresting.

But even with computerized inventory and stock control, the basic method used in manufacturing the jewelry has been unchanged since the time of King Tut, 'except', says Walsh,



"we don't employ slaves anymore."

It's a method known as the "lost wax casting" process whereby a wax mold is carved then covered by plaster. The wax is then burned out and the particular material, silver or gold, is forced by centrifugal casting force into the space where the wax was, creating the item which is then broken out from the plaster and cleaned and polished by hand.

At present about 95 percent of the business comes from the United States. And women are the big buyers. Slightly more than 80 percent of all orders are sold to women who are buying the item as a gift for a man.

Heraldic jewelry is considered by many to be the ultimate men's accessory. It is often the only piece of jewelry that some men will wear because it is more than just an "ornament" but is a tie to their unique ancestry.

Notables such as Prince Charles, actor Pierce Brosnan and newscaster Peter Jennings all wear a family ring along with a host of others, all proud of their family past.

While the need for warrior identification on shields, surcoats and banners is no longer needed, the need for knowledge of our past and a feeling for our traditions still exist.

We may not carry shields to the office but if you look closely you will see the odd crest and coat of arms gleaming from a lapel, a necklace, a tie pin or a ring. Many corporate logos have their origin in heraldry.

After all, we are in the present only because of our past.

Celtic Studio is not open to the public. They are located in scenic Maple Ridge, British Columbia nestled below Golden Ears Mountain.

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