

THIS summer members of the Solent Guild of Woodcarvers and Sculptors will be displaying their skills at events in many parts of Hampshire. And not only are they exhibiting work of a very high standard, but live demonstrations are also planned, while visitors will even have the chance to try for themselves this challenging and immensely satisfying pastime.

It is probable that the Guild was the first group of its kind to be formed in the south of England when it was established over 12 years ago. Since then it has gone from strength to strength.

In 1978 Jim Bell, an enthusiastic and talented craftsman, was dismayed to find only three exhibits of handiwork in Portsmouth City Council's bi-annual art exhibition. He decided to do something about it; and supported by three friends from the woodcarving classes where his interest had first been aroused, he arranged a public meeting at Cosham — 20 enthusiasts turned up and the Solent Guild of Woodcarvers and Sculptors was born.

Since then many beginners have been helped along the road to success and have become very proficient craftsmen — and women. Sadly Mr. Bell did not live to see the full results of his initiative, but two of the other founders — George Rockey (currently the Guild's President) and Vic Flower — are still active in the Guild's affairs.

Membership is open to everyone with an interest in woodcarving, whether or not they have any previous experience. Most newcomers are recruited from among those attending further education classes in the Portsmouth area, where the tutors in woodcarving are long-standing members of the Guild. One of them is Ray White, who started teaching six years ago.

"I have been interested in carving for over 30 years and joined the Solent carvers soon after the group was formed. Like many others, I began just by thinking of something I wanted to carve and looking for a suitable piece of wood to use. Gradually my skills developed and my work improved.

"Having taught practical subjects — including woodcarving — to handicapped people for many years and with my background as a fire service instructor, I happened to be the appropriate person when the Guild was asked to suggest someone to start a class in Southsea; and I was only too pleased to do it.

"A universal problem for most people wanting to carve is learning to project in three dimensions. Many of them, such as engineers who have spent years working to very fine tolerances, feel that in their retirement they need to have free expression. But having for so long seen everything in two dimensions, they find it very difficult to transmute into three. Once this common problem is overcome, however, anything is possible," he said.

Ray has also started a beginners' class



Pictured at Marwell: Standing (left to right) John Powell (Chairman) and John Bowen; seated Doc Duff, George Rockey (President) and Ray White.

Carving their way to success

by MICHAEL KENNEDY

at Havant, where his colleague, Alan Crockford, has been teaching for over five years, during which time he has built up long waiting lists. He finds it very rewarding to see his pupils progressing well — "some, having started from scratch, show a strong natural ability which only needs drawing out" — and demonstrating tremendous enthusiasm and a continuing commitment.

As well as those who go to the further education classes, there are many people working at home and having little contact with other woodcarvers. Sometimes they may bring pieces to one of the Guild's exhibitions for comment or advice, which is always freely given. Often this can lead to them becoming members, like Patricia Weeks from Havant, who had been carving on her own for three years and is self-taught. She came along to an exhibition in the town's museum and joined on the spot; within no time at all she had settled in

so well that she was soon among those demonstrating their skills to visitors.

Being based in Portsmouth, it follows that most members of the group live in the area, but some come from as far afield as the Isle of Wight and West Sussex. Many walks of life are represented, including doctors, dentists, school teachers and managers, with age being no barrier when it comes to taking up the craft.

"Although I had worked in timber management for a number of years, I never tried woodcarving until I was 62," Don McKay, the Guild's Honorary Secretary, told me. "A year later I joined the group, though I was quite hopeless at the time, but they very soon straightened me out. That's one of the best things about the Guild, members always rally round to help newcomers and indeed anyone else who gets into difficulties with their work."

Timber is, clearly, a major requirement and pieces are often available through the



Almost as lifelike as the original which can be seen off the Hampshire coast.

Ray White, long standing member of the Guild and tutor.

hitherto paint had hardly every been used in the Guild.

Regular carvings are held at Portsmouth Arts Centre in Reginald Road, Eastney, which give members the opportunity to meet and work together, so benefiting them from an interchange of ideas. There is also a strong social side to the Guild. This encourages the cheerful, friendly spirit so evident within the group and is an attraction for people to join.

There are only two occasions each year when the carvers compete with each other. These are for the Bell Shield, presented in memory of the founder, and the Harry Wareham Trophy, awarded in remembrance of one of the Guild's most popular members. Jim Bell is also remembered through a tree planted in Milton Park in 1979, with a plaque carved by his old friend, George Rockey.

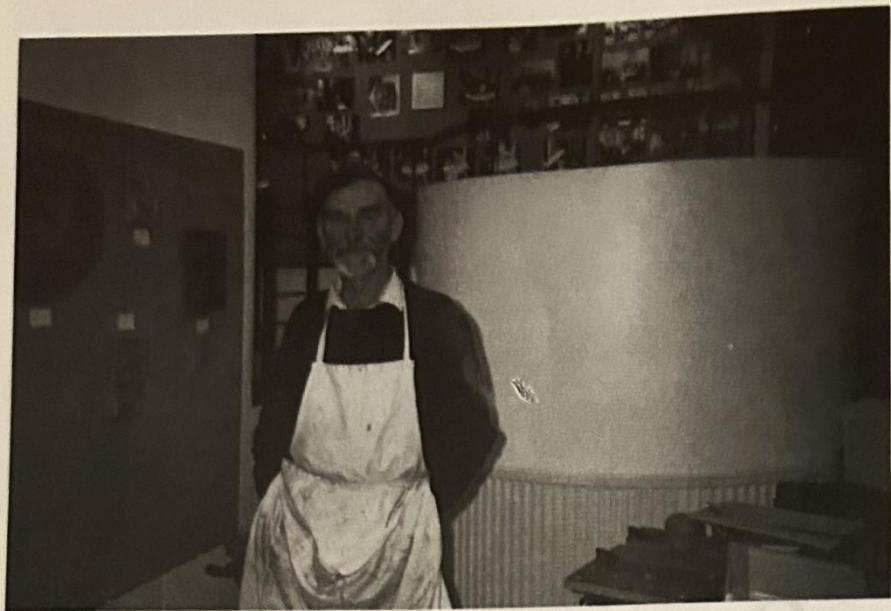
Exhibitions and demonstrations by the Solent Woodcarvers take them to many parts of Hampshire — and beyond. Last year they visited the little Norman church of St. Leonard at Gradeley. The rector here is Roger Bennett — a former naval chaplain and member of the Guild, who has the living of four small parishes near Andover. This event was very popular and raised a useful sum of money for the church roof restoration fund.

The ancient art of woodcarving, historically the exclusive preserve of specialist craftsmen, is alive and very well in south-east Hampshire. Though members of the Guild carve for relaxation and enjoyment, they continue to demonstrate the versatility of wood and the imaginative genius of people whose skills are part of a long English tradition.

If you would like to join the Solent Guild of Woodcarvers and Sculptors or find out more about their activities, contact Don McKay, Honorary Secretary, 14 Trevor Road, Southsea, PO4 0LW (telephone Portsmouth 839934). Members of the Guild may be seen in action at the following locations during the coming months:

- July 6 The Guild's Annual Exhibition at Portsmouth Arts Centre, Reginald Road, Eastney.
- July 13 Annual Fete, Ampo.
- July 14 Country Fair, Ancient Farm Site, Queen Elizabeth Country Park, Gravel Hill, Horndean.
- July 20 Havant Lions Show, Havant Park.
- Aug. 10 & Stansted Park, Rowlands Castle.
- Aug. 24 Flower Show and Fete, Hambledon.
- Aug. 25 Lions Club Event, Catherington.
- Aug. 26 Horticultural Show, Emsworth.
- Oct. 19 & Queen Elizabeth Country Park, 20 Gravel Hill, Horndean.

Ken Malcolm (left) and Vice-Chairman Don Shepherd demonstrate their skills at an exhibition at Havant Museum.



Guild at a reasonable price — or even given free to members. Recently a visitor at one of the exhibitions offered Don a cherry tree from her garden, as it was about to be cut down; he gladly accepted and offered to remove it himself.

Some people build up a veritable Aladdin's cave of different timbers, but for those with limited storage space or who need the more unusual types, commercial suppliers meet the need. Specialised woods are, according to Don McKay, becoming increasingly difficult to find and he pointed out that the very popular lime, once available easily and in large quantities, is now in short supply.

A great deal of preparatory work is needed before a woodcarver starts to fashion even a simple piece. Members spend a considerable amount of time on research, perhaps studying animals and birds at first hand — Marwell Zoo is a favourite haunt — besides taking photographs and making sketches. Ideas can come from almost anywhere, with magazines and newspapers often starting

a particular line of thought, and many people build up their own picture libraries, always a valuable source of reference. The choice of timber is very important, as the dark and light grains must fit closely with the requirements of the subject.

Most Solent Woodcarvers are amateurs, that is to say they do not make items for sale, but there are a few professionals among them who usually work to commissions.

One is John Powell, a retired naval officer who lives at Emsworth and is currently Chairman of the Guild. His highly acclaimed carvings of waders and wildfowl to be seen in the creeks and mudflats off the coast near his home are in demand in many parts of the world. Some have been used as models by other members of the group, and this has created one of the most significant trends in its history, with everyone now very 'bird conscious'. John has been running week long courses at West Dean College, near Chichester, teaching his own distinctive style and showing how the carvings can be brought to life in authentic colours;

