



Sculptor Mark Irwin's stainless steel kingfisher perched on a bulrush

TO THE WIRE

A day in the life of sculptor Mark Irwin
in his studio in the Yorkshire Wolds

6.30 This is the best part of the day with everything to look forward to. After 36 years as an engineer in the Royal Navy I was about to start a second career in business, when first a prostate cancer then a Parkinson's Disease (PD) diagnosis changed my perspective. I started as a hobby artist blacksmith with my own forge high on a hill, but a move to a more residential setting meant a change of direction was needed. I saw an owl made from chicken wire in a magazine and thought "I'd like to make one of those", so I went on a course and knew straight away I had found what I wanted to do. I used my engineering and metal working experience to progress and moved away from chicken wire to steel and stainless steel wire. Practice and perseverance have allowed me to now work on more intricate and complex projects. Now I work from my studio at home in the Yorkshire Wolds so the commute only involves negotiating the stairs, kitchen and utility room.

7.30 Breakfast with my wife Belinda overlooking the garden. At the moment I'm having a game with a sparrow. I made a sculpture of a blackbird sitting on a garden fork. For the past few mornings I've tried to take a photo of the sparrow sitting on the blackbird's head, seemingly his favourite perch. As soon as he's seen my camera though he has fled.



Mark at work in his studio

8.00 In my studio I generally only work on one piece at a time, that way I can apply maximum concentration and focus. The biggest frustration is time – working with wire means that progress is often painfully slow – you can see what you are trying to achieve but when you extrapolate your progress, you realise the job will take twice as long as you first thought. Since my PD diagnosis, things that I consider are taking too long become tiresome and I have to have a chat with myself. The great thing is that I only take on

work that I want to do or enjoy doing. I like the challenge of something new.

'Working with wire means that progress is often painfully slow'

10.30 A cup of tea – once you are in the groove, time just evaporates. Work is relaxing and tiring all in one. Most pieces start with some research and sketches finishing in a full-size drawing in chalk on my studio floor. Most larger pieces need a framework of steel before the wire is added so I use the chalk drawing as a template. The template and frame must be correct – mistakes from this point on are more difficult to recover easily. Wire is then added making sure it is securely attached to the frame.

12.30 I try to have lunch with Belinda if she is in. It's only a short catch-up generally as I am normally keen to get on with my work – probably due to my eternal frustration that things always take too long.

1.00 The best part of working as a sculptor is seeing your design gain shape before your eyes. Whatever the subject is, let's say a dog, its overall being will be formed from ▶



Life-size steel wire wolf, galvanized and etched



‘My first customer was Alan Titchmarsh who bought one of my display pieces for his garden’

ABOVE: A 30-inch tall galvanised cockerel with copper comb

hundreds of small characteristics; lumps here, dents there, eyes and ears in a certain position relative to each other. The more of these elements you can get right the closer the finished sculpture will be to the subject. With wire you must be careful not to add too much – because each piece of wire is weaved into the next, so removing it to correct a mistake can be a real problem. Form can however be manipulated to some extent by use of a hammer, but getting it right first time is the easiest and best way. When a piece is finished it is galvanised to weatherproof it and etched to give patina.

4.00 I need to go and exercise at my local gym before I run out of

energy. People with PD need to stay active both physically and mentally. Work is great for dexterity but it doesn't use all your muscles. I have always enjoyed staying fit – the gym is close so I can run there and back.

6.00 My main meal of the day and a chance to have a proper chat with Belinda about life outside my studio and the real world, family, children and grandchildren. She offers advice and invaluable support and help.

7.00 Evenings are the ideal time for catching up on order messages or marketing my work. Good photographs of each piece are important, it is the only method

of communicating the scale, feel and look of a piece so I spend quite a while on this. In the past year, I have had commission requests from around the country including two RHS gardens. At my first big show, my first customer was Alan Titchmarsh who bought one of my display pieces for his garden; I was on a high.

9.00 I generally watch a bit of TV with Belinda before bed with a tot of rum.

10.30 Bed. A good place to dream about the next creation – a crocodile. ♦

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