

FREE

# Style

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MEET THE MAKERS:

## COLIN & CHRISTINA

**Nestled away in a Victorian barn workshop in Brightstone, Colin and Christina Conroy are quietly working to help protect an endangered heritage skill: the art of making and restoring stained glass.**

Words: **Ginnie Taylor** | Images: **Julian Winslow**

The history of stained glass is extensive, with the use of coloured glass dating back to the Ancient Egyptians. The earliest example in the United Kingdom was found during monastery excavations in Northumbria, with the discovery of fragments of coloured window glass. Stained glass as we know it today, however, has evolved from the medieval art form. Widely used in Gothic Architecture, vibrant visual narratives were painted in churches and cathedrals to bring Bible stories to life for the (largely illiterate) congregations.

Thanks to the Gothic Revival of the 19th century and the abstract art movement, stained glass can now be found in many forms and in many buildings – from places of religious worship and education to grand houses and humble homes. Nevertheless, creating stained glass is a skill that is in danger of extinction. Colin and Christina Conroy are two members of the community who are working to keep this ancient art alive. Together, the husband-and-wife team operate Coralesce Stained Glass from their workshop in Brightstone. Master craftsman Colin takes commissions for restoration

projects, while he and Christina run courses for students of the art form.

Colin has been making and restoring stained glass panels for over 40 years. Starting at the tender age of just seventeen, he began his career in Essex, before moving to Surrey and eventually making his way to the Isle of Wight. Here, he's been commissioned for restoration work on properties that range from English Heritage sites to holiday homes in Seaview – complete with bespoke mermaid designs, each unique and crafted to represent the



owners' daughters. Today, stained glass is a luxury and, Colin explains, very labour-intensive. "You need to have the right look, the right glass, the right design. When you've been doing this for forty years, you want to make sure the houses look beautiful."

Their workshop is where the magic happens. Colourful stained glass decorations hang from the rafters, with flowers, mushrooms, and whales catching the light. It's not a craft for the faint of heart; it requires patience, precision, and concentration. "It's filthy and dirty," laughs Colin. "When I rebuild panels, they're falling apart."

But before a student can get their hands dirty with restoration, they need to learn the basics. Tuition begins with a six-week beginner course, where students learn how to make stained glass pieces using a 'Tiffany Technique'. Popularised by Charles Tiffany, creator of the eponymous lamps, this method is primarily used for lightshades, three-dimensional pieces, and decorative work.



*The husband-and-wife team have a workshop in Brightstone.*



First, the students learn to make a cartoon (the term given to the pattern that the glass will be cut into). Christina designs cartoons, so no experience is needed. "You don't have to be artistic," she says. "We have lots of pre-set designs. This is typical for stained glass makers. In Victorian times, builders would have pattern books customers could choose designs from – like how we choose a kitchen now."

Once the cartoon has been created, the glass is cut and ground, then meticulously put together using copper foiling. Soldering then commences, using a combination of 60% tin and 40% lead, with a variety of techniques employed throughout the process to create firm holds and neat edges. Once this has been mastered, students can progress to lead panels and then, finally, restoration.

Since the couple opened the studio in 2014, the courses have proved popular. Pat, a local Royal Mail Manager, is now learning



stained glass restoration, having completed the beginner and intermediate courses. "I've always wanted to do this," he explains. "It's very difficult, but I enjoy it, it's therapeutic."

Helen, formerly Head of Microbiology at the hospital, is also learning restoration, alongside selling her work. "You can let your imagination run free and do anything. It's not something I thought I would do, but I love it. I like to make natural things – flowers, fish, birds."

Colin is clearly delighted that their students are so enamoured with the heritage art form. "We've taught people who are actually teaching their own courses now, which is brilliant." The couple live next door to the workshop, in a beautiful thatched cottage with stained glass designs decorating their garden. "We hope we're leaving a legacy," says Christina.

[coralesce.com](http://coralesce.com)



Coralesce Stained Glass will be holding an Open Studio to coincide with Brightstone Christmas Tree Festival. Visitors are welcome to learn more about their stained glass courses and buy their students' work at their Christmas Grotto, which will be open 4 – 6 December, 12noon – 4pm.