



Frome's Opal Queen

Sarah Ford shines the light on the sparkling world of Frome goldsmith Annette Gabbeday

in gold, its gentle curves twisting and reflecting the stones' fragility in elegant settings.

Visitors particularly enjoy looking through the heavy-bound leather books in which Annette sketches her ideas, and where she discusses and develops the bespoke pieces for which many customers come to her. She draws enchantingly in soft pencil, with the jewellery accurately represented in watercolour.

One thing Annette does not hide is the fact that she has no fingers. The ease with which she manipulates even the tiniest objects is so matter of fact that when you meet her you rapidly readjust your ideas. "What I have learned, ever since I was a small girl passing my mother sewing pins, is that there is no such word as 'can't'," she says. "I look at people with fingers and think they must get in the way and wonder how you manage to work with them. I believe the skill of making something is not just to do with



Frome has been described as a mini-Bath and one of the reasons for its appeal is the range of independent shops, which entice customers up the cobbled street of medieval Catherine Hill. They include the designer goldsmith Annette Gabbeday whose workshop and gallery in this artisan quarter is a magnet for connoisseurs of opal and other fine jewellery.

Her work includes rings, necklaces, bracelets and cufflinks and her latest collection is a stunning assortment of aquamarine

pendants, white gold diamond rings, tourmaline necklaces and tanzanite eardrops. But she has made her name working with opals, the unusual spectrum of colour and freeform shapes tending to inspire her final designs.

The opals are amongst Annette's most beautiful pieces. Mined beneath the Australian desert, these dark, fragile glass stones are as pretty as a moth's wing. Every colour is there: speckles of red, orange, blue, turquoise, murky greens, no two are the same. She mounts them

your hands, it's the skill within you that matters just as much."

Annette's love of creating jewellery began as a sixth former when she studied the craft at school, before embarking on a five-year college course in jewellery design and manufacture. Work experience at a jeweller's in Ascot helped her along the way and gave her the determination to prove that her skills would develop to a commercial level.

She has come a long way since her days working the craft fairs and WI market stalls back in the early '90s. "I am now known as an opal specialist, working with two or three pieces a week. The colours are lavish and spectacular but because of their fragility they can be difficult stones to work with." She specialises in Australian opals and can also acquire beautiful opals from Mexico.

Annette moved to Somerset 14 years ago and after seven years she expanded into her present location. Jennie Darbyshire joined in 2008 as assistant designer and customer advisor. "Jennie's bench skills are outstanding and she has been responsible for many of our

new collections, including our latest range of exquisite charms, which were launched in spring," says Annette.

Bespoke wedding jewellery is more popular than ever and Annette says that getting to know the bride and groom during their preparations is a privilege. "Often

on a Saturday in the shop we will look at the clock, and think that the bride and groom will now be exchanging their rings." She adds, "In the same way on Christmas Day I like to think about all those people who are opening my boxes. It's lovely having that connection with people."

Annette also sells a range of jewellery from some of the most exciting young designers in Britain and on the day of my visit she is preparing to become the first outlet in the South West to stock Alessandro Baldieri luxury designer watches. Known as the King of Watches, Alessandro's designs are sold in many top international stores. "I'm very excited about the watches coming in as it's a whole new field for me,"

Annette says. "It's great that Alessandro is supporting us and, in turn, Frome."

A keen supporter of the Frome



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Festival, where one of her opal pendants was the prize for last year's Treasure Hunt, her jewellery also took centre stage at the 2009 fundraising ball organised by the Somerset Community Foundation – for more information on this year's event, which Annette is again involved with, see page 65. A handmade 18-carat yellow and white gold pendant, created by Annette especially for the raffle, raised £2,500 for charity.

It's clear that Annette is fond of this part of Somerset and loves working in this thriving artistic community, where the retailers are very much in tune with one another. "It's inspiring to be with people who fully understand what you are doing and chatting about ideas for the future; it's a real community feeling."

Annette tells me that there are more than 50 independent shops in Frome, which is incredible for what is considered a small town, and that she believes there is a huge amount of potential in Frome still to come. □

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