

A moment of *clarity*

When her husband bought Amanda Lawrence a glass-engraving kit 26 years ago, neither of them could have known the journey it would take her on.

Tracy Spiers went along to meet her

Look at the tools in front of me and shudder. They look too familiar and I momentarily get whisked back into a chair I don't like very much. They are dentistry drill bits. Although the person using them is working on an enamelled glass surface, it is for decorative purposes, or engraving to be exact, and the subject matter is a three-dimensional glass leaf, one of many she has made for a special celebratory tree. Amanda Lawrence is a well-respected glass artist who lives in the beautiful Slad Valley - the same valley the late poet and author Laurie Lee so lovingly wrote about in *Cider with Rosie* with his insightful lyrical talent. I met Laurie several times as a young journalist and often listen to recordings of him reading passages from this well-loved



Amanda Lawrence with sample pieces of coloured frit

text in Stroud's Museum in the Park. This year marks the 100th anniversary of his birth and many events have been organised countrywide in his memory.

But he was and is not the only creative to be impacted by this glorious valley. Having moved from city to countryside seven years ago, Amanda has discovered that birdsong, patchwork fields, wildlife and woodland influences have crept into her studio. Natural forms and designs are strikingly reflected in her kiln-formed and engraved glass, whether they are vessels, wall pieces or sculptures.

"It's been an absolute revelation living here. It is the first time I have properly lived in the countryside. I have never called myself a wildlife artist, but I have always used animals and birds as a subject matter. This valley has crept into my workplace. It has literally got under my skin and I wanted to understand more about it," explains Amanda.

This sparked a two-year challenge to walk as much of Slad Valley as she could, recording sound, taking photos and making sketches as she went to capture the beautiful landscape from unusual angles. With her visual and audio research, Amanda has produced a stunning series of glass pieces for an exhibition *The Valley under the Skin*, in the Lansdown Art Gallery, Stroud from June 17 until July 6.

Alongside her glass sculptures, vessels and wall pieces will be a selection of her photos, maps, sound effects, sketches and an installation of a metal beech tree made by local artist-blacksmith Ben Prothero on which she will hang enamel-coated glass leaves, depicting colours reflecting the

change from spring to autumn. It will act as a fundraiser for Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust (GWT).

"It will be called the Tree of Wishes and, for a small donation, I will invite visitors to write down a message of hope that they have for the environment. I will then engrave their messages on the leaves while I am in the gallery and add them to the tree as they are finished," says Amanda, who will also run themed workshops in the exhibition hall to give people the opportunity to try their hand at glass work.

She has also organised a second exhibition entitled *Inspired by Slad Valley* from June 21-29 in the village's Holy Trinity Church, where Laurie Lee was a choirboy. This will be part of The Slad Valley Festival, an event-filled week long programme to help mark Laurie Lee's centenary. It will feature work by around 20 Gloucestershire artists and craftsmen who have been inspired by the valley.

"Our aim is to celebrate the fact that Slad Valley is as inspirational for contemporary artists as it was for Laurie Lee. We think it is the first time anything like this has happened in Slad Church," explains Amanda.

"I just thought if I have been inspired so much by this wonderful valley, there must be many more artists who are, so it prompted me to organise something."

What strikes me is Amanda's quiet confidence and clear vision. Her sketches are worked on at the drawing board and a shape is decided. She shows me a piece of slumped glass depicting a buzzard with a map of Slad Valley covering its wingspan in delicately engraved lines rather like veins



Above: Mobbed by Amanda Lawrence



Above: Ivy Tree by Amanda Lawrence



Left: Dawn Over Slad by Amanda Lawrence Above: Amanda Lawrence at the drawing board



on a hand. This is her signature piece for her solo exhibition and is a gift to GWT. I notice three red dots and wonder what this signifies.

"They are three copper beech trees which, when in full leaf, are so distinctive they can be seen from the air. I was fortunate to have been given a glider ride for my birthday by my mother-in-law so I know. Buzzards are the iconic bird of the Slad Valley and I had the idea of engraving what it would see from above," says Amanda. The piece was made by layering and fusing different coloured frits (crushed glass) which she engraves before slumping into shape. Amanda has also produced a sister piece in silver dichroic glass (two colours) to depict the Buzzard's flight by moonlight.

Having studied glass at Wolverhampton University and the International Glass Centre, Brierley Hill, Amanda specialises in kiln formed and engraved glass. She combines these two skills to create her unique masterpieces.

"They are not often used together, but to my mind they make an excellent partnership, each contributing something crucial and complementary to the project. Kiln forming enables large, impressionistic, three-dimensional shapes, grabbing the viewer's attention. Engraving enables detail and precision, drawing the eye in close," explains Amanda, who is a member of the Society of Designer Craftsmen and the Contemporary Glass Society and a Fellow of the Guild of Glass Engravers.

But although Amanda can plan and

prepare the glass with an end product in mind, ultimately the kiln has the last say.

"I can plan all I like, but once I put the glass in the kiln, I am never absolutely sure what is going to come out. It can be better than I expect and much more exciting. It's like having Christmas morning every day," she exclaims. And the pieces that don't come out as good?

6 I fell in love with glass on the spot. I was in my second year of my law degree and apparently I didn't stop talking about it

"I have to treat it as a learning experience!"

It's 26 years since her husband Andy bought her a glass-engraving kit - a clutch pencil holder with a diamond bit, tumbler and some rudimentary instructions - for their first wedding anniversary. Amanda was then studying to be a lawyer, but had been to a retrospective exhibition of Sir Laurence Whistler's work in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Whistler was the British

Guild of Glass Engravers' first president who did many Royal commissions in his lifetime.

"I fell in love with glass on the spot. I was in my second year of my law degree and apparently I didn't stop talking about it," recalls Amanda, who whilst working as a lawyer for 10 years, attended glass engraving classes before deciding to study glass full-time.

It is a long time since Andy encouraged her by buying that first glass engraving kit. Little did he realise the journey it would take his wife on. Today she is a master at what she does and as she carefully and delicately practices engraving text onto one of the leaves for her Tree of Wishes, I am in awe of her concentration and steady hand.

I only wish I could spend my money on a beautifully engraved piece of Amanda Lawrence glass rather than a dentist crown. ■

The Valley under the Skin, takes place at the Lansdown Gallery, Stroud, from June 17 until July 6 (10am-5pm Mon-Sat; 11am-4pm Sunday). Inspired by Slad Valley takes place at Holy Trinity Church, Slad, from June 21-29 (10am-5pm Mon-Sat; 1-5pm Sunday). For more information see www.amandalawrenceglass.com