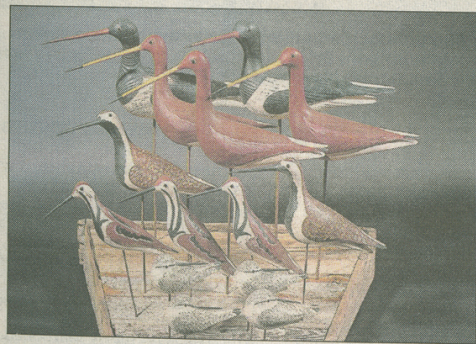




DRIFTING ALONG: Main photograph, Guy Taplin near Point Clear and, above, one of his pieces – a mixed flock of shorebirds
Photographs: CONTRIBUTED

From the East End to easternmost Essex, Guy Taplin has carved up a storm in driftwood. **Ian Collins** pays tribute to the maker of magical birds.

When wandering along a wild stretch of the Essex marshes, you may spy the Bird Man foraging for driftwood. This is artist Guy Taplin, a Cockney sparrow who has long since migrated to our coastal edge. Then again, you might also glimpse him after sudden flights to Zanzibar, Kerala, California, the Carolinas, Portugal, or Egypt – any practical and romantic port of call where storm-broken boats and tide-bashed timber lie beached and heaped for harvesting.

Britain's foremost bird sculptor knows the different kinds of wood by touch and sight, and he can tell at a glance how each fragment may fit his peculiar purpose.

One bit could make a stylised neck, another a body. Graining may suggest feathering. Flaws from previous use and weathering could be worked into a rough and ready design which somehow takes wing in the making.

Pieces of metal are also prized: perhaps a curl of copper will make a tufted duck's crest, a stair-rod a heron's leg, a can lid a plover's wing.

The bloom of old metal rusting through peeling paint adds to the impression of antiquity in a 21st-century creation which, for me, is the pinnacle of the art of recycling. These birds look as if they have just been released from prolonged hibernation in deep-sea chests.

Guy and I have been friends for ages – he featured in the 50-artist exhibition I curated for the 50th Aldeburgh Festival a decade ago. Sharing his obsession for birds, I've followed his exhibitions, latterly with Messum's gallery in London's Cork Street, with something approaching awe.

Now I have told his tale in a 224-page biography called *Bird*

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on a Wire. It's really an adventure story with lots of pictures.

We don't get too bogged down in technical details. For Guy thinks that, with persistence and patience, anyone can do what he's done. His tools are basic, his techniques minimal.

How to make a Taplinesque duck?

Well, you get a piece of wood and you chop everything off that doesn't look like a duck," he explains.

And he's not joking. With no early thoughts on art and no aptitude for woodwork, he is entirely untrained as a sculptor. He remains haunted from basic tasks of domestic carpentry – any shelf of his would fall down, possibly taking the house with it.

In his foreword to *Bird on a Wire* Michael Palin, whose London house holds a flock of Taplins, said: "Guy's great skill is that his work doesn't tell you everything. The confidence of his modelling, the elegance of line, the capture of movement goes so far and then lets you do the rest."

He cites the example of Guy's great hero, the Cornish primitive artist Alfred Wallis who scribbled dazzling memories of sea-faring days on scraps of cereal packet.

And then he added: "If an artist can with so little fuss and such great assurance transport me and my home into the sky or on to the sea I wouldn't call him a primitive. I'd call him a magician."

Me too. He invests his elemental work with our dreams of wildness and wilderness – the passion that has taken more than a million Britons to join the RSPB, support hundreds of nature reserves up and down the country and stock millions of garden feeding stations. We're besotted with birds.

And then the Taplin saga is the equivalent of an epic migration.

Born in the East End when war was looming, he ran wild as a child in a family of eccentrics and misfits. His ancestors included a pig-tailed Chinaman and a grandmother who was bridesmaid at the first of Marie Lloyd's weddings.

The infant Guy was a tearaway who learned to love the countryside during war-time evacuation to Herefordshire, and then by roaming the woods and hedgerows around Epping. Forever fascinated by birds, he began as a fanatical egg collector.

After leaving school he careered from career to career – as Post Office messenger, meat porter, street trader, lifeguard, hairdresser, cook and gardener.

He had a spell in a psychiatric hospital after faking a nervous breakdown to escape the hell of national service posting to a Cyprus on the verge of civil war.

He tasted fame in Swinging Sixties' London, with designs for cruise belt buckles. Helen Gurley Brown, founder-editor of *Cosmopolitan*, turned up in a white Rolls Royce outside his parents' house in Wanstead asking for a guided tour of his factory. He introduced her to his seamstress mum at work in the front room.

Then, when it was all getting too comfortable – and too constrained – Guy Taplin crashed out again. With an interest in Zen Buddhism he appeared to withdraw from the world by taking a job as the Bird Man of Regent's Park, caring for a fine collection of ornamental waterfowl.

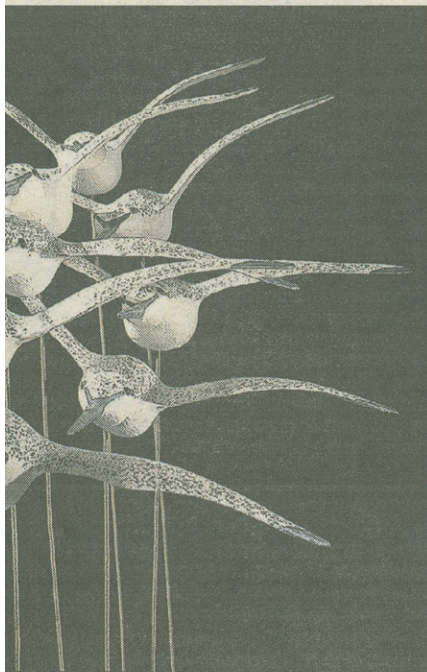
When ordered to cull the park's surging population of Canada geese, he was able to enlist the help of Paul and Linda McCartney who had scores of the threatened creatures airlifted

to safety on the Mull of Kintyre.

Observing his charges, he also dug deep within himself to recreate their images in wood. Almost on a whim, he took a piece of driftwood from the Thames foreshore and then, using only an axe, spoke shave, sandpaper and basic paints, began to carve a crude copy of a mallard drake based on the antique decoy ducks he had lately admired.

His first efforts were almost laughable. But through

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ELEGANT AND LYRICAL: Left, a flight of sanderlings, above, a linecut homage to villa Taplin, top, terns flying over boat hull, right, Guy Taplin's workshop and, far right, the man himself at work

Photographs: CONTRIBUTED

determination and repetition he advanced his craft as he worked his way through a mountain of disused telegraph poles, railway sleepers, glasshouse frames, theatrical props and sculling boats.

Very early on he realised that thrift and salvage and recycling can be rather more than virtuous for an artist: wood with a previous life has an added value – giving the extra dimension of a ghostly echo.

Thirty years ago he took over an

old spray-booth on a near-derelect Butler's Wharf. His warehouse workshop was sandwiched between studios occupied by punk and glam artists Derek Jarman and the Logan brothers.

His rapidly-improving work began to be admired – and bought by architects, actors, directors and designers. Jackie Onassis snapped up two life-size swans from the window of a Nantucket art gallery for \$20,000.

By the time of the Onassis

purchase Guy was established with his young family in an old sea captain's house at Wivenhoe, the Bohemian hangout near Colchester often visited by Francis Bacon.

He took to working in a converted sail-loft beside his home and also in a pre-war chalet far out on the Essex saltmarshes near Point Clear in which he is regularly marooned by rising tides. Once, when deserted, the chalet was lifted clean off its footings and dumped on a sea wall.

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Surrounded by all the to-ing and fro-ing of feathered forms, he works intuitively and in great bursts of energy like a man possessed – more than one visitor has been horrified to see him setting about a delicate bird's head with a hammer.

Long since surpassing the original decoy-style ducks, geese and waders, he now ranges from wrens to eagles and from single birds to superb assemblies. A duck may be caught preying on a frog, while an owl traps

a snake or tempts fat owlets with a shrew. A pair of kingfishers hovers jewel-like over grey fledglings in a bank burrow.

His flights and stands of birds are ever-more elegant and lyrical, with godwits and egrets now limbering up like prima ballerinas.

Simplification and distortion suit this artist's aims – a bill or neck may be stretched improbably thin as a single feature represents an entire figure, or else a body is extended into

a lithe question mark. And that may be the most fitting form of all. For there remains an air of mystery in the art and the artist

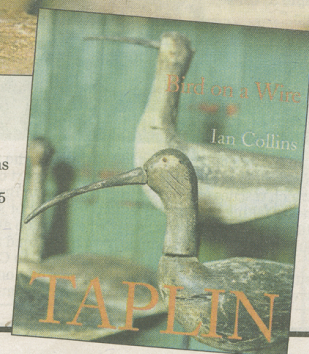
Guy said: "You need to go into yourself and to plumb the depths. But by doing that you are acting in some way like a shaman or magic man, connecting with the deepest feelings of people."

"My birds are like those pebbles you found on a beach as a child, which you put in your pocket and

meant to keep forever. They are touchstones to the human heart."

■ *Bird on a Wire: The Life and Art of Guy Taplin*, by Ian Collins (Studio Publications, £29.95) is available to EADT readers at £25 including postage.

Please make cheques payable to Messum's and send to Studio Publications, Lords Wood, Marlow, Bucks, SL7 2QS. Offers subject to availability.



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