

Guy Taplin makes wooden birds and ducks. "You get a bit of wood," he says, "and you chop off anything that doesn't look like a duck. It's a piece of cake really, dead easy. A lot of it I find very boring."

Is he teasing? His birds now sell for anything between £3,000 and £20,000. They're in Tate Britain and the Royal Collection. Jacqueline Onassis bought them. Michael Palin and Jon Snow buy them; so do Guinneses and Sainsburys. The birds are beautiful: graceful and lovely to the eye. It makes you want to touch them, something you couldn't do if they were alive.

Taplin is 68 years old with a full head of hair, a mischievous nature and a taste for the absurd. He lives with his wife Robina (who makes lovely stained glass) and two children in a house in Wivenhoe, Essex. The only objects in it that seem not to have had a previous life are a Rayburn and a 42 inch television screen about which he is slightly embarrassed.

He's an East Ender, born at the outbreak of war within the sound of Bow bells with a background so colourful it makes one dizzy: a great-great grandfather Neville, from Hoxton, who once, when drunk, bit off the heads of his brother's white rats; a great grandfather Peter, a Chinese immigrant, who was fished out of the Thames at Wapping; a grandmother who was Marie Lloyd's bridesmaid; an aunt Connie who died drinking water from the spout of a boiling kettle; and an aunt Clara with whom he, Guy, spent hours under a metal table skewered to the floor while the doodlebugs did their work.

He left school at 15 and got the sack from every job he was ever in, beginning with the post office in Great Portland Street where he poured water in someone's stamp drawer, destroying in an instant £2,000 worth of stamps. In the army he was a featherweight boxer but found National Service so awful he pretended to go mad.

"I knew a bit about catatonia. They sectioned me and put me in the madhouse in Netley where they drugged me to the hilt so I really was potty by then." He was a meat porter until fired, a swimming pool lifeguard until fired, a hairdresser in Piccadilly until he dyed an Arab client's hair orange. He ended up making quite a lot of money out of selling ribbons.

"My whole life's farce," he says cheerfully. "I wasn't cut out for the world of men."

In the '60s, he started making beautiful belts sold by Mr Fish and worn by famous people. "We were Mods and we had motorbikes which made us very nasty. We would go up to Wardour Street on Saturday nights and get paralysed on purple hearts."



The power of transformation: Guy Taplin with some of his creations

But – another of his philosophical asides – man's extremities are God's opportunities and he gave it all up, turned to the practice of Zen and became head bird keeper in Regent's Park for the next four years. He married Robina who worked in the greenhouses, and began to carve birds. In 1978 the Portal Gallery in London held a small exhibition. When it closed, Taplin went to collect what was left – but every sculpture had been sold.

He'd been collecting birds' eggs in Epping forest since he was eight. "When you're young I think what is strongest in you is the instinct to pursue and to kill," he says. "The whole thing is pursuit and possession of the pursued. When you grow up, this interest in nature enables you to re-enter Eden, our natural state. Birds picked me to take me back there."

If you saw his workshop, you'd never guess what he makes in it. It's at the top of a rickety set of wooden steps, tiny, inches thick in dust. The filthy windows which overlook the railway line from Wivenhoe to Liverpool Street – not that you can see out of them – are festooned in ancient fairy lights strung with grubby Barbie dolls. There's an old cake tin full of broken fake Rolex watches, some rusty lids

of tomato tins, a very dead pike some plumbweights from a 15th-century Portuguese trader sunk off the Cape Verde island; a bullet from the American Civil War, three nude plastic ladies with very dirty hair covered in cobwebs... "I like their company," he says.

And, piled up to the ceiling, are the hunks of driftwood he collects from the Essex coast and all over the world – leaving barely room for two of us to stand up. He buys plastic beads for the birds' eyes but he has never bought a piece of wood in his life and he never throws anything away.

"I like remnants, echoes of a life lived intensely, of the man who ran this old bit of Spanish fishing boat into port. I want to make something wonderful from the residue of a life lived, of what people have used. These objects have power and birds are transformed into what we're talking about."

He laughs. "What a load of old tripe!" he says, and then thinks better of it. "It's the turning-dross-into-gold department."

❖ 'Bird on a Wire', a book by Ian Collins about Guy Taplin and his work, is published by Studio Publications for £29.95. Taplin's work may be commissioned through Messums, London W1, www.messums.com

'My whole life's a farce. I wasn't cut out for the world of men'