

# Woodturning your life around



The increasing stress and pressures of his job

led dentist **Graeme Elliott** to take six months off from dentistry. Having always had an interest in carpentry and restoration, during his time off Graeme started doing more woodwork and also began woodturning. Now working part-time in private dentistry, Graeme has more time for his family and also runs a small online business selling vintage items and woodcraft. *BDJ Team* Editor Kate Quinlan spoke to Graeme to find out more.



**Interview**

*Where are you from and why did you originally choose to become a dentist?*

I'm from Portrush, County Antrim, Northern Ireland.

I wanted to be a vet but didn't get offered a place. Dentistry was my second choice. I wanted to do something practical and science based. I qualified from Dundee Dental School in 1999.

*Can you summarise your career history since graduation?*

I did vocational training in Edinburgh and worked as an associate in the same practice. I also worked in the hospital orthodontic department in Dunfermline. I moved back home to Portrush in 2007 and worked as an associate in the practice which I attended as a child in the nearby town of Coleraine: we are a large mixed practice with eight surgeries.

*Can you outline the circumstances that led up to you deciding to take six months off work?*

The job was becoming increasingly stressful. I had a large patient list and with a lot of the older dentists retiring many people were demanding to see me as I was one of the most senior. Unfortunately, I'm not the kind of person to say no to people and tend to put a lot of pressure on myself to perform.

*'I am lucky to have a fantastic team around me and without their support it is unlikely I would still be a practising dentist.'*

Eventually, in 2018 I cracked. I had panic attacks in the surgery with my hands shaking. My GMP referred me to a private clinic immediately. I was prescribed sertraline and then worked with a consultant psychologist. It took several months before I could even enter a surgery without feeling ill. Gradually I eased myself back in, firstly nursing with our hygienist then moving on to check ups, hygiene and simple treatments.

I am lucky to have a fantastic team around me and without their support it is unlikely I would still be a practising dentist.

*When did you first get into woodwork?*

My grandfather was a carpenter as was my uncle and I always enjoyed making things when I was younger. I worked as a painter for my father's company during school holidays and then full time for a year before uni. There are also mechanics and blacksmiths in the family so I've always been keen to learn skills.

*What is woodturning and where do you practise woodwork?*

Woodturning is where a piece of wood is placed on a lathe which rotates it while the wood is carved with handheld tools. My garage has been gradually converted into a workshop.

*What equipment is involved?*

I have a range of tools sourced over the years including some of my grandfather's tools.

It's a mixture of old and new. I quite like using hand tools such as chisels, spokeshaves and planes to shape and carve wood. I also have machinery including a bandsaw, tablesaw, drill press and lathe.

*How do you source the wood and what kinds do you use?*

Many of my items are made from Old Bushmills whiskey barrels. Bushmills is our local distillery and is the world's oldest licensed distillery. When working with the oak from the barrels you get the aroma of the whiskey. I also like using reclaimed wood so many items are made from old hardwood furniture. While mostly oak I also use beech, walnut, mahogany, iroko, yew and several others – these generally bought from a timber merchant.

*How do you decide what to make?*

I often find ideas on Pinterest and YouTube or at times I'm asked to make something. I was asked to make a bread lame by a friend [pronounced 'lahm', meaning 'blade' in French, used to cut or score bread dough to help control its expansion as it bakes] – something I'd never heard of – so made one up after consulting Google. I put it on my shop and it was a bestseller for a long time. Everyone was making sourdough during the pandemic.

Several companies make the metal parts for woodturning kits so things like cheese knives are common.

I like sourcing different things so I source kits from Australia and the USA in particular. The fiddle bread knife is popular in Australia [a bread knife in the style of a violin bow].

*'I had a phased return after six months off. I have been moving more towards private practice and enjoying being able to spend more time with patients.'*

The BBQ pigtail flipper is a great tool which I sourced from America and use myself to pierce and flip food while barbecuing.

*Have you invented new items yourself?*

Not really but I often modify items or try different designs.

*Do you have any particular bestsellers?*

The turned wood bathroom light pulls are the bestseller. Cheese knives are always popular at Christmas. Bottle openers and barbecue tools for Father's Day. Americans love the oak whiskey barrel items. Fishing priests are also popular with American and Canadian customers.

*Are you surprised by the success of your shop?*

Yes. I originally started it as I was churning things out and there's only so many chopping boards and cheese knives that one family need, so I put a few items on Etsy and they sold. During lockdown everyone was shopping online and I wasn't in the surgery every day so the shop was busier.

*Do you work alone?*

Yes, although the kids and cats sometimes join me.

*When did you return to work in dentistry and what does your working week look like now?*

I had a phased return after six months off; I built up to a four-day week with Fridays off. I have been moving more towards private practice and enjoying being able to spend more time with patients.

*Are you content with your current work-life balance?*

Yes.

*Has focusing on something other than dentistry been therapeutic?*  
Yes, I definitely find the woodturning in particular to be therapeutic.

*Do you think your skills as a dentist lent themselves to woodwork?*

Possibly my woodwork skills helped my dentistry! Certainly there are similarities; so much of dentistry is about adhesive dentistry these days compared to the mechanical retention involved in amalgam and crown work. I'm not sure a young dentist could cut a three-quarter crown prep these days; similarly, most young joiners reach for the glue rather than cutting a dovetail or a mortise and tenon joint.

*Any other hobbies or interests?*

I am Akela of a local scout group and enjoy passing on skills to the young people. I have always been a keen cyclist, particularly mountain biking, and used to race quite a bit. Growing up on the Atlantic coast I have always been around the water. I enjoy a bit of fishing too and represented Ireland at the World Championships in my younger days. These days I enjoy kayaking and paddle boarding with my kids.

*Do you think you might ever give up dentistry to focus full time on your woodwork business?*

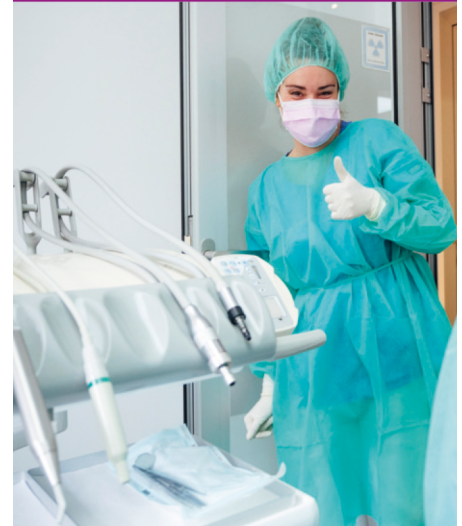
My business isn't big enough to support me but I think I would like to increase it to enable earlier retirement. Changes in NHS pensions mean I get some at age 60 and the rest at age 67. I would rather not work until then so I'd be happy to be woodworking.

*To see Graeme's Etsy shop visit <https://www.etsy.com/uk/shop/Beerhillwoodwork>. Beerhillwoodwork are also on Instagram.*

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