

David R. Russell

1935 - 2018

David R. Russell, a colossus among collectors of antique woodworking tools and co-founder of the Kendal building firm Russell Armer Ltd, dies at 82

Through a lifelong passion for early woodworking tools David Russell built up what was hailed as one of the foremost collections in the Western world. Determined to share the vast knowledge he acquired along the way, he published *Antique Woodworking Tools*, a highly illustrated book that has become a standard work of reference for tool collectors and dealers and indeed for anyone interested in industrial archaeology or the history of material culture.

Over many years David Russell was to be seen at tool auctions in England, France and the United States, bidding for some of the very best tools that came on the market. And when, after publication of his book, he made up his mind to dismantle the collection, he still attended the David Stanley Auctions, taking delight in seeing items from his collection end up in the hands of other collectors and woodworkers.

The younger son of Albert, a worker at Cropper's Paper Mill, and Alice Russell (née Mason), he was born at Burneside near Kendal in what was then Westmorland. He left Kendal Boys' Grammar School at 15 to serve as an apprentice to the Kendal cabinet-maker and joiner Albert Benson in whose workshop his older brother Rodney was already making his mark. One of his first jobs as a young apprentice was working on site with his brother and another tradesman at nearby Sizergh Castle.

'His first love was the foreman's Norris jointing-plane, which he was not allowed to touch however much his fingers tingled,' wrote Huon Mallalieu in *The Times*. 'Seven years later his passion was assuaged, but not extinguished, when he bought his first Norris for £5 in a Sunday antiques market.'

In the intervening years National Service in the Army in Malaya had interrupted his progress and on his return to civilian life David decided to follow a rather different career path by working in the building trade, first in Bournemouth and then in London for George Wimpey. But his love for fine tools had not waned. 'Before long I had bought another Norris,' he wrote in the preface to his book. 'Now I had a pair. Then I found another. Now I had a collection.'

In 1959 he wed Eileen Wray, with whom he had started courting when they were teenagers at the Burneside Church Youth Club. The young couple went back north in 1960 and David with his brother Rodney set up a partnership called Russell Brothers (Kendal) Ltd in January 1961. They bought land in Burneside for four bungalows and did most of the building work themselves.

By 1966, they were employing a staff of 148 and the business had a turnover of around half a million pounds. They had their own coach to bring workers from Barrow.

By the late 1960s, Russell Brothers (Kendal) Ltd were expanding their housebuilding from South Cumbria into North Lancashire and building schools in Kendal and Windermere and as well as a supermarket and factory. Their biggest single development was the Heron Hill housing estate in Kendal beginning in 1970. At this stage of the company's history it employed a workforce of around 300.

In the early 1970s Russell Brothers responded to an economic downturn by diversifying into building boats and running caravan sites, setting up Windermere Aquatic Ltd and Westmorland Caravans Ltd.

David was a great sportsman: a trophy-winning fell runner in his youth, he later played wicketkeeper for Burneside and Westmorland cricket clubs. He also became active in the social and cultural life of Kendal, one highlight being his involvement in organizing major events as part of the town's 400th Royal Charter celebrations in 1975. In that year David was chairman of Round Table while Eileen was chairwoman of Ladies Circle.

By the early 1980s, now trading as Russells, Armer Ltd, the housebuilding business, which had become David Russell's primary responsibility, had built more than 2,500 homes.

In 1985 after a restructuring of the various business divisions, David became sole director and chairman of Russell Armer Ltd focusing on housebuilding. David also continued to run Beetham Caravan Park.

One building project of which David was particularly proud was the high-density redevelopment scheme at Webster's Yard off Highgate in Kendal, devised in conjunction with the local architect Mike Walford. The project was deemed by Roger Stonehouse writing in the *Architects' Journal* to be 'by far the most adventurous' development in Kendal of the late 1980s. 'It is tailored to the nature of Kendal,' Stonehouse concluded, 'rather than wallpapered externally to suit the local style as is the conventional developer's approach.'

Following a heart attack, David sold Russell Armer in 1989 to the Dyke Brothers, a Lake District firm. He retained an ongoing role as an adviser to his old management team and in 1991 the team initiated a management buy-out of Russell Armer.

Obliged to take early retirement for health reasons, David bought and oversaw the restoration of a farmhouse in the Dordogne. In retirement he moved to his new French home, where he energetically pursued his interest in woodworking tools and continued gathering together one of the finest collections in private hands. He dedicated many years to researching and compiling a definitive history of woodworking tools, drawing greatly on his own collection. Though not a trained scholar, he had an unerring eye and a remarkable instinct for tools of great beauty or which were milestones in functional development. His book *Antique Woodworking Tools: Their Craftsmanship from the Earliest Times to the Twentieth Century*, with specially commissioned photographs by James Austin, was published in association with Bernard Shapero by John Adamson in 2010 to international acclaim.

Retirement also enabled him to indulge his passion for wood-carving and birds. When some years earlier Alfred Wainwright, the fell walker and Kendal's Borough Treasurer, had let him have two stuffed cuckoos from a discarded display at Kendal Museum as a model to make a carving, David had found he had a natural gift for wielding the gouge. A delicate carving of the cuckoos and many carvings of flowers, leaves and animals ensued. At his French home he carved finials to the newel posts of his staircase in the shape of a squirrel, a toad, an ancient Egyptian-style cat, a cat strumming a banjo, a mouse and an owl.

His love of birds was wide-ranging: whether he was watching nuthatches feed at the bird tray or was standing in awe in his French garden gazing up at the migrating flocks of cranes as they flew high overhead, his enthusiasm was boundless. He built his collections of antiquarian bird books and twentieth-century bird paintings with as much pride as he did his tool collection.

David's wife, Eileen, predeceased him in 2017, but he is survived by his children Craig, Claire and Anne and ten grandchildren.

David Richard Russell, woodworking tool collector and builder, was born 23 September 1935; died 21 March 2018