



# Bragging RIGHTS

When Billy Bragg needed a guitar in a hurry, **PI GUITARS** in Nailsworth made him one in just 12 hours

WORDS: Katie Jarvis

Six in the morning, February 2024, and something is happening in Nailsworth. (Plenty is always happening in Nailsworth. But this is really something.)

Outside, it's still dark. Downstairs in the town's Subscription Rooms – erected in 1852 at a cost of £785 (raised in £5 shares and donations) – the lights are on. A team is already beavering away.

To the fly-on-the-wall, their aim is curious. Old wood – offcuts; unwanted furniture; shelving that once held ornaments, books; wood that's been pulled out of skips; gifted by builders; ropery wood; unglamorous wood; unloved and unwanted...

These pieces of wood are being handled with skill; with care. Even reverence, you might dare to say.

In one corner, Gavin Pond is discovering the neck of a guitar. Because that's how it feels: as if the neck were always there, waiting to be uncovered by saw and plane, spokeshave and sandpaper.

In another, Simon Chapman is working on a fingerboard.

Other people are forging the rest of the constituent parts that will make this wood sing as it's never sung since the old days when it stood with the wind whistling through its leaves.

Their aim?

To make a guitar, from scratch, in just 12 hours.

Astonishingly, by 10.30am, the two halves of the body are already being fitted together.

As time wears on, finishing touches are added... including pink pickups to honour the experience of one of the team of volunteers, a breast-cancer survivor.

And there it is: half-a-day after that 6am start: a stunning, hand-crafted instrument. An instrument (a work of art) that singer-songwriter Billy Bragg – upstairs in the Subscription Rooms hall – lifts into his hands, straps round his neck, and begins to play to the audience gathered to listen. He has travelled two-and-a-half hours, from Weymouth, to be here in Nailsworth.

This, he says, with an appreciative grin, was a preposterous challenge with an amazing result. 'And here I am with this guitar,' he adds, strumming, 'which 15 hours ago was a kitchen table-top. If ever ya want a geezer to come and play ya kitchen table-top for ya, I'm that man.'

Then he sings and he plays:

*'Well if you ever have to go*

*to Shoeburyness*

*'Take the A road, the okay road that's the best*

*'Go motorin' on the A13...'*

From start to finish, this has been an incredible journey.

**'HELLO!'** **PAM BROWN** greets me warmly, as I walk through the Subscription Rooms doors, flung open to the town in friendly

communion. The working-day has not long started, but already it's warm outside where Rich is cutting back fragrant purple buddleia to display in jars. And already – in the cool within – heads are down, brows furrowed in concentration. Amongst them, Brandon is sawing wood; Harley is busy on sanding; Pam is making drinks.

'Coffee?' she offers.

Gavin Pond appears: fulsome beard; T-shirt showing the six stages of evolved human: from ape, through upright hunter-gatherer, to full-on rock guitarist. (Evolution's work is done, people.)

How to describe what these two have created here in Nailsworth?

Well...

It all began in October 2009, when they were working at the Steiner-Waldorf-inspired Acorn School in town: Pam running the office and kindergarten; Gavin in charge of craft.

(Craft: such a defining principle of this educational philosophy.)

'My son was at the school for 12 years, and I could see – with him and his friends – the power of craft for dyslexia; the less-regular mind-shape,' Pam says.

So when Pam was made redundant, she and Gavin had a complete rethink: 'We wondered: "What can we do to take craft to as many people as possible? And not just people who could afford to go to a Steiner school?'

It turned out that the answer lay just round the corner. Literally. >

One of Pi Guitars' creations, handmade in Nailsworth

*far left:* Scenes from the guitar workshop, Practical Intelligence, in Nailsworth

*inset left:* Billy Bragg with a hand-crafted guitar made by Practical Intelligence Guitars

*left:* One of Pi Guitars' many handmade creations



‘We’re passionate about what we do; we’d like to spread the power of craft, mental health, wellbeing and confidence through doing’

Their first thought was to use the nearby Subscription Rooms for Gavin to hold longbow workshops, teaching the crafting of these medieval bows out of hickory, lemon wood and purple heart.

But the town knew better. ‘We were approached by some parents whose children we had taught, who were now home-educating.’ That approach was followed by Ruskin Mill Trust, a wonderful Nailsworth-based charity, offering specialist outdoor learning to children and adults with complex needs. They heard about Pam and Gavin – and saw the potential for their students. Next came Cotswold Chine School – internationally recognised for its expertise in helping young people to overcome trauma – for Practical Intelligence to run education and therapy groups.

‘And it’s just grown from there.’ Pam’s not kidding. Specialist tutors are now on board, such as Rich, whom I met outside. And participants from nine years old (they’ve had to raise the age to 12 because of unmanageable demand) to 99 have taken part in the workshops they offer:

- Home education mornings;
- A luthier school. (Gavin studied baroque and renaissance lute and guitar-making at West Dean College);
- Weekends in knife-making, stained glass, wedding rings and longbows;
- Automata;
- A men’s shed where men and women make and mend: their first project, a giant chess set, was donated to Nailsworth...

And then, of course, Pi (‘Practical Intelligence’) Guitars.

Guitars made by the volunteers here; volunteers whose abilities Gavin matches to tasks in hand. Some have become proficient guitar-makers in their own right; some have abilities defying complex needs – abilities with saw and plane and sander.

Together, they make guitars sponsored by businesses and donated to charity; others that sell for £1,000 (cheap at half the price); all of a quality admired by musicians such as Billy Bragg. The sales help a little towards the £100,000 a year needed to keep things going: much of it funded by the educational

organisations that send students here; the rest raised by Pam.

‘So what would you like from this article?’ I ask Pam and Gavin.

‘We’re passionate about what we do; we’d like to spread the power of craft.’

‘Yes, mental health, wellbeing and confidence through doing. The importance of craft and hands-on activity.’

‘More guitar sales and sponsorship are always good,’ they to and fro.

‘A knighthood,’ jokes Gavin.

I mean, to be fair: Gawain – friend to young knights; defender of the poor and unfortunate – got one. So I really don’t see why not.

**SO WHO’S HERE AT** Pi Guitars on this Monday morning? I meet Simon, from Gloucester, who retired as an engineer three years ago.

(Ah! Simon Chapman. Of the 12-hour-guitar fame!)

He smiles and shows me a switch-tip he’s just made. It’s tiny – like something an elf would use: a beautiful and detailed wooden cover to go on the switch that selects neck or

bridge pickup. ‘A bit intricate; saves using a bit of plastic,’ he says.

Behind him is a stack of wood – none of it beautiful; some of it ropey. To me anyway. But it shows how much I know.

‘This mahogany has just come from Cirencester College. There’s a lot of wood around that ends up getting burnt that makes beautiful instruments.’

‘My dad died 15 years ago. The first guitar I made here: the fret-board is from a table we had in our garden that we had loads of family barbecues on – so that’s living on forever. And I’ve made one with my kids’ bunk beds.’ A mate of his told him about Pi.

Then lockdown happened. ‘In my situation, I was locked down perhaps longer than most. But, after lockdown, I started coming to classes to learn how to make guitars; then started volunteering here.’

In my situation... What does that mean?

‘A complete stranger saved my life, twice. I had a cardiac arrest; someone kept me alive for half-an-hour before the ambulance came.’

‘I was given six months, eight years ago. I’ve had two transplants. But I was racing

my bike again within six months... Modern science is amazing.’

(Not the only thing around here that’s amazing, Simon.)

Pi Guitars: fantastic, he says. ‘It’s given me the ability to work with people who are perhaps a bit less fortunate.’

‘On a Tuesday, sometimes, I come to help with people who’ve had a stroke.’

‘One guy sits on a stool on the lathe up there and turns chair legs. He’s made a three-legged stool. Can’t walk; can’t speak; he’s only got one good arm. But he takes home a three-legged stool.’

‘That’s what Pam and Gavin do for you.’

**HARLEY SHOWS ME ROUND**, pointing out each piece of (much donated; all high quality) equipment with evident ownership. Rich helps him reach a longbow he made, now proudly displayed on one of the walls.

Holly Thody, a singer, is back from recording a video in Essaouira, Morocco (riding horses along the beach). Alongside her own concerts, she and Gavin are in a band together.

‘In the last month, I’ve only just become more involved. I didn’t quite know what Gavin did and said: “OK, I want to see!” When I came to the workshop, I thought: “Wow! This is a really cool space!”’

There’s Flynn, who’s been coming for 11 years, since he was six. He’s a keen sailor; a watch leader for a youth development charity in Portsmouth. Has his time here helped?

‘It has; I’m able to look at things in a different way. I’ve always been quite practical but it makes your brain think differently.’

‘It’s the social aspect as well. The kinds of people who come here tend to be nice – it gives you a different social grounding.’

I’m shown a stunning guitar that’s nearly finished: made from an oak kitchen table; inlaid with seams of ash; a dot of purple heart; American cherry from furniture Gavin found in a skip.

I’m told about a guitar commissioned in memory of a dearly loved dad and husband, using teak from his workshop.

I chat with Ali, who started coming all the way to Pi when he lived near Watford; came whenever he could because it meant so >



Billy Bragg with the team that made his guitar in 12 hours



## ‘I spent the next 30 years trying to find the balance between craft and people’

much to him. Last August, he and his partner, Lucie — an artist — moved to Stroud full time.

He knows all about mental wellbeing; he worked for the charity Mind during the pandemic: incredibly intense. ‘I was recovering from burnout in 2022, had a couple of weeks off, and in March or April I came down for the first time and absolutely loved it. It was such a warm welcome; we just all connected.

‘We had some really sincere moments.’

He’s played guitar since he was a boy but didn’t know anything about building them. ‘But here...’ He stops. ‘Well Gavin and Pam: you know. You’ve met them.

‘Very warm, immediately defusing any pressure. If you want to watch, that’s fine. If you just want to do a bit of sanding...’

Since then, he’s learned multiple skills.

‘I loved pottery in school, as well as woodwork. You’re removing bulk to create a shape. That’s what I do here — you remove wood to create the shape.’

Yes. Good point.

You take something too-little valued and find something utterly beautiful in it.

**SOON, THEY’LL STOP** for lunch together. Soup and bread, cheese, salad. Simple, wholesome.

Before I go, I manage to tie down Gavin, much in demand (as ever).

He is, quite simply, a fascinating man. A musician; a professional musical instrument-

maker. Somebody whose life, in various ways, has been spent within diverse communities.

‘When I was 19, I lived in a Camphill Community with adults with learning difficulties. Taught a bit of pottery, worked on the farm in mid-Wales. I really loved it. I spent the next 30 years trying to find the balance between craft and people.’

He pauses.

‘Sorry — I get a bit emotional.’

He’s worked in a secure unit with criminally convicted adults with learning difficulties... And, honestly, so much more.

What is it about need that draws him?

‘I remember, when I was 18, feeling quite strongly that I wanted it to make a difference to more than just me if I got up in the morning.’

People are his life. Music is his life.

Stevie Ray Vaughan if he needs cheering up. Jimi Hendrix. Renaissance lute, if he wants soothing. Cat Empire. A bit of reggae...

He plays a delicate tune on one of his favourite self-made guitars for me: a copy of an 1890 Washburn.

‘Blackbird!’ (A song I love.)

‘More startling,’ he laughs, self-deprecatingly.

‘This is the earliest form of the steel-string guitar. I built it just after I left college: the back is an offcut of my father-in-law’s fence. And holly I picked up off the floor. The soundboard was a packing piece that was chucked in a load of wood...

‘It’s a really sweet, lovely little guitar.’

Hanging on the walls around us are top quality Pi instruments: electric, acoustic — as well as prototypes that are half-electric, half-acoustic.

‘But our objective is the process of building with people — that’s our product; making good people.

‘The guitars are actually a byproduct.’

I could talk to this man for hours.

Except that...

Pam pops her head round the corner.

‘Gavin,’ she asks. ‘Can you help? Sol’s reached a dead end.’ ●

• **Gavin Pond, co-founder of Practical Intelligence, joined Dr Simon Opher MP at 10 Downing Street for a special event promoting men’s health and wellbeing recently. The invitation was in acknowledgement of the 16 years the organisation has spent helping men to build confidence, friendships and skills.**

• **Please contact Pam on 07971 737626 if you are interested in volunteering, buying or sponsoring a guitar, or just want to visit to see what they do.**

• **Nailsworth Community Workshop is at Nailsworth Subscription Rooms, Bath Road, GL6 0HH, on the A46 in the centre of town, next to The Village Inn pub. Visit the website: [practicalintelligence.org.uk](http://practicalintelligence.org.uk)**