



Sea glass jewellery (from about £17) by Maureen Gilbertson, inspired by her beach walks in Northumberland

Maureen retired from local government five years ago and today she runs her own business selling jewellery fashioned from sea glass. **Karen** gave up being a barrister when she had children and now works from home painting murals and making art. And **Chrissie**, who moved to France from Scotland with her husband in 1999 after deciding they wanted 'a change of life', has found a niche refashioning vintage buttons into contemporary jewellery.

WHAT THEY ALL HAVE IN COMMON is Etsy. Very briefly, *etsy.com* is a website that enables makers to sell their wares anywhere in the world by setting up their own shop window online.

Launched in 2005, Etsy is the brainchild of Robert Kalin, then a 25-year-old classics major with no business experience who was, as he puts it on his Etsy profile, 'living alone in a wood shop and wanting some company'. The name, he says, comes from his watching Fellini's *8½* in which the phrase 'eh si' ('oh, yes') was used a lot. 'In Latin,' says Kalin, 'et si means "and if".'

Kalin became Etsy's CEO but was ousted by the board in 2011. With the company expanding rapidly, someone with more business savvy was needed. Step forward Chad Dickerson, the current CEO, who has overseen a massive expansion in the company. Today, Maureen, Chrissie and Karen are among the millions who sell their home-made goods to customers across the world without the hassle of setting up a stall in a street market or having to pay rent on a shop in the high street.

All they have had to do is follow a fairly standard set-up procedure online and, in return for the virtual shop window, they give Etsy 20 cents (12p) for each item listed and 3.5% of each sale. Which, of course, is nothing compared with a real high-street rental.

Maureen Gilbertson's story is typical. She used to walk along the coast ten minutes from her home in Northumberland and, like so many people, she couldn't help but pick up pale green and blue lozenges of sea glass lying on the beach. They were so pretty, surely there was something she could do with them?

'I've been into crafts all my life,' Maureen says. At first she made some pieces for herself – simple necklaces and bracelets. By reading and going online, watching YouTube videos, she learned how to drill a hole through the glass and how to set a piece in a silver bezel.

'I thought "I can't keep making and wearing them myself," so I went on the internet to see if I could sell them and the first place that came up was Etsy.' She had used computers in her job in local government and found the website quite simple to use. 'But I wouldn't say it was totally easy,' Maureen adds. 'If you have no idea about computers, you would probably need a bit of help.'

As it was, within a week she had sold her first item. That was in November, the run-up to Christmas. March, by contrast, is very quiet, but in good seasons her sales now average about five necklaces a week. In the first year her profits went towards buying tools. Since then her turnover has been doubling

For 42% of sellers, Etsy was the first place they sold their goods

every year. 'Last year it was £6,000. I don't know if I can double that next year!' It's not a living wage, but it is a useful addition to her pension.

A FEW YEARS AGO, Etsy was just another place for kookie one-offs, the folksy and the homespun.

It seemed to be inhabited by vintage girls with their predilection for Fifties flower-print dresses and big put-up hair. It was all very lo-fi.

Recently, though – and almost without anyone noticing – it has gone from human to humungous. Last year, sales topped \$1.35 billion (£800 million). And, remember, we are talking a lot of red and white gingham bunting here, not big-ticket items. Behind those figures are 36 million buyers and sellers, with around 25 million objects for sale.

Such rapid growth has led to some pitfalls. Chrissie Marshall, 60, has been with Etsy since 2008. She says it has been a wonderful way not just to make a bit of money, but for getting in touch with other like-minded crafters all over the world.

In all, she has sold around 740 pieces, many of them inspired by her button collection. She has collected buttons and fabrics since she was five.

'I've got more buttons than anyone should have a right to – about 30 tins, three layered boxes and tiered drawers. Some I'll never use because they have been with me for ever.' Others are transformed >

Handmade arcade

An online global marketplace for arts and crafts now has a turnover of £800 million a year and can turn hobbies into cash. **Tiffany Daneff** reports on the rise and rise of Etsy

Photographs **Michael Hedge**



Left: Karen Boatwright captures animals on canvas (from about £40) and in wool (from about £16). This page: vintage buttons and glass form the basis of Chrissie Marshall's jewellery (from about £10)



◁ into pieces that she has sold all over the world from Japan to Turkey. 'About 80% goes to the US and, strangely, only about 5% is bought in the UK. I have a man who buys from me to sell in the little

In 2013, a package of craft supplies travelled more than 12,000 miles, from a seller in Singapore to a buyer in Ecuador

boutique in his hotel in Italy.'

Recently, however, Chrissie has been disappointed with a drop in sales: 'Etsy is moving up in the world and is less homespun now... a lot of little shops are getting pushed out.' She cites the problem of resellers – where a factory in the Far East, say, copies an idea and mass produces it to sell via Etsy – which is not allowed.

There was quite a lot of unhappiness within the Etsy community and things have since been tightened up. Although Chrissie still thinks Etsy is 'an

amazing site', at times she has considered giving it up, but crafting is in her blood and she doesn't know how not to create.

TO GET NOTICED YOU NEED TRAFFIC. To get traffic you have to be noticed. It's the classic online seller's Catch 22. Etsy offers online tuition and advice on how to boost your profile.

'You need to have a lot of things in your shop,' Maureen says. 'It looks more impressive.' She was lucky that her husband, a keen photographer, was able to take pictures of the

jewellery to put up online. 'You really do need good photographs,' she says, a point that is echoed by other Etsy sellers.

Karen Boatwright, 52, from Whitstable in Kent, recommends Etsy to anyone thinking of starting a small business. 'It is a great way to test the waters. You can see which products are selling without having to commit yourself to big manufacturing.'

She agrees that you have to put in a lot of effort to push your shop. But being noticed can have its downsides. Karen's range of

homemade sleeping bags was spotted and copied by a large US company after one of their group buyers ordered one in.

When a friend saw a copycat sleeping bag on its website, Karen complained. 'They took it off their website worldwide and withdrew it from their catalogue.'

If the experience has made her more aware of the possibilities of intellectual theft, it certainly hasn't put Karen off Etsy: 'From the very well-known makers to a grandmother knitting socks, Etsy is accessible to everybody.' ◆



FIND OUT MORE

To learn more about how to buy and sell on site, visit [etsy.com](https://www.etsy.com).

Find Maureen at

[etsy.com/people/thestrandline](https://www.etsy.com/people/thestrandline).

Find Karen Boatwright's artworks by putting 'tintabernacle', and her sleeping bags by putting 'goodintent', into [etsy.com](https://www.etsy.com)'s search box.

Find Chrissie Marshall by putting 'KrishenkasTreasures' into the website's search box.

For modern UK craft, visit [folksy.com](https://www.folksy.com).

For more handmades, from steampunk assemblages to Seventies sewing patterns, try [zibbet.com](https://www.zibbet.com).