



My company
 Blackbird: Shop, studio, workshops, 2 Market Place, Margate, Kent CT9 1ER. www.blackbird-england.com, www.maxine-sutton.com.



Trade secrets

Maxine Sutton tells us how she started her textile studio and craft shop, Blackbird, and what inspires her

Why did you start the business?

I work with organic textiles – screen printing and embroidering – and about a year ago I decided to look for a bigger studio space. I wanted a place where others might be inspired to have a go at working with textiles too; somewhere to connect with materials in a new way or develop existing skills; as well as promoting the value of handmade objects and creativity in a retail space.

What is special about your shop?

The shop is full of beautiful things that have an interesting provenance and a story behind them. I think that there is a reaction

against mass consumer goods that are cheaply made in far-off countries. In the same way that the real food movement has taken off, I think people are beginning to want a connection with the objects they choose to have around them too.

Who has helped you along the way?

My family have all been really fantastic and given their time to get things up and running. I was also fortunate to access some funding from the local authority via an empty shops scheme. It's really worth spending time on your business plan as it's so important when communicating your

vision to others, especially if you need to attract funding or ask for loans.

What do you specialise in and what is your most popular item?

Blackbird specialises in handmade crafted gifts and homewares. Ken Eardley's ceramics are popular; they are such a pleasure to use as well as look at. Emily Warren's wonderful papier-mâché animal heads are very special and appeal to lots of our regular customers.

What obstacles have you overcome?

The biggest learning curve has been realising the amount of time the shop space



A selection of the eclectic mix of contemporary crafts and giftware for sale in Blackbird's showroom

alone takes to run. I really underestimated just how much work it is to source new pieces and keep the shop stocked with interesting and relevant items, as well as keeping on top of admin, displays and promotion. Continuing with my own work is also important, so that's going to be a big challenge in the future.

Where would you be if you hadn't set up your business?

Blackbird is an extension of my practice and beliefs; it's about creating a space in which to communicate my passion for making. If I hadn't set up the shop I expect I'd be trying

to do that in some other way and probably always hankering after a place to showcase all the wonderful work of other makers.

Do you have anyone else in your team?

I don't employ anyone else yet, but I think finding the right staff is going to be crucial. Hand-crafted pieces will always cost that little bit more, so the ability to tell the story behind the pieces to engage customers is key, as well as being creative with displays and windows.

Where do you like to shop?

Margate Old Town is truly a hidden gem worth searching out. The retro and junk



shops nearby are fantastic. I often go to Scotts Emporium (01843 220653, www.scottsmargate.co.uk) and Junk Deluxe (07963 892041, www.junkdeluxe.co.uk) for furniture, lights and all kinds of secondhand treasures. I also love the Chinese painted boxes and rice measures in Qing (01843 299055, www.qingart.co.uk), an Oriental interiors and gift shop.

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