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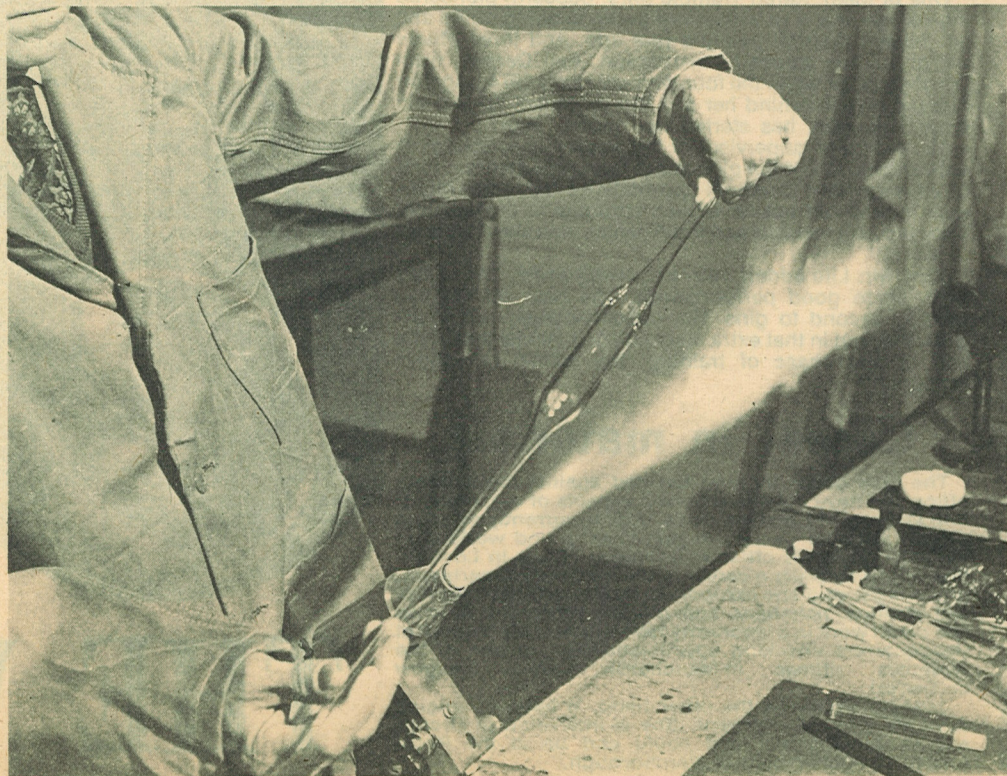
SCOPE - NO MUGS FOR BEN THE
GLASS BLOWER - ARTICLE RE
GLASSBLOWING AT ERDE

FEB 1974

No mugs for Ben the glassblower

HOW TO MAKE A GLASS VASE!

The process starts with a slim length of tube just over half an inch in diameter, and some solid glass rods. The tube is then placed in the flame of the torch which reaches 1,000 degrees Centigrade and slowly drawn out (picture 1). A small bubble is blown into it and on this are laid eight strands of the molten solid glass. Then it is all down to pure skill. The glass, still in the flame, is twisted and the skill in this gives rise to the spiral effect on the vase (picture 2). The base of the vase is then fused on to the main section before it is again blown for shape. Once there is a blown out shape at the top and bottom of the vase the final shaping can take place. In the case of the bottom the bubble is cut in the flame and then reamed out to give it a solid base (picture 3). This is then smoothed with carborundum. The same carborundum treatment is given to the top of the vase after being cut.



Ken Meadows visits ERDE to see master craftsman Ben George fashion a half inch glass tube into a beautiful vase.

IT WAS HAROLD PINTER who once commented, "I can't drink Guinness from a thick mug. I only like it out of a thin glass". If the playwright ever gets the chance, he ought to visit the Explosives Research and Development Establishment at Waltham Abbey, near London. That's where you'll find Ben George, a little wizard of a Welshman. He has produced, for permanent display, a set of glasses so beautiful and delicate that nectar would not seem out of place in them.

Ben's job at ERDE is to produce all the laboratory glassware — measuring glasses, retorts, diffusion pumps and other fragile scientific apparatus — to incredible tolerances and intricacies.

As one of the finest free hand glassblowers in Europe he does it very well indeed. But it is his skill in turning a long test tube into a magnificent glass or vase of intrinsic beauty that has brought about his recognition.

"Scientific work is my bread and butter the other is just a hobby. To produce beautiful things with the skill I possess is simply a dream of mine that has come true," he says.

The dream started a long time ago. He began his apprenticeship in glass blowing at a Wimbledon glassblowing school in 1929, as a 17-year-old. After working for several London firms he got a job at Crystal Palace. There he did a lot of pioneering work with the scientist Logie Baird.

Ben recalls one historic incident from his time there. "I was working one evening when I noticed a fire. I reported it but they just said 'go home boy you're tired'. I watched the great Crystal Palace fire whilst waiting at the station for a train to take me home."

Future influence

It was before World War II that Mr. George met an Austrian glass designer who had a marked influence on his future. Ben read in a newspaper article about Fritz Lampl, who received world wide acclaim by reproducing copies in glass of Greek coins 2,500 years old.

Lampl was then looking for craftsmen who could reproduce, in delicate glassware, the beautiful designs he was working on. Ben did some work for him from sketches supplied.

The two men drifted apart and in the war Ben found himself working on photo electric cells and magnatrons in Oxford with Lord Charwell.

Though he continued after the war, working in the Clarendon Laboratories at Oxford, Mr. George was not satisfied by producing scientific equipment. His skill demanded a creative outlet.

Through another newspaper article he renewed his association with Lampl and the two of them began working together at Oxford. They produced some of the finest glassware of the period. With Ben's skill and Lampl's designs they went from strength to strength, culminating in an exhibition of exquisite beauty at a store in Regent Street, London.



Ben George and the finished vase.

But the strain began to tell. In one spell, Mr. George produced 48 glasses one after another. His nerves suffered. Ben took good advice and went back into industry spending five or six years at Harwell. During this time he had many opportunities to work abroad if he would return to decorative work. He turned down lucrative offers to work in Canada, France, Germany, Australia and New Zealand.

The year 1956 was his real year of decision. He opted out of joining the UKAEA and went to ERDE instead. He has continued to produce glasses, vases, decanters and novelty items in his spare time. He's lucky to have a sympathetic management so that he will retain his skills.

More skilled

Not that his talents are waning. "If anything I am more skilled now than ever I was. I can certainly make a wine glass far quicker than in the old days," he said. To prove it he gave SCOPE a demonstration by making a vase in about 25 minutes.

His most difficult and impressive item? "I think it must be the bride in the one and a half inch tall bottle. I did this at Oxford. The bride's veil had red spots on it and she carried a coloured bouquet of flowers. The bottle followed the shape of the bride and when

perfume was put inside the bottle the bride grew in size."

Trade mark

Mr. George reflects on those Oxford days. He says he was so highly skilled that he was like a machine. He could produce a set of glasses that were so perfect that he was accused of making them by machine. "Now", he concludes, "I always try to make one of the set slightly larger than the others. I suppose it's my trade mark."

What kind of satisfaction is there in producing something that no other person can make? "Well," says Ben, "I just enjoy using my talent. I don't look for anything apart from the pleasure it gives me and others when I have produced something. Money does not come into it."

Once, after watching Ben George at work, Fritz Lampl had this to say, "There have never been such gifted workers as the British. All people tell me that the British have lost their craft but it is not so."

"It is only buried. Though there is nothing so difficult as free-hand glassblowing, I have never had such skilled workers as I find in England."

Ben George is probably the best of them. Happily he is as enthusiastic as when he blew his first glass bubble.