

## Tony Hawkins: Remembering a master craftsman in glass

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In this 1968 photo, Tony Hawkins crafts molten glass into laboratory instruments.

By Alan Littel '53

A singular memorial recalls an Alfred township resident who died earlier this spring. His name was Tony (Anthony John) Hawkins, 86, a British-born glassblower who created laboratory instruments at Alfred University's College of Ceramics from 1960 to 1983. He died April 30, in Hornell, after a long illness.

The memorial to Hawkins is unusual in that it's neither a commemorative plaque nor an effigy in bronze or fired clay. Rather, it's a typical art-deco aluminum counter stool—one that might well have been salvaged from a 1930s-era diner—that stands, or squats, just inside the door of the Collegiate Restaurant, on North Main Street in the village of Alfred. It bears a message of once-symbolic possession, and now of remembrance, etched onto its cushion top: “Tony's Seat.”

John Ninos, who, with his wife, Chelly, owns and operates the restaurant, popularly known as “The Jet,” says he has no plans to change the seat cover.

“For as long as I can remember,” Ninos says, “Tony came to us for his meals. He lived miles from the village but drove in seven days a week, January through December—whatever the weather. Tony was a fixture here. Three meals a day, breakfast, lunch and dinner. And if there was a day when he didn't show up, we'd call to see if he was okay.”

When I met with Ninos recently at the restaurant to talk about his old friend and guest, he pointed to the stool. “That was Tony's place,” Ninos said. “And at least in my mind, it will remain Tony's place.”

On those occasions when I, too, dined at The Jet, I would inevitably see Hawkins's tall shambling frame make its way slowly—and, as he aged, sometimes painfully—to the counter stool. It rarely happened that someone else would have preempted the seat, but if it did, Tony would slip into a nearby booth to join friends or acquaintances for his meal and a chat.

I first came across him some 50 years ago. I had taken up a job in Alfred University's press office to report on campus news for local and regional papers. Much of the copy I produced was fairly routine, and I was on the lookout for stories that would go beyond the formulaic and invest the workaday world of higher education with something more personal, something that would touch the popular imagination.

A friend one day casually mentioned a young employee from England who did what my interlocutor thought was probably the oddest work at the university—crafting the glass instruments used by students to carry out their laboratory experiments. This was the clue that led me to Hawkins.

The piece I eventually wrote about him had been long forgotten until a few weeks ago, when Laurie McFadden, Alfred University's archivist, rediscovered it in one of her files. The article is dated July 15, 1968. And if my old profile of Tony Hawkins may be considered a contribution to the memory of a gentle character and an exceptional artisan and artist in glass, here it is in its entirety:

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At first glance he seems out of place—perhaps too young for the job.

Glassblowers by profession are thought to be guardians of an antiquated craft. You think of them as industrial fossils: elderly crusty individuals with faces brick-red from a lifetime spent before superheated furnaces.

But Anthony Hawkins, at 37, confounds reality, or more likely the myth.

Tall, sandy-haired, quick to laugh, this transplanted Briton is one of the best of a rare calling. Indeed, Hawkins is something more than a craftsman in glass. As full-time scientific glassblower at the College of Ceramics at Alfred University, his ability goes beyond an artisan's skills to embrace the academic disciplines of mathematics, chemistry, and physics.

“You never know what you'll be called on to do next,” says Hawkins. “Every conceivable variety of glassware is used in every conceivable sort of chemical research or experimentation. And not all of the glass you need can be purchased at the corner store, or even from a scientific supply house.”

This is where Hawkins comes in. It's something of a curiosity that high technology, while making obsolete certain hand skills, resurrects others. Scientific glassblowing is a case in point. The particular handicraft is central to the efficient operation of the college's ceramic-science program. And for the past eight years, Hawkins has been designing, building, calibrating, and repairing much of the delicate glass laboratory equipment used in ceramic research and teaching at Alfred.

For example, he shows a visitor a large bulbous object sprouting, like antennae, glass and rubber tubing. “If you're a graduate student or researcher working in the basic chemistry of ceramics and glass, you need high quality chemical reactions—reactions with the impurities removed, impurities such as air. To get rid of air, you need superior vacuum vessels.”

Hawkins makes them to order, size and shape dependent on whatever the experiment or research project requires.

His work is adept, intricate in design, of precision quality. His raw material is molten glass; from it he extrudes, with lung power and practiced eye, mercury diffusion pumps, vacuum freezing traps used to make liquid oxygen, measuring flasks, burettes, high-temperature crucibles, a man-sized pure-water still of serpentine glass tubing—an object of sculpture as well as of scientific utility.

Hawkins's work is also his more personal avocation. In the cluttered glass shop of the Ceramics College research building, he has filled a locker with what he creates as a hobby: glass candlesticks, vases, paperweights, glass jewelry, intricately sculpted glass figurines one or two inches in height. He is constantly tinkering with chemical mixtures to obtain the right colors for these objects: manganese for hyacinth blue, copper for green, other substances for the rest of the spectrum.

Hawkins says he enjoys Alfred's rural life, and comes to it from a long apprenticeship in glass that began at the University of Bristol, in England, and was later enriched by stints of artisanship at the University of Nottingham, also

in England, and at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada.

A native of Bristol, he disclaims any life-long ambition to be a scientific craftsman in glass. It was something he says he had stumbled into, decided he liked, and pursued. His approach to the work is matter-of-fact, entirely professional:

“It doesn’t take genius. But it does take patience, attention to detail, manual skills of course—a sense of form, I suppose, and an interest in the subject matter of science.

“It also takes years of practice. And this is what discourages young people,” says Hawkins in the flat nasal twang redolent of his roots, England’s West Country.

“The art has reached a plateau, a leveling-off point. There aren’t too many of us in it, particularly at the scientific end. But those of us who stick with it,” he adds, stating the obvious, “are in fairly high demand.”