

# GLASS ART<sup>®</sup>

For the Creative Professional Working  
in Hot, Warm, and Cold Glass

March/April 2023



**Cumbria Crystal**

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# GLASS ART®

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## Glass Art®

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Laminated Dichroic Jewelry.

Photo by the artist.

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### May/June 2023

Editorial Due	February 20, 2023
Ad Closing	March 20, 2023
Ad Materials	March 30, 2023
Issue Mails	April 19, 2023

### July/August 2023

Editorial Due	April 20, 2023
Ad Closing	May 20, 2023
Ad Materials	May 30, 2023
Issue Mails	June 23, 2023



# Cumbria Crystal

Through the Eyes of CEO Chris Blade



by Dr. Julie Anne Denton

Small batch production glass factories have been greatly shaken lately. They have been struggling for decades while what is considered fashionable glass has moved from beautiful glass sets to Philippe Starck fly swatters and Smeg kitchenware as the choice objects of desire.

## A Classic Story of Survival

The discerning, who collect more traditional drinking glass sets, are becoming more select and perhaps more elite too. In particular, lead crystal factories in the Western world have suffered from adhering to new and stricter regulations concerning lead content within the glass batch recipe. With fewer health and safety restrictions, different working conditions, tougher environmental conditions, lower wages, and automation to speed up the process in other countries, how can the West compete?

In recent years the blow has become almost Thor-like as his hammer smashes these firms, first in the UK with Brexit, then during a global pandemic that closed down many factories due to staffing and cash flow problems. Add into the mix a war in Eastern Europe driving the price of energy up tenfold, and you have a recipe for disaster. Yet, there are still a few small batch production family factories that continue to thrive despite the enormous odds stacked against them.



## Survival Mode

This is the good news story of a small glass factory nestled in the sleepy and, arguably, the most beautiful area of England in the Lake District. This factory, known as Cumbria Crystal, is situated on the Northwest coast in the Furness peninsula (aptly pronounced furnace) in Ulverston, a small village of 12,000 people.

Traditionally, the town of Ulverston was known for rope making for the once thriving British ship trade. Cumbria Crystal was founded by one of the great British heritage families, the Cavendishes. Why? Because they couldn't find any quality crystal for their stately home, Holker Hall. The story goes that one evening over a dinner party thrown by the Cavendishes for local businessmen and women, they were lamenting their lack of quality British glassware. With the help of some of their guests, they decided to fashion their own glass and recruit glassmakers into the area from Stourbridge in the West Midlands.

In 1976, a dream became a reality, and Cumbria Crystal was established by the Cavendish family.

*(Above center) Grasmere Collection Square Spirit Decanter with Silver Stag Topper. A partnership with Hamilton & Inches, Royal Warrant holder in Edinburgh, has led Jewelers, to the development of sterling silver products such as decanters. Photo by Chris Blade.*



Limited edition of 60 decanters and crystal whiskey tumblers organized by Diageo. The tumblers were made by Cumbria Crystal. Photo courtesy of Diageo.

As a factory, Cumbria Crystal creates handblown and hand cut 24 percent lead crystal bar and stemware. Their catalog includes wine glasses, gin glasses, decanters, and others. It is known that numerous traditional glass factories in Europe today have their glass products produced offshore and are later finished and packaged at the mother factory in the country of origin. Glass factories farm out work to keep costs down while retaining their brand name.

Chris Blade, the CEO of Cumbria Crystal, recently shared, "I am very proud to keep our traditional skills in-house without any automation." This means that once the batch crystal (the raw ingredients to produce the glass) arrives at the factory, everything stays on-site until it leaves the building as a finished product. "Our product is completely British. We do not subcontract anything, but occasionally we bring in people on a consultancy basis for specialist projects."

An official Downton Abbey film production poster displaying a wine glass from the Grasmere Collection. Photo courtesy of the Downton Abbey Franchise.



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## Seeing Is Believing

As an alumnus of the Royal College of Art, London (RCA), Chris Blade waxes lyrical. "We aspire to create the best handmade crystal possible, using traditional glassblowing techniques and processes. As an example, we do not have continuous melt tank furnaces like larger crystal manufacturers, as it would represent a major move from traditional glassmaking methods. We have two rather large traditional pot furnaces for production and a third smaller furnace reserved for learning experiences for the public.

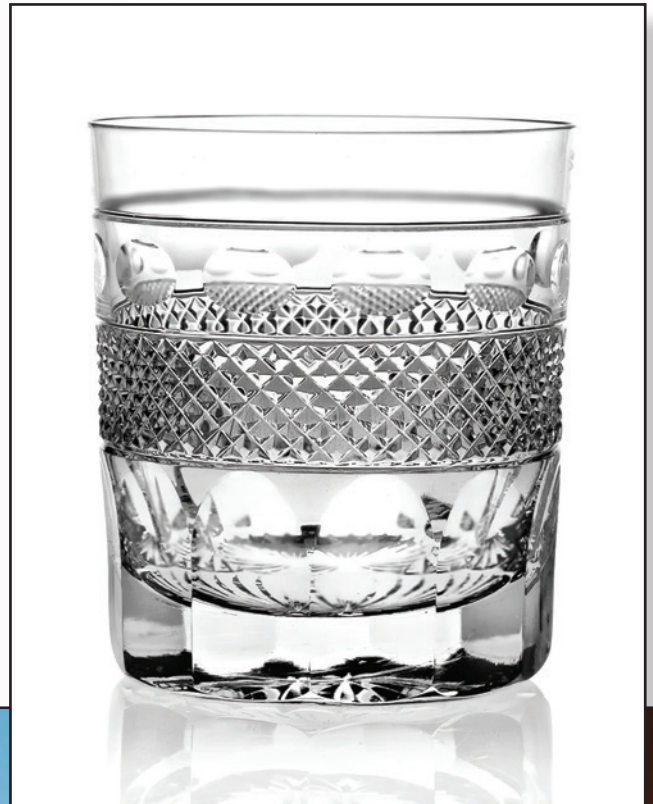
"In terms of price, we do not try to compete, because we have no desire to be in competition with other glass manufacturers who are more driven by price. To give one an idea of our quality aspirations, we actually downgrade 50 percent of our finished crystal for minor reasons. These products are occasionally made available to UK customers and visitors to our shop. This is only sold in the UK. This downgraded crystal is often still of a higher quality than what is available elsewhere."

When it comes to Cumbria Crystal's products, Chris Blade is old school. Chris's thoughts concerning the artistry of his items are influenced by the early ideologies of the post-war 1919 to 1933 Bauhaus movement, which embraced naturalistic expressionism, individual creativity, and handcraft. Chris Blade wants to close the deepening gap between art and craftsmanship using the principle that decoration is of secondary importance to form, and form is dictated by function and material.

*This Double Old Fashioned 12-ounce BT-102-GR Grasmere tumbler is the company's hero product used by Daniel Craig in the James Bond movie Casino Royale. Photo by Chris Blade.*

*The Grasmere Barware Collection.  
Photo by Jan Baldwin.*

"People perceive crystal as a functional object with a finite price. I wish to change this perception and represent crystal as functional art. We try to educate and demonstrate to our clients exactly what it takes to create products to the highest of standards. When buying Cumbria Crystal glass, you are buying artistry that just happens to be in the form of a wine goblet." Chris Blade's attitude is reminiscent of the art critic and polymath John Ruskin, who also lived in the Lake District. Ruskin's ideas influenced the mission of the Arts and Crafts movement circa 1862 through 1914. The Arts and Crafts manifesto essentially endeavored to develop products that not only had more integrity but were also made in a less dehumanizing way with little or no automation.



## Royal Seal of Approval

Cumbria Crystal is associated with nobility through its origin story and through its connection with the hit British television series *Downton Abbey*, which uses Cumbria Crystal's *Grasmere* in all of the formal dining scenes. Chris is rather proud of the noble connections that Cumbria Crystal boasts. "There are numerous royal families the world over who own our crystal. Currently we cannot boast a Royal Warrant, but we hope to achieve that one day."



Pierce Brosnan as James Bond seated next to glassware from the Helvellyn Collection, which is used by most British embassies and consulates globally. Photo courtesy of the Bond Franchise.

Interestingly enough, Chris was invited to the annual Royal Garden Party at Buckingham Palace some years back. Queen Elizabeth II was due to attend but unfortunately had to cancel at the last moment. Instead, Chris Blade got to meet Prince Charles and Camilla Parker Bowles, who are now known as His Majesty The King and Her Majesty The Queen Consort since the death of the Queen in 2022.

"I have met King Charles III a few times. The Prince opened our graduation show at the RCA, and I founded my first business with support from the Prince's trust. Shortly afterwards, I was selected to have a one-on-one conversation with Lady Diana, The Princess of Wales. I also met the late Prince Phillip a few times at various stages en route to achieving a Gold Duke of Edinburgh Award. I was presented the Award at Buckingham Palace by the Duke."



The Grasmere Collection on the set of *Downton Abbey*. Photo courtesy of the *Downton Abbey* Franchise.

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## Paralysis by Analysis

In a world where fashions change every season, it is fascinating to understand how a traditional glass factory stays at the top of its game both in its quality output, which is expensive, and its relevance to societal needs and desires. Chris Blade recently spent time analyzing the back catalog of Cumbria Crystal products and ruthlessly axed more than 800 historical designs. "We examined sales since the inception of Cumbria Crystal and scrutinized products, collections, and forms sold. Armed with this information, we were able to identify and remove less popular or profitable designs. Even now, we probably still have too many unique products, so we will repeat the process in 2023."

The exhaustion accompanying the agony of choice is a thoroughly modern phenomenon. Chris is well aware of this malaise, which can lead to decision-making paralysis. By slimming down the catalog, Chris wants to make life less complicated for his clients while leaving space to embrace new motifs to Cumbria Crystal. "To give an example, our *Grasmere Collection* comprises about fifty different products, whereas for Saint-Louis or Baccarat, collections may have only half a dozen."



The Loop Collection barware designed by Dr. Jessamy Kelly for Cumbria Crystal. Photo by Jan Baldwin.

Over the last few years, Cumbria Crystal has launched several new collections to keep their offerings contemporary and relevant. "A lot of cut crystal collectors still enjoy the traditional designs, but to enrich the offer, we have been working with British designers to create our *Palm*, *Loop*, *Boogie Woogie*, and *Luna* collections to date. Further, for the last four years we hosted an education and design project with the glass and ceramics PhD/master's students from the RCA. We invite a select few annually to the Lake District and introduce them to the inner workings of the glass factory. We show the students how to cut crystal, and thereafter they are invited to create a design concept. If we see creative and commercial potential, we may put that design into production, and the student will receive royalties from the sales to help support their studies."



Crystal has a whitish finish before polishing in sulfuric and hydrofluoric acid. Photo by Chris Blade.



Private bespoke collections belonging to a Cumbria Crystal client. Photo courtesy of the client.



Bentayga Mulliner champagne glasses in a Bentley limousine. Cumbria Crystal is one of only two crystal suppliers for Bentley. Photo courtesy of Bentley.



The Bentley Mulsanne WO Limited Edition collection of bottles and tumblers. Photo by Bentley.

The 100th anniversary Bentley electric concept car. Photo by Bentley.



## Growth Is Essential

Even after all the trials that recent years have brought to Cumbria Crystal, the company continues to gently go from strength to strength. Their hopes for the future embrace distance selling directly to international customers, growth, and the recruitment of more talented and experienced production glassblowers and cutters. Chris envisions the creation of a Central Lakes visitors center and flagship store, along with a healthy partnership with the department of tourism, since tourism is the primary source of income for the Lake District economy. As Cumbria Crystal works on its global presence, the company also searches for new and innovative investment partners.

When discussing why one should buy a piece of fine crystal, Chris quips, "There are a number of studies that show if you drink wine from a really special glass, it tastes better and your enjoyment is greater. Therefore, I suggest to people, 'Don't buy cheap glass. Buy stunning handmade crystal, and serve your guests cheaper wine. The glass will wind up paying for itself.'" **G&A**

**Cumbria Crystal**  
www.cumbriacrystal.com



Dr. Julie Anne Denton received her doctorate in the combination of sand cast and flameworked glass for artists in 2017. She has been schooled in the Italian flameworking tradition and has worked alongside some of the best flameworking and sand casting artists of the day. Settled in Zurich, Switzerland, Julie runs her design firm, [www.atelier315.ch](http://www.atelier315.ch), and virtual school, [www.zurichglassschool.com](http://www.zurichglassschool.com), from the center of the city. She works with a small team beside her who all care deeply about quality.

Julie Anne creates work that resonates beauty, workmanship, and authenticity. Her key themes are people, folklore, nature, and counterculture. She has received worldwide recognition for her storytelling skills as an artist and her technical skills as a glassmaker.

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