

Our kind of people

New model Army

Stewart Tuckniss has taken time off from MOD to bring the armies of the empire back to Britain

Report: Lorraine McBride

Pictures: Ian Nelson

IF LOYD Grossman from TV's *Through the Keyhole* visited Stewart Tuckniss's apartment, he would love it. "Now what do we have heeere? Who on earth could have a mini regiment of carved wooden soldiers guarding not just his smart wooden front doooooor, but each of his seven neighbours as well?"

Sorry, Loyd, but it doesn't stop there. Stewart's Thames-side Brentford flat is filled with room-dominating reminders of his travels. Half a dozen four-foot-tall colonial soldiers are dotted around. There's a globe, a marble topped table and wicker cane furniture, all of which create an unmistakable out-of-Africa theme. There is even an antique carved elephant's tusk earning its keep as a loo-roll holder.

Stewart's historical soldiers, all hand-carved in Ghana, exude enormous character. Each has a unique expression and combines African appearance with British military uniform and military bearing. The range includes Guardsman, Beefeaters, Gurkhas and others who fought in battles from Flanders to the Khyber Pass.

Stewart's father and grandfather both served in the colonial army, and his interest in empire militaria may have sprung from this. In any case, the MOD man who has taken an unpaid sabbatical from his job as a Band C administrator has managed to turn his love of African art and military history into an exciting business.

"When I was growing up in Liverpool the walls were adorned with African art," he recalled. "As a little boy I often played with soldiers and one day I woke with the idea to mix the two together."

Stewart set off for Africa where he was enchanted by the carving skills of craftsmen in Ghana. Falling for a local culture is not uncommon, but whereas many of us fantasise about running a bar in Majorca, Stewart went one better and bought his own carving school and workshop. Then he applied for a career break from MOD and, ever since, has devoted himself full-time to running his business.

The carving school in the Kumasi region in the Ashanti kingdom has 20 craftsmen, and each puts his individual mark on the carvings. "My control is minimal," said Stewart. "Some of the models' faces are smily, some are grumpy, some are arrogant and some handsome. But every one is different."

Each soldier takes about three months to complete. The models are hand-carved in wood harvested from sustainable sources in Ghana.

They are then dried in the open air and painted in rainbow shades. "We just use the ordinary gloss you paint your house with," explains Stewart.

Stewart wanted the statuettes to reflect the ethnic and racial differences of the colonial armies. The carvers were not used to differentiating between European, African and Indian faces, but cultural-crossover was helped when Stewart modelled for the carvers. "They embraced the challenge of new faces," said Stewart. "When they met one of my friends who has a goaty beard, the Beefeaters went overnight from having a full beard to minimalist ones."

The wooden soldiers are marketed across the globe, and tastes vary from nation to nation. In Britain, Gurkhas are a hit. The Americans generally prefer Indian or African soldiers, while Beefeaters are very popular in middle America ("they use them to guard their bars," Stewart explained). In France, African soldiers are popular.

Fans include the curators of the Victoria and Albert Museum, where they have been exhibited, and interior designers who use them to create the moods of the empire.

Defence *attaches* snap them up for gifts, as did Donald Trump and the choreographer of *Bombay Dreams*.

Stewart has just exhibited at the House and Garden show at London's Olympia, where he was surprised to come face-to-face with an interested Lord Lichfield. "Haven't you enough guards already?" asked Stewart.

So in addition to princely palaces, are the soldiers from Ghana for the ordinary



Guards on parade: Stewart Tuckniss is surrounded by carefully carved effigies from the days of Empire

two-up, two-down in Peckham? "I think they're great conversation pieces whatever the size of the house," says Stewart. It is his firm belief that if a soldier dominates the room rather than a television, that can only be a good thing.

Stewart is aware that his MOD career may have given him a head start, "The benefit has been immense," he says. "I've mixed with everyone from soldiers to generals, done operational tours and I've developed the ability to sell, talk and put my message across."

With much of the hard setting-up work done, Stewart has pencilled in a return to MOD for January. But he has set ambitious goals for his business and does not hide the fact that he is concerned about the demands of running a business and holding down a job.

Considering his

ambitions, there is every reason to think that the carving business will only become more demanding. Stewart wants to work with his colleagues in Ghana to produce and market even better carvings, work that people will treasure 100 years from now.

And he just might achieve that if enough people follow his motto to the letter: "Put a soldier in your house and salute him every morning."



African carvings in London: Stewart Tuckniss displays his models at Earls Court