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Building a furniture business

Andrew Ward explains how his well-established furniture making company has evolved and continues to produce high quality items

BY NIGEL HUDDLESTON

It’s been a rollercoaster ride, but you get the feeling from talking to Andrew Ward that after 34 years in the trade his company, Jacob Furniture UK, is getting close to being the finished article. ‘We’ve been through the recession and the trauma of getting over it by doing every type of work we’ve been asked to do,’ says Andrew, ‘but now we’re narrowing down our services to what we specialise in, which is high-end bespoke furniture.’

Specifically, the high-end, Cheshire-based furniture manufacturer is branching out with its own stunning, contemporary and traditional ranges to supplement the established side of the business in bespoke cabinetmaking and upholstery.

And when he says Jacob Furniture is called ‘bespoke’, it really is. ‘We find it very difficult to get people to understand what we do,’ he says. ‘A lot of companies describe themselves

as bespoke furniture makers when really they’re offering the same piece of furniture in different fabrics. ‘With a chair from us, for example, the seat will be as deep or as high as you want it, with your choice of interior filling, based on your comfort requirements. Every piece of furniture we supply is made from start to finish, by us at our workshops in Cheshire.’

The early years

Andrew studied furniture making and design at the Manchester School of Furniture: ‘There were only 12 students in the year and six lecturers. I was very lucky really for the one on one teaching. It was a very traditional course in hand cabinet making and traditional upholstery using horse hair, hand-sewn upholstery and traditional polishing. The first year we studied English and Irish designers, and then had three years doing restoration work. The teachers were all old

craftsmen who had worked in the fields of cabinet making, traditional upholstery, French polishing and restoration.’

When he left in 1983 he set up his first business with a friend, buying up antiques in need of some TLC from big fairs around the country, restoring them and selling them on. ‘Unless you were at a really high level the antique market just died in the late 1990s and it was hard to make a living, so I reverted back to making furniture and the business grew from there.’

What has since become Jacob Furniture UK – named after his son – began life in a 20ft shed in Andrew’s back garden. ‘I started off working for the trade, for interior designers, which is still a lot of what we do now,’ he says. The business had a major jolt with the global financial crisis of the late 2000s. ‘We’d just invested £240,000 to buy new machinery, but it was about a month before the Icelandic bank went under and that put us under tremendous pressure. We struggled through but managed to keep the wolf from the door and our heads above water.’ He goes on to say: ‘In the past, we’ve taken on work which we hadn’t done before, but

it meant we have learned all manner of new skills. We now use an array of materials, Perspex, metals, laminates, glass and woods that we wouldn’t have dreamed of using before.’

It took until this year for the company to join The Guild. Andrew says the appeal was ‘recognition by other people of what we as a company produce.’ He adds: ‘We were thinking about how we could get realisation for true bespoke furniture making and to believe what we say is what we do. Often clients find it difficult to visualise a piece of furniture, when it is not right there in front of them’

Traditional and contemporary work

At the start, Andrew says, his work was very traditional in style and materials, but times have changed, and both the bespoke work and their own designs now fuse the old and the new. ‘When we started, MDF was word people would turn their nose up at, whereas now we use it on a regular basis, due to its ideal properties.’

Among the first of the company’s own designs is the Domeba range, comprising a sofa and armchair with a



teardrop shape for its arms that's carried through to the platform of a footstool. 'We want to push forward into creating art furniture, pure one-off pieces,' says Andrew. 'We want to forge our own branding and image, to become known for making this particular type of 'off-the-wall' furniture. We're aiming high end, keeping quality as our main priority.' He continues: My son Jacob and I encountered the owner of acres of forest in Wales. After visiting it, we purchased a large amount of oak, of which we have made several pieces of furniture, and have now begun designing others. We have combined these natural materials with man-made to produce art pieces, bespoke in the true sense of the word.'

While a contemporary influence is strong in the designs it's the UK's long tradition of cabinetmaking from which Andrew draws most inspiration. 'I love the English walnut period of the early 18th century and my tastes have changed over the years, so I love Art Deco and the Arts & Crafts movement as well.'

The future

The company has a team of five and is looking to add more staff as we grow. This includes Jacob, the now grown-up boy the firm is named after. 'He started in the workshops, learning with me from the age of six,' says Andrew. Recently he has trained in photography and CAD drawing with 3D design, to

move with modern times. He continues: 'I still use a drawing board, old school. I design working drawings and pencil sketches, then Jacob converts them to 3D designs and renders them for customers to help visualise the design.'

The range of skills in the business and its flexibility in approach to design and materials has led to some unusual commissions, including sofas and tables for branches of a major high street retailer, furniture for a steam ship, silver thrones for those who can't be named and magic furniture for a magician.

The spectrum of modern materials to work with means it's a constant process of learning and exploration for Andrew and his team. 'We have come across an innovative technology to adhere Perspex to fabrics without any adhesive,' he says. It means we'll be able to make beautiful panelling and apply it into furniture and wall art.' He goes on to tell us: 'We're also working with solid surface products, laminates, veneers and exquisite fabrics from around the world enabling us to produce beautiful bespoke furniture at its highest level.' 

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