

In the workshop with Peter Sefton

A room with two views

**Derek Jones visits Peter Sefton
in his workshop and finds a
woodworker for woodworkers**



► Peter Sefton's interest in furniture making goes right back to his school days. The process that captured his imagination at this impressionable age was marquetry. He readily admits that his interest, verging on obsession, was out of sync with those of his peers and to this day the intricate nature of the work remains a fascinating aspect of the craft.

After studying furniture making at Brunel in Bristol nearly 27 years ago, he completed what was to be his first spell at college, before leaving to become a journeyman cabinetmaker. The first serious piece of furniture Peter made at college was a magnificent Carlton House desk veneered in satin wood that he made at the age of 18. 25 years later he says, "It's starting to look a very good colour at last." The piece incorporates coopered doors, brickwork carcassing, intricate

inlay and of course hand veneering is a veritable tour de force for any professional maker, let alone one with so much to learn. A string of successful commissions ensued before he set up his own workshop in Worcestershire producing furniture to his own designs.

It's never a bad thing to have more than one string to your bow and the practice has a habit of creating opportunities later in life. Not unusually Peter's business was supplemented by an income from part time lecturing of students in further education. This eventually led to a permanent position running City & Guilds and BTEC furniture design and making courses at two local colleges. The change in direction is not that surprising as many will testify. The satisfaction gained from passing knowledge to willing individuals is every bit as rewarding as the act of making furniture itself. After 16 years

of being part of an education system, not so much in decline as constantly under stress, the time had come to launch the Peter Sefton Furniture School. 18 months down the line F&C dropped by to see what we could learn from the experience.

The first serious piece Peter made was a stunning Carlton House desk



Workshop heaven



Peter and Sarah Sefton

We often refer to idyllic surroundings in connection with established makers. Similarly the notion of attending a retreat for the sole purpose of subject immersion has an equally strong appeal. At the foot of the Malverns, Peter's location certainly follows this trend and it must be said that the facilities aren't too shabby either.

Adjacent to the school is Peter and Sarah's home; a converted barn that was once his workshop. As idyllic as it was and many would fight to the death for such a space, it was far from perfect, being draughty and cold in the winter and home to an assortment of wildlife for the rest of the year.

As anyone who has dealt with a local planning authority will know, the experience of obtaining permission for a change of use on certain buildings can't be summed

up in a few sentences. This is a monumental achievement in its own right but consider for a moment completing the process of setting up home and business simultaneously whilst expanding your young family.

It was quite a feat and everything past that must seem like a walk in the park as Peter and Sarah are wonderfully calm and relaxed people to be with. The atmosphere is amplified further by a commitment across the board to create an environment conducive to learning. Sarah manages the administration of the students finding accommodation and in some cases making travel arrangements to make the whole experience an enjoyable one. She also delivers the Business Studies syllabus option to students on the nine-month course and draws on her original training at art college as a textile





The machine 'shop in all its glory, with plenty of space and light

designer to teach elements of the design syllabus. As a business, the two are acutely aware of the need for a strong image and to deliver excellent service.

The building is heavily insulated and heated entirely by timber off-cuts and shavings produced by the students in wood burners in each of the two workshops. There are also plans to install PV (photovoltaic) solar panels with the benefit of selling excess energy to the local grid.

In estate agent parlance the aspect is south facing and benefits from some magnificent views of the Malverns.

The school attracts a variety of students, many of which might be termed 'mature'. There have been a number of overseas candidates on both his long and short-term courses. Whether you're a number cruncher or not, it's an impressive statistic that four out of five students who attend a short course return later for an extended course.

The issue of students and their fees is a contentious one and our conversation drifts towards politics and the role that establishments like this have in providing a service. You don't have to be an expert to see their appeal in today's market, and let's not forget, it's a market where the consumer has a growing number of options.

The new exterior cladding to the workshop buildings disguise what used to be disused farm buildings

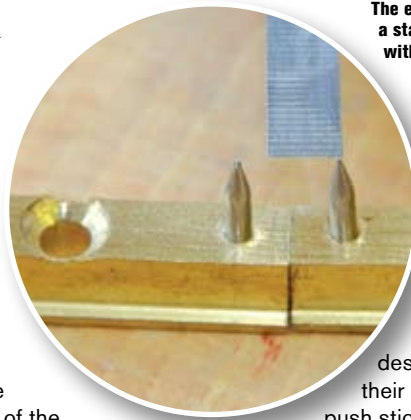
Shoptalk

The workshop is kitted out with modern machines in what were once rather dilapidated agricultural buildings adjacent to his old workshop.

The cabinet 'shop and classroom are located each side of the machine shop. A timber store is also incorporated within the same building along with a facility for the storage of power tools. Each student is provided with a set of hand tools to use throughout their course. The set includes Ashley Iles chisels and a Quangsheng block plane.

I quizzed Peter over his choice of western saws for his tool kits expecting to find an eastern influence in there somewhere. He justified his indifference claiming he could get perfect results with the western saw he's been using for more than 20 years and the thought of changing now holds little appeal. The kits include a mortise gauge that are typically only capable of marking a 6mm mortise or thicker.

After dismantling one such device he explains how he grinds the ends of the two brass inlaid strips to get this down to 4mm. Beginners are taught the basics through a series of projects



The ends of the brass strips on a standard mortise gauge can withstand grinding to allow a 4mm setting

designed to add to their tool collection, push sticks, mallets and veneer hammers to name a few. Making tools that you will later rely on is a perfect way to develop the relationship between maker and material. As confidence grows and the needs of the individual change, these are replaced with projects of greater complexity.

As you would expect from his background, Peter places great emphasis on the safety aspect of using machines (the subject of his shortest course) and has developed several methods to convey the benefits of one machine over another to help illustrate the point. This is evident elsewhere from the choice of sharpening methods permanently available to the students to experiment with, which include two Tormeks, numerous oil, diamond and water stones and of course 3M 'scary sharp' films. The inference being that there's no right or wrong way, only the one that suits you best.



The cabinet 'shop is every bit as spacious as the machine shop with the benefit of some fantastic views

Peter's table saw tip

Peter is a prolific jig maker with a systematic approach to getting the most out of each machine and tool. One such example was for a simple device used to cut laminates or inlays accurately on the table saw.

To find out his invaluable table saw tip, go to www.woodworkersinstitute.com



► Holistic tutoring

Roy Hands was the first of the students we spoke to. He was enrolled on a three-month course following an intensive one week chair making course last year, incorporating steam bending, turning and green oak woodworking.

Paul Haskins, a bricklayer by trade, had enrolled on a nine month course as part of his plan to effect a career change. He was beginning to master the WoodRat that he'd bought before joining the course to make a large blanket box when we met. A competent user of SketchUp, he demonstrated how he used the software to design the piece and talk through his concept with Peter before cutting any timber.

Peter invites guest lecturers onto the course to instruct students on other aspects of furniture making and design.

Chris Eagles for instance demonstrates woodturning and Paul Hodgson demonstrates chair making. James Ryan, from the Barnsley Workshop, lectures on his design ethos and Mary Greenstead is a leading authority on the Arts and Crafts movement. As well as visits to the Gordon Russell museum in the Cotswolds town of Broadway, the students get to see different types of commercial workshops in full flight. The students visit local maker Sean Feeney who also lectures on furniture

design at the school which is kitted out with a traditional drawing board and CAD.

When it comes to influences Peter mentioned John Makepeace and Peter Rolfe in the same sentence. Makepeace for his contribution to the world of furniture, almost single-handedly keeping contemporary designer/makers on the map and Rolfe for his creativity, particularly his shaped work.

Roy Hands with the chair he made on a one week intensive course last year



Paul Haskins makes the most of the expertise available by learning to master his own WoodRat...



...the two discuss the finer points of machine dovetailing on a series of test pieces



Jig making is covered extensively and forms the basis of a number of projects

The drive back to the south coast was around five hours, taking in some of the worst parts of the M25. We left in a hurry without thanking Sarah properly for her hospitality, something I'm ashamed of now despite a belated apology.

We talked about philanthropy and the mercurial ease in which the

Seftons appear to have built their empire. I've met a few makers turned teachers on my travels with F&C and with the emphasis now shifting away from conventional education, it's important that people like Peter exist. How long will it be, I wonder, before they become part of the mainstream?

Workshop

*Hammer F3 spindle moulder with power feed
Hammer A3-41 planer/thicknesser
Hammer N4400 bandsaw
Hammer K3 Winner table saw
Wadkin radial arm saw
2 x Axminster lathes
2 x Felder chip collectors*

As well as an impressive collection of machines, the workshop boasts a hand-cranked veneer press. Worthy of a place in any museum of industrial design, it was great to see this being used. In contrast a complete vacuum press kit, which is stored in a wooden box below.

Veneer has always featured prominently in Peter's work so it's natural for him to cover this process in some detail. Peter has his sights set on a hand-held veneer stitcher and possibly a calibrating machine as future investments.

F&C