



# The modern apprenticeship

## part 1

**Michael Huntley muses on modern apprenticeships and asks David Charlesworth, Peter Sefton and James Ryan for their views on private training**

I have been asked to write about modern apprenticeships, but, unsurprisingly, the word apprenticeship means something different to me than it does to today's audience. As I had been specifically asked not to write about how things were much better in the old days, I researched what the term meant to a random selection of today's training establishments.

### **What is an apprenticeship?**

In modern jargon, an apprenticeship is a specific, named pathway with a named qualification and funding allocated to an individual learner. Many Further Education Colleges (FE) in the UK offer City & Guilds cabinetmaking courses at Level 3 NVQ. This pathway might be called an apprenticeship. These are the normal Further Education Colleges

which used to be found in every large town, many of these have changed titles, but there should be a college near you. They are funded by the government.

To enter a course, you will usually need to have at least five GCSEs, with two at the minimum of a 'D' grade, or an appropriate Level 1 qualification. Your abilities will be assessed at your interview. ➤

## David Charlesworth and Peter Sefton Q&A



David Charlesworth and students on one of his courses

The other option is to go private. To give a flavour of this philosophy I asked some questions to a couple of well-known private providers. David Charlesworth and Peter Sefton kindly let me quote them here.

### Do you offer a training course that could be called an apprenticeship or foundation for apprenticeship?

#### David Charlesworth:

A foundation for successful furniture making would be more apt.

**Peter Sefton:** Yes, the professional long course we run is very similar to an apprenticeship as the students are mentored under a master craftsman. As the course progresses, students also cover business studies and marketing, getting the students prepared for the real world of running their own workshops or employment. We don't offer a formal qualification, but our course is based on my experiences of teaching in further education and running a bespoke furniture business.

### Can you briefly describe the objectives of your course/courses?

**DC:** The objective of my 12-week course is to get a beginner to the stage where they could make a simple piece of exhibition-quality furniture. Short courses of one week concentrate on fundamental skills: blade preparation, sharpening, plane tuning and use of planes, for example.

**PS:** Using my breadth of knowledge in many areas of furniture making, my objectives are to mentor new designer makers, introducing them to a range of techniques. This could be as a bespoke furniture designer/maker or running a business doing batch production work for other designers.

### How does this compare to your own apprenticeship or introduction to woodworking?

**PS:** We cover things in much more depth now. Although furniture making has not fundamentally changed over the years, the range of tools and materials available along with the variations of techniques has widened and technology has moved on. We embrace and teach those new skills and techniques within the workshop.

### What would you like to see improved or changed in the training of cabinetmakers in the UK?

**DC:** I have little experience of this area, but I detect that many of the City & Guilds courses seem to be severely limited with respect to the learning of hand skills.

**PS:** I would like to see more young people getting into woodworking and handcrafts at school, showing them that working in furniture making – or any of the craft – is a very rewarding career and that you learn by doing it, not writing dissertations. Far too many college courses are biased towards design with little time for making but I feel that the best designers have a full understanding and experience of working with wood and other media and know how materials behave and their possibilities.

### What is your perception of the current training standards for successful new entrants into the craft of cabinetmaking?

**DC:** I don't know any successful new entrants! My present students are mostly keen amateurs. In the past



An example of one of Peter Sefton's stunning pieces

when I taught 40-week courses, a number of students went on to have successful careers.

**PS:** From my experience, state education furniture making has been watered down over the years. The full-time City & Guilds course I trained on, was all day, five-days per week. We all know that a full-time state course can now be classed as a couple of days a week. Also, the fundamentals of the current City & Guilds course are what would have already been learned during GCSE and A-Level woodwork at school, so standards for school leavers need to be raised.

The original City & Guilds 555 was the apprentice's qualification. It was the bedrock of the furniture industry, but has been chopped about – for the worse – so much over the last 20 years.

Feedback we get from students about state courses is that they often

have little access to a lecturer and need to make an appointment 48 hours beforehand to see them. They are often left to learn by themselves with no direction – it's good to learn by your mistakes, but you need an experienced maker to help you turn that mistake around. They are not learning sharpening or wood machining/timber preparation, as technicians do that – it is often seen as too dangerous for the students to use the machines – so how will they learn? They are only getting part of the experience!

### Are there any other comments you would like to add?

**DC:** As I understand it, most of the good furniture making courses at college are being scrapped as a cost-cutting measure. Personally, I think this is a scandalous waste. What would David Pye have said?

## Barnsley Trust

Further views are presented by James Ryan of the Barnsley Educational Trust. The Trust is a special case due to their standing amongst their peers. A reference letter from them is usually deemed sufficient at a job interview.

James writes, "Edward Barnsley was one of the most important British furniture makers of the 20th century and his workshop is one of the few that offer a practical apprenticeship in furniture making in the UK. We believe passionately in the value of practical, workshop-based training. The Barnsley Workshop has been teaching apprentices to become fine furniture makers since its early days in the 1920s.

### Training

Those starting a career in furniture making, especially if they want to work at the very top end of the market, often find themselves in a Catch-22 situation. They cannot get a job without practical experience, but they cannot gain experience without a job. At college they will have made a few items of furniture, learnt about design, wood science, furniture history and business skills; but they usually lack sufficient practical skills to be commercially viable furniture makers. It takes time at the bench to reach this ➤



Craftsman Joe Orchard working on the stand for a large extending table



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF JAMES RYAN

**Designer James Ryan (left) and Apprentice Chris Wallis (right) working on oak (*Quercus robur*) library steps for an exhibition at Masterpiece London 2012**

► level. Understandably, employers are reluctant to employ anyone who, for perhaps a year or more, will lose them money. Training someone well costs a lot. Taking into account the financial support we provide to apprentices, the lost productivity of the person who trains the apprentices and associated administrative costs, it adds up to about £25,000 per year to train an apprentice. The EBET does not receive government support. Instead it raises funds to cover the cost of training from charities and individuals with an interest in education and the crafts.

### Quality experience

We take the training of apprentices very seriously. In the same way that we produce well-made furniture, we aim to provide high quality training. For us that means showing apprentices the standard they should be aiming for and then how to achieve that standard. Apprentices work alongside experienced furniture makers and follow a carefully conceived syllabus. They work from start to finish on each piece they make. For the first three months they use only hand tools. This is the bedrock of their training. They go on to learn a broad range of Barnsley techniques, combining hand work and machine work; making furniture of increasing complexity.

### EBET apprentices

Our apprentices have gone on to achieve a lot. Alan Peters OBE trained in the Barnsley Workshop. In recent years two of our apprentices have represented the UK at the WorldSkills competition. Chris Wallis, who joined us in 2009 and is now one of our craftsmen, represented the UK in 2011. At the Barnsley Workshop we believe in training those who want to be outstandingly good. Having trained with us we hope they can derive satisfaction from making things well for the rest of their careers." James Ryan from the Barnsley Workshop asks us to point out that the closing date for applications for this year's intake is 20 May, 2013.

### Practice makes perfect

My personal experience of apprentices when I was running a workshop is that they arrived fresh from college without a full range of basic skills. I think this has now changed and improved, but it still seems to be the case that FE colleges focus too much on perceived theoretical skills and not enough on the basic practical skills and speed found in every functioning workshop. Private providers, like functioning workshops, have to succeed with their students, therefore they concentrate on the skills that they know are essential in order to get and keep a job.

Next month I shall look at Sheffield Hallam University and see how they support their graduates and also have some pithy comments from John Lloyd in Sussex and one of his successful students. As usual I welcome correspondence on the subject, contact me via my website where I will post notes that I didn't have room to include in the printed article. *F&C*

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