



Tom Cooper

Near Dalkeith, Midlothian, Fi Martynoga finds two young furniture makers for the price of one!

The former parkland of Newbattle Abbey is full of grand old trees. Holm oaks line the pitted track to the former army camp that forms its trading estate. The buildings are brick, utilitarian but capacious. Several contain furniture makers, eight in all, including Michaela Huber (see issue 39, page 23), plus stone masons and other artisans. Blue wood smoke, always a good sign, drifts from Tom Cooper's workshop chimney. Inside it is cosy and I find two makers, as Stephen Finch, formerly at Real Woods Studios, now rents bench space from Tom. This is a bonus because Stephen shares Tom's refined aesthetic sense and produces furniture of equal finesse. That's partly why he is welcome there. The other reason is they like each other, with plenty of jokes flying and a little gentle sparring.

Photos from top left: Sycamore and elm 'wavy' nest of tables; Burr elm with sycamore detailing 'trinity' table; Edinburgh elm and reclaimed Australian Jarrah, 100th anniversary battle of Gallipoli sculpture; Edinburgh elm table top lectern for American College of Surgeons; Oak and sycamore 'petal' hallway table.

It was Tom's attention to detail, particularly to finish, that attracted me to his work. "Finish has got to be spot on. I spend as much time on finishing a piece as on making it. It has to stand the test of time", says Tom. He graduated in 2001 from Edinburgh College of Art: the last year they ran a furniture course. That is not where he learnt many of his skills, though. "All my methods are self-taught. I pick up tips from other makers and always remember the Six Ps: Prior Preparation Prevents Piss-Poor Performance!"

Seeing pieces in progress demonstrates this maxim in action. Tom is currently finishing a set of occasional tables. Designed to stack, two smaller clones of the top table nest, one inside another, with precisely the right amount of tolerance between them. Tom has used contrasting woods, sycamore and elm. Patterns of swirling grain repeat as echoes in each piece. It is clear that every component has had to be squared, planed, sanded, and even oiled before being glued for assembly. The results

are flawless. "The customer never sees the precise work. If you are making drawers or doors for a piece, they have to fit with just half a millimetre around them. It's absolutely necessary - and completely invisible!"

Antiques of the future

To get the quality of timber they need, Tom and Stephen have recently started to oversee the processing of trees from start to finish. Potential customers frequently offer fallen trees but only a few of these can actually be used. A wind-thrown tree may well have rot that renders it useless. What's more, access with a sawmill is often impossible in back gardens. But people like the idea of having something made from their own tree. When the two makers can rescue a tree, they are pleased. They pay a portable saw miller to plank it, get it dried in a solar-powered kiln near Cousland, and then bring it back to continue seasoning at the workshop. Tom records every stage of the process in a little Book of Provenance, that goes to the customer with the finished piece.



From this talk of how wood is processed, I glean an interesting snippet. Scottish sycamore (famous as a wood for making string instruments) must initially be dried in a vertical position. This is to encourage the sap to drain. If left in the plank it dulls from creamy white to grey, and the polished surfaces are left without the sparkle that should be a defining feature of well-prepared sycamore.

Tom makes working models of many of his pieces, to show customers exactly what they will be like. He demonstrates a model of an extending table, built as carefully as a full-sized piece, and just as carefully as a table made by a Georgian cabinet maker. Indeed, this furniture is of such quality it will become the antiques of the future, long after the rickety products of Ikea have been chewed to wood pellets.

Aside from trees for his own use, through the Scottish Furniture Makers' Association, Tom has been closely involved with an Edinburgh project. Initiated by residents in the Meadows area, 'Local Woods

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to Local Makers' has ensured that several of the elms felled because of Dutch elm disease have been transformed into furniture rather than firewood. Unfortunately, the makers are victims of the success of the project. Edinburgh Council, alerted to their value, now sells felled trees to hardwood sawmills in England – an unforeseen outcome. Before that happened, Tom made a fine table for the Lord Provost, Donald Wilson. He also designed and produced a display, exhibited in the Dovecot Studios last year. It details all the processes, the felling, milling, kilning, selection of timber, design, cutting, initial finishing, assembly, and final finishing, that are involved in converting a butt to a table.

Tom also has a special relationship with the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh. He made a lectern for them that they presented to a sister college in Chicago, for their 100-year anniversary; and has done several other small pieces, ranging from a quaich to a sculpture to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Battle of Gallipoli, presented to the Australian College of Surgeons. When another gift is needed, or some ceremonial piece, it is to Tom that the College will turn.

Attention to detail

Tom shows me other pieces of work. An almost circular table, with a pattern of reticulated shapes like those on a tortoise shell, takes my fancy. The dark wood reticulations stand a little proud of the pale sycamore that separates them. The paler wood reminds me of most elegantly achieved pointing between stones on a wall. A more formal semi-circular table has a geometrical inlay, perfect in every detail. “I don't like the timber to dominate. The design and the wood have to work together”, Tom comments. Yet detail is clearly of paramount importance to him. And his attention to it is surely what has earned him a great deal of attention

of late. In the last few months he has appeared in *The Scotsman Magazine*, *Trend*, and *Full Circle*, the journal of ASHS, the Association of Scottish Hardwood Sawmillers.

Stephen walks through the workshop as Tom is showing me his standard lamp, its shape derived from plant forms, like many of his designs. It is made from exquisitely laminated walnut and sycamore, and has elegant concave curves, ‘The Cooper Curve’ as Stephen quips. Tom's repost is to tease him for playing with some thick conte board. “Up-cycling”, says Stephen, “For my house. I'm in a hurry for some shelving and you should be proud of me for preventing waste. Besides, furniture makers can't often afford their own products!”

Sadly for many of us, it is true that the products of this workshop will never be cheap. The time it takes to produce them, the sophistication of the craftsmanship, and the unique nature of every one, must inevitably make them expensive. Yet the clients are out there. Tom's order book is full for the next nine months, and, by working six days a week, he does make a living. More about Stephen will have to wait for another issue but it is clear that here are two of the very best of Scotland's young makers.

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