

Carpentry, joinery and cabinet-making

Where the traditional
joins the contemporary

Tall dresser-style units form part of an aged effect oak farmhouse kitchen in Upper Wardington, Northamptonshire



In a throw-away society, well-made furniture is an investment for life, enhancing the lived environment in a way that does justice to the needs of the property and those who live in it. At the same time, it is creating the antiques of the future.

Modern machinery makes life easier but furniture-making is still a craft with a value for those who

work in or have an affinity for wood. With older buildings the challenge is to produce pieces which are in harmony with their setting but which also meet the demands of modern living. And since old houses especially do not always have the regular dimensions of modern dwelling, bespoke, made-to-measure furniture is often a necessity.

This includes not only free-

standing cabinets and tables - oak remains the material of choice for its qualities of grain and robustness - but also panelling, libraries and kitchens and bathrooms. The techniques fundamental to furniture-making have not changed in essence over the centuries, though modernity has brought advances in interior functionality such as sliding rails, soft-closing, and electronically ➔



Above:
Solid oak island
with granite
worktop at Lower
Harlestone,
Northamptonshire

operated mechanisms. And as in previous times, furniture craftsmanship can be used today not just to show but also to conceal - in the vein of the old hidden 'library shelf' door, there is an increase in cabinets built to mask modern audio-visual units, marrying the grace of the old with the convenience of the new.

Today the kitchen is increasingly seen as the most important - and often most impressive - room in the house, a place where one does not just cook but also entertains. Fitted bathrooms are second in popularity, but most on the increase are panelled rooms or whole libraries. Bespoke furniture-makers work with

the client, planning the design to measure, hand-selecting specific pieces of timber and other materials to fit the place and the person.

What is common to all these projects is the enduring appeal of wood itself. Claire Martin-Redman Smith, Director of Fraser James Furniture, tells us, "People today want the wood to speak for itself. They value the highlighting of the grain and the natural colour of the wood itself. In recent years walnut has taken over in popularity from maple, while the warm colour of cherry makes it also sought after. Stained is out, unless to match existing furniture. And everybody

wants curves, even if only one or two. They are the most challenging, and as has always been the case, this can take three times the amount of materials and time due to the craftsmanship involved."

But while there is a renewed demand for quality craftsmanship, the trade of carpentry, joinery and cabinet-making itself is under pressure. Timber prices are rising - particularly for 'exotics' such as walnut and cherry, previously available at good prices from North America - and just as importantly, the availability of skilled craftsmen has been greatly reduced. There has been a decline in carpenter ➔

Left:
Hand painted kitchen and dining area, with a mix of granite and oak worktops, at Stanford Hall, Leicestershire

Top right:
Freestanding solid oak chest of drawers is in keeping with the traditional style of this bedroom at Leamington Hastings, Warwickshire

Middle right:
Warm colours of walnut and cherry enrich these library shelves at Badby, Northamptonshire incorporating differing ceiling heights and beams

Bottom right:
Hand-painted and solid oak kitchen cabinet unit, Blakesley, Northamptonshire



apprenticeships in recent decades - High Wycombe, once a thriving centre of the furniture trade closed its nationally acclaimed college for furniture making some years ago. The trade is no longer generational, not the highest paid, and while the appeal of bespoke furniture to creative and appreciative people is as alive as ever, there is a challenge for the trade to meet demands and thrive.

Fraser James' workshops are in rural Northamptonshire, and working in such locations is increasingly the norm in the

industry - this is due to economic realities, but the benefit is that furniture makers are once again working close to their roots in the natural environment.

With so many other manufactured products on the market, mass-produced and limited in character, what price can one put on natural materials and expert quality craftsmanship? Bespoke furniture not only provides the most sympathetic adornment to houses that already have character, it is an investment for years to come. And as Claire points out, "Bespoke cabinet-making

is creating something that hasn't been made before - every piece is unique for you and your space. The traditional is never out of fashion - especially in times of recession - but the design can be as contemporary as you like. The only limit is your imagination."

For further information visit:

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