

What makes a good designer? What course of action can he choose to ensure that he gets the best training? Should he be trained as a graduate from an art school or should he start at the bench in some form of apprenticeship? If one looks at the designers who have made their mark in their chosen field it is difficult to determine whether the type of training was responsible for their success. This is not the case with John Makepeace, who is regarded as the country's leading furniture designer and maker.

John Makepeace was born in 1939 in Solihull and had no formal art school background. Instead, from 1957 to 1959 he was a trainee cabinet-maker with Keith Cooper in Dorset. Not quite an apprenticeship, rather a two year intensive course in the realistic 'school' of a working furniture maker. Like many young aspiring craftsmen he wanted to set up his own business. In 1963, after a spell of travelling to the Scandinavian Countries, he bought Farnborough Barn near Banbury, which he and his wife Ann Sutton, the equally well known textile designer and innovator, turned into a house and a workshop.

It was not long before the name of Makepeace began to appear in the leading design journals. His name was soon to become a standard both inside and around the world of furniture and furniture design. Discerning users, collectors, museums and galleries sought his work, which never seems to have fallen into a 'style'. Anyone who knows his work is quick to agree, that the wide variety of designs he has produced is indicative of his fertile imagination and his innovative approach to construction.

The workshop in Banbury flourished and soon had a work force of five highly skilled craftsmen. Over the years John Makepeace has trained a number of young people who have joined him as apprentices. One only needs to see their work to realise that their training has been successful. He is constantly being approached by craftsmen who wish to join his team. Not least among these devotees have been students with design training who have felt the need to learn how to make furniture at the bench, so that they in turn could set up their own furniture making workshops.

Among other ideals, John Makepeace saw the value of extending his unintentional training scheme to create a school for craftsmen. The success of his enterprise at Banbury eventually outgrew the site and his search for new and larger premises saw the birth of his educational dream. In 1976 he and his wife acquired Parnham House at Beaminster, Dorset. After only half an hour of looking over the house they realised that it was the most perfect setting for their workshops and studios. The Great Hall would provide a permanent display of furniture and wooden artifacts, and amid this atmosphere of creativity and excellence there was room enough to establish a residential school for aspiring furniture makers. If this is not enough, by taking over Parnham House, the Makepeace's have entered into community service by opening the house and workshops to the public.

The School for Craftsmen in Wood at Parnham House

September 19th, 1977 sees the opening of the John Makepeace School for Craftsmen in Wood. The course, which will last two years, will be fully residential, and cost £3,000 a year — a figure that will include accommodation, tuition and materials. There will eventually be 16 students who will follow a timetable that is based on the working day of John Makepeace's own workshops.

The students selected for the first intake come from a variety of backgrounds. Their ages range from 18 to 30. Some are young people straight from school, some are university graduates who feel that their academic abilities were over emphasised at secondary level, some are students from schools of design. All have shown a deep feeling for wood and a commitment to becoming independent furniture makers. Applications for 1978 include a successful architect and a research chemist.

As the course is essentially practical in concept, the working day will start at 8.00 am with a break of an hour for lunch continuing through to 5.00 pm. A relatively formal course of instruction is planned, which will ensure that students are taught a body of knowledge upon which they can build their subsequent development. Set designs will be made in the first year that will take the potential craftsmen through a progression of skills. There will be no exercises. Everything that is to be made will be saleable. With an expenditure in time of five days per week at the bench, each student will produce all the wooden items for a small household. In this way it will be possible for a student to recoup a substantial portion of the fees. In the second year, students will be encouraged to develop their own

The North Court at Parnham House also houses the Workshops for the students on the Two Year course.



Parnham House. Showing the main entrance



designs based on the knowledge of sound construction, materials and practice acquired during the first year.

Compulsory evening lectures and seminars will cover business practice, especially in relation to the small, or even one-man enterprise. Also during evening sessions, students will be taught drawing and design, marketing and sales techniques, purchasing of materials, typing, in fact the many facets of running a craft business that have made John Makepeace's enterprise so successful. Nothing will be treated as pure theory. Time sheets will be kept so that a realistic assessment of costing is maintained. A complete office system will be established during the course for students to continue when they become independent. Outlets

for their work and premises will be located and developed to provide a continuity of sales and income after the course. The object is that students should have become commercially established before the course draws to a close.

The day-to-day running of the course will be the responsibility of the resident tutor. Robert Ingham, who taught technical studies at secondary and adult level, trained first as a teacher of handicrafts at Loughborough College and then as a furniture designer at Leeds College of Art. He also ran his own furniture making business before taking up his appointment at Parnham House. A variety of professional approaches will be brought to the course in the form of visiting lecturers and craftsmen, all of whom have achieved excellence in

A four poster bed made from a single yew tree with cheese cloth drapes and mattress supported on a slatted ash platform.

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Table and chairs in English sycamore. The table top stands clear of the perimeter rails and is cut away to show the tops of the legs. The chairs have seats in heavy natural coach hide, fixed with copper tacks. The legs of both table and chairs are detailed with blue chevrons at the feet.

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their speciality. In some cases their contribution will be such that, during their stay at Parnham House, they will be invited to give lectures and demonstrations to the public, thus extending the influence of the school and further involving the community.

The whole idea has been realised as a non-profit-making educational charity called The Parnham Trust Limited. Scholarships that will be endowed by subscriptions and donations to the Trust are planned. It is intended that one will be available for a student from Dorset and one for a graduate from a school of art and design.

The aim of the course is to turn out designer craftsmen who are entirely self sufficient. They may be more orientated to craftsmanship or to pure design. They may make fine furniture or small wooden artifacts, but they will know how to make and cost their designs, how to manage their books, where their market is, and how to sell their work. The long term aim is to establish Parnham House as the centre of wood craftsmanship, housing not only John Makepeace's workshops, but the school alongside it, with a museum and gallery exhibiting tools from the past and examples of craftsmanship in wood from all over the world.