

PERFECT



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PARTNERS

The ideal situation for any two-person furniture-making partnership is for one half to be the maker and the other to be the designer. With Williams & Cleal of Somerset, this is exactly how it has worked out. **Graham Clarke** paid them a visit

There are, we know, many furniture-makers across the land who reckon they have got their act together. They've got swanky premises, they're good at cabinetmaking, and they may even have a van with branding on the side. But how many of these businesses have the ideal partnership of a husband and wife, who are both highly trained designer-makers, who respect each other's abilities and craftsmanship, and who never argue ("Well, not about work anyway!")?

Recently I visited the workshop of Justin and Jane Williams, known in the trade as Williams & Cleal. Their converted 2300sq ft farm building – cow-shed actually – serves as an admirable workshop, comprising machine room, polishing room, office and a large open area for the team to make mock-ups, store timber and do close-up work.

Set in the heart of rural Somerset, the workshop is so out of the way, one couldn't imagine any business, other than farming, actually succeeding there. But, of course, as Justin and Jane pointed out, they do not seek passing trade. Theirs is a business that has built itself up over a 12-year period, based almost entirely on one-to-one commissioning.

"We design and make contemporary furniture," Jane told me. "It will range from small giftware items like jewellery boxes, through to complete fitted interiors. In recent years we've designed, made and installed bedrooms, kitchens and studies."

One customer who has been with them practically from the start of the business, and who they now class as a good friend, has even commissioned them to make a bedroom piece with no brief. "She wants 'something' to fit a bedroom space," Jane said. "It may be functional, or decorative, or both! What an opportunity for a designer! I'm really looking forward to coming up with ideas for this."

Timber suppliers

Williams and Cleal work predominately in English and European hardwoods. All wood is hand selected for colour and grain. Justin said: "I have over a dozen regular timber suppliers who now know the sort of wood we require. For instance, if I ask for some English walnut, and they have a good supply but it is not up to scratch, then they don't even offer it to me. This has only come about after a dozen years of careful and persistent selection."



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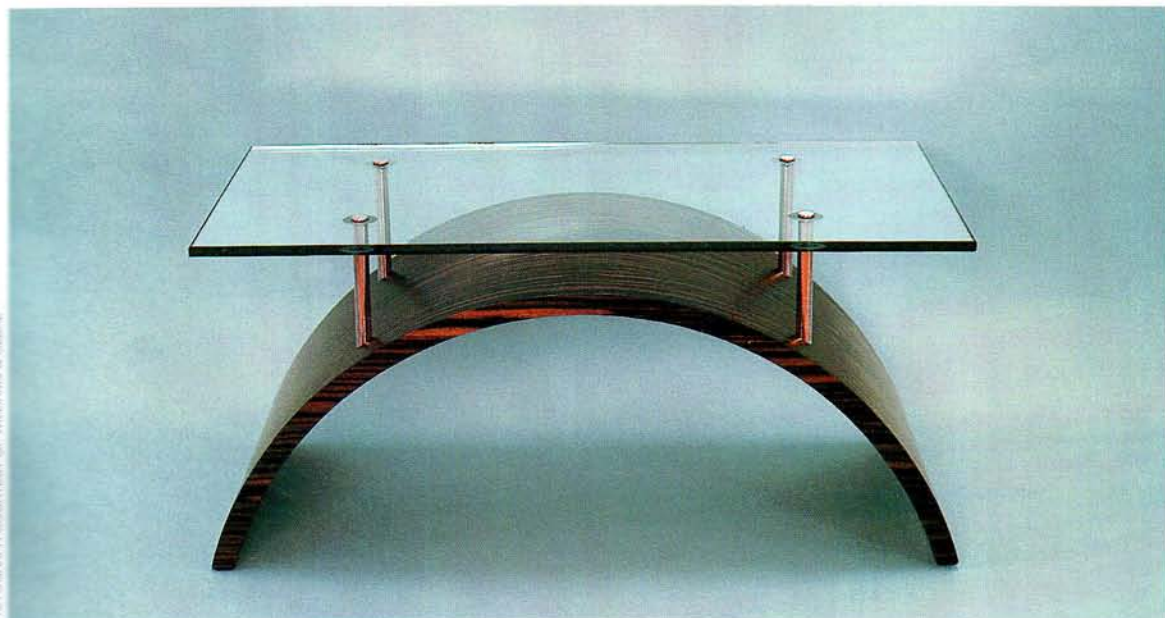
Veneer is one of Justin's 'weaknesses', according to his wife Jane. "He has a veneer supplier in the East End of London, and he can often go up there for a day searching for a specific grain, but instead he'll come back with £1,200-worth of assorted veneers on the back seat of the car. And he still might not have the one he was really after!" "But," says Justin in defence, "at least we always have a good stock of veneer, which can come in very useful at times." Hmmm.

Partners in time

Justin and Jane met while studying Fine Furniture Craft & Management at Buckinghamshire College, and their partnership initially began as a romance when they left the college in 1988. They eventually married, and as well as having made well over 300 bespoke items in their time together, they have also produced an 18-month-old son, Edward.

"Juggling being a business partner and a mother is a delicate operation," admits Jane, "but we're extremely lucky in that our parents are tremendously supportive, and will look after Edward when we're unable to. They're a real whizz at nappies, too!"

The business of Williams & Cleal was established in 1990, and at the start the pair was able to access the excellent Princes Youth Business Trust for a low-interest loan and support. "We had a £5,000 loan and it started us off with some



Opposite: Desk made in lacewood with aluminium

Above: Desk in English walnut, figured maple top and ebony detailing

Left: Coffee table in macassar ebony with bronze supports

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The real influences

What have influenced and inspired the hundreds of Williams & Cleal pieces over the past 12 years? The pair put their heads together and came up with this list of four:

- We have always been struck by the William Morris quote: "Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful". Quite often cabinetmakers will sacrifice one for the other. In modern-day parlance, we would ask whether form should follow function, or vice versa? Our answer is that they are equally as important and should work together.

- We incorporate aspects of the Art Deco period, i.e. the use of contrasting timbers and opposing grain direction to achieve high levels of decoration.

- The work of architect Frank Lloyd Wright. He tried to design work that complemented its environment, and drew upon Nature and the qualities of the materials used.

- Finally, we draw inspiration also from the area in which we live. This enables us to value and enjoy nature, which in return affects our lives and work in a multitude of ways.

Below: Dining table leaf storage. The front and back of this cabinet contain two spare leaves from an extending dining table. This was a storage solution, but it also allows the leaves to mellow in the same light and conditions as the table. Made in steamed pear, burr maple, maple columns and ebony inlay.

machinery and timber," Justin said. "We'll always be grateful for that kick-start."

The first piece the pair made and sold was a solid English elm dining table and chairs. "The design and construction was very much Arts and Crafts, displaying 'honesty of construction'" says Justin. "It had exposed joints through the table and rails of the chairs. It was exported to Southern Ireland, and was greatly received."

"Over the years we have had several employees and one apprentice," said Justin. "All of them were skilled makers and craftspeople. At the moment we have just one member of staff, Tim Alcock."

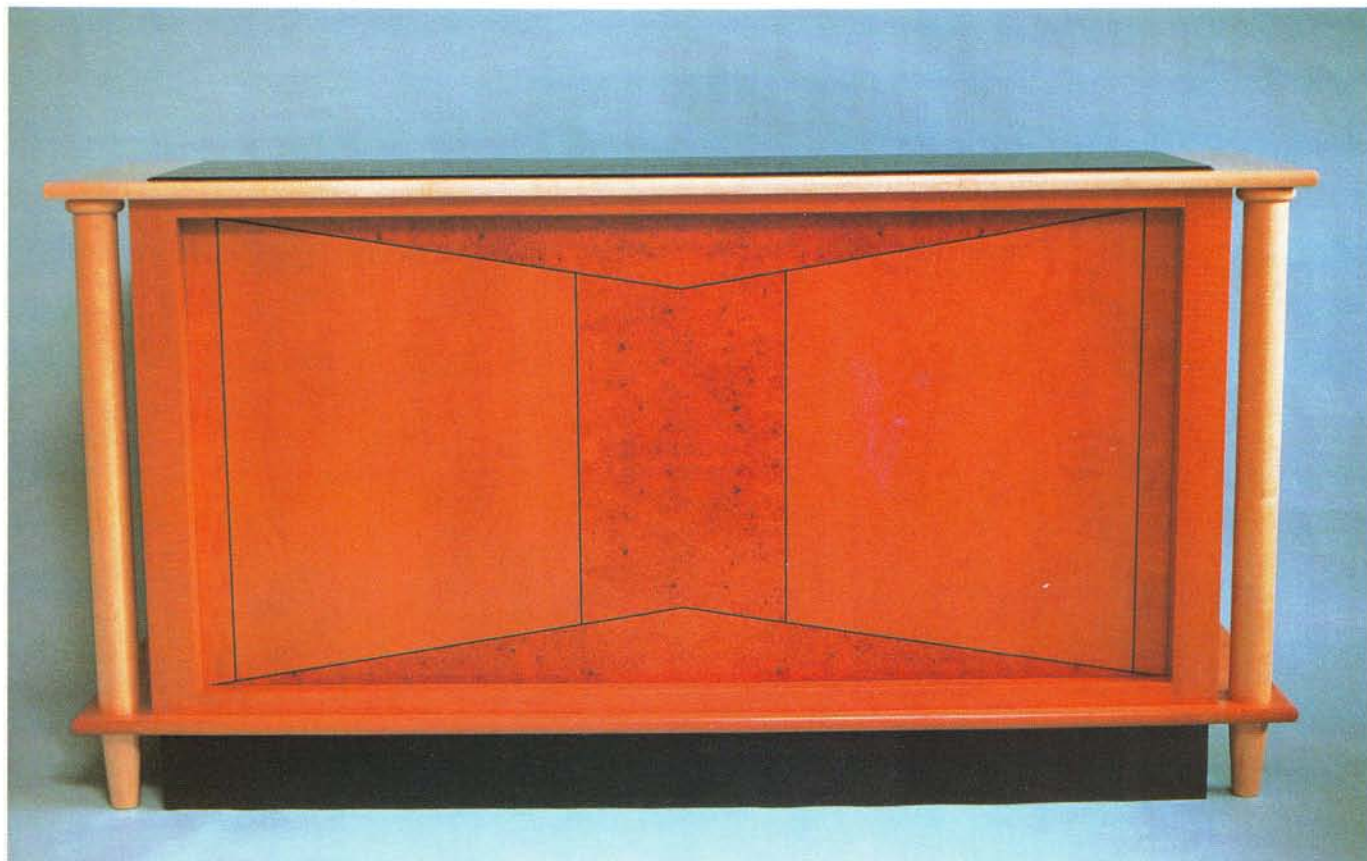
When I was there Tim was making some wardrobe handles. "I've been here for a year," he told me. "And I've thoroughly enjoyed the variety of work." As he moved across to replace some air filters in the polishing room he explained that he, too, went to Bucks College, and did a three-year degree course in Furniture Design and Craftsmanship.

"We're very lucky to have Tim," Justin explained. "Talented people are few and far between, especially in such a rural location as this."

Design philosophy

These days Jane concentrates on the design, attracting new clients through marketing the business, and doing much of the paperwork. Justin, meanwhile, is very happy to oversee the making, the purchase of stock and machinery, and installation when necessary.

Jane was keen to point out that their design philosophy is to create contemporary work with an emphasis on clean, simple lines and distinct material selection. The key to a good



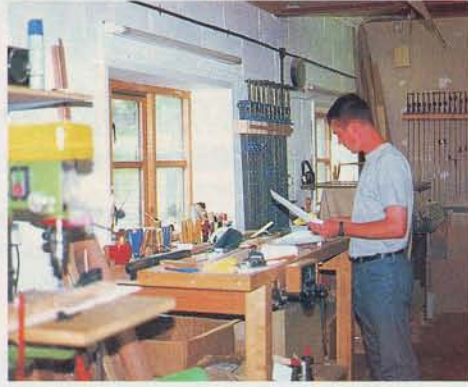
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Left: Justin in his 2300sq ft workshop

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Above: Jane compares a mock-up table against her original design drawing

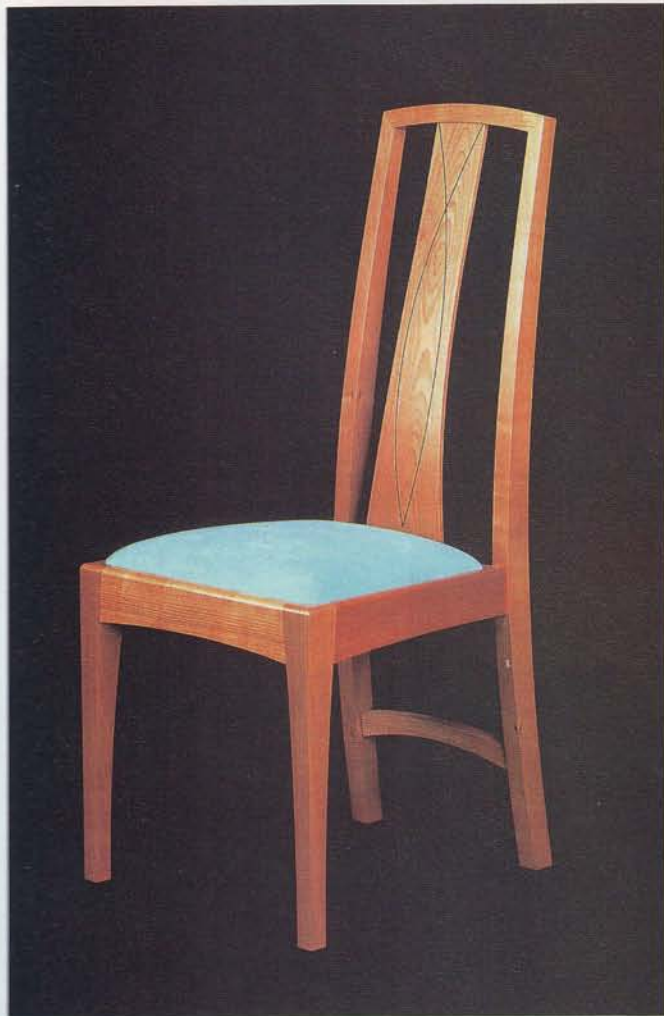
Above, right: Part of the wood stock in the workshop

Right: Tim Alcock has been with Williams & Cleal for a year

Below: Dining chair in English cherry and ebony inlay



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Below: A collector's cabinet, in English walnut and burr walnut

design, Jane feels, is the ability to combine aesthetics with function. As she explains: "What use is a good-looking chair if it is uncomfortable to sit on for any length of time, or is likely to break after constant use?"

Many clients and contemporaries have said that it is possible to identify an item produced by Williams & Cleal. What do they say to this?

Jane: "Looking through our portfolio, you could possibly say 'Oh! That looks Art Deco', or 'That looks Arts & Craft'. We do seem to have developed a range with similar values. But more than this, the key ingredients to our work are 1) sensitivity to proportions, 2) designs which do not compete for attention but instead celebrate the natural beauty of wood, and 3) a harmony between form and function."

Justin adds: "It is, however, crucially important to stay

sensitive to the client's preferences, and to be sympathetic to the interior in which our work will finally rest, whilst all the while achieving what we feel is a 'good design'. It's a real balancing act!"

Over the years the pair have watched various styles go in and out of fashion. "We hope our work is timeless", says Jane. "We try to produce 'classic' furniture which will be around for generations. But this doesn't stop us from selecting elements of 'fashion' to include in our work. Recently we have used various metals and glass, and have experimented with colour finishes."

"We're currently producing a lot of work that incorporates decorative veneers such as burrs, contrasted with darker timbers like walnut," said Justin. With fresh ideas like these, this partnership is set to thrive. ■

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Left: Chest of drawers in steamed pear, burr maple and ebony detail

Below left: This is, arguably, the Williams & Cleal 'signature'. Jane designed these chairs with 'tree-style' backs very early on in the partnership, and they have proved to be a lasting and sought-after success

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