

Life at the 'Sharp Edge'

It's hard to believe that it's six years, 'Halloween' 2003 to be precise, since I earned my GTB for the last time. After almost 27 years I had fulfilled my ambitions at Mars and like many other Associates, I had been lucky enough to enjoy a very varied career. I loved pretty much all of it. Mars also enabled me to see many parts of the world via 15 years¹ of almost constant travel, broken only when I was based in Ireland for a short time in 1993/4. Being honest, sitting on a plane is one aspect that I don't miss!

It was in June 2003, whilst we were on vacation, that I asked my wife, Iris, how she would feel if I wanted to do something different. I'm not fond of the word 'retirement'. Of course, she asked me what I had in mind. Having been largely absent from home most weeks of the year, she certainly didn't need me under her feet. I replied that I wanted to do something completely different and, as a 'one company man', had no intention of working for anyone else. The long and short of it was that I aimed to learn to make furniture and become a qualified cabinetmaker. No point in taking a half-hearted approach, so the decision was made.

Of course, as it has turned out, we do other things too. We spend a chunk of the year living in Italy, which we both love, and I am also heavily involved in local education in rural Rutland. I have failed miserably to make any inroads into reducing my golf handicap, clearly due to a lack of talent rather than lack of time. However, golf, in particular, allows me to keep in touch with lots of old Mars friends.

Fortunately, I've always had some practical skills, enjoyed making things (a manufacturing man at heart) and am passionate about working with wood which is a truly captivating medium. Combine these things with a serious interest in furniture and the history of furniture making and there you have my motivation in a nutshell.

Wood is something that 'lives' and moves. This brings its own challenges, but people have succeeded in exposing the beauty and strength of wood through exquisite craftsmanship almost since time began. Examples, both ancient and modern, are all around us and with the benefit of greater knowledge, I now see the products of timber in a whole new light.

On day one of my 'change of life', I began to set up my workshop. This required a sizeable workspace for hand working, assembly and finishing as well as room for several bulky machines – a bandsaw, a planer/thicknesser and a table saw being vital necessities. A large chunk of my garage is now devoted to woodworking and my car has been relegated to living on the outside. I already possessed a decent range of hand tools but visiting manufacturers, quizzing the technical sales people and ultimately choosing which machines to buy, was great fun. At the same time, it soon became obvious that the choice of furniture making courses was not so wide. This was evidence that making a living from this craft is very difficult these days. However, if you are good enough, once-off commissions can still be very lucrative.

The choice of venues came down to either Northampton or Nottingham, both about an hour from home. I chose Moulton College, Northampton, which was in a wonderful rural setting and a great environment for students. I was a student again, albeit part-time and of the mature variety!

I remember the slightly apprehensive feeling on the first day – would I be the only 'old lag' amongst a bunch of teenagers? I need not have worried. Yes, there were lots of youngsters. However, I soon discovered that I was in the company of a former director of British Telecom, an IT consultant who was overseeing the installation of all the IT systems at the new Wembley Stadium, a former ship's surgeon (he ought to know how

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to cut the right bits off, I thought) and a retired engineer, called Hamish, who used to supply Mars with colour and flavour pumps. Subsequently, whilst on an antique restoration course, I met a former director of the Slough Estates Group who knew quite a few Mars Associates – small world!

Moulton College turned out to be an inspired choice. Both the teaching and the workshop facilities were outstanding. Our tutor, Dave Chapman, was a real character who made the whole experience a pleasure. He had been in the furniture making business for over 40 years. He knew everything there was to know about the craft, he was a master demonstrator of all the skills and was brutally honest with his feedback. He combined great teaching with the common touch. For example, my first selection of timber for a project from the lumber yard was, apparently, only fit for a bonfire! However, Dave did explain the error of my ways and gave me the 'tricks of the trade' to avoid repeating the mistake.

In three years I learned much about furniture design, construction, timber selection, use of different joints, bending and shaping wood, veneering, in-lay techniques, properties of the many different adhesives, surface preparation and even some upholstery. In case you're wondering, health and safety was, of course, high on the list – almost everything we did was potentially hazardous.

Learning was through a series of practical projects, written theory assignments and, at the end of each year, exam pieces to be completed within a set time limit. The course was stretching but I did manage to get through it successfully. Towards the end, the projects included one or two pieces made to your own design. One of my efforts resulted in a three-legged mahogany corner table with a bow front which now stands in our house - after appraisal from my wife.



What does it take to succeed in 'making', as it is known in the trade? Well, lots of patience for a start. Also high on the list are creativity, careful planning, attention to

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detail and accuracy. 'Measure twice, cut once' is a commandment which is ignored at your peril! Above all, you need a sharp eye and even sharper tools.

'Making', though, is only half of the story. 'Finishing' or polishing is the other half and usually takes more than double the making time. It's a 'labour of love' and wasn't part of the course. So, I embarked on trial and error, with plenty of the latter. As I soon found out, surface preparation is critical – a small scratch in the wood will magnified many times when it is polished. Overall, however, finishing is really about bringing out the beauty of the wood. Colour and level of shininess is more at the behest of the customer and in the 'eye of the beholder'. For example, some like a mirror finish while others prefer something more natural. Whatever finish is chosen, the impact of moisture and temperature must be more or less eliminated by sealing the surface of the wood. The advent of central heating was the furniture maker's worst enemy but, having said that, modern adhesives have now helped to eliminate most of the problems.

Producing a great finish involves a degree of alchemy and trickery. It's possible to disguise almost any defect but you have to know what works. Therefore, it is helpful to understand the reactions of different substances (e.g. stains, oils, shellac, varnishes and waxes) on both the wood and each other. Dredging up some of my hitherto forgotten knowledge of chemistry has been vital in avoiding potential disasters. It is very easy to ruin a beautifully made piece with a lousy finish. Even worse, the value of a precious antique can be easily destroyed with flawed choices of remedy during restoration.

I have found furniture making challenging but enormously satisfying. Just as in any business, the spectrum of emotions can range from emotion to despair. All projects, whether big or small, are punctuated by numerous 'moments of truth'. If your dovetails are a perfect fit then elation. On the other hand.....!

When Lis asked me if I would write this article for 'Martians Reunited' I was delighted to do so but a little concerned about whether it would be of interest. At least I hope it shows that the transition from Mars to doing something to doing something completely different need not be too difficult. I would also be delighted to hear from any fellow craftsmen or women.

On most occasions when I am in my workshop, it is not long before some amusing incident from my time at Mars comes to mind and brings a smile with it. However, handling those razor sharp tools soon restores concentration especially if I want to keep all of my fingers!

Rob Sawyer worked for Mars from 1977-2003 in a career which spanned Snackfoods, Petcare, Food and Multisales and roles in Manufacturing, P&O and General Management.

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sawyerob@aol.com)