## GETTING STARTED

I'm often asked how I got started making furniture, and the truth is that I arrived at woodworking by a somewhat circuitous route. Born into a middle-class English family—actually, upper middle class—it was soon noticed that I was a handy little boy able to fix things and make them work. This notion was reinforced by the fact that I either acquired or was born with an intuitive sense of structure—what made things stand up…or not. Aged 5 or so I remember drawing a capital "T" and being bothered by the horizontal bar balanced on the vertical—obviously an unstable arrangement. So I added a nut on top to keep it in place—and of course got reprimanded. Even now I admire the structural integrity of the letter "A"—no pushing that around!

"He's going to be an engineer" was said so often by the friends and relations around me that I never thought to question the notion—especially as I had only a vague idea of what engineers actually did. Well, they certainly didn't do engines, and by the time I graduated from Cambridge in 1953 engineering was a lily-white collar job, engines being left to the mechanics. This was all pre-computer, and we made our computations with slide rules and the mechanical, hand-cranked Facit Calculators produced by the ingenious Swedes. Stress analyses that can now be done in seconds took hours and were exceedingly tedious.

In 1953, with the ink on my diploma barely dry, I emigrated to Canada and got a job with the British Columbia Forest Service designing and building forest access roads and timber bridges in the interior of British Columbia. I then moved east, worked for a French Canadian outfit in Montreal and finally Alcan, the Aluminium Company of Canada, designing foundations for large rolling mills.

After seven years I finally recognized that I needed to find work where I could both design and build. With large engineering structures you never got your hands dirty and seldom even got to see the completed structure. I quit Alcan in 1958, got a student visa, moved to Boston and enrolled in MIT's School of Architecture as an undergraduate. I very soon realized that I lacked the ability to draw or even sketch. I could make detailed, accurate engineering drawings but when it came to freehand I was lost. So I developed a knack for making scale models and would present these (together with floor plans) for the regular critiques. In many ways models were more useful than conventional paper drawings. One could simulate the movement of the sun with a flashlight in a darkened room, thus revealing the patterns of light and shade to which the actual building would be exposed.

Our first projects were modest—a ski chalet, a beach house, an artist's studio—but then, in the third year, we were given 60 acres of the Philadelphia waterfront to re-develop. Here I got lost. I simply could not think at that scale and had to accept that I was much better off designing things of a size I could make myself—still architecture, but at a much reduced scale.

MIT had (and still has) professionally maintained workshops for the use of the students, dedicated to wood, metal, printing and electronics. I became one of a small band of pioneers that set up shop in the woodworking department and began making furniture for my home and growing family. Eventually I was working a regular 40-hour week, putting in less and less time in classes and drafting room, finally quitting the MIT program altogether. I realize now that having to plan and organize my work within a limited time frame was very useful when I later came to make a living as a woodworker.

We moved to South Newfane, Vermont, built a house and workshop and made a rapid adjustment to country living... and Vermont winters. Having had no formal training in woodworking (no training at all, in fact) was a major disadvantage. *Fine Woodworking* magazine did not yet exist (the first issue was 1975) and there were no resources such as Google, You-Tube or even email. Local woodworkers were scarce, elderly and unwilling to share their expertise with newcomers. So it was a steep learning curve, but (very) occasionally it was an advantage not knowing the "right" way to do something—one might come up with a technique that worked as well or better than more established methods.

Orders for new furniture were scarce, but of repair work there was no shortage. I remember a man walking into the shop with an armful of splinters hoping I could put it back together again—like Humpty-Dumpty. I told him it would be much cheaper to make a new table. "I know," he said, "but it was my mother-in-law's table and I sat on it." So part of my basic education was seeing how wooden furniture failed. If it hadn't been abused it was invariably due to faulty design, bad work-manship or poor choice of materials—and sometimes all three together.

In 1978 we moved over the hill to Putney, bought an old house with a tobacco barn that became my workshop. Putney was a good choice because it was readily accessible from Boston and New York, and the Putney School attracted some well-heeled parents. The furniture business picked up and the concept of artist/craftsmen began to be more widely accepted.

It was the early years of the war in Vietnam and many young men were looking for alternatives to a conventional college education while still keeping clear of the draft. For a while the State of Vermont allowed "apprentice deferments," so I began taking on students for nine months, staggering them every three months so the senior apprentices could instruct the new-comers. A number of talented young people came through the workshop, including some who later became professional woodworkers.

About this time I got entangled with the U.S. Department of Labor. Two inspectors arrived unannounced one morning and claimed that because the students were working on actual pieces of commissioned furniture I should be paying them the minimum wage of \$1.75 an hour. Since they figured the wage bill over the last half dozen years amounted to over \$15000—considerably more than the place was worth—I had no choice but to contest their decision. The American Crafts Council got to hear of this affair and we were well aware that an unfavorable ruling would have a serious impact and discourage established craftsmen taking on apprentices.

I realized I was in serious trouble, so I got in touch with a local lawyer, Potter Stewart—son of the Supreme Court Justice of that name. Potter was able to find a legal precedent for trainees not being paid which got me off the hook and was acceptable to the Department of Labor. I paid Potter with a large mahogany desk, which no doubt he still has.

At that time, Edward Barnsley was one of the foremost furniture makers in England. He had a direct link, through his father Sidney Barnsley, to the Arts and Crafts movement of the previous century. His daughter Karen was a school friend of my sister, so we had been frequent visitors to the house and workshop in Petersfield. I might very well have become Barnsley's student had I not lost the use of my left arm in the polio epidemic of 1947 when I was 17. Some strength returned but it's a disability I've had to learn to live with.

Through the Barnsleys I had met a neighbor, Roger Powell, the foremost book binder/restorer in England. My one visit to his house was made memorable by the two, armed Irish constables patrolling outside while the 10th-century Book of Kells was spread out across his worktables. I also met Roger's son David, whose furniture business in London had just folded.

By this time my family and I had acquired an island summer home in Nova Scotia and were in the habit of leaving Putney as soon as school got out and not returning until the fall. David Powell was at loose ends when I met him, so I invited him over to run the Putney shop the following summer while we were in Nova Scotia.

David had had a very thorough training: first as a four-year pupil of Edward Barnsley, followed by two years studying design at the Royal College of Art. He had brought his tools with him, so we shared the Putney shop for several years until I moved to a larger building in 1970.

Working alongside David and "No one can stop you stealing with your eyes" went a long way towards completing my education—or at least filling in some of the major gaps. I also developed a keener sense of design but was still hampered by my inability to make free-hand drawings...to sketch. I again got around this by using models, first to scale and then to full-size mock-ups. I made these from scrap—pine, particleboard, cardboard, whatever there was around. I would invite the customers to visit the shop, or even take the mock-up home with them, so they could get a clearer picture of the completed project before committing themselves.

David's style of working was a complete contrast to mine: he would first make a scale drawing on paper, work out any problems and then build it as drawn. The result was that when anybody walked into the shop, depending on which one of us they approached, they would get a totally different piece of furniture in terms of design—and price. David's ambition was to make high-end collector's items and he saw the clients as a means to that end. I tended to start with what the clients needed (as opposed to what they thought they wanted) and design a piece of furniture that was handsome and durable at a reasonable cost.

I barely considered matters of style. I had a keen interest and respect for work of 100, 200 or more years ago...but little interest in making replicas. I once got ejected from Vermont's Shelburne Museum for taking notes on those exhibits that interested me. I was following the same routine in the British Museum some years later, so when a custodian walked over I was ready for trouble. But this was England and all he said was: "Would you like a chair, sir?"

One can learn a lot by making exact replicas of historical pieces. I made a hooded cradle (from Wallace Nutting's book) because I wanted to try my hand at skewed dovetails. Another was a set of library steps by Wharton Esherick. The most recent (2009) and most demanding was making a set of the famous Charles Rennie Mackintosh chairs for a Frank Lloyd Wright house in the hills of Oakland, California. I've included this project to illustrate the use of full-size mock-ups to explore the impact (or lack of impact) on an architectural space.

After I turned 50 I decided to give dry woodworking a break for a few years and try my hand at building small boats. I was hired by Joel White at the Brooklin Boat Yard in Maine and given the first Catspaw dinghy to build, which had been commissioned by *WoodenBoat* magazine. I soon learned how little I knew and got exasperated by how long it took to plank up a little boat. Carvel construction—fitting planks edge to edge—is inherently time-consuming, and it was only later when I worked with Nova Scotia boatbuilders that I realized that lapstrake—planks overlapping like clapboards on a house—was far, far quicker. The Nova Scotia boatbuilder, Jim Smith, could turn out a boat about the size of the Catspaw dinghy in a week—and that was painted and ready for the water. I was privileged to be Jim's helper for several months and soon began to feel comfortable working with air-dry softwoods (as opposed to kiln-dry hardwoods), planks sprung and twisted into place, fastened with copper rivets and reinforced with steam-bent oak frames.

Like any new convert I was eager to "spread the word" so began teaching small classes in the basics of lapstrake construction. I held classes around this country and Canada wherever there were half a dozen or more interested people. Following Jim Smith's example we built a boat from scratch in six days, launching it on the seventh. The workshop menu gradually enlarged until it included a Norwegian sailing pram, a lapstrake canoe, and finally, a 20-foot recreational rowing shell, the "Petaluma." This marked the limit of what even an accomplished class could achieve in the time available. I had also begun to reach my limit and frequent trips by air with tools and patterns, setting up shop in out-of-the-way places were beginning to take a toll.

So I retired from a fascinating if somewhat stressful life and returned to designing and making furniture. I still build boats from time to time in my Nova Scotia workshop and enjoy the change of scale and the slower pace. It's also a chance to work mostly by hand with minimal use of machines. I remember asking Harry Hirtle, whose last job was building a marine slip for us, what he planned to do next, and him replying: "Well, Simon, I'm going to live a life more according to a man of my years."

Since I'm going on 84 I think I'll do the same.

Simon Watts, 2013

