

The forgotten trade making a comeback



Have-a-go Jo: Writer Jo Oughtred turns her hand to a spot of upholstery



The resurgence of the make-do and mend attitude might be one reason to visit an upholsterer rather than buying a piece of new furniture. Jo Oughtred visits the team at Crowther and Sons – Nettleham-based furniture makers and restorers – to learn what it really means to be a master upholsterer

A renewed interest in vintage items and traditional skills has prompted something of a shift in attitude.

We are becoming less disposable consumers, less inclined, now, to simply throw something away. Isn't it more romantic, after all, to save something? To look upon a once tattered piece as it stands proud in your living room?

And though something might look tired without, there can be some really good work hiding within. And if that is not the case – well, it's nothing the masters at Crowther and Sons can't handle.

After 30 years in the business, managing director Edward Crowther is the man to turn to when it comes to upholstery and his skills, passion and attention to detail have earned him an enviable reputation over the decades.

As a young man, fresh out of school, however, he admits to being rather less enthusiastic about upholstery. "When I was 15, I wanted to be a cabinet maker. Curtains and fabric had no appeal – but as soon as I began my upholstery apprenticeship, I knew that I was exactly where I wanted to be."

And six years after he first held a ripping chisel in his hands, Edward set up his own business, never dreaming that it would become the second generation family business that it is today.

It must be a wonderful thing to be passing on such a wealth of knowledge, particularly to his own sons. Knowledge is Edward's legacy, expertise the boys' heirloom.

Youngest son Daniel is the business's latest apprentice, while master upholsterer Ed Junior is following in his dad's footsteps with a wave of truly original ideas, from snooker ball castors to vibrant, patchwork sofas.

Unlike his brothers, Matthew, a graphic designer and middle Crowther son, won't be found among the fabric and mallets. But he has certainly played his part, too.

"I will never forget," says Edward, "when Matthew was about eight years old, he told me that one day he wanted to help me sell furniture all over the world."

"I thought it was such an astonishing thing for an eight year old to say – but he actually has."

With the curves of their massage tables making waves on luxury yachts, amazing customised bike seats roaring along country roads, and gorgeous armchairs sitting comfortably in innumerable living rooms, Matthew has certainly helped his family's business to keep growing and progressing.

Years of experiment and experience have taught the Crowther family what works. The workshop is home to beech, cherry, walnut, rosewood – beautiful, hard-working woods – while the showroom overflows with rich and textured fabrics.

And suddenly I see what makes their furniture stand out. Here we find an absolute determination to produce something of incomparable quality. "Whenever we produce anything, it has to be the best we can possibly do," says Edward. "We put a lot into what we design and upholster, because we all want to keep the reputation we have worked so hard to build."

Revelations are being made to me about upholstery. After watching – and joining in with – all the stapling, snipping, drilling, trimming, I feel a greater appreciation and understanding of what I had always thought of as just taking off a bit of fabric and putting a new bit back on.

The repair and restoration of furniture goes far beyond this. It is careful, precise work – watching Edward attend to the fracture in a broken footstool leg is something



Expert advice: Jo is shown how to recover an old stool that she brought in to Crowther and Sons and, below, different types of upholstery designs from the family team



akin to watching a surgeon at work. But, more than skill and patience required to be an expert in this industry, the quality that strikes hardest at Crowther and Sons is the sense of enjoyment that radiates from the team.

It is obvious that no matter how many fabric samples they pour over, or how many studs are applied by hand, or delicate, tiny stitches they sew, they are having a good time.

And 30 years after he first felt it, Edward is still doing exactly what he loves best. With a company such as Crowther and Sons, you know you are putting your project into the hands of somebody who deserves it, and who is going to do a spectacular job for you. Ask Edward to help you with something you love, and you will take home something beautiful, comfortable, and – just like the business – built to last.

If you have a piece of furniture that needs to be saved, or would like to attend one of Crowther's upholstery courses, visit www.crowtherandsons.com or call 01522 510520 for details.



Relaxing: Crowther's handcrafted massage couch, above, is one of the finest on the market. Below, Cameringham stripe chairs



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