

# NEWSLETTER

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NT NICK THWAITES FURNITURE NEWSLETTER NOVEMBER 2010

Detail of a lectern (or standing-desk) in walnut with a rippled sycamore hand rail and book stop.



## Recent Work

A commission I completed a couple of months ago has just been delivered to my client, a lawyer in Hong Kong. A litigation specialist, he thinks on his feet, so it should have been no surprise to be asked to make a lectern for his office, where he likes to work standing up. He has some illustrious precedents: Churchill and Hemingway both famously worked at “standing desks”, although theirs were constructed simply by heightening a conventional four-legged structure.

For this, we felt something more sculptural was called for. At the same time it needed to be stable

enough not to tip or shake when the user was writing.

Notwithstanding the clean, simple lines of the piece, it required a good deal of thought and preparation: discussion of height and rake of course, and the construction of a full scale mock-up to check the forces applied to the desk by someone writing; then a trip up to the Midlands to source some rich European walnut. I had been saving a board of rippled sycamore for just this kind of commission and, shaped into elliptical section hand and foot rails, this pale, lustrous timber contrasts strikingly with the walnut.





More recent work: Detail of elm and walnut sideboard (left) and English walnut and sycamore anniversary writing box (below).



## Makepeace Exhibition

A few days ago I went to a retrospective exhibition of the work of John Makepeace at the Devon Guild of Craftsmen. Makepeace is the pre-eminent designer of craftsman-made furniture, certainly in the UK, if not worldwide. His designs are sometimes controversial, but always intriguing, often exploring new ways of working with materials. It is fundamental to his approach that each piece must perfectly fit its environment and intended use. Indeed that should be the first aim of anyone working to commission.

The exhibition includes some well-known pieces, such as his "Trine" three-legged chairs, whose seat and back are made from laminations of yew and bog

oak (from ancient trees drowned in peat-rich swamps which preserved and blackened the timber), scooped out so that the alternating layers of wood are revealed in swirling symmetrical patterns. But there are also new pieces, including the "Zebra" cabinets, severely rectilinear in contrast to his familiar sculpted forms, but relieved by anatomically exact reproductions, in marquetry, of zebra stripes.

The exhibition is touring the country and will be in London, at Somerset House, from mid-March to mid-April. Well worth a trip for all those interested in furniture or design.

## Old Technology

Pushing design boundaries with new techniques and materials is exciting, but one of the things I love about wood is the way it was used by our predecessors, with simple tools, to create enduring things of great beauty and utility. A few months ago I offered to help re-hang one of the bells in our village church which was getting a new headstock. (The headstock, of course, is the heavy steel beam from which the bell hangs: "gudgeon pins" at each end of the headstock sit in bearings which allow the whole bell to swing when it is being rung.)

Clambering around the bell chamber (as the youngest and nimblest(!) of the re-hanging party I did a lot of clambering), I was struck by the elegance of the great wooden wheels to which each headstock is attached. The bell rope runs around the rim of the wheel and so, when pulled, rings the bell.

The heaviest bell in our tower weighs one ton and all the force needed to swing it through 360° has to be transmitted through that wheel. And yet the wheel itself is a slender affair, the grooved rim made up in sections and joined to the hub by fine, tapering spokes. The whole wheel could be lifted, if not with a finger, at least with ease: in fact we hauled it up the outside of the tower on a rope, the diameter of the wheel being too great to allow it to come up the narrow stairs from the bottom.

Our old country churches have plenty of treasures on show – fantastically carved wooden rood screens were particularly popular in this part of Devon – but here in a 15<sup>th</sup> Century bell tower is the work of unknown craftsmen, never intended for display yet beautifully made, serving year after year to ring out the tumbling cascades which are one of the glories of the English countryside.



Bells, ropes, headstocks and wheels in the tower of Awliscombe church.

## New Technology

The Gallery page on my website had become increasingly unwieldy as it grew. It has now been re-designed to make viewing and navigation easier: [www.nickthwaitesfurniture](http://www.nickthwaitesfurniture)

I do not, however, have photos of all my work on the website. The pictures on page two of this Newsletter show a couple of recent pieces that do not appear in the Gallery.

After some soul searching, I now have a Facebook page. So far my "friends" are limited to my nieces and nephew but I am assured that this is a key

communication tool so I look forward to a rapid expansion of my friends list.

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