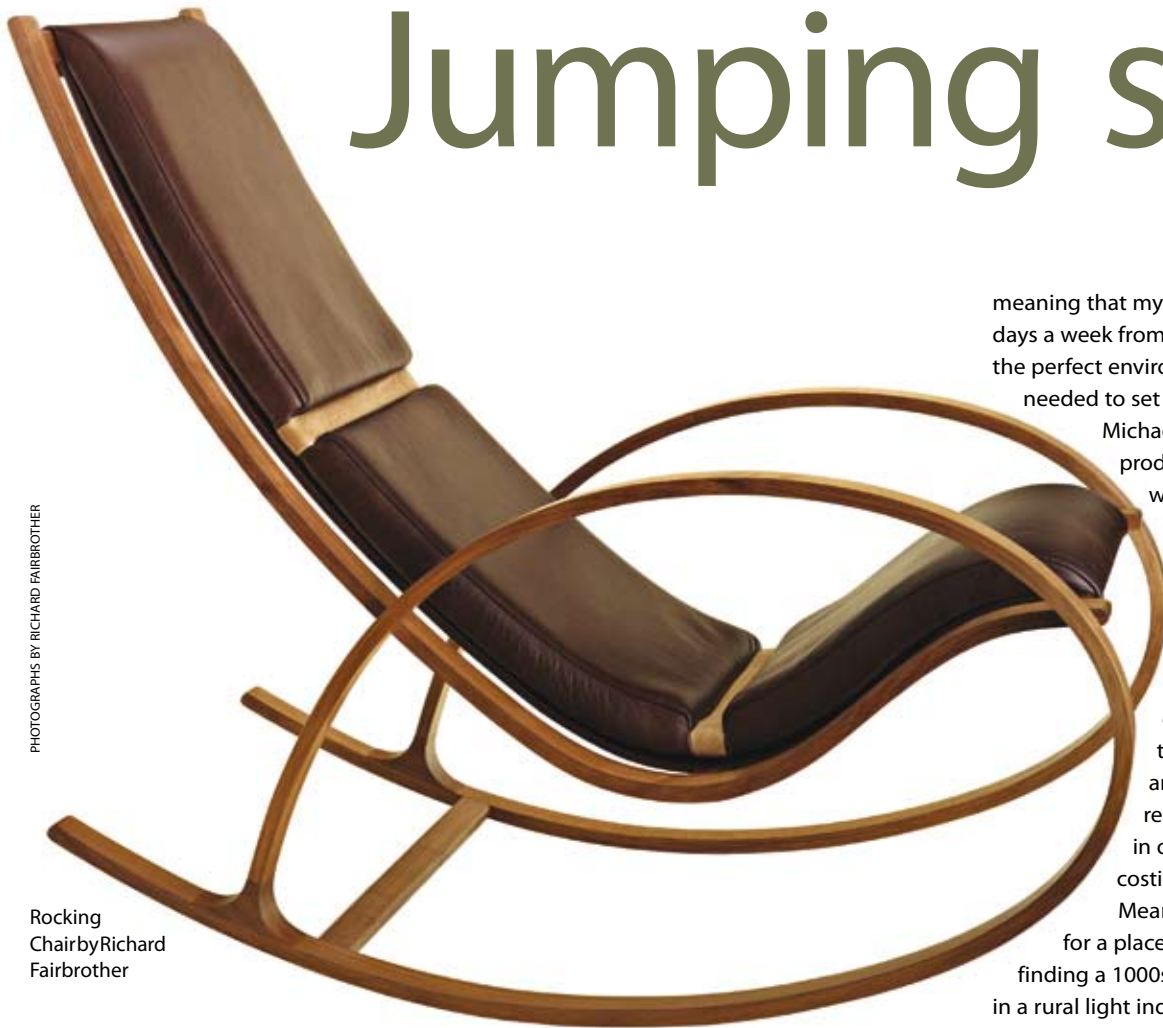


Jumping ship



PHOTOGRAPHS BY RICHARD FAIRBROTHER

Rocking
Chair by Richard
Fairbrother

Richard Fairbrother took courage in both skilled hands when he gave up a secure day job to learn to make furniture for a living. This is his story



Almost three years have passed since I worked my last day as a postmaster running a busy rural office that had been owned by my family for more than 60 years. I would look at the clock, see it was only 9.05am and have the awful realisation that I would have to sit behind glass until 5.30pm, so with the backing of my family I took the plunge and went for a complete career change.

With a lifelong interest in making things – before taking on the post office I had studied engineering – I went on a 2-week course with Parnham – the furniture school founded by John Makepeace – graduate Michael Scott. Three days into it, I succumbed to the wood bug and decided to carry on with a year-long intensive course which started in March 2007, once I had sold the post office.

The idyllic setting of Michael's Devon home and workshop had the added attraction of no mobile phone reception,

meaning that my year there working five days a week from 8.30am to 5pm was the perfect environment to learn the skills needed to set up on my own.

Michael challenged me to produce technically difficult work so that I could make the inevitable mistakes under expert guidance while building a laminated rocking chair, curve-fronted bedside tables, arch-legged chess table with reversible top and a dining chair among other things, and recording the time they took in order to be accurate with costings later.

Meanwhile I started to look for a place to work from, eventually finding a 1000sq ft former office space in a rural light industrial unit. This has evolved over the past two years into my second home, a carefully designed and kitted out workshop, office and gallery space.

All or nothing

Getting the workshop to where it is now took almost two years. Having initially made the mistake of buying cheap equipment that let me down, I invested in the Felder 700 Series machines. As I had the space I went for separates rather than a combination machine.

I was faced with the realisation that to produce work to the standard I wanted with speed and accuracy I had to spend much of my savings.

My landlord was kind enough to install 3-phase power into the unit which meant I only had to get the power put to the individual machines, but first had to get the kit into the workshop. I ended up having to use a very big JCB tele-handler and a hoist.

Now the workshop not only has carpet on the floor – thanks to the previous occupants – but a comprehensive setup of machines, see Workshop equipment panel, placed to allow the workshop to function

Furniture courses

Richard did his course with Michael Scott at Shillingford, Devon. For more info log onto www.michaelscott.co.uk. For similar courses all over the UK turn to the classified pages of F&C.



Minimalist rocking horse from Richard's stable

without hitch. Having room to manoeuvre large pieces of wood and adequate space around each machine is vital.

Making and marketing

I am fortunate that my days in the post office gave me some knowledge of running a small business, and my wife has been running her own successful bespoke hand-crafted jewellery business for more than 20 years.

I have concentrated on developing a strong visual identity to my work. My original training as a mechanical and production engineer has strongly influenced the way that I approach design



Detail of Richard's Rocking Chair

and enables me to solve structural issues in a different way. I have devised numerous jigs, attachments and alterations to help me achieve the results I need.

I am always keen to introduce metal into my work and regularly include stainless steel, brass, aluminium and silver. The combination of metal and wood intrigues me and allows much more scope in creating structures and designs.

I worked to develop ideas for designs, created new pieces and still had the work I made while training, showing it at my first workshop exhibition in June 2008. I sent out 150 invitations to interested friends and acquaintances. As a result, some 120

people attended and I received several exciting commissions.

At the same time I successfully applied to be a member of the Somerset Guild of Craftsmen and was accepted into the new makers' Get Fresh exhibition at the Devon Guild of Craftsmen.

The rocking chair that I designed and made while training with Michael not only has the wow factor but gave me an early introduction to laminating, influencing subsequent designs to follow a theme of arches and curves.

Batch production

Michael encouraged me to work on batch products. With these smaller items I have had success selling not only through my own gallery but also through the Somerset Guild and at various craft shows and exhibitions around the country.

I like working on more than one project at a time – most of the time I guess you have to – so working on batches of lamps, boxes and the like gives me a chance to do something a little different and probably allow my mind to focus on the more complicated commission work.

I'm sure it's the same for everyone, but being relatively new, there seems so much to explore and experiment with. What has really struck me about the furniture-making world so far is the camaraderie and freedom of sharing knowledge. Long may it continue! F&C

Next month Richard makes a hall table.

Workshop equipment



Richard's kit includes a Felder tablesaw, planer-thicknesser, bandsaw and spindle moulder with high-speed router spindle, plus a Boxford model B engineering lathe, Wivamac DB1000 woodwork lathe, Jet oscillating sander and disc sander, Sedgwick morticer and a router boss.

Richard's spacious and carpeted workshop has a full complement of Felder machines. A door leads to the gallery