

# Aled Lewis – the lost decade

## Rod Wales introduces the life and work of Aled Lewis

### *Part the first; we set sail in Thame*

I've reached a time when pension arrangements and downsizing seem to take up a lot of the foreground. It's rare for one's mind to turn to the mid-1970s, I mean, why on earth would you if you could possibly avoid it? A dreary, culturally indeterminate time, jammed between the fast fading excitement of 60s' counterculture and the uncomfortable, liberating purgative of punk. Bell-bottoms were still worn unironically. Disco ruled, having just about seen off glam. News headlines seesawed between the Troubles in Ireland and the troubles in UK industrial relations. Summertime, and the living was queasy...

At the end of that summer of my 25th year I began a furniture course at Rycotewood College. One of the other entrants that year was a 16-year-old Aled Lewis.

Fast forward over 40 years and it is curious, and for me at least not a little moving, to see how our paths have continually crossed, and in spite of, (perhaps because of), considerably diverse working experience, we have ended up simply enjoying each other's company (we have a great capacity to yak), which is completely underpinned by the understanding and respect for what each of us has since experienced, what each of us

has done, what each of us is about to do. Aled, like me, is a maker, a designer and a teacher.

The two-year course at Rycotewood was in those days geared towards making students employable in the industry, whether in a workshop or a factory, and that's exactly what Aled did. There was far less focus then towards setting up as a self-employed designer-maker; the very idea of the artist-craftsman was still, at the time, quite exotic and rare. Consequently there was a broad base of old-school technical instruction, including a strong thread of antique restoration as well as a dose of industrial product model making, delivered by a team of three or four lead instructors and occasional visiting tutors. Design considerations, while far from being ignored, were largely considered secondary to the meat and potatoes business of attaining woodworking trade competence (however that might be defined...) It is salutary to reflect on the decades of varied experience that those teachers brought us and the importance

of their often contradictory tastes and preferences when it came to analysing quality. Aled still approves of this mix as a model now he himself is a course leader, setting out to suck in the experience of other instructors with sometimes hugely differing methods and attitudes, all of which eventually contributes to 'the knowledge' within the host college.

But we're getting ahead of ourselves again. By the end of the course, he was very much employable and sallied forth into the antiques trade as a restorer at the commercial sharp end. He readily admits that much of his first employment involved, shall we say, 'creative' reassembly and a degree of fakery, giving new life to Victorian breakers and re-issuing them as the Georgian pieces they always wanted themselves to be. We shall draw a veil over the ethics of that for now. However, the experience of being surrounded by old hands – old masters you might say – began to inculcate the quintessential bench virtues of speed and precision, of getting the job done and out there. Another cardinal

virtue was learned, that of humility. He is unfailing in acknowledging the influence on his own development of these modest and anonymous craftsmen.

However, a young man's fancies come thick and fast and after a couple of years of this and the extremely low wages that came with it, he took the plunge as an independent and, largely working out of the back of a van, spent a year fitting out shops and restaurants

and even installing sound insulation windows in the mean streets of Hounslow, hard by Heathrow. A 6am start, two houses a day... this was about as far from the romantic, artsy crafty way of making a living from making as it was possible to get. No scented shavings or fancy pantsy detailing. What he was making though, was decent money – about 10 times more than before, and sometimes, where there's a wad, there's a way.



Part the second, in which our hero crosses the pond, thus setting a precedent

Now, we are obviously dealing with a confident young man here, one with a bit of edge despite his courteous disposition and tender years. At 20 a serious attack of wanderlust saw Aled on a Freddie Laker DC10 to New York with a three-month visa and then, on an outstretched thumb and a prayer, through Virginia and the Carolinas down to Jackson, Mississippi. A mere 1200-mile hike. Maybe not quite the full Woody Guthrie, but not bad for a beginner!

In Jackson was an antique dealer, a contact from his first job who had invited Aled to look him up should he ever 'be in the area'. After a temporary job there for a few weeks it was suggested he introduce himself to the owners of an antique dealership in New Orleans, where there was a prospect of a more permanent position.

But first, the itchy thumb and the never-ending highway took him on a little geographical wriggle through the Midwest and then on to California. Cash strapped after time in the sunshine state, he had just enough either to get home or try New Orleans. He chose the latter; landed there at 7am, got the bus downtown, walked in and got the gig! The heat and humidity of New Orleans might have wilted the resolve of anyone, especially a woodworker, and especially one brought up in the mizzle of Mid Wales, but he was to spend the next two years on the banks of Ponchartrain, working once again as a restorer. Well, that was the day job; the nights were a whole other work in progress. A work party you might say. It's that kinda town. Also, weirdly, there was rugby. You can take the boyo out of Wales, but...

In the end, and to the mighty relief of his liver, he was unable to make his stay permanent and returned to England and a job at Design Furniture, the workshop of the fabled Archie Shine (and what a perfect moniker for a furniture manufacturer that is!) Though the new job was as one of a production team of 10, making high-end, Scandinavian-modern inspired domestic furniture, it was also to be an extension to his design education. This was largely to do with the presence of Robert Heritage, the consultant designer to the company. Aled would track the decisions that Heritage made during design development of new products, particularly in the prototyping, and the way he adjusted details after long and close deliberation, sometimes tiny incremental changes, for instance to reduce the visual weight of a rail, or to improve the shadow thrown by an overhang. Aled would watch and listen, a little overawed at times and not always understanding it all. However, he marked and he learned. He began to experience for the first time how furniture 'comes about', that it doesn't just happen by itself. That someone has to make many material, technical, aesthetic and economic decisions about any given piece at some point in the process, whether before, as is usually the case, or during the making. Significantly, the relationship with Heritage, tentative and



Aled with his dog Kelpie

one-sided as it was, felt like an inclusion, a modest engagement, in the process of design.

However, the job description was furniture maker, not design assistant, and the occasionally cantankerous gunvor was far from sentimental about the business of making furniture for profit. Despite appearances – he would drive to the Oxford workshop every day in his Rolls Royce – he had spent most of his life at, or very near, the bench. His first love was the exotic veneer that was a feature of much of the output, mainly Rio rosewood (*Dalbergia nigra*) and macassar ebony (*Diospyros celebica*) in those pre CITES days, which he kept more or less as his special domain, guarding the stuff like a dog with a bone. He would even squirrel away the best bundles under dust sheets, reserving them jealously for jobs as yet unknown. Aled was blessed in becoming the old man's veneer 'boy', but if he committed the cardinal sin of unearthing one of the favoured bundles for a regular job, he'd get short shrift and an earful; 'nah, nah, dat's too \*\*\*\*ing good!' Aled is quick to acknowledge that Shine had fantastic skill in judging the character of veneer leaves, with the ability to take the scrappiest bundle and find something like a 50mm-wide bundle that could fold out and transform into a peacock's tail.

Unusually for a workshop like this, each maker was in charge of a particular line, and made it from start to finish including all the jigs and templates. It was here that he learned to make furniture at a real pace and developed that strange workshop machismo of seeing just how fast (and well!), you could knock out a dozen cabinets or a set of chairs, assisted in this by proper grown-up industrial machines and processes.

Apart from being the principal veneer assistant, Aled was being driven hard on the making front. Despite thinking that he was already pretty quick, the boss once told him, evidently with all the delicacy of an especially unsentimental regimental sergeant major, 'Aled, you're good, \*\*\*\*y good, but you're the slowest man God put breath into...' Such exchanges, if they can be called that, seem not to have affected morale as Aled recalls it still as a great place to work, and the foundation of his later commercial practice.

Despite being very happy there, the travel

bug bit yet again, resulting in a perhaps impetuous decision to leave Oxford for a job in South Africa – still at the time in the last throes of its apartheid agony. Nor could this job in any sense whatsoever be described as living the woodworker's dream. The work was dull and often crude, making fitments for caravans and mobile homes to be precise. Techniques were primitive. I think 'character building' might genuinely be the best that could be said of it. At 24 he was put in charge of a team of whites and Indians (those with the permanent jobs) and hiring blacks by the day. A black foreman, Sunrise, became his right-hand man and sometime teacher and mentor, sometimes utilising entertainingly low-tech methods. He had a novel way of using a router template/bearing cutter set-up, in those days before portable plunge routers. Simply nailing the template to a board and starting up the router with the cutter already protruding and then slamming the whole thing down and through the board then round the template. He must have had strong arms, not to mention smoking motors! Note: don't try this at home (or anywhere else!) His 'press' for laminating boards together consisted of two sets of platens made of 4x4s between chipboard sheets. The glue-up was then placed between them and his pickup driven onto and parked on the pile. Necessity is the mother of invention, if not necessarily of delicacy. This has its funny side for us of course, but in this situation, there were often no other options to make the products.

Sunrise guided him through it all until he was tragically killed in the turmoil preceding the end of white rule. A year of this might have been enough for anyone, and so it was for Aled who shook the dust of Durban from his feet and travelled through Africa. That free spirit blew once more, and having never sailed in his life, he answered an ad to crew a yacht for a trip into the Indian Ocean. I'm not sure who exactly took whom on, but he got on the boat. Leaving in a gale, he was sick for 24 hours – a short enough apprenticeship in seafaring? Thereafter he was fine for what turned out to be the next six months, during which he learned how to sail and to navigate by the stars. Finally, for personal reasons he needed to return to England and yet another job search.

Part the third; an unusually long stint in Blighty

After making some pieces for Nick Dyson as a sub-contractor, he joined the business, which was, as with many nascent furniture enterprises, initially dependent on domestic commissions from family friends and relations. Within a year, they had two more employees – Rycotewood graduates, and this was effectively Aled's first experience of teaching – helping the young makers grow into becoming fully useful and responsible in the workshop.

This was the mid-1980s and our paths began to cross once more, meeting most commonly at that mainstay of furniture marketing, the trade fair. From smaller, craft-based exhibitions like the Chelsea Craft Fair and the Direct Design Show and later, playing with the contract furniture big boys at Earl's Court and Spectrum, we would regularly bump into one another pitching for a slice of the action. The action at that time and place typically being bespoke corporate or institutional furniture; reception areas, boardrooms and meeting rooms – the most visible and highly invested areas of the office environment.

In the Dyson workshop, there was a distinct division of labour with Aled essentially becoming the production manager while Dyson stayed in the office. The business continued to grow; in reputation as well as capacity and eventually it had to physically expand to meet demand and, perhaps more significantly, its own perceived expectations. It became a conveyor belt of large commercial projects, culminating in the mid-90s with a move to a 4500 square foot workshop and plans

to crank up production even higher. Well, turnover certainly did increase. Profits on the other hand were harder to come by, alongside which there were cash flow issues enough to drive anyone to despair. At the same time, not only was production within the workshop having to be taken care of, but the whole gamut of client meeting, design, site visits, installs – the whole nine yards were laid at his door. Relations with Dyson became increasingly fractious and eventually, not being able to face spearheading another large project, the line between them broke.

In the words of the song: The line broke, the monkey got choked, and they all went to heaven in a little rowboat...clap, clap. Well, would that life was always so simple. While Aled may not have ascended on high, downsizing to become once more an independent and indeed solitary designer-maker, proved to be a liberation. He is not sentimental about this freedom however. First of all, the 'liberation' was to a hard seven-day week, and one where he found he desperately missed the camaraderie of the larger workshop. It's not so strange after all when, having spent years making things with other people, it's hard suddenly having to do everything yourself. Not to mention the greater economic uncertainty that's an almost inevitable consequence of being your own man.

Possibly the most difficult, but also most interesting problem facing any new designer-maker after setting up shop is how to be distinct from the competition and develop a recognisable design identity. While any designer worth their salt has to consider this, it is certain that Aled was thinking this way for

years before having to actually depend solely on those ideas for his living. For many makers the love of material and a desire to express technical sophistication can be sufficient by themselves, and while these qualities are very evident in the later, post Dyson furniture, they are just the foundation, not the entirety of the work.

Though this was a good few years ago now, for the purposes of this article we can perhaps begin to use the present tense round about here. We are less concerned with the retrospective, and now into the current work.

I am wary of summarising the body of work too neatly, partly because as Aled says, practical as ever, reality needs to shape the mission statement. However, there are features that distinguish the work. They don't amount to a radical shift of vision or a relinquishing of previously held values so much as the inevitable effect of years and years of small decisions that have gradually accrued and settled, or more accurately, been refined into an ethos.

Over time there has been a gradual, but consistent quietening of aesthetic and technical effect and an increasing reliance on a confident subtlety at the expense of showy or overly assertive process. The standout pieces for me are those that are almost instantly readable at first glance, but which then take you deeper in as you realise the refinement and the level of detail, sometimes almost quirky and semi-hidden. The most interesting designs are perhaps those that have least weight, visually and literally; that are sharp and sensual at the same time, and which are materially and graphically clear. A mastery of technique is very evident, even to the uninitiated, but the best work is simply not anxious, it doesn't need to prove anything; it is comfortable – like the man, in its own skin.

This is to some extent attributable to the change in clientele, which is more often domestic rather than corporate now, and partly having simply had enough of certain processes. For instance, after laying thousands of square metres of veneer over the years, he is overjoyed to decline the pleasures of another bookmatched panel, thank you very much. Nothing too deeply philosophical about that, but it indicates another important driver of the work – that after many years in another man's saddle, he now wants to ride his own horse his own way.



PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK JULLIANA

The Dyfi bench

## Part the last (for the time being): land of our fathers and becoming a Maine man

No matter the existential satisfaction of being his own man, Aled, like every designer-maker I have ever known, felt caught in the headlights once he was out on his own and having to fend for himself. Self-determination takes considerable, well, determination, commitment, nerve; call it what you will. Whatever your past experience, portfolio or contacts, you still have to land the jobs and get them done, meanwhile juggling the myriad delights of running a small business from supply to accounts.

The stresses of this situation were to some extent displaced (and just possibly financially aggravated), by the purchase and personal renovation of a 200-year-old house in Mid Wales, where he continues to live when, as will become clear, he is in the country at all.

Once more our paths strangely intertwined. By 2004 I had been teaching occasional short courses at the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship in Maine, USA (I even wrote about it for this magazine) and, at roughly the same time Aled began teaching on the nine-month course there, co-tutoring specialist six-week segments within that programme.

A few years later and he was invited to become the lead instructor for the nine-month course, taking over from David Uphill-Brown. With characteristic modesty (he was stunned to be asked), and despite all the years of experience, he finds the process of teaching (after getting over the initial terror), still to be a revelation. Having walked the walk, however imperfectly, we can, however imperfectly, talk the talk. This is very far from implying that he will always know the answer, still less that he will always know best. Teaching at its best is humbling.

It also has the enormous advantage – especially after the isolation of being a one man band, of being socially and intellectually rich and energising. It is for him very much a process of collaboration too, never one of lofty authority handing down tablets of stone. It is not always sweetness and light either; students can take you to some technically difficult and challenging places at times and compromises are viewed as unwelcome distractions. The horse can be led to water, but not always made to drink. C'est la vie. At such times his typical response is to embrace the situation, turn it into a mutual learning opportunity with good grace and a dose of humour. I think I need to learn from that. Maybe we all should.

Experience, finesse and humility. From Thame to Maine, Aled's journey goes on. *F&C*

### Contact

To see more of Aled's work, visit: [aledlewisfurniture.com](http://aledlewisfurniture.com)  
For more information about the Center For Furniture Craftsmanship, see: [www.woodschooll.org](http://www.woodschooll.org)

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK JULIANA



Idris Wen hall stand in bleached ash and bloodwood