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' counter-culture 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. Summer-time, 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 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-craftsy way of making a living from making as it was possible to get. No scented shavings or fancy pantry detailing. What he was making though, was decent money – about 10 times more than before, and sometimes, where there's a will, there's a way.
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 — Ryecote woodworkers, and this was effectively Aled’s first experience of teaching — helping the younger growers make into becoming fully useful and responsible in the workshop.

This was the mid-1990s and the 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. The action at that time and place typically being beaspoke 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 perception of what it could become. That 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 improve. 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 such going on any more, he decided to pack up and leave, having turned down a move to the US and other major projects, the line between them broke...

In the words of the song; The line broke, the monkey got chocked, and they went to heaven in a little rowboat...clap, clap, clap. Well, would that it was always as 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 himself desperately remorse and 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. Probably the most instructive thing for me was the realization that it had to physically expand to meet demand and, perhaps more significantly, its own perception of what it could become. That 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 improve. 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 such going on any more, he decided to pack up and leave, having turned down a move to the US and other major projects, the line between them broke...

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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 aggrivated), 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 Upfill-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.

Contact
To see more of Aled’s work, visit: aledlewisfurniture.com
For more information about the Center For Furniture Craftsmanship, see: www.woodschool.org

Idris Wen half stand in bleached ash and bloodwood