



OUT *of* *the* WOODS

In a bid to combine their talents, the Brooks family decided to go with the grain and set up business together, crafting rustic furniture that celebrates the natural beauty of timber

WORDS BY PAULA McWATERS | PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALUN CALLENDER





LEFT Alex (foreground) and Ed Brooks at work in the woods. THIS PICTURE David and his sons use traditional equipment to move a heavy tree trunk. BELOW A garden gate made from sweet chestnut wood





THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM Alex splitting wood along the grain with steel wedges; piles of oak and a wood adze; David cuts a windfallen tree into lengths; a trusted Massey Ferguson tractor is used to pull lengths of timber



David Brooks has a twinkle in his eye as he describes his stash of treasure. Not gold and jewels, but rusty hinges, old deer fencing and lengths of misshapen wood. It may look like junk to some, scattered around his Dorset home and wood yard, but to David, with his background in construction and forestry, it is a rich reserve of possibilities.

It was this ability to spot potential that led him and his sons – Ed, 33, and Alex, 30 – to go into business together. In 1999, while working with them on a landscaping project, David suggested making a gate and some benches and tables using wind-fallen timber in its natural form. “We had a load of oak and chestnut on site and Dad said instead of sawing it up we could use wedges to split it apart following its curves,” Ed says. “The cottages where we were working were 15th century with sagging roofs and irregular walls so it seemed the perfect solution.”

Ed, who had just graduated with a degree in landscape architecture, was inspired by this idea and started sketching designs. The distinctive, quirky style of the resulting furniture was a success and they began to receive commissions near their home in Wootton Fitzpaine, Dorset, and further afield. As Ed does most of the designing, they named the business Ed Brooks, but it involves all the family, including Marion, David’s wife, who takes care of administration and client liaison.

“We work with the organic shapes of timber, just as it has grown,” Ed says. “The

lack of straight lines means that the pieces don’t tend to date and they fit right in with old buildings.” Sometimes they can use clients’ own fallen trees, which adds an extra personal touch to the work. The Brooks family enjoy the challenge that no two jobs are the same. “I’ll always visit a client or see photos of their garden to get an understanding of where and how they live. Then I design accordingly. We love trying something new.”

Work can range from making a latch to renewing all the fencing and gates on an estate. They have also been commissioned to build tree houses and have enjoyed dreaming up adventurous designs, the natural curve and taper of the wood giving the structures the appearance of illustrations from a fairytale.

Ed and Alex grew up around wood. They remember their dad swinging timber about on his tractor in nearby woodland when they were small and David has passed on his practical and technical expertise to both of them. Along with wind-fallen wood, they use scrap metal to make hinges, bars and latches. “If the surface of a piece of iron is pitted, you can see its history. Old materials help to make our designs timeless,” Ed says.

“The quality is superior, too,” adds Alex, who joined the company in 2004, having been apprenticed to a London furniture maker for a few years. “Some of the iron fencing we use was made in the 1860s and yet the nuts still unscrew easily. It is so rewarding to be able to re-use things that might otherwise have ▷





ended up in a skip and to know that they will last for a very long time.”

Metalwork is made to Ed's design by the village blacksmith – they like to keep all aspects of their business as local as possible. “It cuts down on transport and it's nice to work with people you know,” David says. “We use as many of the woodsmen around here as we can to source timber.” The Brooks approach to business is a gentle one and deals are just as likely to be struck over a pint of home-brewed cider as they are over the phone.

Working as a family can have its pitfalls but the Brooks find it suits them well. “Our skills complement one another,” Ed says. “We do a bit of everything together but, basically, Dad is in charge of the forestry, I do most of the designing and Alex and Dad do most of the making. When Alex joined he brought a new approach that's more methodical and logical, and that's been great. He still works a day or two a week in London, with the furniture maker he was apprenticed to, so he brings all that experience with him, too.” Ed also recognises Alex's eye for design, which is just as well since Alex takes a liberal approach to Ed's drawings. “He passes them on to us, then Dad and I decide they don't work so we change them,” Alex jokes.

The furniture-making process starts among the trees, choosing suitable lengths of timber. In 2007 they acquired their own 13-acre wood just a few miles from their cottage so now most timber is from there. It seems like the realisation of a dream for David. “Dad is so at home in the woods,” Alex says. “We all help but it's very much

his domain.” So far they haven't had to do any felling – they just use wood that has already fallen or been blown down.

“Branches that have had to fight for light take on interesting bent forms so they are the ones we look for,” Ed says. They suggest different uses – a long sweeping shape could form the handrail for a bridge; a forked branch could make the back of a chair or the centre of a gate. Once timber has been selected they pull it out with David's old tractor and cut it into planks using their own sawmill at the yard or, if it is in an area that is accessible only by foot, they cut it up in the woods, using a chainsaw or hand tools.

To split a log lengthwise by hand, it is first cut with an axe, then steel wedges are driven in using a mallet and moved bit by bit to force the timber apart along the grain. An advantage of this is that it has much more strength than timber that is sawn straight. The bark is sometimes retained to give a rustic look, otherwise it is removed by hand with a bark stripper. On large pieces an adze is used to get a rough-hewn finish. Mortise and tenon joints are all worked by hand using chisels. “The pieces are harder to make than they'd be with straight joints,” Alex explains. “It takes longer because you have to keep offering up each joint until you get a fit. But it's all the more satisfying when it's finished.”

Would they ever take on anyone from outside the family? “It depends on how they fitted in,” Ed says. “Maybe they would have to change their name to Brooks...”  Ed Brooks, Wootton Fitzpaine, Bridport, Dorset (01297 560807; www.edbrooks.com).



THIS PAGE,
CLOCKWISE FROM
LEFT Ed, Marion,
Alex and David
take a break and
enjoy using their
own furniture;
a split sweet
chestnut gate;
the metal features
of each item are
handforged; Ed
cuts a mortise
and tenon joint
for a garden gate