

Outside the box

Furniture maker and Arts and Crafts enthusiast Michael Slaney does things a bit differently, sometimes scorching or sandblasting wood to achieve a particular effect. **Sue Allan** meets him in his workshop on the Duddon Estuary

Photography by Milton Haworth

Furniture maker Michael Slaney has a reputation for innovation of design and construction, and an evident affinity with his chosen medium of wood.

"I've worked with wood ever since I was a kid. I always had a box of tools with me," he says when I visit him at his workshop at Foxfield, overlooking the Duddon Estuary. "I like making things. I have to do something with my hands, to be creative in some way – and wood is just such a fabulous material."

Brought up in Nottinghamshire, Michael fell in love with the Lake District at an early age and was determined to make his living and his home here. He moved to Cumbria in 1976 to work in Youth Hostels, first at Coniston and then at Carrock Fell near Hesketh Newmarket – because that way he got both a job and accommodation. Carrock Fell was only open in the summer, so he used the common room as his workshop throughout the winter, and eventually decided he should do it professionally.

After three years at the prestigious Fine Craft furniture course at Buckinghamshire College he returned to the county and soon had his own workshop at Nibthwaite, near Coniston. He later moved to Armthwaite with his wife, artist Jac Scott, and taught at Cumbria Institute of the Art (now The University of Cumbria) before going on to do an MA in design at Leeds. When the couple moved back to the south of the county eight years ago Michael set up his workshop at Foxfield: "It felt like coming home," he says, a broad smile on his face.

He works, he says, in two quite different ways: "As a designer I develop ideas about structure based on what a piece of furniture is to be used for. But then other pieces are materials-led. I see a nice piece of wood and think what I could make with it. Letting the material speak is a big thing for me, especially when I find a really interesting piece of wood."

He points to a fabulous piece of yew leaning up in the corner: "I haven't quite decided what to do with that yet, but it'll happen one day. You can't rush these things..."

Michael's business is varied and not always about innovative design as he also does antique restoration. "Last week, for example, I was stripping a huge painted pine cabinet," he says. "This week I'm making shutters, but next week I'm making a fabulous table for someone."

His furniture is very beautiful, and I admire a handsome panelled cupboard and a rather unusual small table, its top dark and very textured, with sharply contrasting pale, smooth legs.

"The top is burr elm that I set fire to," he says. Shocked, I peer more closely at what is evidently burnt wood. "I scorch the wood with a gas lamp, and when it catches fire use a little water squirter to put it out. Then I wire brush it to get rid of the loose carbon before polishing it. The texture comes about because the burr is made up of hard and soft elements, so you're burning



Michael with a piece of English burr oak

the soft wood away. I like to do something different that's a bit outside the box."

It's certainly that, as is another piece of burr wood which has been sandblasted, giving a similar but lighter effect. He thinks it's a technique which is unique to him, and it is strikingly attractive.

Michael is also a big fan of the Arts and Crafts style, and it shows in his designs and craftsmanship. And while he uses traditional techniques, there's always a bit of a twist.

"Take this wedged dovetail key for example," he says. "It's a technique originally used to join two boards together, but I hit upon the idea one day of using it to keep them apart, as in my 'stitched together' table. The original was bought by an Arts and Crafts collector who saw it as a continuation of that tradition."

Although he has small pieces at the new Beach Hut gallery at Kent's Bank and Made in Cumbria shop in Kendal and will be taking part in the C>Art Open Studios scheme in September and the Yew Tree Gallery's Christmas market, most of Michael's work is made to commission.

And the commissions are still coming, even in these austere times: "I usually have a couple of months' work on, although in the past I would have had a year's worth, so things have changed. I like to build a relationship with my clients, usually making two or three visits to their homes to see the context for the piece, and I like them to come to my workshop too. It's time-consuming, but worth it as I get a lot of repeat business."

Looking through his portfolio of commissions I'm particularly taken by a dining table with a series of raised ebony strips, effectively forming a tray on which you can put hot dishes, the ebony echoed by detailing on the legs. He obviously revels in the tactile and textural qualities of wood as well as its looks and function, and I marvel at the silky finish he manages to achieve. How does he do it?

"That depends on the job. Modern finishes deteriorate as they're hard and brittle, so I use wax for bookcases and oil for dining tables. Oiling gives the best possible finish, even though it requires a little upkeep, as the oil just becomes part of the wood." ■



A detail from the Arc table in elm and forged steel; the Gap display cabinet

Information

Michael Slaney Design
Foxfield Business Park,
Broughton-in-Furness
LA20 6BX
Tel: 01229 715014
www.michaelslaneydesign.co.uk

The Beach Hut Gallery,
Kent's Bank, Grange
over Sands
www.thebeachhutgallery.co.uk

Made in Cumbria Shop,
25 Stramontgate, Kendal
www.madeincumbria.co.uk

C>Art Open Studios,
September 17-October 2
www.edenarts.co.uk/
cart-open-studios-2011

Yew Tree Barn
Christmas Market
December 10 and 11
www.yewtreebarn.co.uk



Library cabinets



'Burrwrap' occasional table



Table with burnt burr elm top



Table with ebony inlay detail



Table with wedged dovetail detail



Michael Slaney marks out a piece of wood for cutting in his Foxfield workshop