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TURN, TURN, TURN

INSPIRED BY A LOVE OF WOODTURNING AND MAKING, **BRENDAN WORSLEY** QUIT A DEGREE IN ENGINEERING TO BUILD A CAREER IN FURNITURE

Suffolk maker Brendan Worsley has been woodturning since he was just 13 years old. 'My interest was sparked by a weekend job serving food and drink in a tearoom,' he recalls. 'My boss's husband was a furniture maker and he quickly became an influence on me. My dad helped me turn a wooden pen on his engineering lathe and I quickly got hooked. I borrowed some money off my dad and bought a small lathe and a few tools. I paid him back via my weekend job. With some mentoring from my boss's husband, I started selling small wooden pieces in the shop window.'

Brendan got off to a great start, winning a scholarship with the Association of Woodturners of Great Britain and a woodturning competition for juniors. As well as wood, this launched a lifelong love of tools, which he started buying at a young age. 'I have just turned 35 and I am still spending all my money on tools,' he says. Brendan's dad and many of his relatives are engineers, so after A-Levels Brendan started studying engineering at university, even though he had loved a two-week work placement with a joinery company while he was still at school. 'A couple of the chaps suggested that if I enjoy it I should keep it as a hobby, and unfortunately I listened to that advice and went about studying increasingly tedious engineering

subjects,' he says. 'That is until one day at university, I walked out of a class, not being able to take it anymore. I quit, went home and started my pursuit of an apprenticeship. I was back on track.'

He got an apprenticeship with a local company and, although he feared he had wasted his time doing A-Levels and starting university, by the time he started working at 18 he was old enough to use machines, so was more useful to the company and progressed faster. What Brendan didn't like about working for the business was not seeing the bigger picture. He explains: 'The downside of working for a large company was that I very much felt like a small cog in a big machine. I wanted to learn more skills and be able to see projects through from the very start to the end. In large outfits it is very common to have set roles: customer-facing, site surveys, estimating, drawing, cutting lists, machining, veneering, making, finishing and fitting, not to mention many roles in between. It was obvious to me that if I could get a grasp of each stage I would become a much more skilled craftsperson. For example, my designing skills are now much better, having had experience installing work. I can design for an easy install – after all, it is easy to make items in a workshop, less so inside a client's home.'



GROWING WORKSHOPS

Brendan's workshop space has been slowly growing since his first teenage forays into woodworking. He started out in his dad's garage, but 'he soon got fed up of me making shavings – shavings and engineering tools don't really mix well,' he says. He moved his turning workshop to 'an impossibly small bike shed at the bottom of the garden', then made a disused shed in his grandad's garden into his first furniture workshop. After a while this doubled in size and he began using the garage there as a finishing room. Growing his workshop as he slowly built up his business, Brendan did everything he could to get it off the ground: 'Printing and delivering leaflets, exhibiting at arts and crafts fairs and galleries, and so on. The first six years were incredibly tough and a steep learning curve,' he says. The first project he completed for his own business was a couple of wardrobes for a 16th-century Suffolk elm barn conversion. 'I still remember the beautiful space and regularly drive past,' he says. 'I made the ledged and braced wardrobe doors from English oak.'

For the past eight years he has worked in a 100 sq m ex-military building

which has been used as a carpentry workshop on a local farm since the end of World War II. 'I have all of the usual basic woodworking machines including a dimension saw, planer thicknesser, spindle moulder, bandsaw, wide belt sander, mortiser, lathe, vacuum press and recently a finishing room. It is all quite compact, if I were to take on anybody I would need to build an extension or move, which makes it financially not viable!' he says. 'I very much plan on staying here to work on my design and making skills.'

Brendan mainly works with domestically grown timber – 'we have such wonderful timbers on our doorstep, it seems pointless to be importing' – but occasionally uses the darker north American black walnut and bigger American cherry. Occasionally he will incorporate other tactile materials, such as a copper worktop for his kitchen or leather for drawer linings, handles and decorative panels. In the year he was born, 1987, there was a famous hurricane which blew down a great number of trees across Britain. A lot of the trees on the farm where Brendan works were blown over, and a local furniture maker bought several

elm boards, but never got around to using them. 'When I moved in and we got to know each other, he commissioned me to make him a sideboard,' Brendan says.

'I have always loved tools, both hand and machine,' he says. 'This year alone I upgraded my planer thicknesser with one which has a spiral block, and I am still fizzy about it! I have recently reinstalled a spraying facility, having not had that facility myself for several years. But I am still in love with hand tools, I was also very excited to finally bag a small, curved spokeshave for a particular job for Heritage Crafts – due to global events these haven't been available for at least two years!' So far he has not learned to use CAD software – 'I'm still on my old-fashioned drawing board every week!' He hasn't used a CNC machine either, but as costs come down he may get to in the future. His favourite finish for solid timber jobs is a hard wax oil, for a smooth and durable finish. 'I started out wanting to French polish everything, but it frightens the life out of clients, and I want my work to be used every day without worry,' he says. 'A hard wax oil finish is very durable and can be repaired or reinvigorated if need be, so it works well for me.'



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Turning remains an important part of Brendan's work, but he says that although useful, 'it is just another skill'. 'It is the fastest way to make anything round, and that is a common shape in furniture work. Even the small things, it is super handy to quickly turn a few handles, pegs or legs,' he says. His advice to furniture makers who would like to try out turning is to take a short one or two-day course. 'I didn't have a clue what I was doing as a kid or what tool to use and when, and this showed and I quickly drew blood,' he admits.

INDIVIDUAL DESIGNS

Brendan's design style and business model is all about working closely with his clients, and at the moment he works 100% on commission. 'My guiding principle is to design what is right for the client. As we are all so individual, it would feel quite rude of me to impose what I think they will like on to them,' he says. 'I don't have a set style of my own. I love all the furniture periods, but I enjoy visiting a client's home and seeing what makes them tick, and then designing for that taste. This keeps it more interesting and pushes me into sometimes quite uncomfortable corners, but this is probably when I do my best work, as I have to try harder with the design.'

The design process starts with a chat with the potential client, followed by a meeting to assess the available space. 'While there I can show photos of past projects. I am looking to see what gets a

reaction, both good and bad! If necessary, I can show them ironmongery catalogues and timber samples, and I walk away with a good idea of the brief,' he says. 'I then mull it over for a couple of days and work out an estimate for the client based on a specification. If they are happy to proceed, I start the designing process. If the project is something a bit different, I sketch out quick ideas for 20 minutes a day, and after three or four days compare sketches. I then take the strongest three or four ideas forward and refine them to present to the client. From there it is just a matter of tweaking the design until the client is happy.'

Recently he has been working for Heritage Crafts, the UK's advocacy body for traditional crafts. A client of Brendan's was commissioned to design the body's President's Award, and Brendan hand-made medallion boxes from oak he was able to personally select from the Sandringham estate. These were presented to some of the best craft workers in the UK. 'It was mindblowing and a lot of pressure,' admits Brendan. 'It is an incredible privilege to be working with Heritage Crafts.'

Looking forward after 12 years in business, Brendan hopes to create a few one-offs to sell alongside his commissioned work, which he says will always be the main part of his business. 'Commissions are great, as I get paid something at the end of the day,' he says. 'Making items to then sell is very tricky, as galleries often take a 50% commission,

so the item becomes very expensive unless you start batch-producing, which I don't really want to do as I love one-offs. Having said that, I would love to make a few one-offs in various styles I have been mulling over for a few years now. I would love to go a bit crazy, put them out there and just see what happens!'

He adds: 'I would like to keep my furniture practical, but make it more luxurious. A notch or two up the exclusive ladder, although not by using more expensive or rare timbers, just a stronger emphasis on tactile design to make my work stand out a little. I have a few ideas, but I haven't had time to put them into action.'

Always excited about the next piece of work, Brendan is looking forward to 'possibly the best commission of my career', which he will be working on early next year: 'An old-fashioned oak study with a secret door and several secret cupboards and drawers. I really can't wait! I always like to think the next job will be my best job, but also, you are only as good as your last job. It helps to keep me on my toes.' Other commissions in the pipeline include a large dressing room and a dining table – and a pair of Lynx helicopter seats he has been asked to turn into office chairs. 'Working next to an army base, I often get unusual requests for leaving presents,' he explains.

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