



Jamie's dedication to excellence has earned him a reputation for future conservation.

Arts and crafts

Skilled furniture makers have been associated with Oxfordshire for generations and Oxfordshire has a particular place in the Arts and Crafts movement. Sandra Fraser met a man who has made furniture conservation an art form. Photography by Steve Wheeler

WHEN a prized armchair or heirloom dining table get damaged or broken it's hard to know exactly where to turn to. Pick the wrong person to repair scratches in your much-loved chest of drawers and you might as well have bought it from Ikea. Make the right choice and the work can add value and appeal. But how do you set about finding someone with the skills to help? What you really need is a conservator who loves what he does and that's where Jamie Chatfield comes in.

After training as a furniture maker at the now sadly defunct Rycotewood College in Thame, Jamie concluded he was better suited to conservation rather than furniture design.

"I didn't really have the flair. What I was designing my tutors didn't like – which is fine if you're not going to try to make a living from it," he says, with disarming honesty. Instead, he did a two-year restoration and conservation course at the college and then worked for the renowned and highly respected conservator Colin Piper.

"Then in 1999, Colin moved to Ireland and set up a conservation studio there. I then took over his business..." Jamie's voice tails off in appreciation, but what he doesn't

acknowledge is that Colin would not have encouraged him to take over if he hadn't had faith in Jamie's abilities.

Jamie also tutored at West Dean College and worked as an advisor and moderator in the courses before deciding he needed to concentrate on his business.

The fact that Jamie didn't want to be the next Chippendale or Mouseman has been furniture owners' gain. He has turned his mind, heart and hand, quite literally, to looking after, and sympathetically repairing, the work of previous generations of craftsmen and women. His love of wood shines through the projects undergoing repair in his workshop – which include antique and contemporary pieces in a variety of woods, finishes and styles.

Over the years he has built up a reputation with Oxford colleges, local museums, antique dealers, the National Trust and other heritage furniture collectors and owners, sometimes working on site rather than at his workshop. His dedication to excellence extends to preserving the integrity of a piece by retaining its patina and warmth while still allowing it to be seen, enjoyed and, in many cases, used every day.

Accompanied by his two dogs and a radio, it's a fairly solitary existence, though there

are other conservators and craftsmen in nearby workshops. Jamie's skills have taken years to hone and he would like to engage an apprentice, as long as he can find the right person, with good hands and realistic expectations of income – not easy given the cost of living in Oxfordshire.

It's not a job for someone who wants to get rich quick, but Jamie is working in the picturesque area in which he grew up and every day deals with items of beauty and elegance. He chooses to furnish his own home with collectible furniture, but admits his purse won't always stretch to the price tag of some of his objects of desire.

That said, he has just been commissioned to construct a replica Arts and Crafts table for a collector who was disappointed in a recent specialist sale. Outbid by several thousands, the collector asked if Jamie would consider creating him something similar – Jamie is looking forward to the challenge – he feels it is a good commission, a rare chance to build a piece from scratch. And who knows – perhaps his work will be appreciated by collectors of the future. ■

You can find out more about Jamie's work by visiting his website at www.chatfieldconservation.co.uk, tel: 01295 750940.

