

The future in their hands

Discover how the handcrafted furniture business of **Charles Yorke** is playing its part in keeping some of the world's oldest skills alive.

BY LAUREN JARVIS



As the representative of over 400 trades and professions, one of the key aims and responsibilities for the Guild is to help safeguard the survival of traditional crafts, and ensure they continue to be learned, practised and appreciated for many years to come.

Often perceived as being under threat from technological advances and the demand for cheap, off-the-shelf goods, the Guild's growing, vibrant community is proving time and again that quality craftsmanship is actually alive, well, and doing very nicely, thank you.

One company finding their traditional skills increasingly in demand is the luxury, handcrafted furniture-maker, Charles Yorke. The Kirkby based business has been producing bespoke kitchens, bathrooms, occasional rooms and furniture since 1999, using traditional crafts including cabinetmaking, joinery and hand-carving.

'We're 100 per cent committed to developing, nurturing and promoting these invaluable skills,' explains the company's Design & Marketing Manager, Stephanie Dedes. 'We have 60 talented craftspeople in our workshop, all creating very unique and personal pieces with a great deal of pride, dedication and attention to detail. Our customers understand that what they're putting into their work isn't something that can ever be reproduced by a machine.'

But with the quality of 'off-the-shelf' kitchens and bathrooms at an unprecedented high, and households across the country feeling the financial pinch, how is Charles Yorke managing to compete and convince customers that handmade is the way to go? 'I think lots of people are surprised to discover the price of some of our handcrafted pieces,' says Stephanie. 'We're actually very competitive, and our design team will always try to work within a customer's budget. The materials we use, the finish and the amount of decorative detail will all affect costs, so there are lots of areas we can look at and recommendations we can make to find a solution that works for them.'

Stephanie designs the Charles Yorke showrooms for the independent retail studios which sell the company's bespoke furniture throughout the UK, including Vellos Designs in



London, Spillers of Chard in Somerset, AKC in Manchester, Paul Newman Interiors in Essex, Platinum Interiors in Guernsey and Callum Walker in Perth. The handcrafted kitchens and bathrooms are also available internationally through stores in Paris, Moscow, Malaga and Prague.

Creating the products

All the company's furniture is produced by hand at its factory in Kirkby, using locally sourced FSC-approved materials, selected individually to ensure the naturally occurring patterns in the timber will enhance the design. Cabinets can be made in a broad range of woods, depending on the customer's taste and style, from silvery maple to dark chocolate walnut, and honey-coloured oak and elm. Charles Yorke also offers a hand-painted finishing option. 'The studio displays give clients the opportunity to see the quality of our products first-hand, but

we also produce a new *Charles Yorke Book of Furniture* every 18 to 24 months to showcase our designs,' reveals Managing Director, Mark Denman. 'It pictures the different kinds of projects we've been lucky enough to work on, and produce fantastic furniture for. All the rooms and pieces featured in the book are from real people's homes.'

For customers without a retail studio nearby, the *Book of Furniture* provides inspiration, and a starting point for discussions about their own projects' needs. Beautifully photographed and finished, the book encapsulates the quality of the work revealed between its covers. 'We've just released Volume Three,' Mark tells us. 'And it's something we're very proud of.'

In addition to stylish, original design (Charles Yorke was named Bathroom Designer of the Year at the KBB review awards in 2012), the quality of workmanship and high level of customer service are, Stephanie believes, essential ingredients in Charles Yorke's proven recipe for success. 'Our products really



Photographs: Charles Yorke

do stand the test of time,' she says. 'As well as being beautifully designed, crafted and finished, they're also durable and strong. But we do offer an annual MOT service to our customers if any of their furniture picks up a scratch, and send out our French polisher to work his magic.'

With such specialist craft requirements, does Stephanie ever find that Charles Yorke struggles to find the right people for the job? 'There are lots of apprentices coming through who are learning many of the skills we need, like carpentry and cabinetmaking,' she replies. 'But it has been harder to find people who are practising more unusual crafts like hand-carving and French polishing. We're keen to develop skills in these areas, but more needs to be done to promote these trades, so that young people see them as a viable career. From our experience, the demand is definitely there from the customer.'

The future

That demand will keep the Charles Yorke factory busy throughout 2014, with many production orders already booked in through the retail partners at home and abroad. And the company's ongoing relationships with several high-end developers, including Millgate Homes, will also see the team designing rooms and furniture for a host of new luxury properties across the south of England. 'Working with developers is a growing side of the business for us,' explains Stephanie. 'We've provided kitchens and bathrooms for some beautiful houses, and the team has really embraced the opportunity to produce incredibly creative and imaginative designs, which ultimately turns them into very special homes.'

With expansion on the horizon and future business looking good, it seems that Charles Yorke will be helping to keep the invaluable skills of their craftspeople alive for years to come. And with hotels, country clubs and castles also on the company's client list, it's clear that even in today's disposable, fast-fix society, there's still a place for the finer things in life... ■



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