



Niall Meadows



Andy Butterly



Toby Howes



Steve McIlveen

The Bristol Five

Starting out on a career in furniture making, as a designer-maker, is one tough business – few make it far. But in Bristol five graduates have found a novel way of lessening the burden. **Ben Plewes** investigates

I'm driving through Bristol to find the workshop of Niall Meadows, Toby Howes, Andy Butterly and Steve McIlveen: a group of furniture makers who, when they finished college, elected to stay together and form a cooperative where they work independently but under the same roof, rather than going their own separate ways,

As the car's sat-nav homes in on my destination it takes me left off Gloucester Road and down a small alleyway towards what looks like an automotive complex. I'm confused: every building I see contains cars –

being fixed, recycled, re-sprayed, cleaned, you name it... But there are no furniture makers.

I call a number on my mobile phone. "Just knock on number 14's roller door – it's next to the big blue doors, the guys are in," instructs Niall Meadows through the speaker.

He isn't there himself; he's manning an exhibition of his furniture with his twin sister, Kilda, who has a range of ceramics on display. The exhibition is at Room 212 on Gloucester Road, which is about half a mile from where I am now.

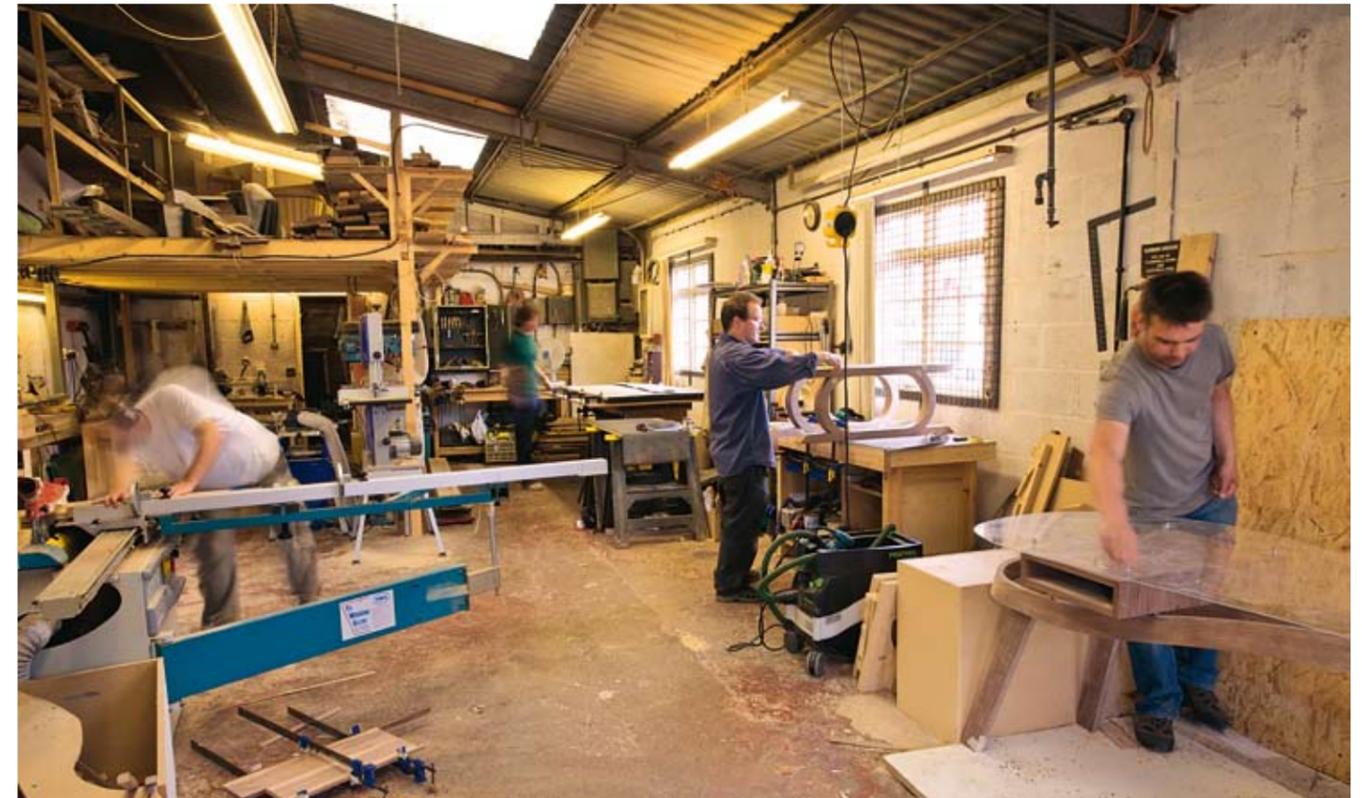
I give the door a loud knock and enter the workshop where I'm greeted by three friendly

faces, all brandishing hand tools of one sort or another. The workshop has a buzz of creativity about it and feels completely alien to the automotive yard just a few metres away. I have a quick look around while getting directions to Room 212, and after a few minutes I set off, camera in hand, to meet Niall Meadows.

Beyond the thin veneer

Room 212 is a fairly small gallery, just big enough to put on a decent exhibition. Niall is an uncompromising furniture maker. Each piece shares an eclectic mix of well-thought-

► The workshop has defined individual workspaces and common areas – mostly around the machines. Through the opening in the wall you can see the team’s expansion into next door!



◀ Niall’s work shows impressive variety; ‘DNA table’ shows confident use of mixed materials, the pippy oak and ovancol sideboard is a subtle twist on traditional, while the geometric bowls in oak with waney edge is a mix of styles

through design, playful form and superb craftsmanship. The pieces are well finished, but there’s often a twist in the tail. Niall has a knack of combining smooth, well-finished surfaces with rough bandsawn sections or waney edges within the same piece. It’s a combination that works well and adds interest to the finished articles.

I ask Niall what drives his passion for furniture design. He tells me it’s about finding unique solutions to problems in a way that has been thought through from the ground up. Niall prefers to draw inspiration from furniture makers that he’s met personally as opposed to established names in the industry. It’s a refreshing approach – like others with a passion for wood, Niall has found a grounding force in furniture making that goes beyond the thin veneer of modern life.

Back at the workshop Niall gives me a run down on the premises and a guided tour of its facilities. The space is ideal, the rent is cheap and the bill includes power, water and business rates. Split that five ways and you can see good

Their workshop transforms from a production unit to a factory of ideas

reason to form a cooperative. “It was certainly worth waiting for,” says Niall who proudly points to a large electricity transformer in the far corner of the workshop and explains that the big grey lever on the side controls the power for the entire industrial estate – perhaps that’s why the landlord is keen to remain in their good books!

A walk around the workshop reveals some great kit. The centrepiece is an Italian Griggio panel saw with sliding bed, which is easily big enough to handle 8x4ft boards. Toby bought it for £800 from a local kitchen manufacturing

company who were upgrading their equipment after ten years of use. I can easily see how a machine like this becomes a focal point in a workshop of this size.

The financial advantages of forming a cooperative don’t end with rent and electricity bills then. Everyone clubs together to make sure the workshop has a full complement of tools. Toby bought the panel saw. Niall recently bought a Festool Domino jointer, which paid for itself within a couple of jobs. Andy supplied the bandsaw and planer thicknesser. Caroline (ah, yes Caroline – our illusive fifth element, we’ll come to her in a moment) bought the pillar drill, disk sander and mitre trimmer, while Steve has just purchased a new three-phase Sedgewick planer thicknesser which will really add some grunt to the workshop’s machining capabilities.

There is other kit too of course, but the point is that everyone clubs together to feed the workshop. If at any point one of the group should decide to go their separate way, they take their kit with them – the idea being that

So what’s it like working as part of a collective?

Most furniture designer makers who set up shop after finishing college do so on their own. I remember doing it myself, and there I remained for the next three years until the next move beckoned. Setting up a cooperative didn’t even occur to me, or any of my furniture making buddies at the time. But what a great idea it is; after chatting to Toby, Andy, Niall and Steve, it all makes perfect sense on a number of counts.

Going multiple ways on the setup and ongoing running costs means that the financial risk for each individual is much smaller, and the quality of kit is better too because there’s more cash available between everyone to purchase new equipment.

Professional woodworking can be a lonely

existence so having regular workshop company is a major boon too. It’s much easier to stay motivated when working as part of a group than it is working day in, day out, on your own. As Niall pointed out to me, “we haven’t done any collaborative projects yet but we do help each other out at the thinking and costing stage of projects, and any workshop issues are shared.” Having this ongoing moral support makes everyday challenges easier to deal with.

Andy explained that supply contacts are also shared, so better prices can be negotiated because of the increase in order quantities of veneers, timber and sheet material. This translates into higher profits for the makers. Add a tea making rota and a shared biscuit tin and there’s not much else to improve upon!

It would seem, then, that there are advantages to be found at every corner in the cooperative workshop. I’ve seen a good number of professional setups over the years, but this has been one of the most inspirational. The shared resources and buying power afforded reduce the strain on each member, but more important than that, it’s the team spirit and cooperation each member of this hand-picked team demonstrates that is truly impressive. They’re all in it for the right reasons, and it shows. The quality of work is excellent and by teaming up as they have, their workshop transforms from a production unit to a factory of ideas. There’s no rest for the creative here then, for this is furniture making the cooperative way.



NIALL MEADOWS

Niall prefers to design pieces from the ground up and draws inspiration from everyday objects and experiences. By keeping exposure to ‘celebrity’ designer makers to a minimum Niall feels he’s better equipped to come up with his own original ideas and designs.

And by experimenting with materials and observing how different timbers look and feel throughout the making process, Niall attempts to harness a playful approach to design that continually evolves. He likes to experiment in the zone

between raw material and machined finishes for new forms of surface effect. Another good example of this approach is a set of waney-edge bowls which combine the hard geometric lines of industrially machined timber with the natural randomness of a board’s waney edge.

Niall enjoys speculative projects because it gives him the freedom to experiment on his own terms. He describes this approach to design as “a very organic process” – in other words, speculative projects give him the freedom to follow the flow of a piece and change direction if needed.

ANDY BUTTERLY

Andy likes to take traditional designs and give them a contemporary twist. "I like to keep it simple," he explains "and to concentrate on chunky, sometimes mechanical and geometric designs." When objects are simple, proportion is key, and it's this area of design that excites Andy most.

Inspiration for Andy comes from many sources, but major influences include the designs of Charles Rennie Mackintosh for their simple angular forms and of Marcel Breuer and Le Corbusier for their ability to mix materials and disciplines so well.

Andy's desk was not drawn from a particular design or period but is based on classical proportions. It's made from maple and American black walnut with handles of African rosewood. The drawer fronts are solid walnut with burr walnut veneer applied to the front face. The drawers also feature hand-cut dovetails and quirk and bead slips to hold the drawer bottoms in place while allowing the panels to expand and contract over time.



◀ From left: Andy's desk shows classical proportions and a pleasing mix in timber; stock awaits a project on Steve's bench; more of Niall's work

every member of the cooperative has a physical stake in the business that remains their own.

A meeting of minds

So the four that are five met and studied together at Bristol College. They learned as much from their own exploration into furniture craft and working together as they did from the course itself. "Tutors provided support when it was needed but most of the course was self directed. We would practise new techniques as we needed them, and the tutors were always there to back us up," says Niall.

During their final year everyone had worked hard for their end-of-year exhibition, which is customary for an advanced course in furniture making. Unfortunately the exhibition was cancelled – a potential disaster for final-year students who rely on this kind of exposure to get their names into circulation. Exhibitions are the best form of advertising when you're fresh out of college, an opportunity for the lucky ones to line up commissions, while for everyone else it's a chance to make valuable contacts for the future. So the exhibition being cancelled was bad news for this group of

Going multiple ways on the costs means the financial risk for each is smaller

dedicated furniture makers. Were they deterred? Not a chance! They got on with the job of building things well and created their own display stand at the New Designers exhibition at the Business Design Centre in Islington, London.

Next on the agenda was the Celebration of Craftsmanship & Design exhibition in Cheltenham. Toby and Niall exhibited pieces at the prestigious annual event run by Betty Norbury. "It was a great experience," says Toby. "I came away with enough work to keep me going for the best part of the next year." That kind of incentive is hard to ignore, so with the exhibition requiring that no piece is submitted for entry twice Niall, Toby and Steve

are busy designing and making new pieces for inclusion in the 2008 'Betty Norbury'.

That second career thing

Most of the team have arrived at woodworking via previous careers. Toby was an ecologist for 13 years before studying furniture making at Bristol. He says, "I got to the stage where I hated writing reports, so I knew it was time for a change!" However, the in-depth knowledge of trees and how they grow gained through ecology has proven useful in furniture making. But it's creativity that really drives Toby, and there was something missing in his previous life as an ecologist – furniture making provided that all-important creative outlet, which is clear to see in his work.

When I met Toby, he was busy finishing off a custom-designed desk in American black walnut. Its sweeping laminated curves are both beautiful and structural. A 12mm toughened glass top with stainless steel fittings ensures its structural elements are visible from all angles. With only two weeks to go before completion, most of the desk was there to see.

Toby's work has a contemporary feel to it –

▼ Toby's sideboard combines a walnut case with burr poplar veneered doors; bedside table has a concealed drawer; drinks cabinet has iris-closing mechanism



TOBY HOWES

Toby's approach is different from the norm. He likes to tap his creative side when making furniture and enjoys speculative projects because they allow freedom of expression.

Lateral thinking is key to Toby's creative process. This involves combining ideas from many sources to create unique pieces. Because of the complex nature of some of Toby's designs he will often jump from rough sketch to three dimensional model, skipping the whole orthographic drawing or CAD phase altogether. Toby likes to create pieces that are aesthetically simple while functionally complex. Take his drinks cabinet for example – a beautifully simple object from the outside, but a coopered cabinet like this with integral rotating iris is incredibly complicated to make. Toby uses his models to work out all the angles and curvature prior to cutting valuable timber.

Toby's bedside tables are another good example of complex design. Again, a full-size 3D model was built for reference so Toby knew the construction would go as planned.



he seems to have mastered that fine balance of traditional technique and modern design.

Andy meanwhile spent several years as a probation officer before deciding to turn his hand to wood and tap into his creative talent. After a good deal of thought and planning he became full-time at the workshop in January this year. Andy's story is similar to Toby's in that he found little in the way of creative satisfaction at work. After gaining a degree at the London School of Economics, he was looking forward to a professional life of dealing directly with people, but unfortunately the plague of the public sector set in and he found himself staring at a computer screen for eight of the nine working hours of his typical day. Having to meet performance targets to feed the government's numbers-driven machine was the final straw...

Life is better now, though. Andy has an impressive waiting list and a good number of valued customers. Next on the agenda is a freestanding kitchen for a client in Oxford, a sideboard, a pair of matching desks... and did I mention a little show called the Celebration of Craftsmanship & Design? Well, that's on the 'to do' list, too.



Now we come to Caroline. That's Caroline Williams. Caroline was heavily involved at the outset. At the beginning she had a part-time job and would devote the rest of her time to setting up the workshop. She now works full-time as a doctor and describes herself as a silent partner, coming in to work on the odd piece from time to time, with a foot still very much in the door.

Similarly Steve is currently part time at the workshop but conversely aims to ramp that up soon. He's working his way through a telecoms contract at the moment and wants to be full-time by the end of the year. Steve's bench occupies an old spray shop adjacent to the main workshop. In fact the workshop is going through a bit of an expansion and there's talk of integrating a spray booth next to Steve's work area too.

In addition to studying furniture making at Bristol College, Steve spent two years working for SF Furniture in Gloucestershire, making bespoke furniture. He says, "the time I spent working in a full-time professional environment gave me valuable experience," which has led to his decision to join the workshop full-time later in the year.