

Woodwork – My World by Tim Tall Continued

Certainly, if at one of the cursory careers lessons, anyone had mentioned that their career ambitions might be to become a carpenter or the like, there would have been a seriously audible sharp intake of breath from the teacher conducting those events. I can testify to that myself, as in the autumn of my Upper Sixth, we got summoned to a careers meeting, where I gathered later that the expectation was that you said that you either wanted to go into a profession, like banking accountancy and the like, or better still to go to university and study to become a medic, dentist, vet, lawyer etc. Well, I had the notion of becoming a boat builder. Now to be fair, I had studied History, Art and Economics, so they probably were not expecting that. Anyway, it did not meet with any degree of enthusiasm, but Dennis Keam got hold of me later suggesting that if I liked making/repairing boats in my spare time, that maybe doing it as a day job might take the pleasure away. He went on to suggest that being a woodwork teacher might suit me better and leave me the school holidays to pursue my hobby and passion. Well, if ever anybody changed my path through life, that was it and I am eternally grateful for his advice and insight.

Now back to what we did in the workshops. We made things slowly, lovingly, by hand, with the focus on everything fitting together as perfectly as possible. The emphasis on slowly should not be missed here, as often we were given sawn timber, the workshops had no planer/thicknesser back then, and spent a considerable amount of time, sweat and energy just getting the wood to right size and shape, before any construction could take place. The joints that were studied and practiced, and applied to our projects were evolved over a long period of time, and by nature of adhesives being either messy to use or unreliable, ie not waterproof, nearly all of the joints, to work well had to be pretty much a friction fit. Hours were spent in readiness for three-hour O-Level practical exams, during which, from a set of pre-prepared pieces of wood, you had to mark out, cut and assemble an array of traditional joints in that time, using only hand tools. The idea being that at the end of the exam, the unit created held together well with no glue used. Quite an ordeal for 15/16-year-olds back then, and unthinkable for 5th Year pupils today for sure. How things have changed! Now, because there was nothing to compare this approach with, I do not think anybody ever thought “surely there has to be an easier way to make my piece of furniture?”

So that was it in a nutshell really, it was not so much the product but the process that seemed to be the goal. The more demanding and complicated the joints, the more celebrated the achievement became. So often the appearance and function of the piece being made took second place.

My days at Truro School as a pupil ended when I went off to train as a handicraft teacher for three years, undertaking teaching practices in schools on the fringes of outer London, and the approach was all very much of a muchness. I did four years in a school in Yeovil, delivering pretty much the same things. The goal being well-made pieces of furniture from a variety of timbers that were either available or affordable.

You will have noticed I have not mentioned the D-word yet, design, and that is because the designs used in school workshops were usually time-honoured affairs, that were deliberately chosen and used to deliver the skills teaching required to pass exams. Other than that, a selection of well-used books was provided with dimensioned plans of other people's designs, for the pupils to select what best fitted their purpose.

Similar things may well have taken place at Truro School, but I know for a fact that when my brother, who attended the Truro Boys Secondary Modern School in Union Place (where the public library is now) brought home his little oak and sea grass-topped stool, he informed me that when he went to glue it all together, one of his four legs had gone missing so he rummaged around under the bench, found another that fitted and so used that! Everybody in each year group pretty much made the same things as they progressed through their time at school. Individuality was neither welcomed nor encouraged. Safe in terms of outcome but limiting in terms of personal development you could say.

There was a design element on the O-Level and A-Level Woodwork and Metalwork written papers, but not much time appeared to be allocated to do that real justice, from what I remember.

I returned to Truro School in September 1980, being able to take advantage of what was still a very new purpose-built 'Craft and Art' block, what we now call the DT rooms. And what a set up that was, spacious, airy, well equipped and with four rooms each dedicated to wood, metal, technical drawing and projects, where the now-famous *Spirit of Truro* plane was constructed (flying for the first time in the early summer of 1981). The department consisting of three full-time members of staff led by Dennis Keam, and a part-time member, Peter Lang, who taught some woodwork and technical drawing lessons. My appointment by Derek Burrell, the Headmaster, included me introducing the Oxford boards' A-Level in Design, to run alongside the three 'Craft' A-Levels of Woodwork, Metalwork and Technical Drawing. So this was a change in approach for sure, an exam that specifically focused on the design as well as the making of a product, and the use of the word product being equally significant, as it did not have to be made solely from one material, nor did it have to be an item of furniture, which had previously been an understood likely outcome. There was an O-Level in Design too, but that was never considered nor offered at the time, though we had plenty of past papers, and it did look like a good course to follow.

So this new course opened up a new and uncharted approach within the department and actively encouraged creativity and novel thinking, though it still focused on the outcome being well made and fully functional. But the 'sky is the limit' was the underlying ethos, and in many ways the teacher's role became that of having to think forward, at the very outset, not so much in cold calling the likely outcome of a student's project, but to at least be confident that there was a reasonable chance of it being successful in some way or another. That responsibility did weigh heavily on me at times, but with the support of a first-class time-served engineer, in the form of Andy Crawford, our newly appointed workshop technician/engineering instructor, the stage was set for what was to become an exciting change in the way Truro School pupils were taught and expected to develop. Obviously exam results were expected to at least be on a par with what the department was already achieving.

After the first two students went through, getting a B and a C, which in those days was at the high end of grades achieved normally, the numbers of boys taking the subject grew year on year.

It is worth noting that one of those students was to return to Truro School, as a DT teacher in the 90s, in the form of Bob Warren.

So we now had students taking responsibility not only for the selection of the focus of their product but also for its form, aesthetics and functional characteristics rather than just finding their design in a book. Whilst some items of furniture were still produced, they were fairly unique to the student that designed and created them. Nobody could use somebody else's components now when they glued up their stool! The other change was that now it was usual for projects to include any suitable materials from across the range, rather than the one in the title of the subject.

This multidisciplinary approach was soon to arrive in the newly introduced GCSE courses that replaced the O-Levels and CSE courses that had been the mainstay of examinations for 16-year-olds for at least two generations.

GCSE ushered in a period of transition in craft and design teaching, in as much as single material courses were initially available in Wood, Metal and Graphic Communication, (which was a watered-down Technical Drawing and Graphics affair really), but the 'new kid on the block' was a subject entitled CDT - Craft, Design and Technology.

Truro School tried to ride two horses at once initially, with GCSE Woodwork being offered alongside CDT, but the times were changing within this sector of education and it was only a matter of time before the straight craft syllabuses were soon removed by the exam boards.

This meant that pupils from the age of 14 were going to be actively encouraged and expected to not only develop their own ideas for their projects, but also had the freedom, and possibly the increased burden of being able to choose the most suitable materials for the construction of their creations too. This had implications for the teachers and the room usage, and timetabling, as it quickly became apparent that one teaching group could be spread between two workshops during their lessons. However, this new approach enabled products of considerable range and creativity, to not only get designed and created but also to achieve high grades at the age of 16. It almost became the norm to try to include the use of at least two different materials in the same product, with three often being used. The groundwork carried out at this level also had implications for pupils when they opted for the A-Level Design course, which had already gone from strength to strength, in terms of the numbers of pupils opting for it. Whereas the traditional Woodwork and Metalwork A-Levels rarely attracted more than two or three students each, numbers for Design were now regularly up in the low teens.

The assessment of the design and make element required that the A-Level students had to arrange and display all of their work carried out over the two years, so these exhibitions soon became a showcase for the work of the department, along with the coursework from the GCSE pupils. It was often that all three workshops had to be used to display the considerable array of work created in any one academic year. The influence this had on pupils lower down the school was not insignificant

either, with many telling us that seeing what older boys and girls had devised and created had enthused and inspired them to take up the subject. Creativity and quality were still the requirements for high grades, but students were now able to use an increasing number of portable power tools as well as the standard machinery. After generations of pupils being unfairly considered to be less academic for choosing practical subjects, there was a justifiable and long overdue, aura of academic respectability surrounding the work we did in the Design Block!! Note the new name, please. The range of equipment had grown alongside this with a vacuum-forming and injection-moulding machine having been installed as well as a MIG welder, morticing machine, handheld and fixed belt sanders and finishing machines. We could anodize aluminium, electroplate steel, as well as plastic dip coat metal-based projects. In fact, there was not much we could not offer, and the workshops became increasingly more like smaller versions of commercial facilities.

As was the pace of change in the commercial world, so education followed suit and eventually CDT became replaced by Design Technology. Initially, there was a suite of courses on offer, which in some schools included needlework/textiles, home economics/food, graphics products, electronic products, as well as the Design and Realisation course, which closely followed on from CDT.

The reality was that Truro School could really only offer Design and Realisation as there was no facility for food or textiles, nor any will on behalf of the powers that be to consider it.

Alongside all of this was the sudden and dramatic influence of IT, initially in the presentation of design work and the folders required for exam assessment purposes, but increasingly in the shaping and manipulation of materials. This mantle was in the first instance enthusiastically pursued by Dave Hodge, who set up the department's own little network of computers. Not long after it was decided to purchase our first computer-aided machine in the form of a Surgrave engraving/ routing machine, so we could offer genuine CAM, (computer-aided manufacturing). The accuracy this enabled our students to achieve was truly impressive, and the speed at which components created in this manner ended up being incorporated into projects was impressive. In fact, it was a sign of things to come for sure. Sadly, Dave suffered from a back problem and left the school, to concentrate on creating educational software, initially targeted at DT subjects, making considerably more money than he would have had he remained as a school teacher.

Enter Cliff Flowers who took this aspect of Design Technology to a new level, introducing CAD (computer aided drawing) by way of the Techsoft 2D drawing package. About the same time, we purchased a substantial laser cutter, which really was something in terms of what it enabled even our younger pupils to create. Using it on wood to customise projects, but also to shape wood, ply and acrylic sheet so accurately and quickly that it soon found itself running through the lunchtimes and well after school had finished. Cliff then went on to building and setting up the school's first 3D modelling machine. Obviously, with a greater array of skills required at the same time, it was realistic to expect that the pupils were getting less time to hone their practical skills, but I feel we held on to the best of the old as well as embracing the best of the new.

Certainly, by the time I retired in the summer of 2014, the projects being created from the 1st Year upwards still exhibited craftsmanship, care and attention to detail, creativity, functionality as well as being pleasurable to look at. Quite an achievement in the light of the time given to the students in which to achieve all of that. The combination of the needs for students to successfully master hand and eye coordination and to harness, and utilize, the numerous advantages of modern manufacturing technologies has altered what goes on in the workshops for sure, but at the end of it, it is the look of pride on a pupil's face when others admire their achievements that remains the same. That was, and still is, to me what is so important about the subject that I and others did and still do teach in the School workshops. We deny young people growing up that sense of pride and achievement at our peril I am sure.

To conclude, I have to say I have no idea to this day, what else I could ever have done for a career other than what I did, and I feel truly blessed that I had the good fortune to work alongside so many able, hard-working and thoroughly likable young people as I did in my thirty-four years in the school workshops. Nor could I have done it without the unwavering support and professionalism of my many colleagues, through the years, in the department who I have already mentioned here by name, during the writing of this article, so it is only right and proper to mention and thank John West-Letford, who was the workshop technician and engineering instructor for my final years as head of the department, for his unswerving loyalty and care for the pupils who so benefited from his expertise and enthusiasm. He retired in August and I wish him a long and happy retirement.

The evolution of a subject, when managed sensibly, can be a wonderful thing for all concerned!

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