

# 20 minutes with... Ben King

Ben King talks to us about his work, inspirations and why he became a furniture maker



PHOTOGRAPHS BY BEN KING

**B**righton-based bespoke furniture maker Ben King prefers to use English wood from local sustainable sources and makes all types of freestanding and built-in furniture.

**F&C:** What are you working on at the moment?

**Ben King:** I'm just about to finish an oak (*Quercus spp.*) vanity unit with draw-bored tenons and some nice waney edges on the aprons.

**F&C:** What's the hand tool you can't do without?

**BK:** I love using my spokeshave. I feel

very close to the work when I'm using it. It's the most versatile tool I have. I often have a curved edge to work with so it's indispensable. It's also the tool I take to timber yards to get through the dirty surfaces of sawn boards, to see what's really there.

**F&C:** What's the last piece of equipment you bought?

**BK:** I recently bought a nice wide-butt chisel. It's got a great fat bubinga (*Guibourtia demeusei*) handle and I'm finding lots of excuses to use it already.

**F&C:** Nominate a classic piece of furniture from any period – bespoke, mass produced,



Coffee table, ash with maple strips

studio furniture and tell us why it's so special.

**BK:** The Ercol Studio Couch. Ercol is an English company started by the Italian-born Lucian Ercolani, making furniture in a Danish style. The retro design trend has enabled them to bring back some of his design classics and this piece is one of them. So, this couch has been in production on and off for 60 years or so. There are a number of things that make this a classic Ercol piece. The short splayed legs tapered at both ends – probably with a wedged through tenon – the Windsor-style arms and a soft friendly appeal. Sofas are usually a big lump of fabric, but this design lifts and lightens an often clunky item of furniture with an efficient and stylish use of wood.

**F&C:** What made you become a furniture maker?

**BK:** I wanted to do something creative, practical and physical, something that I would not get bored of. The combination of skills needed to do this makes it a constant challenge.

**F&C:** What inspires you?

**BK:** Good and interesting design, both natural and man-made. I find the archaeology of ancient cultures fascinating.

**F&C:** If your furniture was music, what kind of music would it be?

**BK:** It is best enjoyed with a Jimmy Smith organ solo.

**F&C:** What do you admire in the craft at the moment?

**BK:** Anyone who's doing it.

**F&C:** Who has been your greatest mentor/role model?

**BK:** James Krenov – though only through his books obviously. If I feel I'm rushing or lacking inspiration then he's the man I turn to. The passion revealed in his writing and in his work is absorbing.

**F&C:** What comes first, design or technique?

**BK:** As a maker, I can design around what I know in terms of technique, or I can choose to try something new. Either way, a design idea comes first to me. If I only design to my current skill set then I won't learn any new techniques.

**F&C:** Are we too obsessed with outdated modes of work?

**BK:** No modes of work are outdated. They may however, be forgotten, ignored or out of fashion. Technology creates new possibilities but the past is the best resource we have for learning. I'm still thinking about an Egyptian stool which I saw in the British Museum last year – I've never seen anything like it.

**F&C:** How or where do you exhibit your work?

**BK:** This year I will be at the Bentley Wood Fair – [www.bentley.org.uk/woodfair](http://www.bentley.org.uk/woodfair).

**F&C:** How comfortable are you with working to someone else's design?

**BK:** Not very. It's frustrating not having the freedom to make changes.



Glasses shelf in maple

**F&C:** What's your creative process like?

**BK:** Once I receive a commission I tend to do a scale drawing with a ruler to get an idea of proportions, then a rough sketch immediately after to bring it to life. A few days later I'll go back to it and get it close enough to finished, to enable me to get started.

**F&C:** Do you consider yourself an artist or a craftsman?

**BK:** The other day a woman at B&Q asked me if I was a tradesman. I said yes, but of course there is an artistic element to what I do.

**F&C:** What's the practical process you undergo when moving through the stages of a project?

**BK:** Nothing out of the ordinary, I don't think. I make a cutting list and plane up the timber over thickness and width by 10% or so. I leave it for as long as possible, then I go back and plane to final size. I make the piece, oil or wax it and hope they like it.

**F&C:** Do you think furniture making is in danger of disappearing?

**BK:** In terms of making furniture on this sort of scale, I think it's fluctuating just above extinction but will never die out.

**F&C:** What advice would you give to someone starting out?

**BK:** I'm fairly green myself but I'd say make things that you like. This way you'll be genuinely positive about your work and happy with what you've done. Also, take on small jobs – one small cupboard door could lead to a wardrobe. Work with at least one other person who you think you can learn from. Be confident. As soon as you call yourself a furniture maker you are a furniture maker.

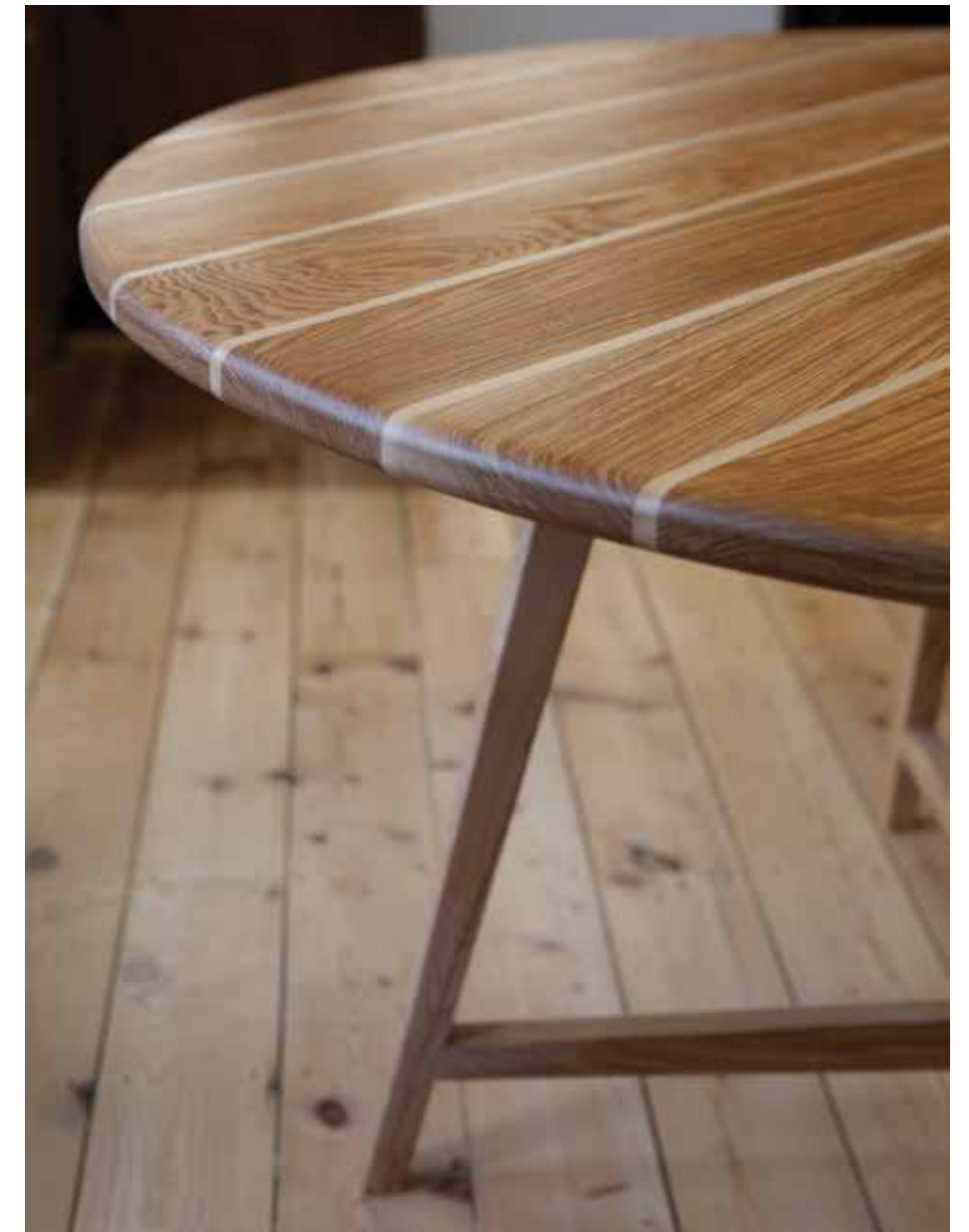
**F&C:** What irritates you about the industry?

**BK:** I don't feel part of an industry. *F&C*

**Contact:**

**Email:** [ben@benkingfurniture.co.uk](mailto:ben@benkingfurniture.co.uk)

**Web:** [www.benkingfurniture.co.uk](http://www.benkingfurniture.co.uk)



Round dining table, ash with maple strips