



Matthew and springer spaniel Mister take a moment

Award-winning Wiltshire furniture designer Matthew Burt admits to a 40-year affair. He talks to View about the object of his affection

Love is in the air

It's no exaggeration to say that Matthew Burt has farming in his blood. As well as the 400-acre arable farm on which he grew up, he had 10 uncles, all of whom farmed on the Wiltshire/Somerset/Dorset borders. Matthew enjoyed his country childhood on the farm in Sutton Veny in Wiltshire's Wylde Valley, growing up with an appreciation of natural history that has stayed with him and informs his stunning 21st-century furniture, lovingly and skilfully crafted from English wood.

'I see timber as recycled sunshine and rainwater. It's a gift,' says Matthew. 'I do use some other materials in my work but I've had a 40-year affair with wood. I just love it.'

'Each tree has within it a narrative of the time it has lived,' he continues. 'The grain reflects that narrative: the seasons it has gone through, the position it has grown in. We recently purchased a little tree that was marvellously curved. It had grown out of a bank in Somerset, facing the sun, so it had a big fat belly at its front where it had drunk in the sunshine, but at the back it was tight grained where it had strained to stay upright: it had beautiful grain. Eventually it fell in a storm. When you slice into a tree it tells you the story of its existence.'

With many generations of farming ancestors behind him, Matthew fully intended to follow in their footsteps. 'It was a free and rather privileged existence,' he recalls, 'but a whole class of yeoman farmers has gone. Small farms are no longer viable in Wiltshire.' His

parents broadened Matthew's horizons through education: with no thoughts of being a designer he found himself studying zoology at the University of Reading. 'I realised that no one had really consulted me and, as much as I loved zoology from a natural history point of view, I didn't see it as a job. I suppose I'm pretty old school, seeing education as a means to becoming a civilised human being, and that one then trains for a job.'

It was through a friend at university, though, that he had his epiphany. 'A friend invited me to see a gift he had made for a girl,' says Matthew, 'a barrel-vaulted chest, not particularly well made, but I was dumbstruck by it – I thought, I've taken exams every

summer from the age of seven to 23 and yet I could no more speak this language than fly to the moon. I felt strongly that I wanted to speak this language; it was a turning point. After I got my degree I set about finding out how I could learn to make things.'

He secured a two-year course at Rycotewood College but by working on building sites had saved enough to finance just one year. The principal agreed to allow him to condense the two years into one and at the end-of-term show Matthew was offered an apprenticeship with Richard Fyson of Kencot in Oxfordshire, just two villages away from Kelmscott, the home of William Morris, and a bike-ride from the Cotswold village of

Sapperton, where Ernest and Sidney Barnsley and Ernest Gimson formed the Cotswold Group of Craftsmen: 'Richard Fyson's workshop was steeped in the Arts and Crafts tradition: he was an exemplar, a brilliant craftsman who set standards against which I will compete for the rest of my days. He was very much a cabinetmaker, not a designer. I wanted to design my own things, to represent my own time.'

To create his now world-famous signature pieces, Matthew uses wood selected from managed sources throughout the UK. 'When I was a nipper I used to get up to unspeakable mischief beneath huge, towering elms, always trying to get up among them and discover

what a rook's nest looked like. Trees seeped into my psyche. In this country we have evolved alongside wood, it's been our constant companion; it's relatively easy to manipulate, and incredibly versatile and robust. In the UK we're blessed with some beautiful trees.'

Beautiful doesn't mean exotic. 'I'm not looking for exotic,' he affirms, 'I'm looking for aberrant and maverick woods from England – rippled, burr, pippy and tigered – wood from ordinary trees affected by circumstances.'

'Tigered oak comes from a tree whose roots have been colonised by beefsteak fungus, *Fistulina hepatica*,' he explains. 'The fungus in the roots reacts with the tannins in the oak



Matthew won a competition to design benches for the new extension at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, which led to commissions for the Courtauld Gallery in London and the National Museum of Wales, culminating in an invitation back to the Ashmolean to design these benches for the Egyptian gallery: 'This was a delightful sequence of work,' says Matthew. 'It's a joy to put pieces in a public place and see the public take glorious possession of them.'



An Island desk (so called because as a personal desk it offers its user peace and tranquillity) made from rippled oak with ash drawer interiors: 'Wood will be here for us as a material as long as we have the confidence in the future to plant and nurture it. It's the ultimate eco-material!'