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Jan Turner
Editor

It was a pleasure to meet and mix with some of the Fellows of the Association of Master Upholsterers during their AGM weekend at Lytham St Annes over the summer – and what a fascinating few titbits I picked up along the way!

In the category of “most unusual jobs I have ever done” I heard about a gentleman who handed over a full snakeskin (complete with head) and asked for it to be used to upholster a toilet seat. And then there was the student who printed a skeleton onto fabric and asked the member concerned to use it to cover dining room chairs – he duly did so with the chest and torso artfully adorning the back of the seat and the pelvic area cleverly positioned to work with the chair legs. Take a look for yourself on the centre spread where a picture of the finished chairs is featured as part of our ‘student special’. The upholsterer involved was suitably amused by the unusual challenge – and the student delighted with the finished result.

Presumably the lady who asked for a zebra skin to be used to cover an ottoman – tricky around the corners as the hair stands up – was equally delighted with the final result. Along with the person who wanted something else finishing with a black and white Jersey cow skin.

I’d be delighted to hear from anyone else who has dealt with an unusual or bizarre request, for in a world where one man’s meat is another’s poison, what we consider to be a little offbeat or even plain outrageous, can represent the fulfilment of someone else’s dreams.

And that’s what makes our trade so special. What lifts it from the humdrum ordinary to the gloriously extraordinary. Work like this is not the stuff of same-old, same-old, mass produced High Street blandness: it is artfulness verging on wizardry.

For that is what the skilled upholsterer and soft furnisher truly is today. Part designer, part artist and all round creator of peoples’ dreams.

So it’s time you started selling yourselves as such – but more importantly seeing yourselves as such. The younger end of the industry certainly does and there’s clearly a generational divide that has them positioning themselves as ‘designers’ while the much more experienced older end simply view themselves as ‘tradesmen’.

The more I spoke to some of the Fellows in Lytham, the more I became convinced that young and old have so much to learn from each other. One talks the talk while the other walks the walk.

Perhaps you should all walk and talk together a little more?

Until the next time.

Jan Turner
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A farewell presentation to Sue Spencer, who left the association after 20 years, was made by the AMUSF board of directors following their last ever meeting in Cardiff.

On behalf of the board and members, chairman Des Fanning presented Sue with a hand turned wet walnut vase, crafted by Richard Chapman, a ‘turner extraordinaire’ whose works have become highly collectable.

Michael Gilham, as Upholder and on behalf of the Fellows, presented a voucher for theatre tickets. Many bouquets of flowers and cards were also presented by those in attendance.

AMUSF news roundup

HOME RUN

The AMUSF has a new home – and a brand new manager! The association moved from its Cardiff headquarters to its new base at Wycombe House in High Wycombe at the beginning of July. Following their last meeting in Cardiff, members of the board packed up mountains of equipment and documentation, leaving a few sterling volunteers to complete the job the following day.

With three borrowed vans – via Wendy Shorter, Peter Finch and the Chapmans – everything was then driven down to High Wycombe.

On hand to help was new manager Sheila Draper who then faced the challenge of fitting everything from the expansive Cardiff premises into the more modest space at Wycombe House.

“It has been like trying to fit a gallon into a pint pot ever since,” said Sheila who has previous experience with industry associations. She spent six years as general manager of the Intellectual Property Federation (IPF) and prior to that had a spell spent with the Timber Research and Development Association (TRADA). You can read more about Sheila on page 22.

Sheila was also present for the very last board meeting at Francis Vaughan House which took place on Thursday June 30.

WHAT’S ALL THE FUSS ABOUT?

The Furnishing and Upholstery Support Services (FUSS) scheme is alive and well – and set to get even better!

The members’ scheme, an integral part of the AMUSF membership package, provides an opportunity to purchase fabrics at discount from over 70 fabric suppliers.

In fact it’s so helpful to member upholsterers and soft furnishers, that some time ago the association also set up FUSS – the Furnishing and Upholstery Support Services – as a fee-based scheme for students and other non-AMUSF members to help them in their training and early years before they can apply for AMUSF membership.

All it takes is an email, fax or phone call to the AMUSF head office in High Wycombe to request a quotation by supplier, the fabric type and quantity required. If FUSS has an account with that supplier, then the office will get back with a price as quickly as possible. If ‘the price is right’, then the member simply has to arrange payment to FUSS up front, the order will be placed and delivered direct to the member.

Said manager Sheila Draper: “We are keen to expand our supplier lists to offer an even bigger and better range of fabrics. So we need members to keep us up-to-date with their needs and ideas for new supplier accounts.

“The members-only section of the website will soon carry a list of some of our current suppliers. Members should also bear in mind that it’s sometimes possible to obtain fabrics from other suppliers via some of our larger members. They shouldn’t despair if they don’t immediately see what they are looking for.

“The more that members use the scheme, the better the deals that can be obtained for them, as it’s often overall value which dictates the discount – and non-members too can take advantage of the scheme, provided they are members of FUSS. The scheme is also open to students and retired members of the AMUSF.”

Access to fabric has long been a key element of an upholsterer’s craft and was one of the founding reasons for AMUSF’s start up post-WWII.

PRIZE THANKS FOR SUE

A farewell presentation to Sue Spencer, who left the association after 20 years, was made by the AMUSF board of directors following their last ever meeting in Cardiff.

On behalf of the board and members, chairman Des Fanning presented Sue with a hand turned wet walnut vase, crafted by Richard Chapman, a ‘turner extraordinaire’ whose works have become highly collectable.

Michael Gilham, as Upholder and on behalf of the Fellows, presented a voucher for theatre tickets. Many bouquets of flowers and cards were also presented by those in attendance.
Branch briefings

The next Beds, Bucks, Herts and North London regional meeting will be held on Saturday October 1. We have arranged a visit to the Warner Textile Archive at Braintree Museum. Tickets are £15 per person and include tea/coffee on arrival and a light lunch. We will have a talk and tour of the museum as well as a “behind the scenes” visit to the fabric archive. If anyone would like to join us, please contact Wendy Shorter for further details (01727) 824358 or email wendy@wendyshorterinteriors.co.uk. Closing date for tickets is Monday September 19 2011.

The Hants and Dorset branch held their annual BBQ in the New Forest on Tuesday July 19. We decided to hold it during the day so we could see the deer being fed and hoped it would be warmer than an evening meeting. Of course, being England in the summer, this was wishful thinking. And being British we decided to go anyway! As we sat down to eat the heavens opened so, not to be put off, we put up umbrellas, donned macs and continued. Margaret said her “gravy” was a bit watery but the food was still edible. The rain stopped just as we were finishing so the rest of the afternoon was spent socialising, sharing information and generally having a good time. It was good to see Janet as our guest and our newest member Liz Cox and her children. Our next meeting will be the AGM on October 12, venue to be arranged. For more information contact Kevin Lee/Mary Crack on 01489 572108.

The Kent branch met on July 6 with a few exciting things coming up to report. We first would like to thank Barbara and Martin at the Bluebell Railway which we visited recently (see report and pictures opposite). We had a great tour of all the engine workshops and sheds and it was very enjoyable. In the autumn we will be having an open evening. We have invited along Sheila Draper, who is the new AMUSF manager, and wanted to open up the evening for members to come along and get to know Sheila. Date and venue is still to be decided. We have also been invited by the Sailing for the Disabled Association to visit two old sailing vessels that will be docked on Canary Wharf. The trip will be held on September 30 and anyone wanting to come along can contact Davin on 020 8854 4402 for more details.

VISIT TO BLUEBELL RAILWAY

Frank Geoghegan, Kent branch member, writes:

Some 26 people took part in a trip to the Bluebell railway in early July. It was a beautiful summer’s day and on arrival at Sheffield Park Station we were greeted by a smiling Barbara who gave us our itinerary for the day.

Barbara and husband Martin are both enthusiastic members of the Bluebell railway. Barbara, among other things, is an engine fireman and Martin an engine driver. From the ticket hall – a nostalgia-filled time capsule from an era before Mr. Beeching – we stepped onto the platform where a train making gentle puffing and hissing noises was waiting to depart and our Kent branch friends were urging us to jump aboard. We barely had time to sit down before the whistle blew and the train set off on our 9.75 mile ‘back in time’ journey to Horsted Keynes and Kingscote. The journey took us though the Sharphorne tunnel with its 1 in 75 gradient.

On the return journey we were given a guided tour of the carriage shed by Dave Clarke and saw many carriages from the late 1800s undergoing restoration. The work being carried out by Dave and other members using skills from a former age was of a very high standard. Dave also showed us around the upholstery workshop. The upholstery work is all traditional. The coverings are superb cut moquettes, which are woven to the original specification. As you can imagine, all this attention to detail costs a fortune in time and money, but the results speak for themselves.

From Horstead Keynes we returned to Sheffield Park in a train formed of Metropolitan Railway coaches, built in the 1890s. After lunch in the station restaurant we were taken on a guided tour of the engine sheds where we saw historic steam engines being restored to their former glory and then just had time for a fleeting visit to the newly opened railway museum. The Bluebell railway is a huge working museum and like all good museums it is possible to go again and still see something new and interesting.

I would like to say a big thank you on behalf of everyone to Martin, Barbara and Dave, who, with their organising skills and extensive knowledge of the Bluebell Railway gave us a wonderful day to remember.

The Surrey branch extends an invitation to any members who would like to join them at Silvermere Golf Club “Inn on the Lake” in Cobham, Surrey for Sunday lunch (carvery) and chat on Sunday September 25. The cost is £21.50 per head for a three-course meal with coffee included. Please confirm to Ron Mercure at 0208 941 4521 or ronnie.mercure@btinternet.com.
BELFIELD FURNISHINGS WINS DAMAGES IN ‘COPYCAT’ VICTORY

One of Europe’s leading furnishings manufacturers has forced a textiles importer into a settlement after one of its most successful designs was plagiarised.

Derbyshire-based Belfield Furnishings launched a high court claim against Bolton company Global Textiles (UK) and secured substantial damages, legal costs and an end to the importation of copycat products from China.

Said Belfield md Rob Stone: “It is vital for our business, our staff and our customers that we protect our designs from plagiarism.”

The company instructed intellectual property specialists Taylors to bring the successful action on the basis of intellectual property theft.

FINE CELL WORK AT AWARD WINNING CHELSEA FLOWER SHOW EXHIBIT

Bespoke cushions created by Fine Cell Work were featured in the award-winning Magistrates Garden at Chelsea Flower Show.

Created to celebrate the Magistrates’ Association 650th anniversary, the garden was designed by Kate Gould and included embroidered blue linen cushions made by UK prisoners who take part in Fine Cell Work workshops – a social enterprise that trains prisoners in paid, skilled, creative needlework. The garden won a Silver Gilt medal at the show.

FIRA ANNOUNCE AMENDMENTS TO FLAMMABILITY STANDARDS

FIRA International has announced amendments to two major British Standards concerning furniture flammability.

The changes have been made to ensure fabric specification is identical to that contained within the UK’s Furniture & Furnishings (Fire) (Safety) regulations.

Phil Reynolds, FIRA’s principal technical manager said: “The update has been made to ensure consistency across testing approaches and to maintain the highest standard in fire safety testing.”

Amendments came into force on August 1, and are available for purchase via FIRA’s online standards plus database – www.fira.co.uk/standards-plus-database.

Industry adventurers raised over £3,000 for the Furnishing Industry Trust (FIT) when they tackled the infamous Three Peaks challenge this summer, taking on Ben Nevis (4,409 ft), Scafell Pike (3,210 ft) and Snowdon (3,560 ft) in under 24 hours.

A six strong team – John Jones from Dreams, Luke Palmer from Orangebox, Russ Evans from NHC, David Fielding from Vita Cellular Foams and Deni Shaw and Chris Robinson from Multiyork scaled all three summits in 23 hours and 10 minutes.

Andy Corbett, organiser of the trip and FIT board member said: “It was a fantastic, high spirited group. We met as strangers and completed the challenge as good friends. I’d like to thank the entrants for their tremendous hard work in raising a fantastic amount.”

EXHIBITION NEWS

- The NBF Bed Show – Telford International Centre, Telford: 27th-28th September
- Decorex – The Royal Hospital Chelsea, London: 25th-28th September
- 100% Design – Earls Court, London: 22nd-25th September

The Bed Show 2011 preview: The UK’s biggest dedicated bed exhibition, with nearly 70 exhibitors and brands taking part, takes place at the Telford International Centre, Telford, September 27-28. Register online at www.bedshow.co.uk

Manchester Furniture Show review: Many of the 156 Manchester Furniture Show exhibitors reported very positive outcomes with good feedback about the overall appearance of this year’s show in July. The new layout, including the new Charter Hall, worked perfectly, linking the Main Hall and the West Hall.
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THE APPRENTICE

Upholsterers have had little or no help in recent years when it comes to taking on apprentices but the AMUSF and Proskills are lobbying hard to find a solution ...

U&SF has been very keen to highlight the difficulties facing upholsterers when it comes to taking on and training young people.

Proskills – which puts in place frameworks for training that employers want – is working in close partnership with the AMUSF to find a solution that will suit upholsterers up and down the land.

The proposed Apprenticeship Training Association (ATA) scheme – known as Apprenticeships Work – will take the responsibility of employment away from SMEs (Small and Medium Enterprises) such as upholstery businesses and provide small businesses with the extra support they need to take on more apprentices without the worry of financial risk and administration.

While the first bid for funding has been unsuccessful, work is ongoing to reach an agreement, and Proskills CEO Terry Watts is keen to draw upholsterers’ attention to the scheme and gain support from industry for the apprenticeships which are available.

Said Terry: “The timing of this article couldn’t be better, as we are currently consulting with the government on our plans for the ATA, which will allow upholsterers to take on apprentices – and we really want upholsterers to hear about apprenticeship programmes that have recently become available.

“The ATA has really been planned with upholsterers specifically in mind, as we understand the problems facing them in particular, but companies don’t need to wait for the ATA.

“The vast majority of people agree that the value an apprentice can add to their business in terms of productivity far outweighs any perceived risk, and we want to help upholsterers get in a position where they can add that value.”

Terry continued: “Our proposal is that the business – an upholsterer, for instance – receives all of the benefits of having an apprentice while Apprenticeships Work takes care of HR functions such as payroll, mentoring, appraisal and other related issues.

“Apprenticeships Work will assist businesses in recruiting the right apprentice, thus saving small companies the costs of advertising and agency fees. Indeed, the only cost to a ‘host’ employer such as an upholsterer will be the apprentice’s salary.”

Things move slowly with government, however, and despite the proposal being well received Proskills doesn’t expect a positive solution soon; so employers are encouraged to consider apprentices and contact Proskills if they need help with training. One of the real sticking points for upholsterers when thinking about taking on apprentices has been meeting stringent health and safety standards, but Proskills’ close relationship with apprenticeship trainers can even help solve this problem.

Terry said: “Training providers are experts in how to achieve health and safety standards, and as they always assess these before allowing apprentices to work on the premises, employing apprentices is actually a very good way of ensuring standards are up to scratch.

“In fact, you could say that this is an added benefit of taking on apprentices – and it’s pretty much a free, non-threatening audit and advice service.”

But why has it taken so long to make taking on apprentices so much easier for upholsterers?

Terry explains: “If you’ve seen ‘Yes, Minister’, you haven’t just watched a sitcom, you’ve watched a SASE (Specification of Apprenticeship Standards for England) training video.

“Despite all the rhetoric about wanting to help set up apprenticeship schemes, the government and civil service have made things very difficult in the past. Thankfully, we have a real foothold for now, and we are going to keep on pressing the furnishing industry’s case with the powers that be.”

Terry was very keen to stress that AMUSF president Wendy Shorter had been instrumental in pressing for this fantastic opportunity for upholsterers across the UK. Wendy said: “We really do need to show government that there is interest in this scheme or they will quickly drop all support for it.

“It’s therefore vital that upholsterers out there show that there is a demand for apprentices within the industry by getting in touch with Proskills straight away and declaring their interest in getting involved with the scheme.”

To show your interest in the ATA scheme, just call the Proskills main number on 01235 833 844 or visit www.proskills.co.uk and look at the Contact Us section for regional contacts.
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Social enterprise schemes that offer training in upholstery are few and far between – but where they do exist are making a real difference. U&SF spoke to the founder of a scheme started in Scotland just over a year ago... and to a London-based entrepreneur who is working to establish a similar project in London.

In 2010 Gary Mackie was approached by Scottish charity, Cornerstone, which provides care and support in the community to enable those of all ages with disabilities to enjoy a valued life, to set up a social enterprise, Bennachie.

Gary, who has spina bifida, previously worked at Glencraft – workshops for the blind and disabled – for 18 years, where he learnt his trade in upholstery. Due to financial issues the business closed down.

Said Gary: “Having a disability, I understand how difficult it can be to find employment that caters for certain needs. When Glencraft closed down there was a real threat that I would struggle to find work.

“When Cornerstone approached me to set up and run a social enterprise to train and employ others with disabilities, I was delighted. Upholstery is my passion and with few social enterprises in this industry, it was a perfect opportunity.”

Bennachie is based in Aberdeen, and currently trains and employs six people. Funding comes from Cornerstone, however the aim is for the organisation to become self sufficient and, in turn, help to fund the charity.

Since starting, Bennachie has taken on a range of domestic and commercial projects from local McDonalds branches to recently being signed up to reupholster 150 buses with the First Bus Group. All work carried out has a quality guarantee.

Said Gary: “Without Bennachie, it’s likely that I’d still be unemployed. It has massively changed my life and provided me with an opportunity that otherwise I probably wouldn’t have had.

“We’re gradually expanding with a view to take on and help more people. With no formal training in place yet, we are currently looking at working in partnership with local colleges and we’ve applied to become members of AMUSF.”

The work at Bennachie has proved of particular interest to London-based Laura Willoughby. She noticed a gap in the market for social enterprises in the upholstery sector when she saw a business for sale in Finsbury Park.

Although Laura has attended AMUSF courses herself, she isn’t an upholsterer by trade and is looking for an upholsterer interested in running the company side while she takes care of the business.

“This is a great opportunity for an upholsterer to come on board and do what they love doing while passing on their skills to help develop others. We’d be giving something back by training the next generation of upholsterers and to a very high standard.”

If you would be interested in working with Laura to establish a social enterprise in London, contact 07968 708703.
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In this issue of U&SF we take a look at what the industry’s students have been up to, with pictures of some of their more unusual and novel work...

HIDDEN SKELETONS
AMUSF member Derek Oviatt quite literally found himself with some skeletons in the cupboard when he undertook a project for recent Goldsmiths University graduate Sam Edkins.

Sam has a BA in Fine Art and had a very unusual request for Derek – to upholster some dining room chairs with a fabric featuring skeleton prints!

Sam, whose practise is made up predominantly of drawing and sculpture, printed the skeletons onto the fabric himself and explained the thinking behind the chairs. He said: “These chairs take on a figurative role, becoming more than just chairs. The print works itself into the chair allowing the legs to flow from the print into the chair structure, in a sense personifying the piece.

“The prints themselves are taken from old medical journals while the chairs are all individual, sourced on the merit of their individual qualities such as shape and structure.”

Said Derek: “It was an unusual commission but that’s what makes our craft so interesting. One day it’s a button back, the next a skeleton!”

COLLECTIVE ACTION
The London Chair Collective – the group of budding upholsterers featured in our September/October 2010 issue – continues to blossom.

Three members – Debbie Lowndes, Pia St John and Jude Dennis – recently took part in the Artsmart London event held in July. It is run by London’s University of the Arts which is committed to supporting creativity and the transition from education to professional practice.

Said Debbie Lowndes: “We had a great time and won the Artsmart award for creative enterprise. Apart from giving us our first ‘best in show’ rosette, it meant we got the money refunded for the cost of the stall!”

The trio showed a selection of work including some award-winning cushions from fellow member Carol Mandeville. The group’s appearance at Artsmart follows an earlier successful show at the Dulwich craft fair in June. They also plan to attend the Alexandra Palace antiques, art deco and collectors fair in September and the Dulwich craft fair in November, as well as an Open House event, also in Dulwich later this year.

The London Chair Collective is made up of a group of past and present upholstery students who work together to combine resources, offer support and reduce overheads for start-up upholsterers.
UPHOLDERS AWARDS
The 2011 London Metropolitan University Upholders Awards were held in the rarefied surroundings of the Frederick Parker Collection at the university’s Commercial Road campus.

Filled with antiquities from the prized Parker (as in Parker Knoll) collection, the climate controlled room provided the perfect backdrop to this years June 16 presentation to students from the upholstery and soft furnishings section of the John Cass Department of Art, Media and Design.

Hosted by senior lecturer Malcolm Hopkins, the efforts of staff at the department were specifically acknowledged. The Master of the Worshipful Company of Upholders, Professor James Kelly, presented the awards along with Warden Steven Chapman and clerk Jean Cody.

WINNING STUDENTS WERE AS FOLLOWS:
Modern and Traditional Upholstery
Intermediate Upholstery – 1st prize, Polly Bell; 2nd prize Lisa Edwards; highly commended, Deline Lambert-Baker

Advanced Upholstery – 1st prize, Eva Strandh-Malmberg; 2nd prize, Esther Denny; highly commended, Natalie Lincoln

Soft Furnishing
Part 1 – 1st prize, Gillian Power; 2nd prize, Nicola Lloyd, 3rd prize, Jennifer Yoon, highly commended, Stacey Hartshorn
Part 2 (Advanced) – Joint first prize, Ciara McGarrity and Carol Mandeville; 2nd prize, Elizabeth Mansbridge

The Derek Austin Award for Furniture Making (Foundation Degree) was won by John Cosh Hall with Paul Butcher named runner up and Jamie Donaldson receiving a highly commended certificate. Laura Haines took the award for Conservation and Restoration.

WINNERS WERE AS FOLLOWS:

WINNERS WERE AS FOLLOWS:
Bute Fabrics
Miniature Chairs – 1st Prize – Nichola Ray for her Cinderella chair
2nd Prize – Liz Alsop for her Frosted Spider Web chair
3rd Prize – Louise Boyland for her bolster chair

Prizes presented by Sorcha Ramsay of Bute Fabrics

Heico Fasteners
This competition was run earlier in the year, but Stuart Elmy from Heico congratulated the following graduate students:
Runner Up – Pauline Craze
Runner Up – Liz Alsop
Highly Commended – Yvonne Hunt, Caroline Hoggarth, Louise Boyland and Alison Thorkildsen.

WENDY HOUSE SUCCESS
Students from Wendy Shorter Interiors upholstery and soft furnishings training centre based in St. Albans, have had a lot to celebrate recently. Between them they have achieved an impressive 95% pass rate with distinctions and credits.

“This is our highest pass rate yet and a testament to the hard work and dedication of our students and tutors,” says Wendy, who set up the training centre five years ago.

Students were presented with their certificates by The Master of the Worshipful Company of Upholders, Professor James Kelly at a presentation day in July.

WINNERS WERE AS FOLLOWS:
Nichola Ray’s Cinderella chair
Liz Alsop’s spider’s web chair

IF YOU HAVE UNDERTAKEN AN INTERESTING PROJECT RECENTLY AND HAVE PICTURES TO ILLUSTRATE IT, PLEASE CONTACT EDITOR JAN TURNER ON editorial@upholsterers.co.uk
BRUSHSTROKES
BY PRESTIGIOUS TEXTILES

The freestyle enthusiasm of a confident artist is captured in Brushstrokes, a vibrant new collection of printed fabrics by Prestigious Textiles. Reflecting the heightening demand for colour within the contemporary home, the six designs in the Brushstrokes collection are on a sturdy 100% cotton panama, all available with an optional PVC glaze. Applications therefore range from kitchen textiles and protective table covers to curtains, blinds, cushions and decorative accessories.

The brightly-painted daubs (dubbed Brushstrokes), circles and hoops (Swirls and Paintpots), stripes (Colourwash) and retro-flowers (Rosebud and Ella) are available in an electrifying array of colour stories, with the brilliance of enamel joined by zestful palettes of orange, magenta, lavender and ink, plus the multi-coloured chintz.

For details on all Prestigious Textiles fabrics, wall coverings and curtain poles, call 01274 688448, e-mail sales@prestigious.co.uk or visit www.prestigious.co.uk

Prestigious Textiles has announced the extension of its international network with the launch of Prestigious China, a partnership company based in Shanghai to serve the burgeoning Chinese market. The new Prestigious China showroom opens at the end of August in Shanghai.

Selected specifically for the Chinese domestic market, the initial portfolio comprises 24 collections of fabrics for draperies, upholstery and home décor accessories, all presented in cut lengths, pieces and pattern books, together with the latest collections of Prestigious wallcoverings. The company will be supported by a daily courier service from Prestigious Textiles’ headquarters in Bradford.

JOHNSTONS OF ELGIN LAUNCHES PREMIER HOME FABRICS COLLECTION

Johnstons of Elgin, famous for its fine cloth, cashmere and tweed, has launched its first ever home fabrics collection, including designs suitable for upholstery.

Taking inspiration from the landscape and heritage of the Scottish highlands, where the company has been based since 1797, the collection consists of three themes; Scottish Heritage, Young Country and Pastoral Elegance, all made from luxurious yarns including lambswool, silk and linen.

James Dracup, group managing director of Johnstons said: “We have long wanted to create our own home fabric collection. It’s a natural progression for us as previously some of our heritage estate tweeds were used for upholstery”. The fabric collection is available online or from the company’s mail order catalogue. Visit www.johnstonscashmere.com
The group took in a visit to John Ditchfield’s Glasform studio in the heart of the Fylde Coast countryside where they saw glassblowers producing some of the innovative designs that have made pieces from the studio among the most sought after collectables in the market place.

The visit followed the Fellow’s AGM where the procedure for processing applications for Fellowship was clarified and levels of charitable giving were set for the next 12 months. This included a rise to the Christmas payments made to retired Fellows.

In his annual report, Upholder Michael Gilham expressed concern at the AGM attendance figures. “There are numerous reasons behind this, not least the effects of the economy,” he said, “but we are in a Fellowship where our common link is the trade and I see the Fellows as an extension of the AMUSF which is going through a great period of change.

“We need to go forward with a renewed sense of Fellowship that is supportive of the trade and in the coming year I hope we can get the Fellows back on track and representative of senior members of our trade.”

Michael thanked Chapter clerk Mary Crack for organising the weekend, Janet Potten for standing in for the clerk at the AGM and running the evening quiz. And to Bob Bishton for setting the most impossible quiz to date!
How long have you been doing your job?
John – 14 years in business, 10 in upholstery. Susan 10 years.

How long did it take to really learn the skill?
We’re still learning! We are both self taught – John is an ex Merchant Navy engineer and Susan did dressmaking as a hobby and is an ex PA and personnel officer.

Do you consider yourselves craftspeople or tradespeople?
Craftspeople.

What makes up the bulk of your work?
Upholstery, equally divided between non traditional leather recover and fabric recover/reupholstery.

What keeps you motivated?
Living and paying the mortgage! Seriously - helping customers choose appropriate fabrics and leather colours for their furniture/needs and paying attention to the finer details.

What aspect of your work do you most enjoy?
Selling our skills to the customer. Also, when returning the furniture, taking off the cover wrap and seeing their reaction.

Professionally, what is your greatest frustration?
Lack of after sales customer care by retailers when a customer has a problem.

Tell us about the most challenging project you have ever undertaken.
Bespoke deep-buttoned headboards with wings and bedframes – all for a wedding venue and needing to be done ‘yesterday’. One of the headboards/beds was 7ft wide by 7ft 6” high and was to stand alone in the room with people able to walk around the bed. There were also small armchairs and a last minute request for 26 assorted cushions.

And the most unusual/ bizarre/ funny request you have ever dealt with?
Recover in leather of a padded, spiral banister finished with chair nails. The owner’s cats had shredded the original and to prevent this happening again the cats were de-clawed!

What are the most pressing issues currently facing your business?
Not enough hours in the day or days in the week. Plus increasing costs from suppliers and the increase in VAT.

How long have you been a member of the AMUSF and how important has this been to your business?
Six years. Subconsciously membership gives credibility to the business.

How do you keep your skills and techniques updated?
From John’s engineering point of view, if something has worn out or broken, it’s looking at how this can be improved. We constantly try different methods and techniques as part of our self-improvement.

What is the single most important piece of advice you would give to someone starting out in this business?
Return customer enquiries quickly and be confident. Get your pricing right and be prepared for the fact that this is not a 9am-5pm, Monday to Friday industry.

Where do you see the future of the industry?
There is a future for proactive upholsterers who promote their skills and business. The industry cannot survive complacency.

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Would I be interested in setting up an upholstery class? It was some time ago now but this was the question I had been waiting for. Diving head first into the world of upholstery after a career change, I attempted to cover all the angles; accreditation by the AMUSF; apprenticing and assisting my friend and mentor with 30 years experience as he taught on community college courses; getting my PTTLS adult learners teaching qualification, as well as putting my time in “on the bench” at a large firm. For whatever reason, whenever I have discovered or learnt something new, I’m desperate to share that information with someone else. Really, I’ve always wanted to teach, teach anybody that wanted to learn.

So when the charity Fine Cell Work (FCW) asked me to set up the first upholstery class at Wandsworth prison, I of course, immediately said yes. This would add upholstery to their portfolio and continue with FCW’s contributions to prisoner rehabilitation. How upholstery will go down with the inmates of Wandsworth prison is an intriguing if slightly daunting challenge. I am very passionate about adult learning – in or out of prison. There is a lot to say about the benefits of a life of learning, what it brings to a community of people and the effect it can have on an individual. FCW has been putting this into practice by teaching embroidery and quilting in prison since the 1960’s and now operates in 29 prisons across the UK.

The reality is everything requires quite a lot of clearance in prison. Background checks are lengthy, there must be numerous meetings to thrash out the details; how will tools be handed out? How will materials and furniture be delivered?

My own induction training is four days of general “what to do’s” including personal protection, corruption prevention, first on scene, and drug awareness modules. Honestly, I have no idea the extent to which I will need this new found information. I’ll keep you posted. Needless to say, the advice, personal stories, enthusiasm and concern has been rolling in from all quarters.

The idea to teach upholstery to prisoners came with the notion that some of the truly amazing needlepoint canvases produced by prisoners for FCW could be incorporated into furniture. It’s a great way of displaying these works of art and by encouraging teamwork and communication, prisoners could work together to produce both the stitchwork, and the furniture itself. Upholstery is steeped in tradition, fitting for such exquisite canvases, but it is also a modern trade. The AMUSF requires high standards in both traditional and modern techniques through its qualifications, which means that prisoners will be both trained in a craft and exposed to skills that are valuable in the workplace. Prisoners will work to gain AMUSF accreditation and will form part of a working group aiming to win a contract to deliver an upholstered item to a client: they are also paid nominally for the time they spend in education.

The programme gives prisoners the opportunity to earn and save money and the chance to reflect on and rebuild their lives through craft and achievement. With other teaching commitments, my own studio in Shoreditch and setting up the prison programme, September is due to be busy. But watch this space – I’ll be back to update you in a future issue on what promises to be one of the most interesting teaching assignments ever!

For further information visit www.boylandshoreditch.com and www.finecellwork.co.uk
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Meet Sheila Draper, the AMUSF’s new full time manager. Based at the new head office at Wycombe House in High Wycombe, Sheila was less than a week into her new role when U&SF caught up with her to find out more about the person set to become the lynchpin of the association.

Sheila Draper is very clear about what she wants to achieve for the AMUSF – and that is quite simply to make it what the members want and need it to be. She is particularly keen to talk to and visit as many members as possible to find out more about what they do and what they want from the association.

“I am not the AMUSF’s chief executive, I am its manager and my personal goal is to give priority to providing good quality services to members. However, it will also be important to represent the association’s interests externally to enhance the standing and reputation of the AMUSF with consumers, the trade, the wider industry as a whole and trainers. Such activities would also benefit members,” she says.

After six years as general manager of the Intellectual Property Federation (IPF) and prior to that a spell spent with the Timber Research and Development Association (TRADA), Sheila is well versed in the needs of a thriving trade association.

Head office is, she says, the ‘hub’ of the organisation; the conduit that supplies advice and information to members, provides a vital contact point and operates as an ‘enabler’ in terms of networking and information exchange.

Trade associations are also organisations that must continually evolve to keep pace with changing times and needs, says Sheila. And she couldn’t have joined the AMUSF at a more critical point, her appointment coming after two tumultuous years in the association’s history, culminating in the head office move from Cardiff to High Wycombe in July.

It is a role with a mammoth learning curve and mountains of paraphernalia to sort out but Sheila Draper is clearly more than up to the task and comes across as well organised, highly focused and personable – in fact, exactly what the AMUSF needs after all the recent uncertainty. And judging by her extracurricular activities, she’s as much of a Can Doer away from the office as she is in it – heavily involved with local community activity, into ‘Jazzercise’ and founding member of her local book club.

Born and brought up in Lancashire, Sheila left home to study law at Nottingham Trent University. Her early career was spent in publishing which she left to have a career break – and, happily married for over 20 years, she has lived variously in London, Hertfordshire, Surrey and Buckinghamshire.

In 1999 Sheila joined TRADA as a marketing services manager, organising its certification schemes and qualifications, seminars and exhibitions and providing marketing backup.

It was a role that proved a useful stepping stone to the much bigger one of general manager at the IPF, where she had sole management responsibility for all the federation’s activities and interests, including membership services, administration, marketing and publications, premises, finance and a whole lot more.

“At the heart of everything are membership services,” says Sheila. “They are really important and, if you like, the ‘front line’ in terms of how members gauge the value of belonging to the association.

“One thing I’d certainly like to look at a little further down the line is getting together with our current suppliers to the FUSS fabric buying scheme to see how we can best take things forward and possibly even extend our supplier list, as that’s an activity which I am already realising is an important benefit for members. One area might be to explore the opportunities for giving members greater access to fabrics not normally available to small businesses by expanding our group buying scheme.”

She also believes that group networking – whether through branch meetings or online forums – is important. “Members have a wide spread of knowledge and experience to share – whether this is done through more traditional branch meetings or online chats is a bit of a generational thing. What matters is that people interact, especially in our association where many members are operating as sole traders.”

It is this aspect of the AMUSF membership – namely the large number of small independent businesses – that forms the most distinct difference between Sheila’s new role and her previous one at the IPF. There, the membership numbers were very much smaller – but the financial contribution made by each significantly greater.

“It has already been a delight to discover how friendly and welcoming everyone has been and how much pride members hold in their work and their association,” says Sheila. “It’s a very personal organisation which is why I want to talk to and meet as many people as possible.

“It seems to me that there is a much greater interest among people now for properly carried out work, by craft people, that endures. We should ensure that consumers are well-informed about the choices they make. They need to know that the AMUSF crest/badge represents high standards and that members adhere to a code of practice. The association should also emphasise its “green credentials” in an age where recycling and renewal are so important.”
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You could say that, up until four years ago, Barry - and his father, Stan, before him - had seen and worked on it all, as far as upholstery is concerned. That was until Barry was asked by a long-term client to take on an extraordinary challenge: to restore an Elephant Seat (Howdah) that had formed part of the famed Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace in 1851 to its original glory.

Said Barry: “When you see pictures of people from colonial times riding on elephants in howdah, you’ll notice that they’re often protected from the sun by cloth canopies.

“But this particular howdah is under an elaborate double-dome structure making it not only extremely rare but also meaning that it would have belonged to a very prestigious owner. It was likely only to have been used for an exceptionally important event such as a royal wedding or ambassadorial visit.”

Being so elaborate and rare also meant that this would prove an especially challenging project – and ultimately take months to complete.

“One of the biggest challenges we faced was the dome itself,” said Barry. “The interior of which was made up of lattice work to create a honeycombed effect - which would have originally been put on wet and pinned to the setting - that we had to recreate with a specially-made interliner and silk.

“The other difficult part of it was that we had to pull and stretch the silk fabric tight over the arched edges at a 45 degree angle – if you can imagine having to pull a limited amount of fabric tight over an egg, where the bottom is larger than the top, then that’s what it was like!

“We also had to create the seat and cushions entirely from scratch – as the originals had likely been lost in transit many years ago - which we did using the client’s chosen silk fabric.”

The most memorable thing about the howdah for Barry was the incredible detail of the ivory work.

“The ivory had actually been with a restorer for an entire year before it came to us and I must say that I’ve never seen carving like it: the detail is mind-blowing. Every single element has elaborate carvings on it of some kind.

“There really had been no expense spared.”
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How would you like to be remembered?
As a kind and considerate husband, a fair and helpful father, a professional upholsterer and someone who gave rather than took.

How did you get into this business?
My father would have liked me to have followed him into market gardening but I wished to do something with wood. Father took me to a chair factory in Maidstone where there were no vacancies in the mill but there was a position in the upholstery shop. The rest is history.

What would you class as your greatest achievement?
Completing our first long distance walk over the Southern Alps of New Zealand (The Milford Track).

Is your glass half empty or half full?
My glass has overflowed many times but it takes effort to achieve this.

Who has been your greatest inspiration and why?
My wife Hazel. We have been together over 50 years, she worked alongside me and has always encouraged me.

Your perfect day?
Waking up on a sunny morning and seeing France is still 21 miles away! And being able to walk across the cliffs.

Your desert island disc?
Hands Across the Sea. The reason being that after a letter from our daughter in Tanzania telling us she was not well, we were driving up a motorway when Shirley Bassey started singing the song. It gave us the idea to draw an outline of our arms on wallpaper, cut them out and send them to her so she could have a hug from us at any time!

If you weren’t doing what you do now, what would you be doing?
I completed three years in the army where I became a driving instructor, quarter master stores assistant and finally a clerk to company sergeant major. If I hadn’t completed my upholstery apprenticeship before doing my military service I would have probably stayed in the forces.

What’s the best thing about our industry?
The AMUSF was not top of the list when I started in business, but once I join an association, I try and put in more than I take out. I hope I have achieved this. I have certainly made many friends across the country so it’s got to be friendship.

And the worst?
Doing away with traditional apprenticeships.

What winds you up?
Some of the legislation that comes from various authorities who really do not understand our industry.

What gives you the greatest satisfaction?
Our garden gives us great pleasure now we are retired, also our children and grandchildren.

Tell me a secret?
If I told you it wouldn’t be a secret anymore.

Doer or talker?
Doer. My daughter used to say how much she was looking forward to retirement but having seen how active and involved with several clubs and societies Hazel and I are, now thinks that she might as well keep working!

Best piece of advice to someone starting out?
Don’t take an overdraft unless you know you can pay it back.
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