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Working Wood

Fine furniture makers go back to school

Nelson woodworking brothers-in-law John Shaw (right) and David Haig are heading back to school — their own school. Shaw and Haig, two of New Zealand's finest furniture makers, are opening the doors on The Centre for Fine Woodworking on November 6.

In a rural Wakapuaka workshop, just 10 minutes north of the city and with inspirational views across the Boulder Bank to Tasman Bay, the craft pair will offer intensive small-group woodworking instruction. And wannabe craftspeople are already clamouring to sign up from as far afield as Japan and the US.

Between them the school's two tutors have more than 50 years' woodworking experience. Shaw, 48, is a highly respected furniture maker whose latest creations include Nelson Airport's outdoor seating and the lectern at Nelson Cathedral. Haig, 50, is internationally renowned for his iconic Signature rocking chair and other stylish modern furniture pieces.

The son of English immigrants, Shaw hankered to work with wood after reading *A Cabinetmaker's Notebook*, by leading American woodworker James Krenov.

At 24, Shaw had a woodworking course in Britain under his belt and a woodturning business in Nelson, but was struggling financially. "Nelson was a cool place for artists in the '80s, but people weren't queuing to buy modern furniture."

Serendipitously, in 1984 Krenov visited Wellington to run a short masterclass and Shaw eagerly signed up to attend. At the end of the course, Krenov presented him with one his wood planes and invited him to California. "I

was stunned. Krenov was searching for a 'sorcerer's apprentice' and chose *me!*"

A year with the master in California took Shaw's craftsmanship to a new level. Returning to Nelson, he built an adobe house and workshop and soon carved out a reputation as a top-flight studio furniture maker.

Haig had no such early furniture-making aspirations. Born in Malaysia in 1955 to expat British parents, his place in the sun ended abruptly in 1960 when the family returned to England. "It was like *Paradise Lost*," he recalls. "Grey faces, grey skies." But in 1973 the family emigrated to New Zealand to set up an organic farm near Nelson. Haig came too with young English wife Clare. "I was a beekeeper and a would-be potter, basically living the hippy lifestyle."

Soon after Shaw visited the Haig farm under the Willing Workers on Organic Farms programme, only to fall in love with and subsequently marry Fini, Clare's sister, who was visiting from the UK.

Haig picks up the tale: "When Clare became pregnant, I stumbled upon a couple of jarrah fence posts in the garden and decided to make a rocking cradle. John was visiting and showed me how to use a plane. As the grey moss came off, the shavings turned blood red and I felt this huge energy release — it was a key moment. I was hooked on wood."

The next few years saw Haig immerse himself in woodworking — until by the 1980s he was designing his own pieces. He booked a stand at an alternative furniture show in Christchurch and displayed his first attempt at a rocking chair. Local MP Margaret Austin was touring the show when "she sat down on

the chair and wrote out a cheque for \$750. I thought — has my career just peaked?"

Commissions flooded in, but Haig soon tired of the chair's look and devised the Signature design in 1990. Its tight curves posed complex construction problems and Haig's solution was the revolutionary use of steam bending to produce solid wood shapes previously thought impossible to fashion. The first walnut version was bought by artist Sir Toss Woollaston and more than 150 Signatures have since rocked around the world. And in 2001, Haig's growing mana garnered an invitation to teach in Rockport, Maine.

The Centre For Fine Woodworking's genesis lies in a one-off bench-making course Shaw and Haig ran in 2004. A retired Scot visiting New Zealand, Andrew Bruce, was so impressed by his tutors' skills he approached the pair with the offer of start-up funding for a new school.

That offer accepted, Bruce has now emigrated to become the school's administrator. "To be a world-class designer and craftsman as well as a fine tutor is an extremely rare combination," he enthuses. "To have a school with two tutors of that calibre, in a beautiful region like Nelson, is an amazing opportunity."

School fees range from \$980 for the inaugural 10-day beginners course up to \$5750 for a 12-week advanced course.

Who will attend the school?

Haig scratches his chin. "People with a desire to make things with their hands, in a workshop situation. Those with a model-making background or perhaps boat-building. It could be someone wanting to step down from the rat race for a week or two, or someone seeking a complete lifestyle change. For some woodworking is like meditation, for others it's a new table. Both approaches are valid."