

timber DESIGN

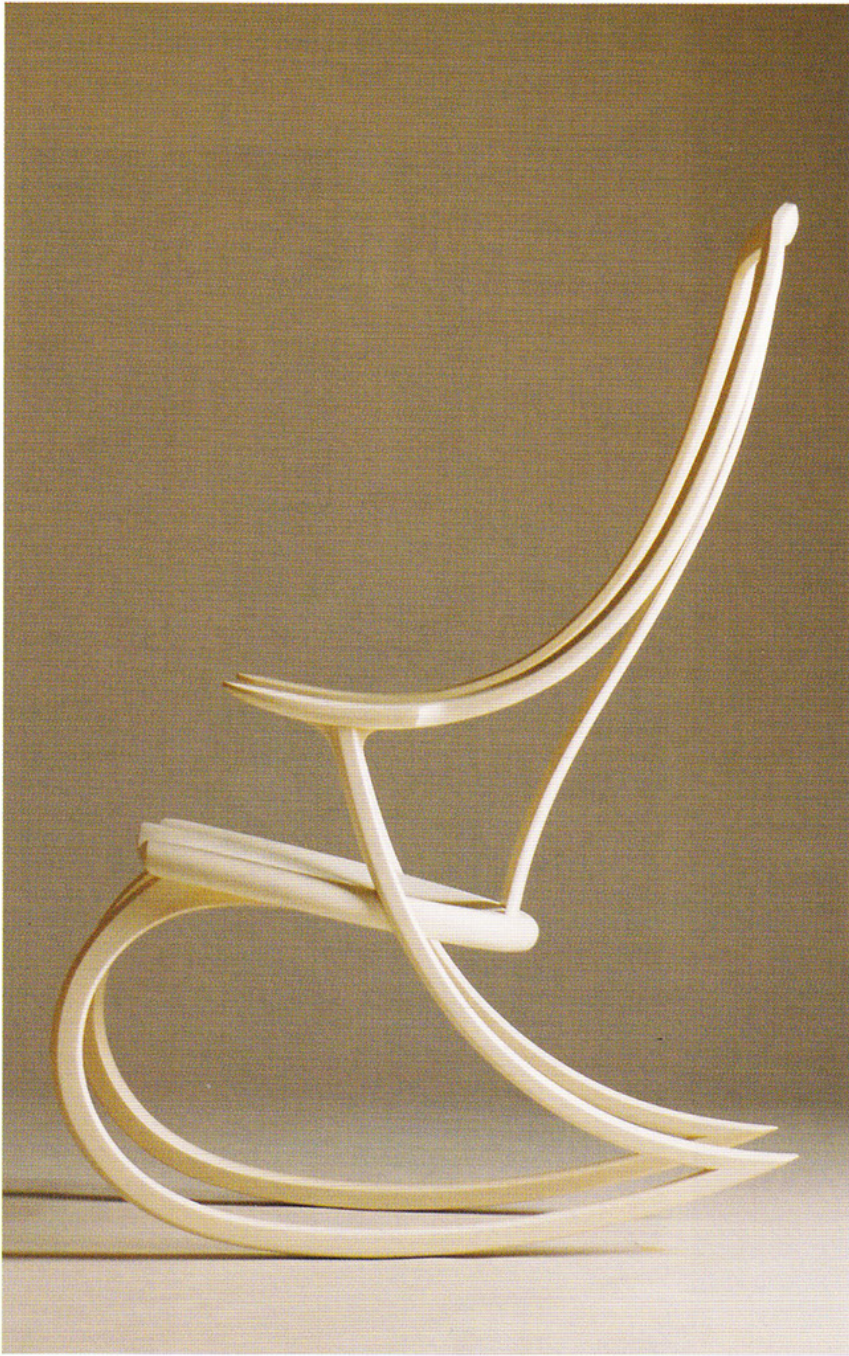
A U S T R A L A S I A

SECOND QUARTER 2007

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SUSTAINABLE BUILDING SOLUTIONS



AGAINST THE GRAIN

David Haig – bending the rules with steam

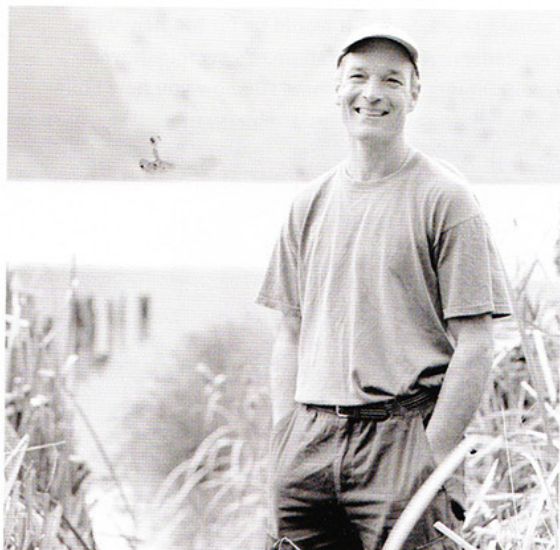
“ He showed me how to use a plane and as this grey moss came off, the shavings turned blood red. I thought I had severed my thumb, but it was just the natural colour of the fresh raw wood. Then I felt a huge energy release – it was a key moment in my life.”

“ Steam bending opens up so many design possibilities that you don't normally have with wood. Not many people do it – it goes against the grain! ”



PICTURES AT TOP
rocker that
international
reputation

LEFT
the critical
conception,
manufacture



It could be said that the career of David Haig, one of New Zealand's most successful furniture designers, is 'steaming' along. His international reputation has mainly been fostered by the 'Signature' rocking chair, which has sold to clients worldwide.

At the top of New Zealand's South Island, just a few kilometres from bustling Nelson, lies the estuary known as Cable Bay. The area got its European name in 1876, when it became the termination point of the first trans-tasman telegraph service, a cable that stretched 1850 km along the seabed to Sydney. Today, there are few signs of the old cable station, and the bay's tranquillity is underlined by the calls of bellbirds and marine waders. When a man-made noise joins the soundscape – a gentle scrape of sharp metal through wood – you know that in a small shed on the bank of the bay, Haig has started his day's work.

From this workshop, over the past 25 years, Haig has risen through the woodworking ranks to become one of New Zealand's most successful furniture designer-makers, and is now known internationally for his 'Signature' rocking chairs.

Having emigrated from Britain in the 1970s, Haig's career in wood began when his wife Clare became pregnant. "In the garden, I found a couple of old fence posts and got the urge to make a rocking cradle," he recalls. "Furniture-maker John Shaw was visiting and recognised the wood as jarrah. He showed me how to use a plane and as this grey moss came off, the shavings turned blood red. I thought I had severed my thumb, but it was just the natural colour of the fresh raw wood. Then I felt a huge energy release – it was a key moment in my life."

Now hooked on woodworking, Haig acquired some carpentry skills and started to learn antique furniture restoration before making his own furniture – including some early attempts at rocking chairs. In 1990, he came up with the iconic 'Signature' rocking chair design – but it posed complex construction problems. "I looked at the design and realised the tight curves were going to be a nightmare." Then he read about steam bending. "I discovered that some timbers become temporarily plasticised when heated by steam. You can bend them into new shapes that the wood retains after cooling. It's a tricky procedure – you can end up with a lot of firewood."

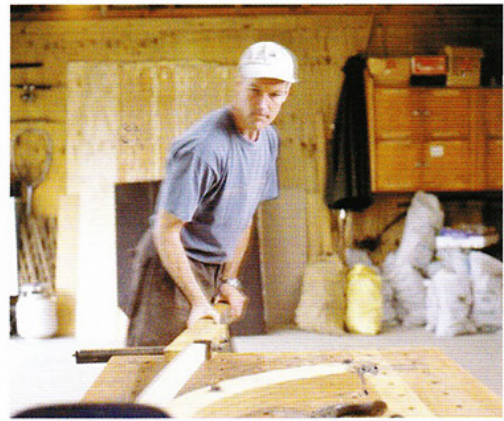
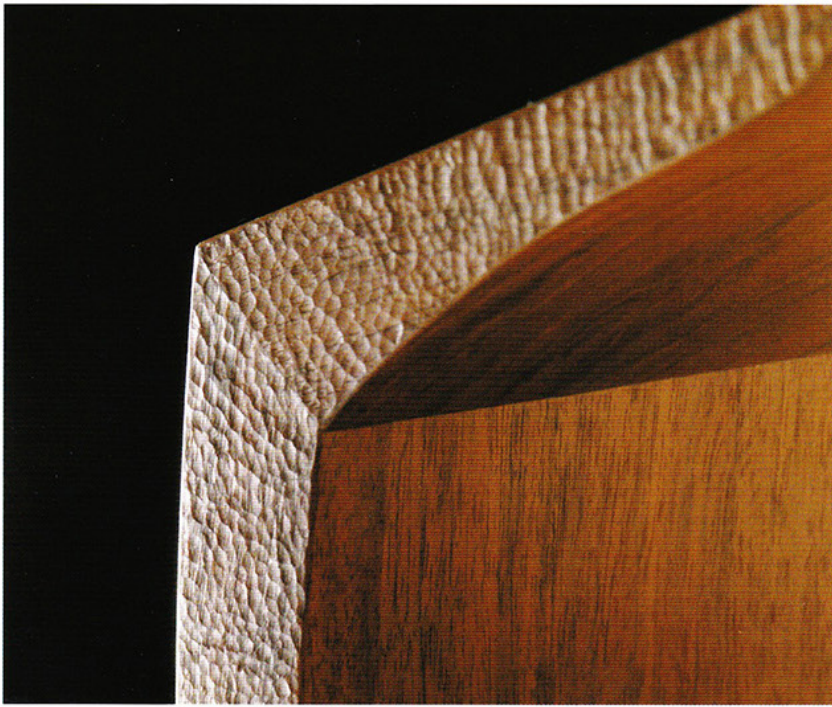
The first chair in the new design sold quickly, and then he discovered he could steam bend walnut, his favourite timber. The prototype in that species was bought by the great Kiwi artist Toss Woollaston. Since then, over 150 Signatures have sold worldwide.

"Thanks to the early settlers who came out with bags of walnuts, 100 years later we have these beautiful trees. I milled my first walnut tree about 20 years ago and I fell in love with it as a timber. But its form is a nightmare – in a grove of 20 trees you'd be lucky to find one or two with enough clear wood. They were planted for their nuts, not their wood. Twisty, turny trunks are fine for woodturners, but challenging for a furniture-maker."

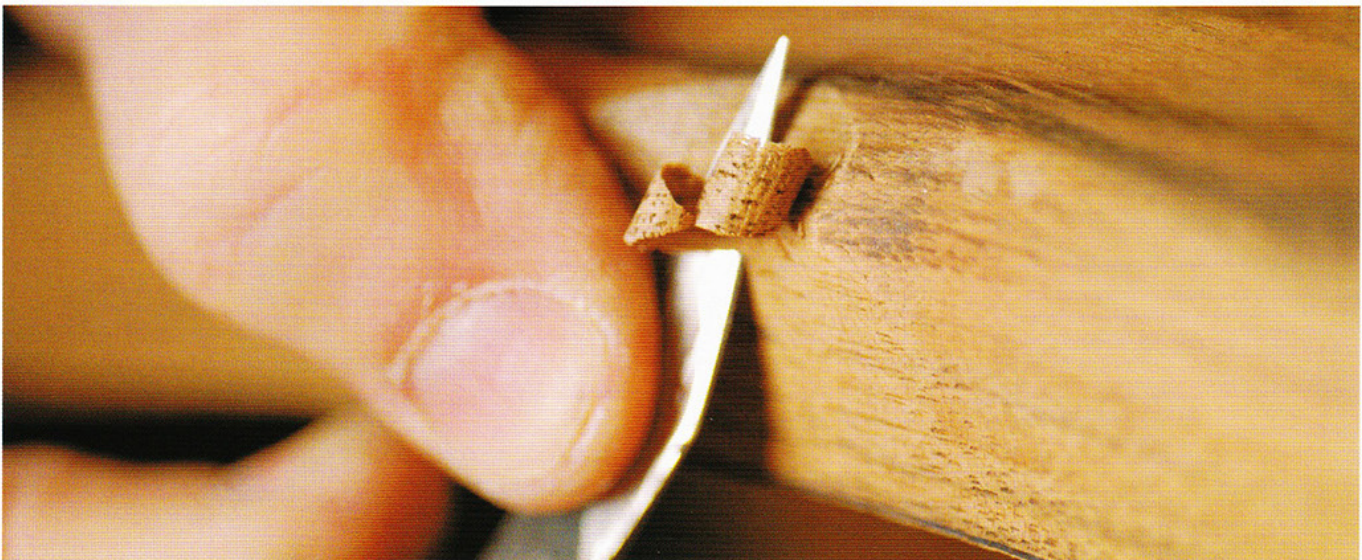
In 2001, Haig was invited to the US to teach an annual course at the Center for Furniture Craftmanship in Rockport, Maine. That confirmed his international reputation as an expert in the field, especially his knowledge of steam bending.

"Steam bending is a key skill for me. I don't like veneers. Steam bending opens up so many design possibilities that you don't normally have with wood. Not many people do it – it goes against the grain! There is a margin of error you have to live with – at the end of the day, wood is organic and unpredictable."

As well as teaching in the US, Haig has recently been asked to tutor students at Nelson's new Centre for Fine Woodworking – New Zealand's only private woodworking school, launched in 2006 by woodworker John Shaw.



“ Timber is actually a hugely complex material, so a good furniture-maker needs to understand the strengths of one timber over another, and the ways in which a particular wood can be put to best use. ”



The new school is based around small class sizes and a high student/tutor contact, and has been highly successful in its inaugural year.

But teaching remains a sideline for Haig. “Commissioned work allows me to extend my design vocabulary and push my boundaries. Occasionally, I have found a single piece of timber in which the whole piece is already almost there – usually where there is a flitch [a plank sawn bark to bark] from a tree trunk that retains many of the characteristics of the growing tree. It conveys very directly some of the majesty and mystery of the ancient tree from which it was cut.

“The famous furniture-maker George Nakashima was the great exponent and master of this kind of application of whole flitches of wood to pieces of very sensitively wrought furniture. Unfortunately, it’s a method that is also very easily abused – everyone has seen the great lumps of unattractively knotty macrocarpa or whatever, with ugly stumpy legs attached, that for some people represent ‘magnificent’ dining or coffee tables.”

As Haig talks, he leans on a near-completed maple and walnut desk. It has one simple drawer that has no discernible way of being opened,

and a raised shelf at each side of the desk that is a continuation of the desk’s solid walnut sides. Solid? It would be far too heavy and expensive. Haig excitedly reveals the craftsman’s secret – how he disguised the desk’s cunning construction. “I’ll show you how I did it but this is definitely off the record,” he laughs.

“For me, the key is the form, not the intricate detail. The critical part is in the conception, not the manufacture, the design decisions – these can take months or even years. There was a coffee table – I carried that design in my head for 18 months while I was unhappy about how to make it. Then a penny dropped.

“Timber is actually a hugely complex material, so a good furniture-maker needs to understand the strengths of one timber over another, and the ways in which a particular wood can be put to best use: which timber is strong enough, or springy enough, how thin or thick to leave it, when to have it quarter-sawn or flat-sawn, or to embellish it with carved details or inlay, whether to finish with the high liquid-lustre of a waxed finish or the lower darker sheen of an oil. All these are part of the repertoire of a good furniture-maker.”

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BOTTOM LEFT
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TOP RIGHT
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WORDS Micha
PHOTOGRAPHY
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