

# 75th Anniversary Exhibition Rendcomb College 1996

## Woodwork Exhibition organized by Colin Burden Staff 1963-97

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## Arts and Craft

### The 75th Anniversary Exhibition of Craftwork

Towards the end of June 1995 the idea of staging an exhibition of craftwork to mark the College's 75th anniversary was born. Having taught craftwork here since 1963, I was well aware of items made during the last 32 years, but I had little knowledge of what would be available from the earlier years.

William Morris's movement to restore the mediaeval traditions of craftsmanship found fertile soil in Gloucestershire, leading to the foundation of the Guild of Gloucestershire Craftsmen. From its early days, Rendcomb developed links with the Guild and with the Loughborough Colleges, particularly in the field of furniture-making.

The Founder and the first Head Master, J. H. Simpson, fostered a keen interest in the arts and encouraged the pupils to use their hands. In 1931 at the Three Counties Show their work was specially commended for fine craftsmanship, and as a result Gordon Russell of Broadway enquired for apprentices from Rendcomb. Denis Lee-Browne, the second Head Master, was Chairman of the Guild of Gloucestershire Craftsmen for four years.

At the Anniversary Ball I set about tracking down items for the exhibition. Offers of help came flooding in from as far afield as Cornwall, London and America. Once the wheels had been set in motion, the Old Rendcombian Society register provided a list of names from the past, and I began telephoning those who lived nearest the school.

Having made an initial contact, I was given further information about craftsmen of each generation. By August I had a list of promised items,

and at this stage I widened the scope of the exhibition to include items made by ORs since leaving the College and by staff and friends.

On the evening of Friday, 29th September, 200 guests, governors, staff, ORs and parents attended a preview of the exhibition. It opened to the general public on the two following days.

The exhibition was divided into three sections. A small display of recent work by junior pupils was shown in Saul's Hall. In the Reading Room there were exhibits by ORs, staff and friends of the College. In the Dulverton Hall were over 150 items made by pupils in the 'Manual' and in the present Workshop since 1920.

### The Reading Room Major Contributors and Exhibits

Roger Attwood, school cabinet-maker: joynt stool in oak, child's chair and tripod table in mahogany.

Colin Burden (Staff 1963- ): hall table in teak, stick-back chair in ash.

Michael Denlev, OR (1968-74): button-back chair

Roy Dennis (Staff 1959-82): standard lamp in brown oak, tea trolley in oak.

Jack Fell (Staff 1934-73): cabinet in English walnut, nest of tables in laburnum.

Timothy Gay, OR (1948-54): record cabinet in brown oak, a cot in pine, a wide range of small items and numerous photographs of his pupils' work.

Cecil Gough, OR (1921-24): oak bedside cabinet (mid-1930s) showing influence of Peter Waals, oak dining chairs (1936) showing Gordon Russell's influence, oak blanket box (early 1930s), oak cigarette box (mid-1950s) following design by Edward Barnsley, American walnut needlework cabinet (1950s) made with his son John from an old bedstead.

Cecil Gough taught at Loughborough for many years, becoming Senior Tutor and retiring in 1970.

David Hart, OR (1950-56), silversmith, a cabinet showing a selection of items made in the Hart family workshops, similar to those operating in the 17th and 18th centuries, in Chipping Campden. The firm carries out a variety of tasks, from simple repairs to elaborate show-pieces, and provides a local service as well as doing work for clients in London and abroad.

Ted Jones, OR (1940-48): two wood-carvings completed in Fiji.

Graham Jordan, OR (1966-73): photographs of houses he has built in Australia, also interior fittings.  
Peter Lane, OR (1939-42): walnut dressing table and mirror.

Christopher Lane, OR (1940-49): recent sculptures in yew, cedar, bronze and Purbeck stone, a dual-purpose trestle table in stained pine.

Denis Lee-Browne (Head Master 1932-60): elm coffer, oak bench (1928), oak chest of drawers, oak blanket box.

Denis Lee-Browne was for three years Director of Rural Industries for Gloucestershire and, as has been mentioned, Chairman of the Guild of Gloucestershire Craftsmen from 1932 to 1936.

Paul Margetts, OR (1972-75): display of forge-work and photographs of recent commissions.

Oliver Morel, OR (1930-34, Staff 1938-42): walnut coffee table, photograph of oak chest made in 1974 with inlays of yew, bullace, spindle, wayfaring tree and holly.

Oliver Morel ran the Eric Sharpe Centre, a resource centre for professional and amateur handworkers, from 1969 to 1980, specialising in raised decorative inlay work - natural motifs of flowers and plants executed in exotic timbers.

Francis Nevel, OR (1926-29): small items of treen in walnut, yew and ash, made by Betula Ltd, a firm set up by ORs Francis Nevel and David Haes (1926- 29). Many illustrations of Betula ware can be seen in woodworking books and magazines of the 1960s. Dick Rolt, OR (1966-71): a high-performance screen press designed by Dick Rolt and made by Rolt Engineering Ltd.

Mrs Hermione Thornton (née Lee-Browne): wood-carvings of a pig in lime and an otter in yew. Charles Herbert (Bert) Uzzell: secretaire, chest of drawers, round cabriole-leg table, magazine rack, dressing table, butler's tray, oval tea caddy, two cigarette boxes - all in English walnut, a dining chair and carver in English oak.

Bert Uzzell's son Dennis is an OR (1926-34), and his grandson Robin came to Rendcomb in 1994. T. T. (Willie) Walters, OR (1940-49): photographs of a clock made from part of a Bristol/Ferranti Bloodhound missile, a gavel made in the form of two bells back-to-back and mounted on a scaled- down clapper to form a handle.

## The Dulverton Hall

There were 150 items on display, of which 32 were made before I came to Rendcomb in 1963. I counted 25 species of timber, mainly home-grown and to be found in Gloucestershire, such as oak, elm, beech and ash, but also the rarer laburnum, acacia and hornbeam. Many were supplied by the Colesbourne sawmills and seasoned in the lower Wilderness in the seventies.

An OR, Kevin Holmes, helped me to set up the exhibits, which took the best part of two days. We grouped the early pieces together. The very table mentioned by OR Dick Field in *Champagne Days* was used to display smaller items. He described it as 'a magnificent eight-legged central table made by Ching White in the Manual Workshop'. He goes on

to say that in subsequent years chairs and small tables were added - 'These pieces were filled and waxed, so that in those early years they were beautifully pale, like ghosts of themselves in the dark hall. Later they darkened'.

One of them, a two-seater settle still in use in Saul's Hall, was chosen for its signature 'CJG' carved on the back. The maker, Cecil Gough, came to the preview and thoroughly enjoyed himself.

Oliver Morel's influence in passing on cabinet skills was shown in two pieces, a chair and a tea trolley made by Patrick Morris and Peter Lane, who were at Rendcomb during the Second World War. Unfortunately, owing to ill-health, Oliver Morel was unable to come to the exhibition. However, he sent a fascinating document for the school archives, a set of instructions written by Denis Lee-Browne in May 1938 for the guidance of 'Manual' masters. The rules were read with interest by visitors, and copies were requested by a number of ORs.

A few of the early pieces were turned on the treadle lathe, which was still in the Manual in the early sixties, although not in working condition. When the present Workshop was opened in 1967, with two new lathes, wood-turning proved very popular and has continued so to the present day. The wide variety of bowls, table and standard lamps, goblets, gavels, lidded boxes, wine tables and joynst stools on display shows the versatility of these machines.

The Rendcomb Puppet Theatre formed part of the exhibition. I found the puppets about 15 years ago in a cupboard on the top floor of the Main Building. The theatre was established by H. V. Molineaux who was part-time Art Master at Rendcomb from 1933 until his death 17 years later. He produced excellent stage sets and spent a great deal of time on the development of the theatre, housed in what is now the Old Rectory Common Room, and of the Puppet Workshop in one of the outhouses. He was an excellent craftsman and made some of the puppets in the Manual. Christopher Lane recognised one puppet for which his mother had made a set of clothes during the holidays.

Keith Stimson (1955-63) made a major contribution. A high standard of craftsmanship was evident in his pieces, amongst them a nest of tables and an acoustic guitar, where fine inlays, called stringings, had been used.

Keith was one of a small group of senior boys who embarked in 1960 upon a project which was to take five years, the making of a gun cabinet for the 21st birthday of the Founder's grandson, Major Tom Wills. Designed by Roy Elliott, Craft Master at the time, the carcass and stand were made of Brazilian rosewood, with European beech back-panels and drawer fronts. The high quality of the boys' cabinetmaking was commented on by many visitors.

After the exhibition it was converted into a bookcase by Roger Attwood, as the design did not meet current fire-arms legislation.

Also on display was a free-standing mahogany bookcase with brass carrying handles, made in the early eighties by pupils John Shaw, Colin Sainsbury and Rory Johnston and given to Major Wills as a wedding present.

In the late sixties I purchased a set of tools, modern versions of a wheelwright's rounder and trap. These have been used to make stick-back in chairs, tables, magazine racks and the very popular 'Rendcomb Stool'. Over one thousand of these have been made, and various designs were on display. We used elm in the early days, but sadly, since the ravages of Dutch elm disease, it is no longer available. Ash has largely taken its place. We generally use beech for the legs, because its close grain produces such a good finish. Recently large batches have been made in American walnut and English timbers such as chestnut, plane (lacewood) and cedar of Lebanon.

The most productive woodworker I knew was Graham Jordan (1966-73). He produced a remarkable amount in his time at Rendcomb, not only for his family but also work commissioned by members of the staff. The most outstanding piece on display was a needlework box in makore and sycamore, made when he was only 13. He found the design in a woodworking magazine, the examination piece of a third-year Loughborough student. Graham now lives in Australia, building houses, interior fittings and dry-stone walls.

There was a wide range of reproduction furniture on display, including a 2-foot, 9-inches oak bureau, a chest of drawers, a pedestal desk, joint stools and wine tables in elm, walnut and yew, owing, it must be said, to my interest in antiques. Many pupils had used their skills to restore their families' dilapidated heirlooms, but these items were not on display.

Some of the largest pieces of furniture were writing desks. One, in English walnut with a tooled leather top, was made in 1980 by Nigel Pitt. It was in pristine condition, as he has spent most of his time abroad, recently taking up a professorship at the University of Brasilia.

It is very unlikely that such major pieces will be made in the future, as a wider range of activities now take place, and time is very much more limited.

GCSE Design and Realisation coursework was well represented and admired. Only small groups have taken the subject, but good results have been obtained and high marks awarded at moderation.

The exhibition was a great success and gave a great deal of pleasure to many people. It brought together many Old Rendcombians and friends of the College. I was pleased with the response from ORs and by their willingness to deliver. Timothy Gay

made two trips from Cornwall and Christopher Lane two from London. Denis Lee-Browne's son Martin and his daughter Hermione were very generous in lending Bert Uzzell's and their father's furniture. Mary Greenstead, Keeper of Applied Arts at Cheltenham Museum and Art Gallery, asked for information on Betula Ltd and on Bert Uzzell for their files.

I should like to thank all those who supported the exhibition and helped to make it a success. I was delighted to receive so many tributes and letters of thanks, from which I select the words of Trevor Chinn, Keeper of the Gordon Russell Trust: *Congratulations - your show was excellent and a wonderful statement to all who saw it of the dedication and commitment to handicraft and design which is so essential in the education of young people.*

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Not until the exhibition was over did I realise that the craft at Rendcomb had never been taught on a full-time basis: craft teachers have worked only part-time or have taught another subject as well. I hope that the tradition of fine craftsmanship will continue in some form or another...

C. C. BURDEN  
Staff 1963 - 97





Pedestal desk by Kevin Holmes O.R.



Pieces by Graham Jordan O. R., possibly Rendcomb's most prolific woodworker

**Craftwork Exhibition:**  
Dulverton Hall



photo: Timothy Gay O.R.



Gun cabinet made for Mai. T. Wills



Small items largely from the Seventies





Gavel made for a Church Bell Ringers' Association by T.T. Walters O.R.



Pieces by Bert Uzzell

## Craftwork Exhibition : Reading Room



Items of treen in Ash, Walnut and Yew made by Betula Ltd, a firm set up by two O.R.s



Dorothy Burden with silversmith David Hart O.R.



A Molineaux puppet