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# HEART WOOD



NELSON WOODWORKER DAVID HAIG NEVER KNEW WHAT HE WANTED TO BE UNTIL HE FIRST PUT CHISEL TO TIMBER AND DISCOVERED HIS LIFE CAME TOGETHER IN A WAY HE COULD NOT HAVE IMAGINED

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IT BEGAN WITH A LOCK and a sharpened chisel in an abandoned house at the top of the South Island. There was a vague memory in David Haig's mind of a woodwork class at an English prep school but until then that memory had been submerged in a life of privileged education. He had always felt like an impostor in that life. He knew he didn't want to be a lawyer like his father or a civil servant like his siblings. He didn't know what he wanted.

David marked the new place for the lock on the door and began to carefully chop out the wood to make it fit. As he blew chunks of wood from the grooves, he thought that this was proper work. His body was involved with his mind and his aspirations. There was a goal in mind and a sense of application. He felt that this sort of work could lead to an inner unity and focus. It seemed to point to a more complete way of life.

In 1981 David and his wife Clare had bought a four-roomed bach for \$25,000 in Cable Bay at the end of a dirt road in the middle of a bare landscape. Tui Cottage, however, felt like an oasis. There were trees all around it, overgrown and towering and so dense that in some places the sky could not be seen. Over the years the house grew with the family. Walls were popped out here and there as more children came into their lives.

The chance to move his young family from Nelson back to his native England for six months came thanks to his mother-in-law who paid for the trip. There David bluffed his way into a job restoring old furniture. When he came home he believed this was to be his path.

As the Tui Cottage garden was slowly cleared, David discovered there was enough flat land to build his own workshop on the property. When it finally emerged after three months, he felt he had to pinch himself every morning as he walked the short distance there from Tui Cottage. He had never wanted a delineated life: one that separated work and leisure and living. He had always thought that a much better way was to have everything together. You didn't have a career; your work was your life.

As more pieces of furniture for restoring came through his doors, David realized he was developing a taste. He was not quite sure why he enjoyed some pieces and not others but what he liked was simplicity. It dawned on him that these chairs, tables and cabinets were probably not that hard to make. He enjoyed discovering pieces of wood to work with but it was difficult to find good material in Nelson so he began to source it himself. He came across old walnut trees that had been planted by the first farmers in the region who had arrived on ships 120 years earlier with their families and bags of acorns and walnuts. Years later the trees were beautiful and gnarled with wonderful streaky and marbled wood.

It felt different to be making something from scratch. He always began with an idea, just a concept, a perfect embodiment of what he wanted to



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Squitty (short of leg and tail) sits next to a collection of dining chairs including the "V" design, built in 2006; cutting a walnut plank on a restored 1896 bandsaw; chisel collection: Japanese, English and American patterns; it was Clare's idea to design the possum-covered footstool that complements the rocking chair; David and Clare on the walkway bench above the beach at Cable Bay.

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create. When it was complete and went back out the door it was never as perfect as he had thought it would be.


That kept him going. Every wood imparted a different flavour. It was, he says, like playing a piece of music in E flat or A minor. It made a difference. He thought of himself as a composer; the timbers he chose were the instruments, his tools the orchestra players, and at the end there was a ringing presence to it.

There was something about seeing a piece of work through from its beginning to its end. He found trees in the backblocks of Golden Bay and waited for the right time to mill them. He treated the wood and seasoned it and blew sawdust off it to reveal its worth. Then he fashioned it into something that was, up until that moment, real only in his mind. He can still look at a piece of furniture he has created and remember exactly which tree it came from.

David thought of all this when he was working. Sometimes, when everything felt right, it seemed as if whole aspects of his life came together. The wood became the focal point for his own story. His home, his family and his world had all grown through the fashioning of wood with his scarred hands. All that he worked for was combined; he created furniture to provide for his family and in return that life fed his creativity.

Then there was the idea of a rocking chair. It had always struck David as a remarkable piece of furniture – there was something about its fluid motion and how a human body and a chair could be so closely linked. He sketched his idea for years. One morning, like the completion of a haiku, he thought he had solved his perfectly balanced equation. His task now was to turn that idea into reality. It took three months to make the first one. He learned the steam-bending method to meld its sweeping arms through the seat and into the back of the rocker which tucked sharply underneath.

It would become his signature chair, his most popular piece of furniture and one that has sold throughout the world for more than 20 years. In those years David has made hundreds but each has a unique story. In a world where material possessions are often impersonal, there is a purity about knowing the genealogy of a product. He has chosen his trees, milled them and treated the wood. He has done it all.

In a career that has spanned more than 30 years, David has a view of time that is not entirely linear. Etched into wood at the front of his cottage is his own monogram. The letters DAH merge with each other in a pattern he discovered as a schoolboy who was embarking on a path of academia and civil service. Years on, after creating his chair, he looked at that monogram again and thought his subconscious was playing a trick on him. The more he looked the more he thought it looked exactly like the culmination of a life. It looked like his signature chair. 



#### RESTORATION MAN

History has always been of interest to Oxford-educated David Haig so moving to furniture restoration was not entirely surprising. Talks and workshops given in New Zealand by renowned furniture makers such as James Krenov and Art Carpenter from the United States and in England by Alan Peters and Richard La Trobe-Bateman in the 1980s kindled David's interest in contemporary furniture making. Talking shop with other woodworkers has been important too.

David has been a member of the Nelson Guild of Woodworkers since its inception in 1983. During the past 15 years he has passed on his knowledge and taught regularly throughout the United States and Australia. He was involved in the establishment of New Zealand's only dedicated woodworking school, The Centre for Fine Woodworking, close to his home in Nelson.

