

AUSTRALIAN

# Wood

53

AUST \$8.95 INC GST  
NZ \$10.90 INC GST

REVIEW

**Jewellery Case**  
**Chinese Cabinet**  
**Wooden Clock**

Project plans inside

**David Haig**  
NZ Furniture maker

**Big Routers Reviewed**  
**Develop Your Design Skills**  
**Inner Space Results**  
**SA Wood Sculpture**

**PROJECTS:**



Print Post Approved 498 567/0001





# Signature Style

David Haig is one of New Zealand's most successful furniture designer/makers.

**Mic Dover** writes how both his career and his best known design developed.

**C**able Bay is an estuary at the top of New Zealand's South Island. It was named in 1876 when it became the termination point of a cable stretching 1150 miles along the seabed from Sydney—the first trans-Tasman Sea telegraph service. Today, there are few signs of the old cable station, and the area remains a tranquil location just a few miles from the bustling city of Nelson. Cable Bay is also the home of David Haig, one of New Zealand's most successful

furniture designer/makers, known internationally for his *Signature* rocking chair. On any given morning, the gentle scrape of sharp metal through wood can be heard beneath the soundscape of bellbirds and gulls. In a small workshop on the bank of the bay, David Haig has started his day's work.

David's career in wood began when his wife Clare became pregnant in 1981. 'In the garden I found a couple of old fence posts and I got the urge to make



David Haig  
Photo: Daniel Allen



David Haig's *Signature* rocker  
Photo: Daniel Allen

a rocking cradle,' recalls David. 'Furniture maker and brother-in-law 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 own thumb, but it was just the natural colour of the fresh raw wood! I suddenly felt this huge energy release—it was a key moment in my life!'

Working with wood became his new passion, and on a visit to the UK, he saw an opportunity to pursue a growing interest in antique furniture, and its restoration. 'I blagged a job with Chris Booth in Farnham, Surrey, in a Dickensian workshop with the hide-glue bubbling away in a pot, eight apprentices and a cobblestone yard outside. I stumbled into the place when a senior worker had just left. There was an empty bench and Booth said, "I'll give you two weeks—if you're any good I'll pay you."'

For David, with a young family and unable to afford formal training, this was a golden opportunity. 'Some of those apprentices were incredible furniture restorers. Every break I would be watching them, notebook in hand. I filled my head with knowledge and my trunk with shellac, wax, old escutcheons and brassware—and brought it all back home.'

In the 1980s, losing interest in restoring





Wine cabinet and V-chair, both in walnut

(Photos l-r: Lloyd Park, Roger Hynd)

ornate Victorian styles, he began to make his own furniture. New Zealand's 'alternative' furniture movement surfaced with regular shows in Christchurch. At his first show, a local dignitary was touring the stands with the press when she 'sat down on my first ever attempt at a rocking chair, pulled out her cheque-book and paid me \$750 on the spot. I thought, has my career just peaked?'

David was now selling his furniture on a regular basis, but was working long hours every day and starting to lose interest in the style of his rocking chair. A respite came in 1989 when a friend in Australia wanted his help in building a stone house in the Blue Mountains near Sydney. The Haig family decamped to New South Wales for a year, and David worked with stone for the first time in his life.

It was to prove a highly significant break, for it gave birth to an iconic design—the *Signature* rocking chair. 'For months, I sketched and sketched, drew and drew and one morning there it was—just a few lines on a piece of paper. Another magic moment.'

However, the sketch was the easy bit. 'I looked at the design and knew the tight curves were going to be a nightmare. I thought about laminating them but knew the glue lines would show—and I didn't want that.' 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 made in this way was completed in 1990 and sold quickly. 'It was so difficult to make, I could hardly imagine ever making another,' he remembers. But then he discovered he could steam bend walnut, his favourite timber. The walnut version of the *Signature* has been a huge success, with over 150 sold worldwide. Today, David tackles almost any piece of furniture, not just rocking chairs. 'Commissioned work allows me to push myself off the deep end, out of that comfort zone where you already know how to do stuff. Sometimes I accept a commission and wake up three nights later in a cold sweat thinking: how am I going to do that? The problems are often "how" not "what"—you have to calm down, break the construction problems down into tiny bits. Decide what the important bits are and concentrate on them. Don't get bogged down with the less important ones, figure those out later.'

'My attitude to work is based on passion: it's not just a job—but it is a business, so there is always a balance between time and quality. Less intricate detail means

more time to raise the quality of the basic form. Steam bending is a key skill for me. I don't like veneers. The process opens up so many design possibilities that you don't normally have with wood. Right now I'm enjoying trying out new methods for creating complex curves. For instance, to make a wide, tapered, curvy coffee table-base. I don't like veneers, so I combined three techniques: tapered laminations, kerf bending (parallel saw cuts) and steam bending.'

In 2001 David was invited to the US to teach at the prestigious Centre For Furniture Craftsmanship in Maine, confirming his growing international reputation as an expert in the field, especially his knowledge of steam bending. The teaching work proved very stimulating for David, which was why he jumped at the chance to be involved in a new venture with John Shaw—the setting up of an international woodworking school near Nelson, not far from where that old trans-Tasman cable used to send telegraph messages to Australia.

David Haig can be contacted at [haig@clear.net.nz](mailto:haig@clear.net.nz) or via

The Centre For Fine Woodworking at [www.centre-for-fine-woodworking.co.nz](http://www.centre-for-fine-woodworking.co.nz)

Contact Mic Dover at [mic@nzstories.com](mailto:mic@nzstories.com)