Reminiscences of Cotswold Craftsmen

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While staying in Chipping Campden in the summer of 1967 my wife and I took the opportunity of following up our interest in the Arts and Crafts movement by trying to find out more from the source, as it were, and to attempt to locate any surviving members, particularly those connected with the Gimson/Barnsley school of furniture-makers and C.R. Ashbee's Guild of Handicraft.

Reaching Sapperton village, to the west of Cirencester, we soon found the simple memorial slabs marking the graves of Gimson and the two Barnsley brothers but we knew little of how they had lived and worked in that quiet village before the first world war. True I had looked at William Lethaby's book, Ernest Gimson, His Life and Work at Loughborough College 20 years earlier but no detailed study had been possible at the time (the one precious copy was not allowed out of the library!) and it would be another 12 years before Mary Comino was to write her definitive and engaging book Gimson and the Barnsleys. Reluctant to leave Sapperton without further enquiry we approached a local woman who thought that a Mr. Jewson who lived in a thatched cottage up the lane behind us might be able to help. We found the cottage, perfectly set behind its informal English garden; mounted on the solid oak door was a wrought-iron knocker that could have been made only by Alfred Bucknell, Gimson's smith. Once we had explained the purpose of our visit we were welcomed in most hospitably by Norman Jewson and his wife Mary, eldest daughter of Ernest Barnsley.

The interior was a complete testimony to the early days in Sapperton: every piece of furniture was in the Cotswold style, most of it made either by Gimson or Sidney Barnsley in the village, or at nearby Chalfont where Peter Waals set up his workshop after Gimson's death in 1919. The stone-flagged floor on two levels was overlaid with rugs here and there and in the open stone fireplace stood a set of Bucknell fire-irons, a wedding present, Norman explained, from Ernest Gimson himself. Everything belonged, nothing obtruded, and the result was a vernacular harmony resulting from years of daily use with the furniture slowly ageing with its owners. As Edward Barnsley had said at Loughborough earlier, "Don't worry too much about finger-marks on your new oak furniture; it will develop a lovely patina in 20 years or so!" and every piece of the Jewsons' furniture was 50 years old or more. We discussed his early association with Gimson and he kindly lent me his book By Chance I did Rove, an account of his journey into the Cotswolds by pony cart when a young and newly qualified architect. In retrospect it is understandable that he got no further than Sapperton in 1906, abandoning his earlier intention of settling into an architect's practice in London: the combination of country life and association with such kindred spirits must have seemed irresistible. After a while he suggested a walk across the village to show us the cottages which Gimson and the Barnsley brothers had designed,
built and lived in until their deaths in 1919 and 1926 respectively. Although Norman Jewson was then in his eighties he was still a tall, upright and vigorous man, kindly and cultivated, extremely alert and quickly responsive to our many questions. Using his stick more as a pointer than an aid to walking he showed us, in the remains of a tiny derelict cottage, the brick oven where, as a young man, he had baked his own bread, and further on, the three Gimson/Barnsley cottages. He indicated that the tenants of Daneway House, at the far side of the village, which Gimson and Ernest Barnsley had leased as their workshops and showrooms in 1902, had been forced by the numbers of visitors to allow entry ‘only by arrangement’.

We visited the Jewsons once more during our stay and had further discussions on his early days with Gimson. He described himself modestly as a ‘pupil’ of Gimson’s, which technically he was, together with a handful of others at various times, notably Geoffrey Lupton who was later to build the hall and library at Bedales School, Petersfield, to Gimson’s design. Jewson, more so than the others, progressed from pupil to friend, associate and collaborator, as well as developing his own practice and profession of architecture, completing, for example, Rodmarton Manor near Cirencester after the death of Ernest Barnsley. Although he worked around the country he never left Sapperton; indeed his only concession to old age was to spend part of each winter in Spain. Later I sent him an earlier short essay of mine on the contribution of Gimson and the Barnsleys to the Craft Revival with a request that he should point out errors and omissions. This he did; in his own kindly way drawing attention to the earliest collaboration of Gimson, the Barnsleys and others through the founding of Kenton and Company, as furniture-makers in London before the move to the Cotswolds and, perhaps of greater importance, my failing to mention the influence on Gimson of William R. Lethaby, founder of the Art Workers’ Guild in 1884 and first principal of the Central School of Arts and Crafts in 1886 but known by Gimson in the first place as a fellow architect and disciple of William Morris. Jewson described Lethaby as “Gimson’s greatest friend in his London period and of whose work he had the greatest admiration”. After Gimson left London, according to Jewson, “they continued to write to each other, but only met at rare intervals”.

Before leaving the Jewsons for the last time, Norman suggested that we should visit the Old Silk Mill at Chipping Campden, taken over as workshops by C.R. Ashbee for his Guild of Handicraft after its migration from London in 1902. We knew a little of that utopian venture which had, like others, sadly come to grief after a few years for all the usual reasons. How much more we should have known, had we been able to read Fiona MacCarthy’s wonderfully detailed account of Ashbee and his Guild in her book *The Simple Life* – not to be published, however, until 1981. We soon found the Old Silk Mill, an attractive three-storey building in Cotswold stone, part covered in creeper and showing, on that morning, little sign of activity. The ground floor was deserted, apart from builders’ tackle, but just before giving up and leaving in disappointment we heard a quiet footfall above us. Thus encouraged, we climbed the wooden stair to the first floor where we were greeted by an old but lively craftsman surrounded by all the miscellaneous stakes, mallets and hammers of a silversmith. He was George Hart, the only survivor (so far as I know) of the original group of Guildsmen who came to Campden in 1902. He had known, lived and worked with all of them; seen the fortunes of the Guild prosper and decline and, like Norman Jewson of Sapperton, had survived and continued working in the same tradition,
maintaining high standards in design and craftsmanship while, at the same time, meeting the needs of the limited market which they served. Like Jewson he was then in his middle eighties, having worked for sixty-five years in Campden although his son Henry (whom we met a few years later, after George’s death) was by then running most of the business, assisted by his sons. For an hour or so we talked of craftwork and craftsmen; there must have been very few designer/craftsmen in the Cotswolds from the turn of the century onwards whom George Hart had not known and our conversations with him and Jewson added much of value to our background knowledge. Just before we left he removed a cloth covering a piece of silverwork on the bench beside us: it was a superb chalice, delicately chased and engraved, commissioned by an American church; a piece of which C.R.A. himself would have been proud and which was probably one of the last masterpieces of George Hart.

Visits to the area in later years were usually in the company of my colleagues from the Association of Advisers in Design and Technical Studies, a group committed to the enhancement of Craft, Design and Technology in schools. In the spring of 1980, for example, we enjoyed a visit to the Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museum to see the collection of Gimson/Barnsley/Waals furniture with, as an unexpected bonus, an informal talk by Mary Comino, keeper of the applied arts collection, who was just completing her book on Gimson and the Barnsleys, making our visit so much more memorable. A day or two later we were welcomed by Major and Mrs. Biddulph at Rodmarton Manor near Cirencester, sometimes referred to as “the last manor house built in England” and arguably the finest expression of the Cotswold school of architecture and furniture. The manor was designed and its building supervised at every stage by Ernest Barnsley, with a long hiatus during the First World War. After Ernest’s death in 1926 the work was continued by Sidney Barnsley and Norman Jewson until its completion in 1929, twenty years after work first started. In the limited time available we concentrated on the furniture, Major Biddulph explaining that the apparent overcrowding was because one half of the very extensive house was let to tenants and the furniture from there had been moved into the Biddulphs’. This produced what must be the largest collection of furniture of the Cotswold school still privately owned. Every room featured pieces by Gimson, Sidney Barnsley or Peter Waals, or by local craftsmen working to their designs. Eighty years and more of development were represented, from Gimson’s Morris-inspired cabinets and drawers, Sidney Barnsley’s table with ‘hay-rake’ stretchers and Peter Waals’ glass-framed bookcase from the later Chalfont period. Edward Barnsley, Sidney’s son, had produced a superb set of bedroom furniture while one piece of very fine contemporary work, a two door cabinet with inlaid roundels inside the doors, had been designed and made by Oliver Morel, one of Edward’s pupils at Froxfield and, just to add as it were, a final signature, I found a delicately pierced twin candle sconce by Norman Jewson.

To return, however, to the early days when I first developed an interest in the Cotswold school of furniture makers through association with Edward Barnsley on a student/master basis at Loughborough College: my year-group of 1947 included the first substantial entry of ex-service men and it is probably fair to say that, for most of us, our war-time experience had tempered our attitudes to education and training and the prospect of designing and making had great appeal.
In retrospect we were fortunate to have found places at Loughborough. Although it was by no means the only college engaged in training teachers of craft it was certainly unique in having such direct links with the Cotswold group through the influence of Peter Waals, Gimson’s foreman at Sapperton who had been appointed visiting lecturer in design in 1935 and who was succeeded, after his untimely death in 1937, by Edward Barnsley. Their influence on the work of the college was profound and for many of us it has remained so. In the pre-war days two large halls of residence and most of the college library were furnished with students’ work to Peter Waals’ designs so that we were constantly reminded of the traditions and standards we were expected to absorb.

Our work in education and academic subjects followed the usual pattern of lectures, discussions and essays etc. but in design and craft it was a process more akin to osmosis. Edward Barnsley gave a few lectures in our first year but they were not memorable, neither lecturing nor writing being his forte: it was in the workshop or drawing office that his contribution was at its greatest as he walked around looking at work in progress, usually in silence for a while and then, in the gentlest possible way, pointing out with unerring accuracy subtle adjustments needed to improve the overall design.

This approach to design must seem strange to present-day students: there was no mention of the history of furniture, of Mackintosh, Marcel Breuer or Alvar Aalto, of Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus. There was no course in basic design, no perspective or wash-drawing, only intensive practice in designing in orthographic (plans and elevations) with details in isometric projection which might appear distorted to an artist but which is a useful method for a craftsman because dimensions can be taken from the drawing. Edward Barnsley did, however, stress the need for continual observation and quick technical sketches to a scale of one-eighth full size: we were required to build up a collection of these for reference purposes.

He himself, of course, was fully aware of the history and evolution of furniture design but perhaps he thought it more appropriate, in the short time he had with us, to encourage an approach based on the ideas and philosophy of the Arts and Crafts movement, led by William Morris, Lethaby and their friends, developed by Gimson and the elder Barnsleys, then refined by Edward Barnsley to a degree unlikely to be surpassed. Fitness for purpose, the use of only the highest quality of selected natural timber, superb craftsmanship, simplicity of form and honesty of design and construction: these characteristics of furniture of the Cotswold school are much quoted and are still relevant for hand-made work in solid timber, as opposed to the modern multi-media and eclectic approach to design. Such furniture never came cheaply; the quality of timber and the labour-intensive construction saw to that, so the idea, common to both Morris and Gimson, of producing good, simple and affordable furniture for the masses was never realised. I recall asking Edward Barnsley how much one of his simple dining chairs, made at his Froxfield workshop, would cost. About £25, was his reply: to put this into context, that represented a month’s salary for a young teacher in 1949! For the three decades between 1935 and 1965 Loughborough College, with the enlightened educationist Dr. J.W. Bridgeman as Principal, followed this pure (some would say limited) but honest and uncompromising approach to design and thus influenced hundreds of teachers and indirectly thousands of students in the schools. After Edward Barnsley retired in 1965...
the design courses became much broader and this coincided also with the impact of technology within education, an innovation which is still creating problems for both the Department for Education and the schools, but that is another story.

After an interval of 30 years I met Edward Barnsley again at Loughborough, which was celebrating its 50th anniversary in 1980. We had a pleasant chat, exchanging reminiscences; he hardly seemed to have changed; a kindly 80 year old gentleman with, however, the same intense observation for proportion and detail in the great variety of old and new work on display. After his death, a year or two later, a fund was set up to enable selected students to develop their skills and potential at Froxfield.

The chair and writing table I am using were designed in the Cotswold tradition and made by me from locally-grown oak, converted and seasoned by a Northumbrian countryman. I hope that Edward Barnsley would have approved but I can imagine him saying, “perhaps if you had just reduced the width of that rail a little . . .”