

INTERIORS

Antique-style furniture for the way we slouch and dine today

If you sat on a dining chair that was made a hundred years ago you would immediately notice two things: the seat would be pretty narrow and the back would be very upright. In short, it wouldn't be as comfy as its modern-day equivalent. The reasons for this, to put it bluntly, are that we are not as slim as our Victorian counterparts and we tend to slouch rather than sit up straight.

It's become fashionable for people to decorate their homes in an eclectic way, often involving a mix of old and new, and antiques are key to this look. However, when it comes to functional pieces, people are increasingly looking for comfort, as well as something that fits in with their lifestyle. And this is where bespoke, antique-style furniture comes in.

"People like the classic look of antique tables and chairs but then they realise that they are not quite the right shape, they're not big enough for their family to sit round or there aren't enough of them," says Julian Brown, managing director of I & JL Brown, the British furniture manufacturer. "We can offer any piece in any size, colour and quantity they want."

I & JL Brown, a family-run business established 30 years ago, sources antiques from the UK and Europe and produces bespoke items. When the company first started, it specialised

in English provincial antique chairs, which were mainly sold to America. More recently, the company's bespoke furniture service has become the biggest part of its business. It makes furniture by hand for boutique hotels and private homes in the UK and abroad, as well as for its showrooms in Hereford and on the Kings Road in Chelsea, London.

At the company's workshop in Hereford, antique table tops are stacked up and the legs are tied in bundles by the entrance. They look scruffy and dusty, but each one will be completely transformed during the restoration process. It is difficult to find antiques in pristine condition so most of the pieces that come into the workshop will be amended or improved

in some way: damaged table legs will be replaced and features — such as drawers — added at the customers' request.

The actual crafting of a table or chair is just one part of the process. The Pemberley table, one of the company's bestselling items, for example, has huge "turned" legs which are made from many pieces of wood so that they won't crack. The finish that needs to be applied to this wood takes a long time to get right.

Simon Hilton, the director of I & JL Brown, says: "How you make something look at the end of the process is the most important part and it is the longest part. You can make



I & JL Brown creates bespoke antique-style furniture. Right, Turner button-back armchair, from £1,500



table look brand new or artfully aged, so that if you put it side by side with an antique you wouldn't notice the difference."

People often come to I & JL Brown for bespoke pieces because they can't find what they are looking anywhere else. A customer recently ordered a 9m-long antique-style table made from a single piece of wood for his country home. "People like the idea of owning something that fits their home and the fact that there won't be another one exactly like it anywhere in the world," Hilton says.

In one part of the workshop, there are 40 Windsor chairs covered in a grey lacquer paint which have been made for the Kings Head, a boutique hotel in Cirencester. Each one has a seat made from a single piece of wood and its curved back has been steam-bent by hand, but perhaps more importantly, the seats are wide and the backs are set at an angle for maximum comfort.

Claire Carponen



The Pemberley dining table, from £5,995