

Book of Rules



Luke Hughes learnt to make furniture from a book. Now he is writing himself, as Nick Gibbs discovers

When it comes to woodwork Luke Hughes has one simple philosophy; that 'there is no such thing as the correct way.' Considering his success as a furniture designer - he was third in the recent *Independent Young Entrepreneur*

Awards - some may disagree and count Luke's ways worthy of imitation.

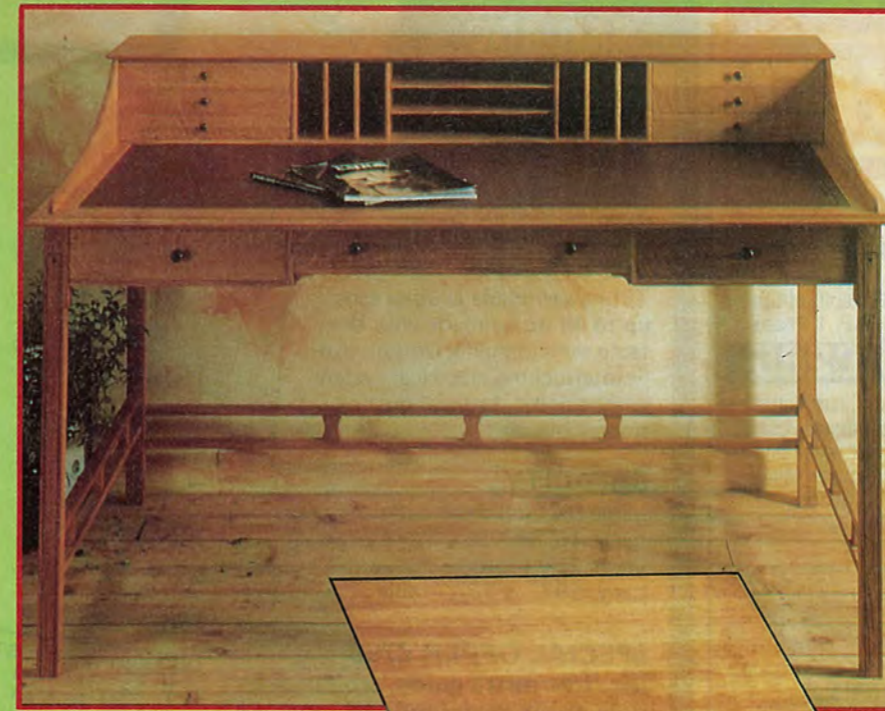
But his would be a hard act to follow. His introduction to commercial woodwork, after a spell in the Merchant Navy, was repairing the wooden parts of Morris

Travellers and then running a carpentry business around London, from the back of yet another Morris. With the realisation that he could make furniture, instead of fitting doors and floors on building sites, so came the self-belief that he need go no further than his local library and bookshop to adapt his carpentry skills to furniture design and production.

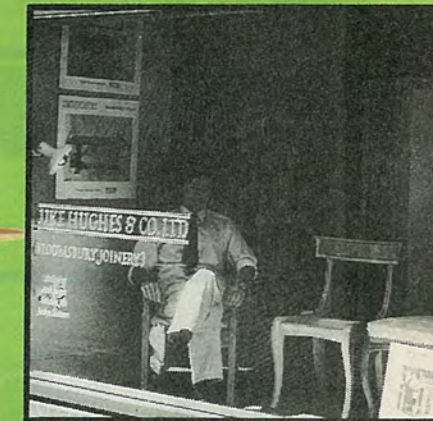
Luke Hughes' dislike of 'correct' methods is less anarchic than it sounds, as his classic furniture proves. It is more a recommendation for books - and the *Encyclopedia Britanica* in particular - as a source of woodworking information, and perhaps also it is a back-handed slap at the institutions and traditions that determine popular techniques and ideas within woodwork.

Luke designs his furniture - which is sold through large stores, his own showroom and to hotels - and makes the prototypes himself in a tiny workshop near his Covent Garden shop, aided by a small group of young cabinetmakers. Production is contracted out to a selection of workshops and factories. Finding people to make his furniture is a constant problem, and in the last six months he has visited 48 businesses to gauge their suitability. He is looking for workshops employing as few as six, or as

Luke Hughes' latest range of chairs, above, needed three prototypes, left, to perfect the design, aesthetically and for economic production



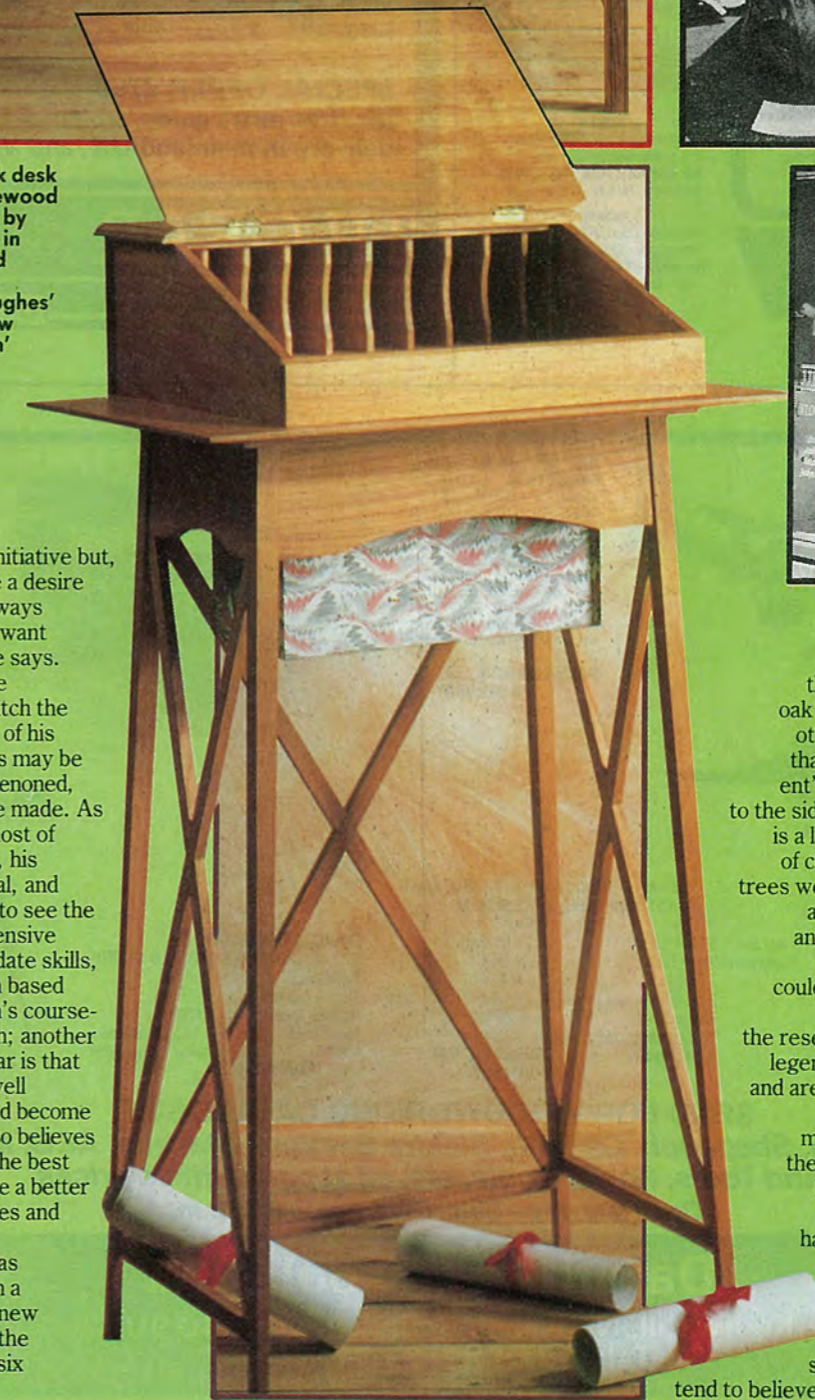
Writing lines: English oak desk with leather top and rosewood details, above, and also by Hughes, a cabinet, right, in English oak, burr elm and rosewood. Top right, one of Luke Hughes' cabinetmakers puts a new meaning to 'on the bench' while Luke enjoys the view from his showroom



many as 600, that show initiative but, more than anything, have a desire to make his work. 'I'm always interested in people who want to make our furniture,' he says.

Indeed Luke alters the production process to match the facilities available to each of his manufacturers. The joints may be doweled or mortise-and-tenoned, depending where they are made. As a man who has climbed most of Everest and all the Eiger, his approach is very individual, and adaptable. He would like to see the development of short intensive woodwork courses to update skills, and an apprentice system based on a cycle of three-month's course-work; a year on the bench; another course; and so on. His fear is that if woodworkers are too well trained they specialise and become inflexible. Strangely he also believes that ex-engineers make the best woodworkers as they have a better understanding of tolerances and components.

Most recently Luke has turned author and written a collection of essays for a new *Encyclopedia of Wood* on the myths of timber. During six weeks research, in the



evenings, he learnt that yes, there is scientific evidence that oak trees are more likely than any other to be struck by lightning; that larch is an essential 'ingredient' in good beer to provide 'cling' to the side of the glass; that eucalyptus is a large component in the making of chewing gum; and that no, yew trees were not planted in churchyards as part of a medieval arms race and anyway, contrary to popular belief, more than one longbow could be produced from each tree.

During the research he found that many false legends emanate from one source, and are then repeated by succeeding writers. In dispelling such myths he puts into his research the same uninhibited energy that he aims at his woodwork. 'I'm getting used to the feeling of having no phobias of mystique,' he says. Instead he promotes improvisation and 'a sense of the possible'. When he says nothing's impossible, you tend to believe him.