

Timber and talent

Just north of Nelson you'll find an institute that attracts a diverse group talented people from all corners of the globe. As *Adrienne Matthews* finds out, it isn't sun, fish or tramping that brings them here, but woodworking. To be more precise, fine woodworking.

Entering the workshop of Nelson's Centre for Fine Woodworking, it is easy to feel like you have stepped into a beehive with worker bees flat out at their workstations, designing, measuring, sawing, sanding and placing pieces of timber together on their way to become masterpieces that will fill their makers with pride and start some off on a brand-new career.

There is plenty of camaraderie as pink and blue haired head tutor Lou Fuller bounces from bench to bench, answering questions and offering her words of reassurance. Someone has brought cake for morning tea and the buzz continues outside in the warm Whakapuaka sun where green fields stretch out below to Tasman Bay and the western hills.

The Centre for Fine Woodworking is one of the world's

top woodworking centres, and only one of two in Australasia, attracting students from around the globe to learn from highly regarded teachers in a serene rural environment that encourages creativity in a region renowned for its drawcard as an artisan haven.

It is the brainchild of furniture maker and teacher, John Shaw. With more than 30 years' experience, he wanted to establish a centre that elevated woodworking to fine craftsmanship. He tutored at the school after its establishment in 2004 until 2016 and still runs short courses.

His brother-in-law, David Haig MNZM, has also been involved from the early days. A widely acclaimed furniture designer and maker, he helped establish the curriculum and undertook much of the tuition for many years.



'Tea for Two' table by Christopher Tweddell, Graduate of the 2022 Furniture Makers' Programme. Photo: Daniel Allen

As people across the globe turn away from the purchase of mass manufactured factory-made products there is a corresponding rise in interest of more traditional crafts and a renewed desire in learning how to apply age-old skills to contemporary design. The Centre for Fine Woodworking offers a range of courses for beginners through to more experienced wood workers and employs international tutors while receiving many overseas students due to its reputation for excellence. Over 140 students attend courses at the centre each year.

From a one room tin shed, the school is now an outstanding facility with many students returning to develop more skills. Becky Paris, 61, is currently on the Beginner's Intensive eight-week Programme. "I'm a repeat offender," she laughs. "I can't keep away. I did this same course five years ago, then a carving course, spoon-making, bench and table making. I love the sense of achievement I get whenever I make something and I enjoy learning the practical skills. When I started it was all like a foreign language but it is amazing how your hands learn what to do."

Loris Mancel, 30, is here too. Originally from France, he started woodworking while living in Brussels. "I wanted to improve my skills and see if it might lead to a viable career opportunity," he says. "The set-up here, tutor Lou and the workshop are amazing. You work at your own pace. There is so much help available and it's really enjoyable to meet people from different backgrounds."

The course is giving 61-year-old Simon Chapple a new lease of life. Made redundant from his job at Victoria University, he took the plunge to step out of his comfort zone and embrace an entirely new challenge. "My previous life was mostly writing and reviewing reports. Here I am having to learn skills that require being meticulous in a different way," he says. "It's not easy but the supportive atmosphere is really conducive to learning which makes it fun."

Twenty seven-year-old Helen Blenkin saved hard for her course. Having studied architecture in New Zealand and the UK and working for several architectural firms, she realised she wanted to do something more hands-on. "I was working as a picture framer but was keen to learn finer woodworking techniques. I didn't have any experience with hand tools and was thrilled to find this course. It is an awesome learning environment," she says.



1. Head tutor. Lou Fuller 2. A selection of the tools provided throughout the course. Photos: Tessa Jaine

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During the eight-week Beginner’s Intensive Programme, the students make a mallet which, although it looks like a work of art, is for practical use, along with a three-tiered shelf, before graduating to a chair which teaches them the timber steam bending technique.

Students on the Full Year thirty-two-week Furniture Maker’s Programme, as for the other courses, don’t require any prior experience, but do need an absolute passion for creative excellence as they work throughout the year toward the school’s annual exhibition, this year taking place in December at the Parker Gallery.

Gloria Hildred, 65, previously a music teacher, has moved from Wellington for the year to undertake the course. She too had been made redundant and was looking for a change in direction. “I had done woodwork twenty years ago but nothing like this,” she says. “It is a chance to get a really good foundation and learn attention to detail. I’m also enjoying the mix of people here from different walks of life and experiences.”

Hailing from Edinburgh, Alice Knight, 30, was a freelancer puppet maker for children’s theatre companies. “I wanted to upskill and this was the only course I could find that I thought would suit me,” she says. She is finding the experience excellent and is working towards the exhibition on an art/craft style cabinet with a Japanese influence.

Deb Harwood, 57, has come all the way from Gisborne for the year to take up the opportunity on the woodworking tools. “I did a bit of woodwork in the 1990s but have been working in IT for the last thirty years,” she says. “The course has had its challenges but I love to create so am so pleased I took this opportunity.”



The centre offers around 18 courses a year including guitar and Japanese lantern making, master classes in the likes of joint making and carving along with residencies. Unless on a scholarship, each student has to fund their course and, if coming from elsewhere in New Zealand or overseas, their accommodation.

“We would love to be able to expand our programme but, as a registered charitable trust we depend completely on course fees and donations and, more recently, funding from Creative NZ, to finance the centre,” says trust manager Helen Gerry. The trust is run by a group of passionate supporters from around NZ, five of them former students. “If anyone is interested in supporting us or coming on one of our courses, we would love the opportunity to show them what an extraordinary facility this is,” says Helen.



1. Inside The Centre for Fine Woodworking on Wakapuaka Rd. 2. Tutor David Haig 3. Zack Rowberry and Oliver Burke attend Centre for Fine Woodworking through the Thorkild Hansen Scholarship Programme. Photos: Tessa Jaïne.

Thorkild Hansen Scholarship Programme

In honour of the late Thorkild Hansen who died in 2021, an annual scholarship is available to a Nelson student under 25 to undertake the Beginner's Intensive Programme. Thorkild who helped his father, the late Jens Hansen, create the famed "one ring" for the Lord of the Rings was diagnosed with cancer in 2005 and decided to follow his other passion, woodworking, enrolling in courses at the centre. With an abundance of natural talent, he flourished and became a much-loved tutor.

As with all the centre's activities as a not-for-profit charitable foundation, the scholarship is dependent on funds donated by the public. This year two students were chosen to receive scholarships.

Oliver Burke, 18, first heard about the opportunity from his joinery tutor at NMIT. "I had a tour and got to see how the course was more skill than industry-based. I was interested in that and learning how to use the hand tools," he says.

"I am really enjoying using high quality woods.

At NMIT we only use pine but there is none of that here." With an apprenticeship already lined up with My Pod in Mapua next year, Oliver is excited that he will be able to experiment with his new skills and possibly, in time, turn them into more than a hobby.

In his last year at Nelson Boy's College, 18-year-old Zack Rowberry's trade building teacher encouraged him to apply. "He saw what I was making and thought it would be right for me," he says. "It's very hands-on and lots of fun. I'm learning loads of new skills which is awesome. It's a great thing to have on your CV and I encourage anyone who loves to work with their hands to give it a go."

"It would be a dream to be able to offer more scholarships and we welcome any support from businesses and individuals to do that," says trust manager Helen Gerry. 

