

LUXURY BRITISH FURNITURE

Proudly designed and made in the East End of London

One of the UK's premier luxury furniture maker's **Michael Northcroft** talks on youth and what the heck we are all doing.

I have my great grandfather's umbrella. It's dated August 1907, so a 110 years young. My father had the cover replaced – and I still use the venerable umbrella. It's made in England although I haven't identified where and the handle is grown in cane from the Far East. It has a gold plated end to the handle (the gold is wearing off) and a solid gold engraved plate too. It clearly wasn't a cheap umbrella. But then Fred my g. grandfather wasn't a cheap chap.

He married the boss's daughter, Mary Cliff. Her father and brothers had died within six weeks of each other from Typhoid. So Mary married a red haired bridle cutter from the shop floor of the factory. Why? Well he had energy and she needed someone to create a safe economic future. In that Fred excelled. He propelled Jabez Cliff and Co in Staffordshire into a company exporting all over the World. In the process he acquired a mansion house, two farms and parts of the town nearby. It's worth noting that his workers lived in humble rented cottages and rode bicycles, while Fred and Mary had carriages, numerous servants



Interior Design by Alexander James Interiors



Interior Design by Pad Deco



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and every luxury they desired (including the old umbrella). Whether Fred was a well-balanced or nice chap is harder to say after all the years that have passed. I did hear one story about him smashing up the crocs one Sunday lunchtime in his elegant dining room, so maybe he was not so easy company for Mary and their children. In the old photos Mary looks serene and calm. My father remembered her being so. Either way the man had energy and drive and his firm made exceptional hand-stitched saddles that were admired all over the World.

That old company originally dating back to the 1700's went bust a few years ago and that moment in time allows me to reflect on what that firm did, what they made and what I do in my own company in London's East End.

My firm makes luxury furniture. That it's gorgeous is a necessary factor. We make it in the UK, in London's East End. It's fulfilling on so many levels for me. Not only that it creates jobs which have that vital creative aspect. Jobs with an end product to be judged and if appropriate to be admired. We meet a need. Folk who have found success in their lives and need furniture made by quality and design rather than by price. They come to my firm relieved they have found a place where quality comes first. Any size, any finish. Unique finishes too and gold or silver if they want that: made to fit the home perfectly.

How many of us are there in the UK and in particular in England making luxury goods?

Alfred Dunhill makes pipes for smokers in East London. They look rather fine although I haven't tried one. At school the boys over 16 were allowed to smoke pipes with parental consent, but knowing my parents would not



Interior Design by The L & C Company

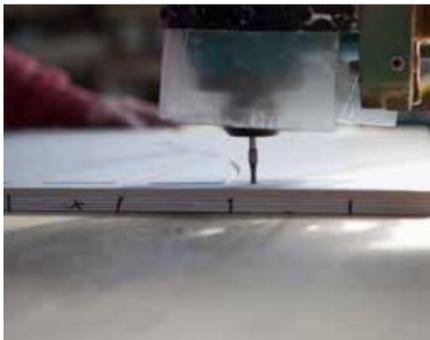


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Interior Design by Snowgoose Interiors

agree I illicitly smoked cigarettes instead. Rolls Royce with their cars and of course JCB diggers are exported all over the World. Why? Well I understand that at JCB they understand what is happening at a molecular level inside their hydraulic systems. Hence the diggers are better than their competitors. Old man Bamford (JCB is JC Bamford) was that much more able and his firm benefitted from that. I am aware of two companies that make umbrellas in the UK although not to the standard of old Fred's umbrella dressed in gold. There are specialist wallpaper companies, some well-known traditional paint companies too. There's a large sofa and chair company which manufactures in the UK - one of the secret suppliers for interior designers they won't tell you about. Each company operating at the top level of quality in the UK does so because they are simply better. It's not an impossible thing to do with dedication and some vision. The competition is not invincible.

But are the UK's efforts enough? Do we all know how tiny our scale of manufacture is in this country compared to our insatiable demand?



Surely London having more billionaires than any other city in the world must be driving creative design and manufacture business all over the UK?

Our schools no longer teach woodwork, metalwork or pottery. The 'hand eye' skills that taught my generation to look at anything that was made and to have some idea of how that was done. Schools no longer come and visit my firm. I visited a well know furniture university a couple of years ago and asked their head of design to send their students on visits to us. I went on such visits when I was at college but that seems to have stopped in modern universities. I understand my firm is the largest design and manufacture furniture making company in the UK - in post Brexit Britain can we afford to have our educators asleep. Is that really sufficient?

The maker of that old umbrella would be more than a little confused by our country just now. That grown cane handle, gold dressing and gorgeous shape will have given creative fulfilment to the originator and to all involved in its creation. That we make so little as a nation is to me problematic. Our young can make excellent livings if they are enabled by not just the educators but by all of us. Sure we don't need the irascibility that old Fred had. And is not starting to reduce our trade deficit worthwhile as we inevitably walk towards Brexiting the European Union?

The energy that created fortunes in Victorian and Edwardian England is the same energy that fuels our financial sector in London. It can also forge the best creative jobs that we used to have in England but have forgotten how to do. Creative jobs are the best thing. Wonderful jobs with all the elements us creative folk need. Can we please get our youth aware of that potential for them and propel uk ltd into a better place too? I am very glad I am not just leaving school. I like being old and cronky. But I do have a thought about our youth and the opportunities and vision that we can help them with.