

## FURNITURE MAKER GARETH NEAL

*Drawing together traditional craftsmanship and digital technology, Gareth Neal's distinctive pieces in seasoned and green wood are designed to stand the test of time*

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**THIS PAGE** Gareth's Vessel Series is made from oak, ash or walnut and is inspired by a display of glass at the Wellcome Collection.  
**OPPOSITE PAGE** Gareth puts the finishing touches to the Hamlyn chair. Crafted from oak and leather, the piece is the result of a collaboration with leather designer Bill Amberg.





**THIS PICTURE** The oak Chatsworth table has textured lines on its base, which are created digitally and mimic the marks made by hand tools. **ABOVE LEFT** Test pieces and prototypes in the studio. **LEFT** Gareth working on his new range for Heal's.

For more than a decade, Gareth Neal has been making contemporary furniture with a nod to historic British design. Using woods such as English oak and American walnut, his pieces range from Windsor-style chairs to intricate cabinets and tactile vessels. Though he is renowned for his reworking of classic forms, he also makes pieces using traditional hand-crafting techniques, including the oak and leather chair that won the Great Heal's Bodging Race earlier this year.

**What led you into the field of furniture making?** As a child, I could often be found tinkering around using building waste to make things such as bird tables and boxes. My father is an archaeologist, so an interest in objects and history was ingrained in me from early on. In 1996, I graduated with a BA in Furniture Design and Craftsmanship from Buckinghamshire New University and then went on to work in the studio of furniture designer Fred Baier, where I began to experiment and develop my skills.

**How did you become involved in bodging?** Bodging is a hands-on craft that utilises green (unseasoned) wood and the traditional techniques of Windsor chair making, often working at source in the woodland. In 2010, fellow designer Chris Eckersley formed Bodging Milano: a group of seven of us spent a week in the ash woods of Herefordshire with the aim of creating a body of work to show at Milan's Salone del Mobile. What started as a one-off project developed a life of its own and soon we were exhibiting annually. This was instrumental in diversifying my body of work. The

bodging process is relatively simple, yet incredibly versatile and uses a set of rules and tools. In the modern world, where materials and products are manufactured and shipped all over the globe, the simplicity of making on site, rather than moving timber to a workshop, really appeals to me. Because they are made by hand, no two bodged pieces are the same.

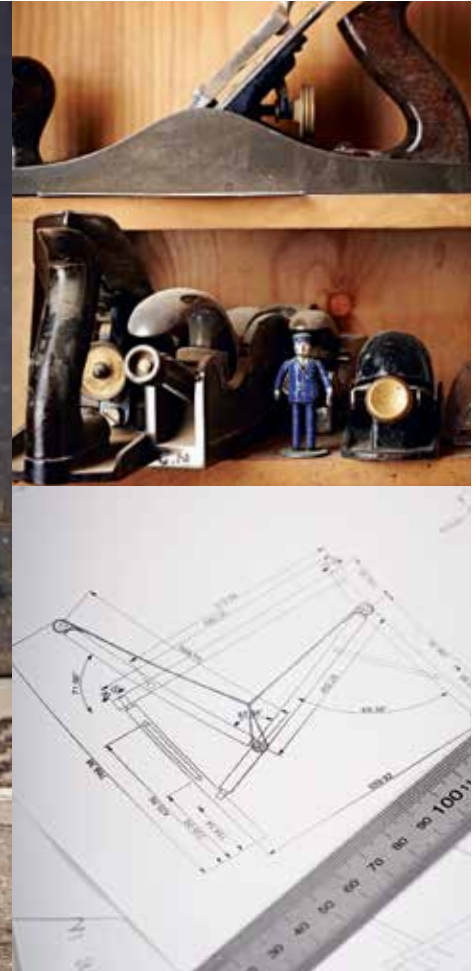
**What happened next?** My interest in bodging continued to develop and, in 2012, I began a project called In Pursuit of Carbon Negative, which saw me attempt a carbon negative lifestyle while creating a body of work from a felled tree. Then, last year, the Bodging Milano team became involved in Heal's Modern Craft Market when we took part in a bodging race in the window of the flagship store in London. As the bodger usually moves to the timber source to work, it's rare to be able to see the craftsman in action, but in this case we took the process to the customers. I made a chair, which the public voted their favourite piece in the collection, and so it was developed for production, which I'm thrilled about.

**Where do you find your inspiration?** For me, there's no set process for conceiving ideas. I'm inspired by place and locality, age-old techniques and traditions and, of course, people. I take photographs when I'm out and about, travelling or at exhibitions and write notes using my mobile phone all the time.

**Can you tell us about your materials?** Many of the materials I use are sourced locally and sustainably. This includes English oak and



**THIS PICTURE** The Ease oak and leather chair was developed at Heal's Modern Craft Market.  
**RIGHT** A selection of the hand planes Gareth uses for bodging.  
**BELOW RIGHT** CAD drawings of the Ease chair.



ash from the West Country, as well as timber from suppliers that are certified by the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC).

**How do you go about making a piece?** The sketchbook is my first port of call. I work quite quickly, drawing various forms and then honing in on a couple of my favourites. From there, I switch between mocking up pieces in the workshop and 3D modelling on the computer, until the design is finalised. Then the making begins. My work ranges from one-off pieces for collectors to furniture products for manufacture, and how it will be used affects the way in which I design it. For instance, my current vessel collaboration with architect Zaha Hadid has less emphasis on function than the Heal's chair, so the focus was almost entirely on form.

**What does a typical day involve?** I cycle to my east London studio, aiming to arrive at about 9am. First, I like to check my emails over a cup of tea. Mornings might be spent poring over designs and working on CAD drawings, while afternoons often involve meetings and taking phone calls. I spend as much time as I can making in the workshop, before heading home at around 6pm.

**Do you work with a team?** I have a very small team, which consists of someone to help manage the studio and an assistant at the making stage. I share the workshop with several other small businesses like mine, so space can be an issue. On the other hand, it's great to be surrounded by other designers in an environment where we can discuss new ideas and give each other technical assistance.

**Why do you think your pieces have such enduring appeal?**

Longevity is the ultimate goal for a designer. I use a variety of techniques to ensure that my pieces don't fall out of fashion and I hope that the honest nature of my work captures a sense of history and place. The chair that I created for Heal's is all about simplicity and lightness, and it is these elements that are key to ensuring items will stand the test of time.

**How have you grown the business?**

Since setting up in east London in 2002, my designs and business skills have evolved greatly. Now I primarily focus on individual pieces for international collectors, private commissions, and designs for production and site-specific projects. My portfolio has always been varied, encompassing many different interests. Certain pieces position themselves at the intersection of design and craft. Some use digital manufacturing, while others celebrate traditional processes as well. It's good to have developed my own narrative from that.

**What are your plans for the future?**

My quest to support and advance the British and European furniture industry continues. It's also important to focus on the success of past pieces and learn from the failure of others. In 2013, the Victoria and Albert Museum acquired one of my George chests of drawers for its permanent collection. This was a great milestone in my career. However, my ambition doesn't stop there: I want to carry on pushing the possibilities within making and designing.

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