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Mark Wilkinson**Founder of Mark Wilkinson
Furniture**

Mark Wilkinson did not have an easy time at school. He was severely dyslexic but it was the 1950s and nobody could understand what was wrong with him so his condition went undiagnosed. As a result he spent most of his time staring out of the window. Nor did he find much support for his difficulties at home, a council house in Buckinghamshire. 'My parents were fearsomely clever people, but they were also frustrated intellectually', he says. 'They would have loved to have gone to university. I was obviously smart, so when I didn't come home with good results they used to get cross with me. They were disappointed that I was not some form of achiever because they wanted that for themselves.'

He was encouraged to sing by a music teacher at school, and at the age of 13 was good enough to be offered a place at the London School of Music. But his family advised him to turn it down because they did not think he would be able to cope.



Wilkinson's time at school was not entirely wasted, however. While staring out of the window he gradually taught himself the art of looking at objects in a completely different way. He says: 'I spent a lot of time changing the geography around me and visually playing with the environment, moving tractors and hedges and trees round. It wasn't until I was in my mid-thirties that I realised it wasn't something that everybody could do.'

Happily, he was taken under the wing of the crafts master who persuaded his other teachers to let him work alone at the back of his class. Wilkinson made stained-glass windows and carved things from wood while other lessons went on around him. He says: 'I owe a lot to my crafts master. He understood what made me tick and he believed in me completely.'

Wilkinson also began to spend his evenings and weekends helping to make furniture with his father and grandfather, who were both carpenters. When he left school at

the age of 14 without any qualifications and hardly able to read or write, he realised making furniture was something that suited him. He says: 'I learnt that if I wanted to be accepted and not be called thick and stupid, as I was at school, then the way lay in making things beautiful. Since then making things beautiful has almost been a neurotic compulsion. It is something that gives me great solace.'

By the age of 19 Wilkinson was good enough to be offered a place at college in High Wycombe to study furniture-making. Once again, however, he turned it down because he was frightened of failing within the education system. Instead, when his parents moved to Somerset, he went with them and, on impulse, bought a derelict nine-bedroom monastery. Because he had no money of his own he did a deal with the woman who sold it to him to pay her the money in instalments.

Wilkinson renovated the monastery with the help of friends and then rented out rooms to them. He says: 'I was the richest hippy around. We used to race around the countryside advertising for Baby Belling cookers. It was great fun.' He also started up a workshop in the garden of the monastery, where he began making wooden doors and windows for local building companies.

Wilkinson abandoned his craft for a couple of years while he went to live in a squat in Brixton, south London, and work for a charity, but returned to set up a furniture workshop with a couple of friends. It was the late 1970s, the dawn of the era of stripped pine, Laura Ashley and Welsh dressers. Wilkinson quickly found a demand for his individually designed, hand-built wooden furniture. He says: 'Furniture is my way of speaking. I just took the feeling and the temperature of the time and translated it into a furniture style that people could read and understand. It was about singing a song and making a statement.'

His big break came when he was asked to design a kitchen in old pine for the wife of record producer Chris Wright, the owner of Chrysalis records. Word spread and suddenly Wilkinson found himself swamped with orders. So in 1978 he and his friend Charlie Smallbone founded the company Smallbone of Devizes, and soon developed a strong following for their individually handcrafted kitchens. Four years later, however, Wilkinson decided to leave Smallbone and start up on his own again. 'I had lost the space to move and breathe and had become constrained. I am best unfettered. I was instantly happier', he says.

Wilkinson successfully ran his own company, Mark Wilkinson Furniture, for more than 20 years, designing bespoke kitchens, bedrooms and bathrooms, and well as launching a range of paints and a collection of boxes, bowls and trays. By 2004 his company, in which he had a 65 per cent stake, had 270 employees and sales of £20 million.

But then in 2005 Wilkinson's business life came full circle when he got a call from Charlie Smallbone asking if he would be interested in getting together again.

Fact File

Date of birth: 25 October 1950

Marital status: married with two children

Highest level of education achieved: secondary school

Qualifications: fellow of Chartered Society of Designers, member of Mensa

Interests: learning to horse ride, scuba diving, motor-cycling, clay pigeon shooting, cooking

Personal philosophy: 'It is important to live life according to a moral code.'

Wilkinson agreed and the two companies, Mark Wilkinson Furniture and Smallbone of Devizes, merged to form the largest part of Smallbone plc, with each company retaining its own identity within the new structure. He says: 'It just made an awful lot of sense. Instead of knocking each other's brains out in the market we could get together and be so much stronger. It is nice to have an old friend who is no longer an adversary.'

Smallbone plc floated on the London Stock Exchange, enabling Wilkinson to take out some of the proceeds of the deal while retaining a stake in the business which now has a turnover of more than £50 million.

Now 58, Wilkinson admits that throughout his life he has always been driven by fear: 'My motivation is fear of failure, every time. I think if you asked successful entrepreneurs, most would say they are motivated by fear.'

However, as a member of Mensa, a liveried member of the Worshipful Company of Furniture Makers and a Freeman of the City of London he is proud to have come a long way since his former headmaster told him 'Wilkinson, you are a waste of taxpayers' money.'

And thanks to the merger with Charlie Smallbone, Wilkinson says: 'I have never had so much fun and I have never worked so hard in the business as I do now. I can't see any reason to stop.'