



Gary Bennett

all over the world who come and stay here. Some of them would purchase a special piece to get shipped back home. In some years, 30 to 40 per cent of our work was being shipped around the globe."

Gary's wife Lara, and David's wife Joanne, ran the art and craft gallery, and Gary says that "certainly for the past 15 years they drove sales to levels we never thought possible. Our gallery in the main street of Margaret River became a must-see destination as one of the largest most diverse regional galleries in WA, so Lara and Joanne's role in our business can't be overstated." David took on production, and administration of the business while Gary was in charge of sales, marketing, and designing and custom studio work.



Image courtesy Gary Bennett

Humans in general want nice things but, Gary acknowledges, some people can afford them, and some cannot. He recollects suggesting to one customer that he start a payment plan. "So, he started putting \$50 a week in our bank, and that went on for about 12 years, and he accumulated a house full of the most beautiful furniture," he says.

Despite expectations that the business would grow, Gary says one of the reasons JahRoc did not expand is the challenge of finding workers when, in the WA mining industry, young people can go up north and make three times what JahRoc can pay.

In addition, the price of timber has increased. "In my early days, I used to get it for almost nothing, pretty much off old buildings. They'd say 'if you can pick it up and put it in the skip bin you can have it', but it's got more and more expensive. That will keep going because of supply and demand due to scarcity which has largely been brought on by poor government policy," says Gary.

All of our native hardwoods are wonderful to work with, he enthuses, listing jarrah, marri, sheoak and blackbutt, noting their diversity in colour and grain. He says, "They cut well and because they are hard, joints stay really strong with minimal glue. Generally, we source material from local farmers, salvaging fallen logs or in some cases where roads and developments are happening. So, it is mostly salvaged material."

He adds, "I love Japanese hand tools because they are beautifully made and function really well. Most of my big machines are Felder. Again, they are very well made in Austria and function well while lasting a long time."

Looking back on his working life, Gary says, "I love being creative and, while timber can be very challenging with all its nuisances, it just feels good to work with. Nature is so astounding and I never cease to be amazed by the colours and grain patterns it offers. It sounds corny but it is one of nature's great art forms."

When asked about skills development, Gary says it is the construction sector that gets all the attention. "They shortened apprenticeships [and] it's a bit sad they don't get the training they should. You can't learn to be a tradesman in three years, it's

Favourites in the factory

Barker 1450 wide belt sander: An older machine, originally built in the 1960s in Melbourne, it ran for the first 25 years at the Wesfi plywood plant in Welshpool, WA. We acquired it in the late 1990s.

Balestrini mortice and tenoning machines: Invaluable for our chair-making process. Big solid beasts that, once set up, will spit out beautiful tight-fitting mortice and tenons all day long.

Griggio 3800 panel saw: The sheer size of this saw along with the tilting arbour make this machine a table maker's best friend.

Casadei 520 buzzer with a combined 3000 mm bed: I call it the air craft carrier and when I need to flatten a side board top, or I'm doing a twin slab dining table or desk, I head out to the big workshop, and this one.

Leda 630 thicknesser: Another workhorse for fast efficient gauging of large-width timber slabs. Keep the blades nice and sharp, and it's a dream to use.

Meber 900 band saw: This is a massive band saw that can also be used for milling veneers which is very handy in our furniture-making process.

Linde H25T fork lift: It would be hard to operate handling the large timber stacks and slabs that we do without this machine.

Caterpillar 232B skid steer: Because we operate on a bush block there are places that the forklift won't go due to the rough terrain, and that's when this puppy comes into her own.

pretty much impossible. I don't know what's going to happen in the future in that regard and I don't know how they can fix that without some targeted government policy in that direction," he adds.

After 40 years, David has decided to retire, and the business is up for sale. Says Gary, "I'd love to find someone who would pick it up and run with it, because I still think there's a future in studio, small-



Rocking Chair

Fish Hall Table
in sheoak

scale high-end, hand-crafted furniture. The further we go into the future, there'll be fewer skilled crafts people and native hardwoods available. I think that makes people revere it even more now. The smart people can see that coming."

That's why, he suggests, anyone who chooses this type of work can make an incredible life from fine furniture making. "I can't think of a better way, for me anyway, a better way to make a living," he concludes. ■

JahRoc
jahroc.com.au

Gary Bennett working on the
Chaise Lounge — 2003

L-R David Paris, Gary Bennett — 2015