



Looking a million dollars, the jarrah living room designed and made to order by Ed Janes and his team of craftsman, at the Fremantle Furniture Company.

BEAUTY AND VERSATILITY

by Ian Kay

Jarrah is a remarkable timber. Growing only in Western Australia, it is a hardwood unique in the world, possessing great natural beauty, durability and immense strength. From the earliest days of utilization, jarrah's strength and durability led to its world-wide use as a wood pre-eminently suitable for railway sleepers, bridge and dock piles, and general construction. New opportunities now developing will tend to highlight its beauty.



The historic use of jarrah — 3 miles of water front street paving in Hastings, England ▲ (1897), and wharves and sheds at Fremantle (1902). ▼



As early as 1903, Millars Karri & Jarrah Co. of England were extolling the virtues of jarrah in a pamphlet designed “to bring to the notice of engineers, and others, the suitability of Western Australian ... jarrah (*Eucalyptus marginata*) for engineering works, street paving and all other purposes where hardwood is required.” Photographs depicted city road construction using jarrah paving blocks and dock works using jarrah piles, and the text alluded to the timber’s remarkable “imperviousness to destructive (marine and land) insects and damp.” The timber’s strength and fire resistance were also promoted in its use for warehouse construction and railway sleepers.

Indeed, subsequent use proved the useful life of jarrah sleepers to average 50 years in London’s tube rail system. Notwithstanding the timber’s workmanlike qualities, the company also demonstrated jarrah’s versatility by using it to dress their office frontage, and made mention of its use for cabinet and art work. They compared jarrah’s grain and colour with high class mahogany — four lines in the corner of the 20 page ‘utility’ promotion.

Patterns unchanged

Today, after ninety year’s trading, utilization patterns are beginning to change. Though still favoured for its durability — less than 5% of the total jarrah logged is used for furniture production — there is a growing awareness of the need to better utilize the dwindling hardwood resource. Greater emphasis is now being placed on the use of jarrah in higher priced wood products. Last year the Forests Department instigated research into improved seasoning, using a Harvey kiln designed ten years ago to promote better pine utilization.

Albeit a late start for the industry in general, many individual craftsmen have, over the years, grown to cherish jarrah’s finer qualities. Excellent pieces of jarrah

furniture have been produced and admired. Shop and office fittings, billiard tables, dining and bedroom suites — all worked to the dark red-brown high quality finish that is so attractive. Over the years, styles have changed, but jarrah's popularity in furniture and craft work has continued to mature.

Furniture craft

Until recently, Ed Janes shared his 115 years of family craft experience with the Fremantle Furniture Company. Ed's great grandfather started his cabinet making apprenticeship in High Wycombe, 30 years before jarrah was available on the English market, and traditional pride is clearly stamped on every piece designed and produced by Ed's team. A registered architect and builder, Ed now devotes most of his time to the custom design of quality jarrah furniture. His appreciation of the timber's qualities is deep and his treatment simple. "Durable craftsmanship should be designed to transcend fashion," he said. "Having settled on a design for a customer, I go to great trouble to find jarrah with colour and grain to suit. I prefer to match the timber and make the most of its natural colour, rather than use stains to impose artificial uniformity," he explained. "Apart from that, we use materials and construction techniques designed

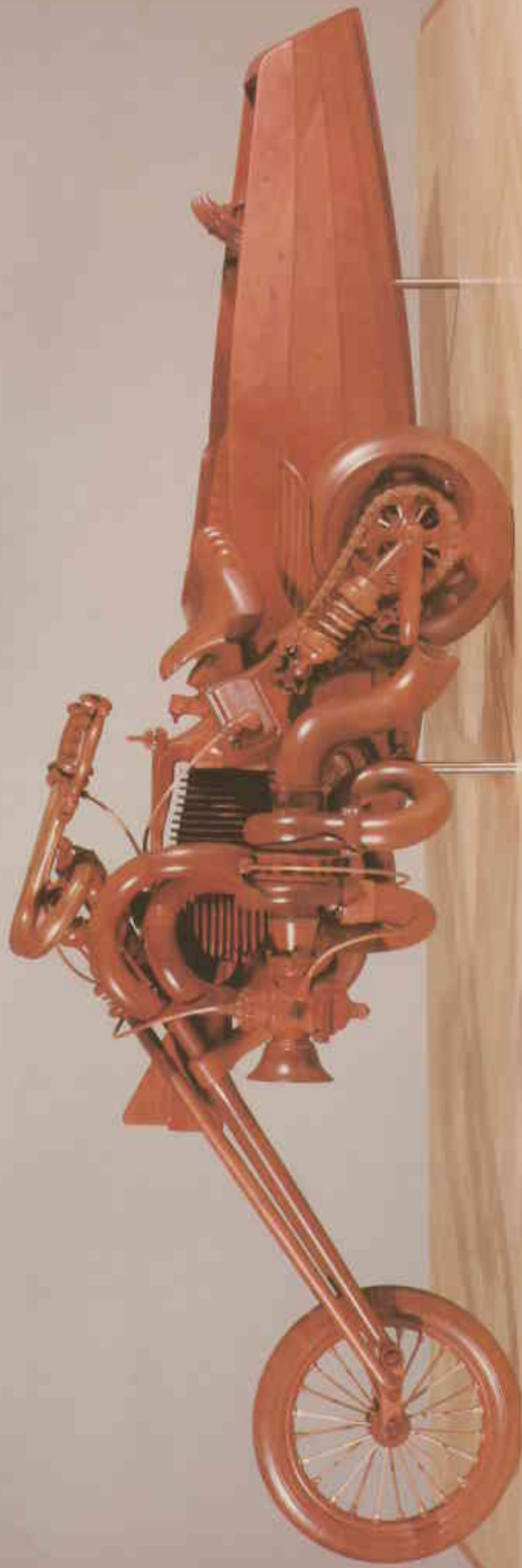
to match the timber's tremendous durability." Special factory projects include the crafting of forty-four chairs, and tables, for the State Premier's dining room, a solid jarrah board room table 12' x 5', furniture for a millionaire's living room and grandfather clock cases. The cases are made exclusively for the world renowned horologist David Walter, and often feature jarrah's rare curly grain.

A jarrah clock-case, produced exclusively for horologist David Walter by the Fremantle Furniture Company. ➤

One of the forty-four chairs hand crafted for the State Premier's dining room. ▼

Ed Janes, custom designer of fine jarrah furniture. ▼





The jarrah sculpture by Michael Cooper, 'Split Personality' is now in the collection of the Art Gallery of Western Australia, and was sponsored by Bunnings Ltd., 1982. Note the choice of natural colour used to highlight many parts.

Sculpture

In 1979, the Fremantle Furniture Factory provided six months jarrah work experience for visiting Australian Crafts Council fellow, Michael Cooper. A highly regarded Californian sculptor, Michael Cooper later submitted to the West Australian Art Gallery conceptual drawings for a jarrah sculpture. Titled 'Split Personality', the work was to be the last of a series of anti-gun statements, but incorporated his overriding love of speed and sailing. The commission was granted by the Art Gallery and sponsored by Bunnings Bros. (Pty) Ltd.

Michael arrived, set up a studio in Fremantle and began three month's feverish work. He

particularly looked for jarrah in contrasting colours, to highlight many of the separate parts used in the construction. He also needed to invent many of the jigs and tools he required. Working by 'eye', Michael machined each part with minute attention to detail, and eventually pieced together the highly acclaimed sculpture like a giant three dimensional jigsaw. "The timber is a joy to work with," he said. "It is not as hard as some I have worked, but it retains a high finish."

Some of the most difficult pieces involved the use of jarrah 'boards', less than 4mm thick, for the construction of the clinker styled side car, and the lamination of the curly handle bars.

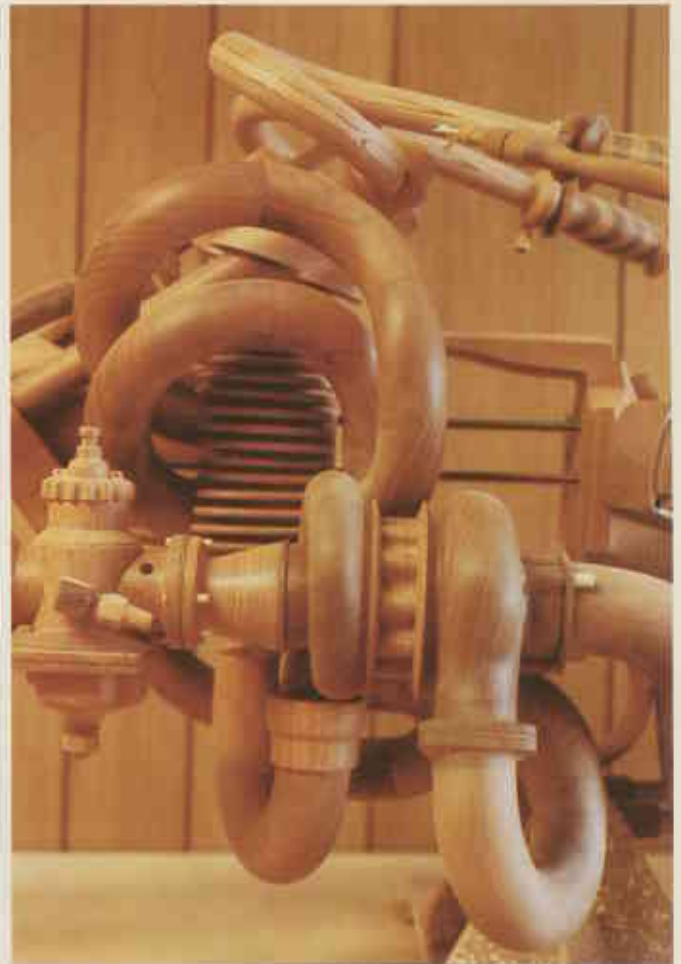
Sculptor Michael Cooper working on the clinker styled side car — his love of sailing expressed in the sculpture 'Split Personality'.



All the individually machined parts went together like a giant three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle.



A close-up of the carburettor detail — all worked in jarrah.





▲ Fremantle luthier Scott Wise, at work in his studio.

Musical instrument made from jarrah by Fremantle luthier Scott Wise. ▼



Bright note

In a neighbouring studio, Scott Wise shares many of Michael's construction problems in his chosen craft as a luthier. A musician by profession, Scott started his craft career repairing the stringed instruments of fellow musicians. Over the years his craft knowledge and musicianship have expanded side by side.

Scott now specializes in the manufacture of instruments such as acoustic guitars, mandolas, dulcimers and lutes, using a variety of native timbers. Jarrah features predominantly in the construction as head stocks, finger boards and the binding on edges.

Like Michael, Scott has had to make many of his own tools and jigs. He uses a bandsaw to quarter cut boards to 5mm thick and then thickness sands them to between 2-2.5mm. Steam forming timber this thick, Scott has crafted many of the smaller instruments completely from jarrah. Unfortunately, the larger acoustic guitars require a more resonant wood for the face, but the contrast here, between the dark curves of the jarrah and the fair skin of the face, is magnificent. The tone too is beautiful, and Scott believes jarrah has tremendous potential as an instrument wood.

"It has colour, stability and gives good sound," he said. "With practise it can be worked, and I have set my heart on carving a name for myself as a luthier using jarrah and other contrasting West Australian timbers."

Finding suitably milled and seasoned timber has been a major problem for each of these craftsmen. "With so little of the total jarrah cut being used for furniture manufacture in the past, it has taken time to persuade millers to take our requirements seriously," said Ed Janes. "They basically cut for construction materials, with little thought given to quarter-sawing or controlled seasoning."

Scott Wise agreed. "Green

timber needs to be carefully seasoned," he said. "I store some jarrah for up to six years, so selecting the right piece is vital. I used to spend days at a mill waiting for the required sections to come through the system, and often found it easier to salvage from old flooring and outdated furniture."

With their difficulties, however, they also share their satisfactions. Ed, Michael and Scott inspire others with their work and continue to demonstrate to many the previously unimagined beauty and versatility of jarrah.

New age

Attitudes are changing in the milling industry according to Allan Forbes, special projects officer with Bunning Bros. (Pty) Ltd. "Past practice was to cut for recovery," he said in a recent interview, "but we are now changing the utilization pattern to account for market changes".

"Logically, the next step in upgrading the market value of jarrah is the improved seasoning of better grades, for furniture and decorative work. Bunnings are working on this and have dovetailed their research with the Forests Department's studies at Harvey," he said. Begun in late 1982, in direct response to the

Allan Forbes
Special Project Officer
Bunnings Bros. Ltd.



growing need to better utilize forest resources, the research programme shares facilities at Yarloop mill and the Forests Department's high temperature kiln at Harvey.

So far, the results have been very encouraging, according to Phil Shedley, Forests Department's spokesman for the joint working group. "Australian eucalypts have always been difficult to season naturally," he said, "but jarrah, in particular, has excellent potential, and we must make every effort to improve its utilization."

Tests indicate that present drying from green must be slow, to avoid surface checking. However, once the wood has reached fibre saturation point (about 28% moisture content), drying to stable moisture content (10%) can be achieved within one day, without detrimental effects, using a high temperature (120°C) kiln.

Upgraded

As well as improving the kiln schedules, an ongoing programme is testing a variety of methods to control the initial drying down to fibre saturation point, during all seasons of the year. Industry practice has been to confine the sawing of finishing quality timber to the cooler months of the year. Year round control of seasoning would therefore increase the availability of high grade timber.

One of the methods to be tested will use a Harvey version of the progressive tunnel kiln, developed by the CSIRO in Melbourne. This system provides high humidity, low temperature conditions in the early stages of drying, followed by a gradual reduction in humidity and an increase in temperature as the timber dries.

Jarrah veneer products are attracting increasing attention from researchers and in the market for decorative purposes. This is perhaps the ultimate in present day utilization of valuable timbers.

Allan Forbes was the instigator of the Furniture Grades Standards Committee, an off-shoot of the

Forests Products Association, which is currently formulating specifications for the up-grading of the timber.

"Exponents of jarrah's decorative use have been in the minority," said Allan, "but they have always been around. You only have to look at the work in buildings such as the Cottesloe Civic Centre (remodeled in 1936) to see that."

Wider appeal

"David Foulkes-Taylor was the modern pioneer of jarrah in home furniture — as expressed in the range and popularity of his designs (1960-70) manufactured by Catts — but Bunnings tend to take the wider view of jarrah's decorative use. We see the total interior of a home or office as suitable for jarrah's fine finish," said Allan, enthusiastic in his praise of the new Australian Bank in Saint Georges Terrace, Perth.

Current market strategy is aimed at popularizing jarrah in the kitchen, in flooring, stairways and exposed beams (as well as in furniture and panelling) in an effort to improve jarrah's share of the decorative market. Figures gathered in a recent survey of manufacturers suggest significant potential.

Another marketing thrust aimed at improved utilization, is the manufacture of outdoor furniture, exporting to England, New Zealand and the Eastern States. It is a new market area and better utilizes the shorter lengths of good quality jarrah. Again, jarrah's weight and durability stand it in good stead, for it is particularly suited to outdoor use in the wetter climates. "More importantly," said Allan, "the industry has moved towards processing the smaller lengths to generate improved returns. The emphasis now must be on getting the very best from the resource available."

Jarrah decoration provides a warm atmosphere in many Australian hotels and restaurants. ▼

