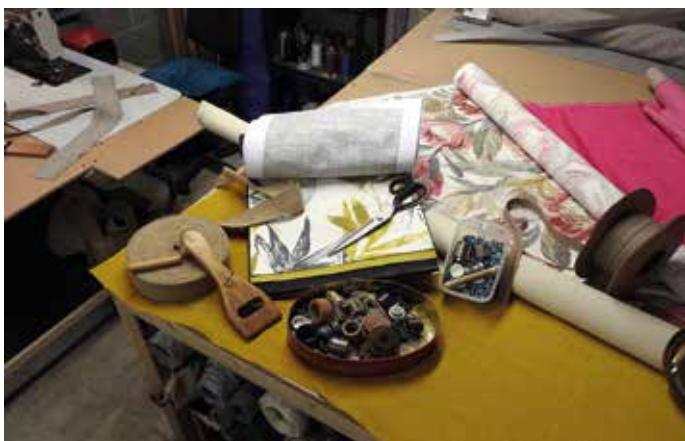




INTERIORS
**A Family Affair:
 Olton Upholstery**
 WORDS & PHOTOS by Avril Stone



I first visited Mike Gorst at his commercial unit near Barnstaple. It was a cold, dank winter's day but the view over the vale of North Devon's largest town out towards the Bideford/Barnstaple Bay more than made up for the February weather. And Mike's welcoming smile, along with the steaming hot cup of tea

he made us, soon warmed up the wintry atmosphere.

Mike Gorst and his family are what some folk would describe as 'incomers' – as they moved to live in North Devon three years after coming to the West Country on holiday. Mike brought with him the knowledge and skill of three

generations of his family's upholstery business.

The company name stems from the family home at Olton in Solihull and Mike can trace the family's profession back to his great-grandfather Charles Gorst, who was born in Lancashire in 1880 and made shop blinds. These were the kind of blinds that were pulled out over the shop windows to protect the public and the goods exhibited on the pavement from the glare of the sun, the wind and rain.

Charles' son William, known as Billy, followed in the same line as his father but expanded his knowledge of the trade by becoming an apprentice upholsterer to a highly established furniture-maker in Birmingham. It is interesting that both his younger brother and sister were also upholsterers.

Billy's indenture certificate is a fascinating – and sobering! – read. It sets out the expectations placed upon him for the four years of his apprenticeship: 'He shall faithfully serve his Master, his secrets keep, his commands gladly do. He should do no damage to his Master nor see it done to others... He shall not play at cards, dice tables, or any unlawful games or haunt ale-houses, nor absent himself from his Master's service night or day.' The weekly remuneration for this dedication and obedience rose from 12s.6d. in the first year to £2 in his final year.

Billy later established what would become the family business and, outside of this, he was also something of a local personality as a great charity worker and a well-known county darts player!

In 1934 Billy's son David was born and, following in the family tradition, he trained as an upholsterer with a furniture-maker in Birmingham. He founded Olton Upholstery in 1975.



Left-hand column, from top: David Gorst and Mike; tools of an upholster's trade; Mike stripping down and repairing an armchair. Above: William Gorst, who was born in 1913.

It was in 1984 that David's son Mike left school at the age of 16 with, as he says, "no idea whatsoever" as to what he wanted to do with his life – although he was *quite* sure he didn't want to be an upholsterer! This no doubt had something to do with Mike's passionate involvement with heavy metal music. His part in the band, Warlord, took him on tour, including to Europe backing several famous bands. Mike describes those days as his Gothic era – and it would have been such fun to have seen some pictures, but none survive!

It was at this time that the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) was being promoted, and David persuaded Mike to try out the 18-month upholsterer's course. As he pointed out to his son, at least it would give him a trade whilst he was trying to decide about his future.



This was probably some clever fatherly persuasion tactic that eventually paid dividends, as Mike admits that the 18-month course not only taught him the art and skills of upholstery with its machine and hand sewing, cutting, design and even woodturning, but it also gave him the experience of the work-a-day life of being an adult, its routine of clocking on and off in the morning and afternoon, meal breaks and the satisfaction of achievement when completing a successful piece of work.

With the course completed, Mike went to work with his father, who equipped him with many more of the intricacies of their profession – such as webbing, diamond buttoning (those deep inset buttons on chairs, sofas and headboards), frame repairs, and hand springing – which is rarely used these days.

During the following 30 years Mike, his father David and grandfather Billy worked together building a successful business

upholstering all kinds of furniture... until eight years ago when they received some shattering news. They were given just two months to vacate the commercial units housing their workshop as the owner was selling up. For a while Mike shared a workshop with some friends but this was not an ideal arrangement.

As many of us know, there comes a time when something happens and decisions are made that take you on a whole new path in your life – and it is not until some time later that you know whether you made the best decision or perhaps not such a good one! This occasion came for Mike and his family when for the first time ever they decided to go west for their summer holiday and arrived at Minehead for their yearly break. The family travelled over Exmoor and all along the North Devon coast and were bowled over by the wonderful scenery they found here.

On a return trip to Devon, Mike and his family were sitting by the harbour at



Lynmouth when his wife Helen said, "We could move here." With the loss of the business premises and the discovery of the magic of the West Country it didn't take long to implement that life-changing decision. Within months they had sold their home in Solihull and bought their new home in Lynton, where Mike turned three garages into his workshop and continued his upholstery business in North Devon.

With their two sons settled in a local school and Helen working for the NHS, Mike was soon attracting local customers and his stalwart clientele in the Midlands continued to contact him with orders for his upholstery work, too. This carried on for a while but soon local demand for his work meant visits back to Solihull became less frequent.

Loving their home in Lynton was without doubt, but as Mike and Helen's sons grew and became talented at sport they found they were going all over the county after school so that the

boys could compete in their sports events; this meant not getting back to Lynton until late in the evening. Mike and Helen decided to move closer to Barnstaple and soon settled at Shirwell, where Mike was lucky to find the commercial unit which is his base today.

Mike is a very contented man who gets great pleasure from his work. He particularly enjoys being given an elderly, well-used piece of furniture and stripping it down and rebuilding it so that it is almost unrecognisable to its owner when it is returned home. He says the look on their faces is worth all the hours of hard work.

Mike is hopeful that times are changing – albeit slowly – from a throwaway society to the modern ideology of reusing, updating and recycling, as he is seeing many more people wanting to renovate their sofas, chairs and bedheads rather than buy new. This gives him the pleasure of putting his artisan skills and knowledge from three generations to excellent use! Long may it continue!

This page: A sofa in need of a great deal of TLC – from arrival to completion.

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