

a class of its own

Words Jessica Mathias Photo John McCombe



What started out as a small furniture-making business in a Blenheim bedroom 14 years ago, has grown into an international success story. Ashton Grove, a name familiar to those who appreciate superior quality and craftsmanship, has taken the furniture market by storm.

While their furniture doesn't come cheap (dining room tables start at \$6000 and matching chairs \$1000 each), there is definitely no shortage of demand.

Made from French Oak and modelled on 17th century French provincial furniture, the pieces have proved a hit with a number of notable New Zealand sports stars and television personalities. However, they also have a large following of 'everyday New Zealanders' wanting to invest in quality furniture that will stand the test of time.

From humble beginnings, Ashton Grove has quadrupled in size with retail stores in Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Melbourne.

Not bad for a small-scale operation which Robert Hood started in his Marlborough home in 1993. Robert, a builder and joiner by trade, saw a niche in the market and started making and selling handcrafted coffee tables, blanket boxes and dining tables, constructed with the few hand tools he owned.

It didn't take long for word to spread through Marlborough and before he knew it, his business had outgrown his spare bedroom.

In 1994, Robert made the decision to move the production of Ashton Grove furniture to Christchurch. He opened the company's first retail store in 1997 on Papanui Road, where it remains today. Since then, the business has gone from strength to strength, with ten cabinetmakers and three French polishers in the company's Opawa-based workshop.

"We have made a conscious decision to maintain a boutique operation," he says. "We discovered early on you cannot mass-produce this product, which is why we only supply our four retail stores. We know there is a huge demand for our furniture worldwide and we are often approached by large overseas furniture retailers wanting us to supply them, but realise we could not maintain the level of quality if we manufactured in bulk. It is the fact the furniture is handmade and hand-finished which makes it so different from what everyone else is doing."

"We send a lot of furniture overseas to people who have fallen in love with Ashton Grove pieces while

in association with

Chambers PR

- Strategic Thinking
- Marketing
- Communications
- Event Management

T 03 377 0147

W www.chamberspr.co.nz

travelling through New Zealand and want us to ship furniture to them. It was a huge compliment to sell a house load of furniture to a family in France, because Ashton Grove pieces are based on French provincial furniture, and the buyers felt the pieces they purchased from us were nicer than the French provincial antiques they could purchase in their own country."

"We've also been thrilled with the response to our furniture in Australia. Australians have a huge amount of respect for New Zealand products and Kiwi ingenuity and design, which definitely works well in our favour. They embrace our product as being as good as Australian made," says Robert.

Thanks to the continued growth of the business, Robert's partner Emma Davies gave up her career in commercial law to help Robert with the running of the business. "I used to work in the Christchurch store while I was studying law at university, but what I didn't realise at the time was that I would end up back in the furniture industry. While it's very different to being a lawyer, there is definitely a number of similarities between the two – the art of negotiation is definitely one of them," says Emma.

So why are people prepared to pay the price to have Ashton Grove furniture in their homes?

"You simply can't put a price on something which is individually hand-crafted in New Zealand," says Emma. "Especially in this day and age, where the majority of furniture manufacturing takes place off-shore."

"A lot of our customers see it as an investment, something that will last and can be passed from generation to generation," she says. "It's the small details and finishing touches that really set an Ashton Grove piece apart from other furniture. Each piece is actually a work of art when you look at the aging, shading of the high points and the aging of the handles and hinges. It's amazing how we can make something look 300 years old in a matter of weeks."

The uncanny resemblance to antique furniture has fooled a number of antique dealers, who have unwittingly gone into Ashton Grove adamant they were looking at antique furniture. It just goes to show how well made and beautifully crafted each piece of furniture really is.

Although the classic lines of Ashton Grove's furniture work well in any home, Robert and Emma have broadened their business further, accommodating for customers looking for something a little more modern. They have just opened their first Zanette store in Auckland, selling modern furniture from Italy. In March, the second store will open beside their Wellington Ashton Grove.

"This is an extremely exciting move for us," says Emma. "We were getting more and more requests from our loyal customers, who were moving into modern homes and looking for items to complement their more traditional Ashton Grove pieces."

"Robert, two of the showroom managers and I went to the Milan furniture show earlier in the year and bought as much as we could. There are so many exciting styles in-store, which I know our customers will just love."

What next for this dynamic duo? They are planning to open two new Ashton Grove stores in Australia within the next two years and after that who knows ... so watch this space. One thing is for sure, whatever they try their hand at next is sure to have classy homes and stylish interiors in mind.



www.davidreidhomes.co.nz/canterbury



There are a number of reasons why you should choose David Reid Homes as your **Custom Builder**, if not just for our...

- Professional work ethic and commitment to go the extra mile
- Award-winning team of builders, designers and interior consultants
- Ability to build unique homes, off client plans, on flat land or steep slopes
- Superior quality and finishing
- Award-winning Standard Plans that can be altered to suit the needs of our clients

Go to www.davidreidhomes.co.nz/canterbury today and explore your options with us - you won't be disappointed!

Sales Inquiries:

Richard Hopkins Ph 021 767 639

Level 1/ 116 Wrights Road, Christchurch

Email: richardhopkins@davidreidhomes.co.nz

Christchurch Office 03 338 3155

