

air's stylish furniture a winner



Sue Allen

Bored with being a builder, Robert Hood started his furniture building business, Ashton Grove, in the spare bedroom of his Blenheim house in 1993.

These days Hood and his partner, Emma Davies, have built up a thriving business with shops in Christchurch, Auckland and Melbourne. This month their final conquest was to open in Wellington after six years of looking for a site.

Back in those early Marlborough days, Hood used recycled timber from building demolitions to make "chunky, almost gothic" coffee tables.

To start with the business was entirely wholesale. Hood said when the move came into retail, it was accidental.

After the company moved production from Marlborough to Christchurch, its first workshop was so small it used to put finished furniture in the carpark during the day to make space.

Before long, people were calling into the workshop and buying pieces off the parking lot. When Ashton Grove moved to a second, bigger factory, it opened its first shop in Papanui Road in Christchurch.

Since those early days, the furniture has become increasingly refined. Its tables, chairs, cabinets, bookcases, tallboys and coffers are based on old cabinet-making and furniture techniques and French Provincial and old-English furniture designs. Most of its furniture is made from imported French oak.

The company employs 10 cabinet makers, including two finishers who specialise in waxing, staining and shellacking to age the furniture.

Its most expensive piece is a leadlight bow-fronted cabinet at about \$22,000; the cheapest a bedside cabinet which sells for between \$800 and \$1000.

Davies, who gave up a career as a commercial property lawyer to join Hood in business in 2003, said the simple lines of the furniture appealed to all kinds of people, but not everyone could afford it.

"There's the wealthy of this world (to whom) money's not a problem and then there's people on average incomes who just save and save to buy one really nice piece."

While several other furniture makers in Christchurch and the South Island have closed down recently or moved production offshore, Davies said not cutting prices to compete with low-cost manufacturers had ensured the business's survival.

Davies said the plan was always that Wellington would be the second shop, but it took six years to find a place to lease. It finally opened two weeks ago.

The lucky break came when Museum Hotel owner Chris Parkin — who has bought Ashton Grove furniture in the past — developed the Museum apartment building on Wakefield Street with retail space on the ground floor.