

If diversification is the key to survival, Neptune Classics will outlive many a competitor. Not only is it one of the largest suppliers of outdoor teak in the UK, but it is comfortably expanding its kitchen and interiors portfolios, the latter with the introduction of four new ranges last month. Not bad for a pair of entrepreneurs with no experience in furniture ...

# The power of three

By PAUL FARLEY

**IN 1996, disillusioned with the profit-driven ethos of their employer, John Sims-Hilditch and Giles Redman decided to create their own company. They were determined that its focus should be products with integrity, to be marketed passionately and honestly.**

The enterprise was called Neptune – a name generic enough to cover a multitude of outcomes. At that time, the pair did not know what direction they would take, but their previous experience at first led them to develop polyurethane wrist supports for computer operation.

This product would never come to fruition – during the production interim, the pair drew on Giles' previous experience of importing hammocks from Mexico, and a little re-invention and branding from John resulted in the Classic hammock – a drawstrung canvas designed to hold two people, supported by an innovative A-frame design, allowing it to stand freely of natural supports.

The product was simple yet incredibly effective, and 6000 were sold in Neptune's first year alone.

"We are very ambitious, product-wise," says John, joint managing director along with Giles. "I love good quality first and foremost – and Giles likes a good price. The combination of the two gives us a great value-for-money product."

Selling the hammocks at shows such as Glee gave the entrepreneurs a glimpse at the garden furniture market, which they perceived as being full of opportunity. Over time, they developed a teak supply chain from the Far East, and Neptune Classics' outdoor furniture came to be characterised by granite and metal elements, with a unique approach to user mechanisms.

"I like innovative engineering as well as design," says John, and this is apparent in the parasol supports, expanding tables and simple assembly methods.

With around 400 garden furniture customers, Neptune Classics is one of the largest suppliers of teak in the country – but at the moment, teak is a little out of favour. Fortunately, the seasonality of the garden industry in general led the people behind Neptune to diversify long ago.

Chichester, Neptune Classics  
new bedroom range.

Says John: "We explored all kinds of new ideas, from fireworks to decorations, and even toys. We realised our energy and focus was all in furniture up to that point – oak and leather was gaining popularity on the interiors side, so we went with it. At this point, our garden trade was accelerating so much, it was hard to see how our interior offering could catch up!"

Upon establishing its own manufacturing facility in the Far East, the timber, fittings, and general quality overall was improved, and through its experienced production team, Neptune began producing interior ranges in basswood – a strong, moisture-stable

hardwood, on par with cherry for stability, yet flawed in appearance when unfinished.

For this reason, all Neptune's interior furniture arrives in a hand-painted limestone finish as standard, and can be painted to order if required in Neptune Classics' own range of 20 colour options, arranged into five palettes. Most of the basswood cabinet pieces feature solid oak tops and marine-grade ply panelling with a birch face, and a high level of traditional joinery completes each piece.

Last month, Neptune Classics unveiled one bedroom and three new dining ranges at Interiors Birmingham. "We've established a lovely interior look," says John. "Now we are focusing on

*The paint palettes are organised into four families, helping the buyer create an interior-designed look in the finished room.*



*The showroom has been newly-refurbished, and displays Neptune Classics' three divisions to great effect.*



broadening it, and we've been expanding our product design and development team to do this.

"We want to help people have more choice, but at the same time keep the offering concise, so we developed several new looks and finishes for 2009."

The paint palettes are designed to give a house an interior-designed look – considered, without being homogenous.

Diversifying from outdoor to interior furniture led, in turn, to the creation of kitchen furniture. The fully-assembled, bolt-together modular system achieves a bespoke feel through a layout that focuses on horizontal symmetry, rather than the traditional vertical lines normally associated with kitchens.

Kitchen furniture is the third side to Neptune, and another guarantee that the company stays afloat should the other areas experience difficulty. Garden furniture is still Neptune's largest investment, but its interiors division – now catering for around 300 clients, who can now deal with the company through an exclusive intranet stock management system – is clearly performing

well.

Since 2000, Neptune Classics has occupied a huge headquarters near Swindon, just off junction 16 of the M4. The newly-redesigned showroom is accessible and attractive, and an asset that John wishes to exploit further.

"We've just started holding open days up here," he says. "With an open day, much more than at an exhibition, it's all about the company, and the great people who work here. Customers can poke around and get under our skin."

Despite being comprised of a relatively small team, Neptune Classics has huge capabilities, and its interiors ranges are a testament to this. Neptune's painted furniture pieces take features and quality further than one would expect – thanks to a mixture of traditional craftsmanship, inventive engineering, and a good dose of enthusiasm.

"Our product differentiates itself in this respect," concludes John. "If our customers get something that's even better than normal, it can carry the day when it comes to making the sale."

**T 01793 881144**  
**W [neptune.co.uk](http://neptune.co.uk)**



*Suffolk dining table, pictured extended with matching chairs.*