

# A Touch of Class

Joint Directors, John Sims Hilditch and Giles Redmond, started Neptune Classics in 1996 in a rural Wiltshire back garden at 'The Old Post Office' with the notion of designing a truly comfortable classic hammock for the English garden. Fourteen years later and they now manufacture a wide range of garden and kitchen/dining furniture which is distributed worldwide. We speak with one half of the duo, John Sims Hilditch to find out more.



JOHN SIMS HILDITCH

Myself and Giles decided to put our know-how to good use and having spent time in hammocks in the jungles of South America, we decided to bring a canvas design like the ones we were used to, to the domestic UK and European market. This meant designing a hammock large enough to accommodate more than one person and we had drawstring installed around the sides to ensure no one fell out! Also realising that not everyone would have two perfectly positioned trees in the back garden to attach the hammock

to, we developed a kit to attach it to a tree, a wall or independently on an A-frame structure. With this 'hang anywhere' concept, the hammock was to prove very popular as John and Giles discovered when they took this, their first product, to an exhibition at the NEC in Birmingham, where they acquired 75 distributors, and from here went on to sell approximately 5,500 hammocks in the first year. It was at this exhibition that, quite by chance, John and Giles were approached by a couple of exhibitors from Northern Ireland who were

also there with a container load of garden furniture. 'They were having no luck selling the furniture and felt that we had a bit of sparkle about us, so they asked if we might be interested in taking the furniture off their hands and selling it ourselves? Both myself and Giles are pretty focused individuals, but let's just say the Irish have the gift of the gab and we were persuaded to venture down a route we hadn't yet considered,' explains John.

However, this furniture was to prove a welcome distraction from their planned business model and they went on to sell all of it and to build up the garden furniture and accessories side of the business in a big way.

'Following the success of the hammock we went on the add to our range with the Rocking deckchair, the Double deckchair and the Kids deckchairs. We also made further inroads into garden furniture, after our foray into this area at the NEC. Designing pieces that were not only aesthetically pleasing, but top quality as well.'

Selling a seasonal product range, John and Giles looked at export, however, this was mostly within the Northern Hemisphere initially, so they turned their attention to expanding their range to incorporate non-seasonal items moving into indoor furniture.

'We were already designing and manufacturing garden furniture, so the next logical step was to turn our attention indoors', says John. 'Our first product was an oak dining table with matching leather chairs. We had been making similar pieces for outdoor use, so this first indoor table and chairs was an easy transition.'



'After this initial dining table, we began to design and make more dining and kitchen inspired freestanding pieces. For example, dressers, island units, wine racks, console tables and of course, further table and chair designs. The handpainted Chichester range was the first collection we developed and it proved popular and this side of the business has continued to grow and develop over the years. Today we not only offer freestanding kitchen furniture, but fitted kitchens as well.'

'We have just launched two new kitchen designs in March, the Henley and the Suffolk,' adds John. 'The Henley is contemporary, and we are really pleased with the oak finish, which is so near the natural finish of oak, something that can be lost during manufacture. The Suffolk kitchen is a classic, contemporary design with very crisp, clean lines. This kitchen design has lovely detail, including a graduated door system with the drawers getting bigger as you go down for larger bits of kitchen equipment.'

Whether the outdoor or indoor furniture ranges by Neptune Classics, John is fastidious about product quality. 'I have a long-term view that our products need to be well designed and

well made to ensure our customers are happy with their purchase for years to come. In order to ensure this, not only do we put a lot of effort and thought into the design of our furniture, incorporating little design details that customers will become aware of over time keeping things fresh and new for them, but the quality of the product is such that there is no MDF or chipboard used in our kitchens, something which is quite commonplace these days. All of our kitchen furniture (and outdoor) is well made from good quality solid wood and top quality materials, such as Blum under-drawer runners because they are the best.'

As well as good design and high quality, John and Giles are meticulous about offering value for money. 'This is Giles' forte, he is very good at keeping our costs under control without compromising on our product quality. We also practise 'bottom-up' pricing. In other words, we don't sell something for what we think it is worth, we add our standard margin and this keeps costs down for our distributors and ensures that we can offer customers the best value for money. So while we may fall into the middle market because of our pricing, we sit at the

higher end for the actual product.' Customer service is also top of the agenda, and the company is currently putting its efforts into building up the brand name at the moment. This services both the retail partners and the end customer. With advertising and PR campaigns in play, there are currently more than 1,000 visits everyday to the Neptune website, with 46 percent of those visiting going to the 'where to buy' section where they are then referred to their nearest stockists.

Once the customer is through the showroom doors, as a company, Neptune continues to offer assistance to their retail partners when it comes to closing the potential sale with advice on displaying the furniture and kitchen ranges, and tips for selling it on to the customer.

With so much enthusiasm and ongoing input from the top down, the team at Neptune are continuing to grow and expand, offering innovative, good quality furniture which is now distributed worldwide to meet consumer demand in Ireland, the UK, mainland Europe, Korea and even Australia.

**Neptune Classics**  
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