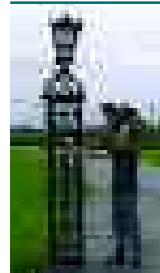




Trade Secrets

The inside story of traditional skills and forgotten arts around the British Isles



Peter Weldon Iron Designs

Designer Peter Weldon has been recreating antique design since 1994. Initially he specialised in making ornate, decorative ceramics for interiors, inspired by three years' study at Staffordshire Polytechnic, in the heart of the Potteries, where he achieved a 1st class BA(Hons) in Design. He moved into the exterior design field in 2001 when he sold his pottery business, Weldon Creamware, to Theodore Alexander, a leading manufacturer of reproduction 18th and 19th century furniture and accessories.

Although European owned, Theodore Alexander manufactures from Vietnam and for 12 months Peter lived in Ho Chi Minh City together with his wife and daughter while he relocated Theodore Alexander's pottery factory to new premises. While concentrating on creating lamp bases and sculptural ceramic designs for the Theodore Alexander collection, it was the antique French ironwork of Saigon that caught his eye. A legacy of their colonial past, Peter found the Vietnamese to be skilled steel

Peter Weldon Iron Designs – the unique ironwork company offering a complete design and manufacturing service for the period house.

fabricators and both friendly and hard working. He met his future business partner, Mr Anh Hai, in 2002 and the seeds of a new enterprise were sown.

Appreciating that almost all of England's finest ironwork was removed during the Second World War, Peter identified a gap in the market. Where does the period home owner go to replace their ironwork? There is

virtually no provision for this service in the UK. For example, it is very hard to find beautiful antique gates and if not impractical to recreate, then the cost is quite prohibitive.

During 2002 Peter began in earnest to develop his now extensive portfolio of antique ironwork designs, many of which are based on French 18th and 19th century originals, together with his Vietnamese business



partner Hai. Operating from 400sq metre premises in the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh, and employing 25 skilled craftsmen, Peter conducts his business on fair trade principles. The workers are paid a good wage and with guaranteed work, Peter is in it for the long term. He visits the workshop regularly, speaks rudimentary Vietnamese and considers Ho Chi Minh to be his second home.

Now resident once again in England, Peter runs his business from an office at home managing design and sales while Hai runs the factory in Vietnam. Every six weeks a seafreight container leaves Ho Chi Minh packed with Peter's designs. Together with two assistants, Peter travels the length and breadth of the country, delivering and installing orders. He is able to provide the customer with a unique design service dealing with each project personally. If the customer can't find what they require from the growing library of designs, then Peter will design and manufacture a new item specially for them. Offering site visits, Peter can provide advice on the customer's needs to ensure that the installation is sympathetic to the house. Then in front of the customer he can sketch out ideas whilst referring to old reference books for inspiration.

Many companies offer good quality ironwork but the customer has to choose from limited selection of designs, many of which are quite unsuitable for the period house. "Modern ironwork installations are often a poor substitute to original work and the majority are quite hideous," says Peter. "I wouldn't put any of those gates and railings around my house."

He sees his service in four distinct stages – the brief, design and costing, quotation and manufacture and delivery.

Peter explains: "Once I have determined exactly what the customer requires, I prepare drawings for them, either freehand, computer-aided or both, depending upon the job. These drawings are examined by the customer and changed if necessary until the design is exactly right. I can then provide a quotation for the project which could include installation by myself if wanted. At this stage the customer pays a 50% deposit for the order."

"The drawings are e-mailed to Hai for the manufacture and if we are dealing with a major challenge, I will travel to Ho Chi Minh and oversee the manufacture, to make sure that everything proceeds to my liking. I can keep the customer informed of the progress with their order by e-mail on a frequent basis. When the job is finished, it is sent by seafreight container to me, and I deal with the delivery and final installation. Depending upon the size of the order, the process takes around three months from start to finish."

Peter's business has matured rapidly in the last three years. Selling to reclamation yards, his first project was to create a large bandstand. "It's a truly splendid structure," Peter says, "with sweeping roof, internal guttering and a wonderful ball bearing weathervane on top. Hai made a fantastic job of interpreting the drawings and cast iron detail. When it arrived I was staggered by the challenge of building it. It took me four days to erect the bandstand and it sold shortly after to a Japanese collector. It was taken down, crated and exported and then I knew I was in business. I haven't looked back since."

Much of his business comes via the internet. His company is a Salvo registered business meaning that he agrees to conduct his affairs by the Salvo principles. Supporters of the Salvo code are primarily dealers who buy and sell architectural antiques, antique garden ornament and reclaimed building materials.

"Many of my customers are salvage yards and they can find my website easily as it can be seen on the home page of the Salvo website www.salvoweb.com." This also means that Peter gets enquiries from architects, builders and developers as well as the private home owner.

"One of our recent exciting projects is to re-create gates for a privately owned castle just outside Edinburgh. The customer couldn't trace any records of the gates that hung originally at the stone piers of his Yew

PETER WELDON IRON DESIGNS

garden. So together we re-created a design that resembled gates found in other castles in the locality and of the same period. I even managed to introduce a secret family monogram into the pattern of the gate overthrow," Peter continues "For a manor house in Shropshire I designed Georgian entrance gates that had oak leaves in the ornament, because the lady of the house was keen on planting the oak woodland, that was once so dense on their estate."

"I also make inglenook firebaskets because it is almost impossible to find large firebaskets these days. Original firebaskets that still remain are usually collapsing or burnt out, so I have designed a splendid collection of log basket designs with or without firedogs."

"Many of the gate designs we recreate haven't been seen for centuries and often the gates are lost forever. Old publications and blurred photographs are all that remain. Even if you found some beautiful antique gates in good condition they are often unsuitable for today's purposes. Narrow widths of 9ft or 10ft are common with low overthrows meaning that although beautiful, an original gate can be unpractical for modern usage".

After just three years, Peter's unusual collection ranges from bridges to bandstands, tree seats to wedding swings, classic period gates to railings. If you can't find what you are looking for on Peter's website www.peterweldon.co.uk, then give him a ring on 0845 612 5746 or 07769 580040. He would be happy to post you some literature or, if you prefer, to arrange a personal visit to create a new and personal design exclusive to yourself.

