

HOUSE DOCTOR

'Is there any way we can sell our home in the next four weeks?'



Sam Dunn

Question: My wife has been offered a job in Europe that means we really need to sell our home within four weeks to release vital cash to help us to move. We've seen ads for "fast home-sale specialists" and property sellers that guarantee "90 per cent of your home value", and promise to sell your house within days. Are they legitimate? We're desperate to move but have no idea if these operators are real or not.

Neil Roberts, Lancs

Answer: The need for speed tends to come at a hefty price – in your case, it may be way too high.

A speedy sale is certainly a possibility if you have a highly prized property in a prime location with a good school nearby and decent transport links. But if this doesn't sound like your home, you'll need a miracle to be able to swiftly sell in today's glum housing market.

Hometrack says the average time on the market is 9.6 weeks, so the chances of offloading your home in less than a month are pretty remote. It's this that so-called "fast home-sale specialists" exploit. Typically, these companies buy homes – often for cash – where the seller is either deep in debt, seeking to speed up a

'You'll need a miracle to be able to sell your home swiftly in today's glum housing market'

divorce or separation, or relocating for a job.

Critically, they'll buy a property at a major discount of between 45 per cent and 10 per cent of its market price and then resell it at close to full market value to make a profit.

Gavin Brazg at online property guide, theadvisory.co.uk, says: "In reality, these companies only pay 70 to 75 per cent of market value and, in five years of analysing this market, I have never ever heard of any property being purchased for anywhere close to 90 per cent."

Purchasing at 90 per cent of market price would not allow for profit, given the expense of stamp duty land tax, legal fees, mortgage arrangement fees and interest.

If your need to move is great enough to warrant selling at a 25 per cent discount to market value, consider such a company. But if that's too much of a financial hit, you could try estate agents that specialise in quick sales and beating the market.

Start with www.GetAnOffer.co.uk. Mr Brazg says it has a strong track record of selling property within four weeks for 90-100 per cent of market value. "They work on 'no sale, no fee' basis and can help you avoid losing a bundle on the sale of your property."

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GOING WITH THE GRAIN

A new wave of craftsmen is seeking to capture the magic of old timbers and rustic beams, as they turn ancient trees into things of great beauty. **Angela Neustatter** reports

Adrian Swinstead's show-piece table – a toughened glass disk resting on three gnarled and gleaming black oak pillars, broad as elephant legs – exemplifies the delight he takes in making ancient history part of contemporary furniture design. A delight that began 15 years ago when a sculptor friend introduced him to the jet dark bog oak, rarely used by other furniture makers, that has, since, become a "passion" and central focus in many of his cabinets, cupboards, benches and tables.

The aesthetics of this choice are evident, but getting the wood does not come easy. Forget lorries driving up to his Bedfordshire home and delivering to the workshop set in the woodland, he says with a guffaw.

"Bog oak comes from forests that were buried thousands of years ago, beneath land near the sea. Climate change had caused glaciers to retreat, sea levels rose, the salinated trees collapsed and were overgrown by mosses which became peat enshrining them. The acidity of the peat matches the acidity of the titanic acid in the oak so it was preserved. Over time the wood darkened to jet black which is dazzlingly beautiful when you polish it.

Swinstead can be found prospecting in the Norfolk Fens where the melting of the ice cap began 5,000 years ago and here he finds most of his bog oak, although the oldest, about 8,000 years old, come from a valley in Wales, south of Snowdonia.

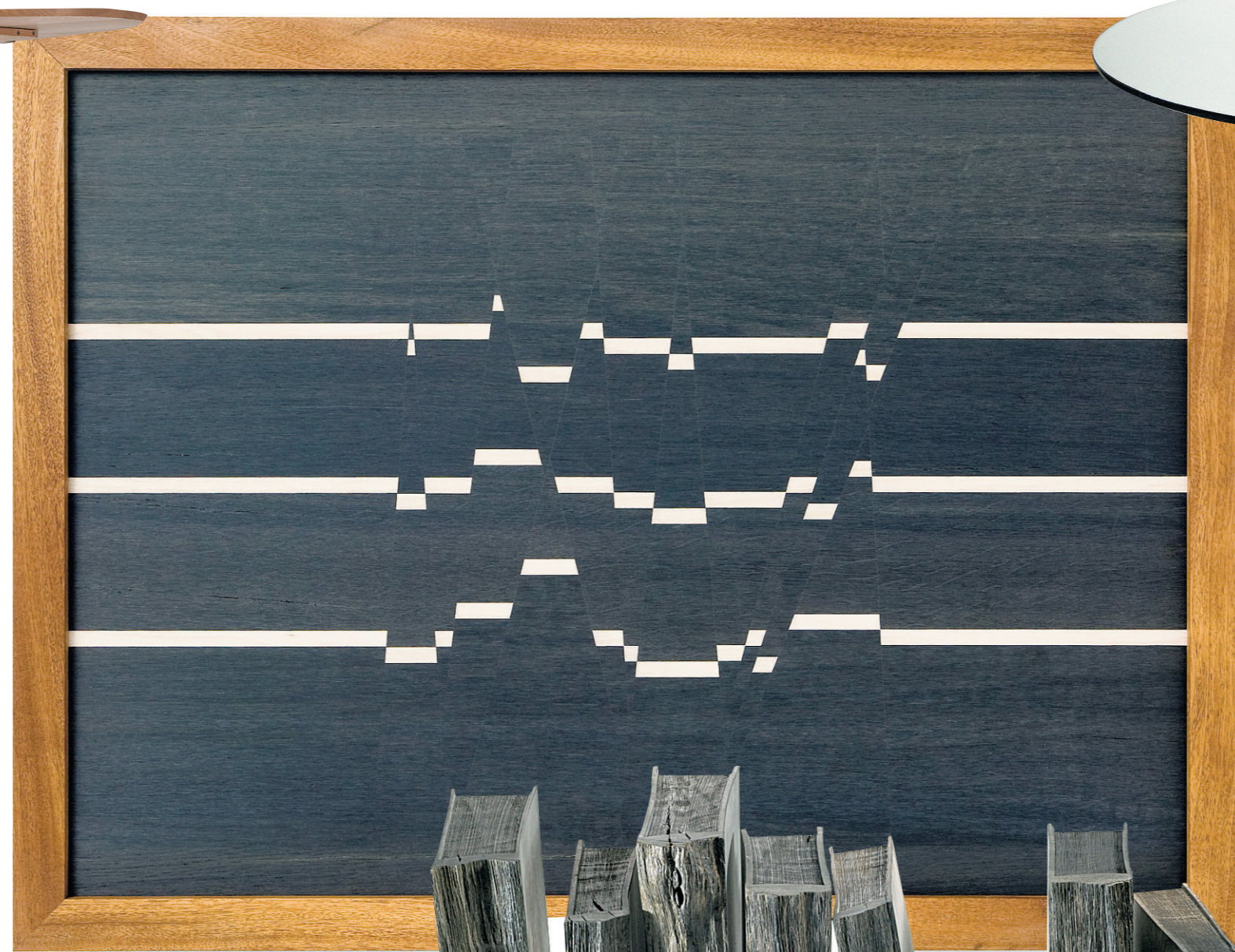
He sets off, hat pulled over his



shaven head, often in slanting rain, pick axe and shovel over his shoulder. He thumps the ground to hear the resonance that tells him there are trees. Once located, it usually takes several hours of excavating to uncover the bog oak which must then be hauled to the surface with a rope.

"The idea that this wood existed when our ancestors were erecting standing stones as an expression of their spirituality, and that it can then be translated into a piece of furniture exciting someone enough they want to put it into a 21st century home, is endlessly thrilling," he says.

Swinstead, who also uses beech, yew, sycamore, horse chestnut, an African striped wood called zebrano, and purple heart wood from Guyana – all sustainable, he is quick to add



'Swinstead can often be found prospecting in the Norfolk fens for ancient bog oak beams'

– is among an increasing number of furniture designers who are passionate about the provenance of the wood they use, environmental responsibility and creating hand-crafted pieces that will endure.

This integrity may be admirable, but choosing not to follow fashion trends – with their quick turnover, use of man-made materials and mass manufacture, which they see as deeply damaging to the environment – makes it difficult if not impossible to make a viable living.

This is something the new National School of Furniture, which opened this month – a joint venture of Oxford and Cherwell Valley College and Buckinghamshire New University – aims to address.

Dr Lynn Jones, head of the Furniture Department at the Buckinghamshire site, said: "It is vital that we learn to value traditional crafts such as furniture making, and that young people learn them before those who still have the traditional knowledge and skills are gone and it is too late."

It is encouraging, she says, to see students looking at how they can design cutting edge contemporary furniture in wood, but have craft techniques and sustainability as their guiding principle.

Which means, says Jones, that the school must find ways to educate public away from wanting furniture they will dispose of in a few years, to see the value in furniture that has been made with care and individuality. "A piece of furniture that is personalised and not one of

Hay-on-Wye festival with broad ribbons of wood curving upwards at an angle to meet the circular top, and a selection of slender-limbed sculptural chairs.

He says: "I see myself as having a modern approach to design but I am being guided by a responsible knowledge of what using the wood means. So it's thinking further than just sustainability. For instance maple might be the fashionable timber one year, then say cherry, but they have a cycle of say 10 years to grow. So woodland growers try to meet demand, then when fashion changes they have a lot of underused wood and nobody wants last year's fashion. I wanted to work with architects and designers interested in trees that don't go in and out of fashion so quickly."

"We need marketing focused

thousands the same, can easily become a part of your

life, living with you, gathering memories becoming an heirloom," she says

Philip Koomen established his furniture company in 1975, at the age of 22. His Pondlife Bench, described by *The Independent* in 1998 as: "organic and wildly eccentric" was original and inspired enough to bring commissions from Beate George Harrison and Neil Tennant of the Pet Shop Boys, and it has been re-created in many different interpretations.

The original was made from cedar of Lebanon and sweet chestnut thinnings, so giving a sustainable life to wood otherwise destined to be burnt.

That was an early inkling, but Koomen has taken on the importance of sustainability as integral to what he does. He sees a clear ethical question he must face: "My profession is a designer and maker, so I ask what am I doing with that?"

For the past 10 years he has been using mostly wood grown within a 30 mile radius of his Oxfordshire home, although he also uses oak, maple, cherry, ash, walnut, ripple sycamore, cedar of Lebanon and sweet chestnut – all from sustainable sources. From these woods come designs ranging from finely detailed classically-styled pieces to flowing modern creations such as a table made for the

on helping the public understand this and handing them some responsibility. But those doing the marketing haven't so far been particularly interested," he adds.

Katie Walker too is committed to putting environmental concern into her work and uses predominantly local wood – ash grown in West Sussex where she lives. She says: "Ash is a particularly good wood for me because I can pare it down to the structure and it bends easily which is important for the shapes I want." One of her newest designs is a Windsor rocking chair where she has steam bent a band of timber which creates the entire frame embracing a solid timber seat with fine ash spindles.

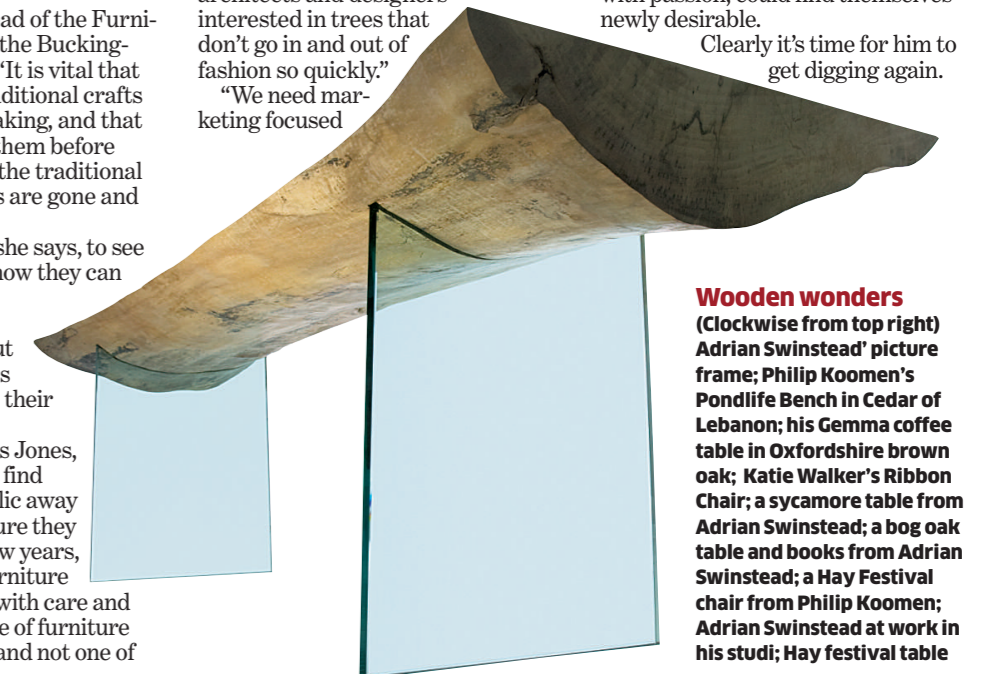
"I studied sculpture and I see the structure as the character of my pieces. I see my furniture as part of a contemporary design "conversation" where furniture that does not damage the conscience, is made with care and love and can be treasured over produced materials, is coming into fashion. I believe we offer serious competition for creations which are more about the wildest ideas, or greatest gimmicks which have dominated for so long."

Betty Norbury, author of *Furniture for the 21st Century* who has run the exhibition Celebration of Craftsmanship for 15 years, would like to share this optimism. She fears too many disadvantage themselves by an admirable, but possibly quixotic, idealism. And although there are discerning consumers who want something that has individuality, and quality that will give it long life, this idealism does not compel generations reared on Ikea culture.

So for the burgeoning number of designers like these, the provenance of the wood they use, and taking great care in the cost of any other materials they add, is a guiding principle. They are, unashamedly, new moralists in an area of creativity they believe must re-assess how it treats the planet in the desire to produce ever more cutting edge furniture.

Swinstead, after 25 years of striving, has steadily built up a small but devoted clientele for his designs. And since his exhibition he has been featured in American design magazines and had write-ups in the British design press, and there are new commissions on the books. He has a strong belief that furniture makers like himself, working with wood, and with passion, could find themselves newly desirable.

Clearly it's time for him to get digging again.



Wooden wonders
(Clockwise from top right) Adrian Swinstead's picture frame; Philip Koomen's Pondlife Bench in Cedar of Lebanon; his Gemma coffee table in Oxfordshire brown oak; Katie Walker's Ribbon Chair; a sycamore table from Adrian Swinstead; a bog oak table and books from Adrian Swinstead; a Hay Festival chair from Philip Koomen; Adrian Swinstead at work in his studio; Hay Festival table