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Going the extra 100 miles

The man for whom
marathons are
a walk in the park

All the tea in Cornwall

The West Country estate
with a Darjeeling feeling

Molto sexy

Twenty years of Dolce & Gabbana





Few people's career paths have been as circuitous as Alastair Graham's. After an MA in religious studies at Edinburgh University in 1993, Graham, now 36, worked at a youth retreat for the Archdiocese of Westminster. From 1994 to 1995, he made a valiant (but vain) attempt to become a Benedictine monk at Downside Abbey, where he had been at school. He then worked for the City insurance broker Harris & Dixon, before studying furniture-making at John Makepeace's legendary, now defunct, Parnham College. In 2001 he co-founded the bespoke furniture workshop Inner Space Furniture. His first commission was a 'brutal, slab-like' kitchen table in ebonised oak for Madonna's London home. Suddenly, and incongruously, this spiritual guy was designing for the material girl.

His religious calling, however, had always been mired in soul-searching. 'After Edinburgh, I applied to become a priest and met Cardinal Hume. He said I first needed to do some hands-on pastoral work.' But his stint as a youth worker came to naught: 'The retreat centre was near where I lived on King's Road, and knowing my friends were living it up around me was too much of a distraction.' None the less, he persevered, moving to the

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more secluded atmosphere of Downside, hoping this would do the trick until, aged 25, he gave up. 'The idea of total obedience to the abbot is central to monastic life, and I realised I couldn't hand over that much control of my life. It was time for a complete change.'

After years of applying himself to abstinence and silent prayer he was woefully ill-prepared for the 'raucous, bullish, combative' culture of an insurance brokerage. One cruel-to-be-kind colleague commented, 'You're really creative and wasted here.' 'It made me realise I wanted a career that wasn't separate from who I am,' Graham says. And there was one aspect of his life which allowed him to dovetail past and present: a passion for woodwork, instilled at Downside.

'Suddenly things clicked into place. The trouble was, I had experience in prayer-stool manufacturing and little else.' To his amazement, he got a place at Parnham (which took only 11 students a year). 'There was an inspirational tutor who was really into semiotics: he encouraged us to see

that furniture can transmit all sorts of meanings. I liked the fact that furniture-making could have an intellectual content. It wasn't just about saying, "Doesn't that chair look pretty?"'

That said, according to Graham, his approach today isn't cerebral. 'I like furniture that's really functional, that doesn't have anything unnecessary.' Not that this stops him from using indulgently de luxe materials, from macassar ebony to olivewood with an 'oyster' grain (so-called because its wavy pattern resembles an oyster shell).

In 1999 he set up as a designer-maker in east London before co-founding Inner Space Furniture with Colin Morrell two years later. Despite its metropolitan-sounding name, the firm operates from a cluster of rose-festooned farm buildings in South Harting, Hampshire. Its craftsmanship has caught the eye of the livery, the Worshipful Company of Furniture Makers, which has given Inner Space a Guild Mark – its award for excellence for one-off designs – for its Dunmore cabinet. This will be part of an exhibition in London called the Art of Furniture-making, showcasing 30 Guild-marked pieces. Graham himself has been made a freeman of the livery. 'It's entertainingly hierarchical. The livery doesn't have many young members, but our team of 10 are all under 40.'

In the past year or so Inner Space has created a vast oak dining table for a house in Wales; a bar and roulette table for a yacht designed by Candy & Candy, young whiz-kid designers to the jetset; and, for 13 Mansfield Street, formerly the London home of Sir Edwin Lutyens, dressing-table furniture adorned with domes that allude to those atop Lutyens's design for the Viceroy's Palace in New Delhi. For Graham, furniture-making isn't about self-expression: 'Every piece should serve the needs of the client.' Madonna's table, for example, includes a childproof feature that prevents it from getting damaged if prodded with cutlery.

In his private life, too, Graham, now moves in much worldlier circles: he is married to the former Calvin Klein model Tara Leon (a star of Robert Altman's film *Prêt-à-Porter*), while his brother-in-law, Justin Chambers, played Jennifer Lopez's fiancé in the film *The Wedding Planner*.

Graham seems to have found contentment as a furniture-maker. 'I love working with something where I can soon see the results.' Which certainly makes it very different from the protracted process of becoming a priest.

The Art of Furniture-making – A Celebration of Excellence is at Bonhams, 101 New Bond Street, London W1, August 4-14 (020-7248 1677; furnituremakers.org.uk). Inner Space: 01730-826633; innerspacefurniture.co.uk

Vocation, vocation, vocation

After stints as a monk and an insurance broker, Alastair Graham has finally found his true calling. By **Dominic Lutyens**. Photograph by **Philip Sinden**

The furniture-maker Alastair Graham with his oak Hazelwell dining table and dog Tallulah, at the Hampshire farm where Inner Space Furniture has its workshop