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haker, in-frame, painted and traditional – when asked what defines British kitchen design, this is often the answer given. But while all this may be true, and while Brits

may be good at it, modern UK kitchen design is now much more, according to the UK manufacturers who produce it.

As well as this, many manufacturers and industry experts agree that now is the best time to be an independent kitchen specialist for a number of reasons, including a returning confidence in the market and a willingness to spend that bit more money. This stems not only from a desire for good design, comments Bushboard's managing director Stuart White, but from continued investment in quality. "Today's customers are more aware of what they buy, how and where it's made and how their choices affect the planet. I think this is definitely stimulating demand in home-produced products," he says.

A number of manufacturers also credit the 2012 London Olympic games for shining a light on British design and, according to Omega head of marketing Chris Blackham, it could have been a catalyst for a lot of manufacturers to fly the flag and be proud of their products. "Across a range of industries, consumers are looking to buy British and buy local and our ability to understand our market in great detail is a big advantage over European competitors," he says.

Meanwhile, Paul Murray, managing director of curved solid wood door producer Curve Craft, boasts that it has "never seen demand so high". He believes the recession has helped by making people focus on home-grown product to support our economy. This, combined with a celebration of Britishness that started with the Olympics, has certainly helped. This has had a multiplier effect, seeing an increase in the number of new British kitchen brands that have entered the market," he says.

Another driver for the upturn in the domestic kitchen market comes down to its image of quality and craftsmanship – and quite rightly so, according to Masterclass Kitchens commercial sales director Steve Tough. "UK customers buying British can look forward to a level of customer service that is simply not possible for European manufacturers to compete with," he says. "Being

# Cabinet culture

Since the days of Chippendale and Charles Rennie Mackintosh, the British have been famed for their quality furniture production and cabinetmaking. It's still something we should be celebrating and many believe that now is the best time to be in the industry. Francesca Seden reports...



Left: Bovingdon kitchen in solid-oak, oak veneer and tulipwood by Cue & Co  
Far left: Arden in-frame kitchen by Steven James

UK-based means that queries can be dealt with both quickly and efficiently and, wherever possible, remedial or additional items can be delivered within 48 hours should they be needed."

As for our European competitors, some are also of the opinion that we can do contemporary design just as well, if not better, than them.

"While traditional kitchens are deservedly a British forte," comments Kessler commercial director Scott Slater, "we should be immensely proud of the stunning contemporary kitchens we make in this country and will never consider ourselves mere imitators of a German or Italian formula.

"I would challenge anyone to put our product alongside an imported contemporary kitchen and say the import was better from a quality or design point of view. In fact, I'd be confident we'd have the edge."

### Heritage and personality

But what is it that makes traditional design such a 'forte' and just how important is that heritage or a 'Made in Britain' badge to both manufacturers and retailers?

Of course, a big reason is a perception of quality, but this stems from the UK's rich heritage in furniture design. "Classic furniture designs are in our blood as British designers," comments managing director of Steven James Furniture, Steven Gordon. "Most traditional kitchen styles have been heavily influenced by the Victorians and Edwardians, who were in turn heavily influenced by the great British furniture designers of the 18th century."

Crown Imperial commercial director Tony McCarthy adds: "British design is often epitomised by its individuality, with heritage and culture playing a key role in creating the unique identities of many British products and services. Consumers tend to champion the 'buy British' philosophy and look for companies that deliver quality, longevity and design closer to home. In addition, consumers are more aware of the importance of retaining and investing in British craftsmanship to ensure it continues to be passed on to the next generation."

British design also continues to be held in high regard across the world, sought after for its creativity and innovation, says founder of Cue & Co of London, Charlie Borthwick.

"For such a small island, we offer so much choice, from heritage brands and manufacturers who have adapted to the ever-changing world without sacrificing their unique identity, to new up-and-coming designers who are

responsible for keeping Britain at the cutting edge of global design."

Symphony group marketing and retail sales director Simon Collyns agrees that traditional design is engrained in our heritage, and agrees with the comments of Slater at Kessler that we are now able to produce great contemporary kitchens, driven by the trend for open-plan living.

However, he also adds that heritage is important when talking about any brand, "as it gives the credibility and longevity that in turn provides a compelling story that consumers will buy into and understand".

A few of those most iconic brands in kitchens and furniture design with strong stories to tell must be Chippendale, Mackintosh and Sheraton. Thomas Sheraton, Thomas Chippendale and George Hepplewhite – known as 'the big three' – were designing furniture in the 18th century for Britain's aristocracy, with their work famed for its exquisite craftsmanship, and their style exported all over the world.

The Scottish Charles Rennie Mackintosh, working in the late 19th century, is cited as the UK's main proponent of the Art Nouveau movement and his style is still instantly recognisable today.

The fact that the Chippendale, Mackintosh and Sheraton branded kitchens are owned and sold by Omega today is proof of the power of that heritage, and that good design can truly stand the test of time. These brands, along with its aptly-named English Rose brand (formerly Omega Kitchens) are marketed under the company's Very British Collection, the hallmark of which is the use of traditional glue and dowel construction of its cabinets.

So Omega is clearly one that is capitalising on its Britishness, but does that marque really influence consumer purchasing decisions?

According to The Made in Britain campaign, the answer is a resounding 'yes'. The initiative was started by British cooking brand Stoves after commissioning research in 2011, which polled 1,000 adults across the UK. The research found that nearly half (48%) were confused about which brands could still claim to be made in Britain. A separate poll by Which? in July 2011 asked "Would a Made in Britain logo help you buy British?" and 84% said it would.

Since the campaign was launched in 2012, 558 British companies from a range of industries, including a handful from the KBB industry, have signed up. These include Mereway, Wren Kitchens, Carron Bathrooms, Bryan Turner Kitchens, Stirling Bathrooms, plus the KBSA and Aquavision, a manufacturer and



Right: Reno open-grained kitchen by Masterclass

distributor specialising in TVs for the kitchen and bathroom.

Since joining up to the initiative, Aquavision has launched a division in the USA, no mean feat in the world of home entertainment and media, says the company, which tends to be led and dominated by the giant multinationals.

Mereway Kitchens' sales and marketing director Graham Jones believes the Made in Britain marque is very important to consumers and cites evidence from Make it British – which claims to be a top source of information on British brands – to back it up. According to a survey, over 60% of respondents agreed that if an online store promoted its products as UK-made, it would give them greater trust in the site. More than 60% also said that knowing that something was manufactured in Britain made them assume that it was well made.

"Our British heritage is very important to our brand as we are a family business that celebrates 30 years in business in 2016 – all of these factors foster trust in our brand with the consumer," says Mereway's Jones.

He adds that, when investing in high-ticket items for the home, consumers want to know that they have invested wisely in a product that will last, so buying British will always be important, whatever the market conditions.

So the Made In Britain marque is great for raising the profile of manufacturing and ensures that customers are aware of the quality, design and innovation that is happening in the country right now, says Daval managing director Simon Bodsworth.

"However, customers won't buy a product just because they see a British flag on it," he adds. "If customers can get the same or better quality and service, then they would much prefer to buy a British product over another on the continent."

For stonemasons J Rotherham, "the all-British tag is a major differentiator and one that helps in the marketing of our products," says managing director Matt Rotherham. He is another to point to that label being a symbol of superior workmanship. "British firms can draw on a resource of people who have very good eyes for detail and can finish products to a higher standard than would be seen from the Far East, so the customer can expect to receive a superior product."

### Originality

Given all the boasting of superior quality, a strong heritage in furniture design, as well as the Brits' supposed ability to produce European-style contemporary kitchens better than the Europeans themselves, one is led to wonder why so many UK retailers sell German and Italian kitchen furniture, and why they don't do away with it altogether.

Mereway's Jones gives us his view: "German design is conservative and efficient, but lacks sufficient originality and personality. The clean, high-gloss look traditionally associated with German brands is readily available from British manufacturers.

"Italian design has always been recognised for its design flair and it was thought that British designers lacked this, but offered solid quality instead. This is no longer the case, as British design has improved its design credentials and now offers both style and quality.

"British design tends to be driven by localised trends, so while we are all Europeans, each country has its own design style and British design is more

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tailored for the British market."

However, some retailers say that if they didn't have a German or Italian brand in their showroom, they'd go out of business. "There are consumers that will only buy a German kitchen, in the same way they will only buy a German car," comments Omega's Blackham. "So it is important that as a British manufacturer, we continue to provide an offer that meets the needs of the British consumer, rather than trying to be something we're not."

Whatever the kitchen specialist is selling, be it British or European furniture, it's now widely thought that now is the time to be an independent KBB specialist, because of the return in confidence in the market, but also because of the rise of 'localism'.

This is defined by the period since the financial crash of 2008, where consumers have become increasingly distrustful of faceless corporations and want to buy from businesses that they feel are giving something back to the community.

They want a return to the security of "old-fashioned values", says Bushboard's White. "That's why localism is such a strong-growing trend and an opportunity for retailers to appeal to the hearts and minds of consumers with a more personalised and expert service that cannot be replicated by the impersonality and inexperience of the sheds."

Bodsworth adds that Daval has grown 15% this year as a result of the trend, as consumers want the assurance that both the products and the company are sustainable. He says Daval is helping its retailers exploit the trend by assisting them in redesigning their showrooms from simple cameo sets to lifestyle sets.

"This," he adds, "makes it easier for the independent to sell them a package, as they have one point of contact for all their design needs. As a result, we have designed and sold 150 displays this year, showing that the independent retailer is perfectly positioned to take advantage of this growing commercial trend."

Bill Miller, managing director of the KBBG, ends with a call to action for retailers. "Now is the time to promote ourselves, as we have never done before," he says. "Many consumers still continue to look no further than their nearest national retail chain to make their next big-ticket purchase. However, there is growing shift in the tide of consumer preference.

"Numerous retail surveys have charted the emergence of a new breed of more informed and independent-minded consumer, who wants to be different, who isn't so inclined to use brand loyalty or price as their yardsticks. They want products and demand a high level of service with a difference that makes them feel special."