

When a beloved chair's springs have gone or the stuffing's been knocked out of your favourite sofa, don't think skip it, think repair it. A Lincolnshire upholstery business is offering people the opportunity to learn how to restore their worse-for-wear furniture to its former glory. DEBBIE HALL finds out more

There's life in that old chair yet . . .

One of the reasons Geraldine Gunner was drawn to upholstery was the recycling aspect of the craft. With both upholstery and soft furnishings qualifications to her name, including an HND (obtained with distinction) in traditional upholstery at Bishop Burton College, in East Yorkshire, Geraldine is well placed as head upholsterer at the small family firm of Wellhead Upholstery, based at Nocton.

But she is generous with her skills, passing them on to students keen to have a go at upholstery themselves, and is Wellhead's head tutor on the courses it runs.

"A lot of furniture I restore is rescued as it would otherwise be going to the tip or off to be burned," said Geraldine, who had to learn the skills from scratch after switching careers.

She took early retirement from the police force in her early 50s and thought she would give upholstery a try.

Geraldine has been teaching for 20 years and Wellhead Upholstery has been up and running for three years. "It was totally new to me," said Geraldine, who lives by the motto, "Don't dump it – recycle it."

"I first started going to day and evening classes and went on to do an HND at Bishop Burton College – I could not get a qualification in the whole of Lincolnshire.

"My teacher was retiring and asked me to take on some of her classes and it led to what I do now."

Geraldine said: "I try to encourage people to do a bit themselves."

With Geraldine's expert guidance, students can learn how to re-use and recycle their own

furniture, preserving it for future generations to enjoy.

Her courses include sessions at the Branston Hall Hotel, Branston.

"I thought it was a nice idea for people to come on a day out and enjoy a three-course lunch as well," she said.

"I have also started doing full weekends, which enable people to see a project through from start to finish and complete the item.

"I tailor the courses to the people on them and even do one-to-one workshops if people wish.

"It's a craft motivation. I don't think the recycling aspect is in the forefront of people's minds, but that really dawns as they work through the course."

Residential and day courses in traditional upholstery are available at country house hotels in the Lincoln area and across England. There are one-day and weekend taster workshops and a one-day course that teaches caning techniques.

One of the things that sets Geraldine apart from other upholsterers or soft furnisheers is her "green" approach to the business.

She tries to find outlets for fabric remnants, from calico to hessian, cotton flocking to polyester wadding, to use in her work.

Of course many people are content to let Wellhead Upholstery take care of the restoration of their favourite items of furniture. "We offer the whole range of restoration work," said Geraldine. "I try to never say no. Sometimes it is difficult for people to find someone to do their items, but we really will do anything – from replacing zips on cushions to full restoration work.

RIGHT: Geraldine working on an antique chair. Wellhead offers a full range of restoration work



Geraldine Gunner: 'A lot of furniture I restore is rescued as it would otherwise be going to the tip or off to be burned' PICTURE: JOHN JENKINS

"The traditional side of the operation is very time-consuming and, when I give a quote, I have to explain that there are so many different steps and that it will take time and that I may need the item for several weeks.

"The materials are all specially ordered, but a number of fabric samples are available for customers to see and feel.

"I also have a look at the customer to see what sort of person they are and what colours they like, to make sure we get the right mix."

Antique furniture is often stripped right back to the wood and then traditionally upholstered in a fabric of the customer's choice.

"Although they have chosen the fabric for



Work progresses during one of the courses held at Nocton

themselves, mostly they haven't got an inkling what the finished item is going to be like until they are presented with it."

Clients receive a portfolio once their piece of furniture has been restored to its original condition – it shows the various stages of the work carried out.

Wellhead Upholstery offers services including hand-finished curtains and roman blinds and can also provide caning, rushing and seagrass refurbishments. It can also embroider garments for the workplace.

Geraldine can give no-obligation quotes, either at home or at business premises in the Lincoln and Newark areas. She also offers a nationwide service arranging collection and delivery by courier.

Geraldine, a supporter of Lincolnshire's St Barnabas Hospice, said: "We can be found at various events around the country demonstrating the skills of traditional upholstery."

The company employs two upholstery assistants and calls on other experts to ensure the best range of specialist skills is available.

"A lot of people find my website.

"I am also in a number of networking groups, which I find very good for

promoting the business," said Geraldine.

■ Day and weekend courses are held throughout the year at venues throughout the county. Prices start at £130 per day course and £250 for a weekend course. For more details, call Geraldine on 01526 323576, e-mail geraldine.gunner@btinternet.com or visit www.wellheadupholstery.co.uk

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