

IT'S DOWEL OR DIE

'During subsequent tests, in some cases supervised by professionals, the system proved marginally stronger than a comparable mortise and tenon and about 10 times faster to complete.'

Jim began working on detailed drawings and a prototype, then looked for a Canadian machine shop to produce the system. He patented his invention, but notes that that did not stop it being infringed during the 2000s. 'Interested parties should be aware that even if you have a valid patent, it is not foolproof, it is merely a deterrent,' he warns. Marketing was done at wood shows and through the internet, and as he embarked on promoting Dowelmax through YouTube he had to hone his woodworking skills – 'my methods were now in full view,' he says.

'At that time in the early 2000s, most woodworkers would never have considered creating an entire piece of furniture using dowels, for various reasons – including the difficulty in alignment and the strength of the fixture,' Jim says. 'These two problems were negated by the Dowelmax design. Videos of an entire project being created using dowels, together with supervised strength tests, proved over and over that the multi dowel system was extremely accurate and the strongest system of all, by a margin in excess of 30%.'

In 2001 he was awarded a medal for

the design at the *Tomorrow's World* science fair in London, and in 2002 he demonstrated the system on Canadian TV. The business progressed slowly but steadily during the early years, with numerous effusive congratulatory emails contrasted by 'constant complaints and reminders that most people considered the price of the package to be too high'.

Jim says: 'This brought us to an impasse. We were unlikely to survive financially if we maintained the manufacturing base in Canada, it was just not feasible from a business standpoint.'

'We needed to ramp up production and at the same time reduce costs, at which point we had little choice but to consider offshore manufacturing.' After three or four years of grief and bad experiences in Hong Kong and mainland China, he eventually found a reliable machine shop to produce Dowelmax. 'The initial samples were excellent and, surprisingly, of higher quality than we had received locally,' he says.

'A business concept such as this, including original idea, prototype manufacture, patent submission, production and marketing, is no mean task and can at times be daunting, but we never considered giving up. As hard as it was, it was always fascinating, particularly with respect to the amazing characters we met and talked to along the way,' Jim says.

'Conventional wisdom opines that a

good idea or product will require three years before commercial acceptance. Not in our experience. Our period of operation has extended over 20 years, and as a small company of three we had virtually no remuneration for at least the first 10 years. It was daunting, but we were determined and had no doubt about the value of the system. It has value for both the beginner and the expert, and could provide additional impetus for newcomers considering the craft.'

EARLY EFFORTS

So how did Jim first get interested in woodworking? 'I learned basic skills at school and found it necessary to learn quickly,' he says.

'The teacher's favourite wood was mahogany, and he had a two-inch square section which he cherished and kept handy. If you erred on a project and wasted any of his precious wood, he would strike you with the block of mahogany – enough to create discomfort but not damage. I am serious! He was however a great teacher, and I liked him very much. Mostly I am self-taught, and when I encountered a woodworking problem, I used logic and common sense to solve it, at the same time carefully weighing up all safety requirements.'

His first major project came when he emigrated to Canada. 'We were not exactly poor, but we were in no position to purchase furniture,' he recalls. 'Some time later the shipping crate arrived with our belongings, and it was large and constructed of solid pine. At that time, my woodworking skills and tools were very basic, but I decided to use the pine boards to make essential items of furniture. These included beds for the children and a couple of tables, all made using dowels and a crude aligning jig.'

'My first completed project was a pine dining table, very basic, a few knots, four by four legs, and a thick top. I was fairly pleased with the result. It had two benches for seating, and we used it for years with no problem or deterioration. A casual friend showed some interest and purchased the set for a nominal sum. Two weeks later she told me the corners were turning up. I checked it out and found she was right. I was so embarrassed. It was a lesson I will not readily forget. The

