

Within a box...

...there may lie all kinds of possibility – at least in the world of former ambassador, now fine box-maker, **Kieran O’Cuneen**

In Faversham, Kent, a joiner’s shop sits on a patch of land with a modest incline, dubbed, rather less modestly, Hogben’s Hill. Though the name calls to mind (we think) Hobbiton, it’s no work of fiction – the Hogbens have been here since at least 1086, when their name was recorded in the Domesday Book. But while the Hogbens’ joinery might well be a subject of interest in its own right, we’re not here for this.

At the back of the site, practically buried beneath the rubble of the now defunct building part of the business, is a small workshop. As you approach you’ll hear the soothing tones of Classic FM coming from inside... And suddenly you’re somewhere else entirely, a world apart from the rest of Hogbens’. This tidy, carefully organised space, with ’70s-style lino flooring and not a spot of dust anywhere, is the creative nerve centre of Kieran O’Cuneen. We find him here, work apron on, tinkering away at his latest elegant trinket box.

Actually, we haven’t really ‘found’ him at all. He found us – a number of weeks prior *GW* received a charming letter that made us smile, while the pictures enclosed, of a stunning range of boxes, held our attention still further. When we learned of the fellow’s past as an international ambassador, and his associations with one or two of the better known figures in woodworking, we knew that there was more to be told here than merely how to make one of his boxes. If we were to repeat even half of Kieran’s stories, mind, there wouldn’t be any room for anything else in this issue. Still, his route into woodwork is certainly one of the most interesting we’ve ever encountered and will take some explaining.



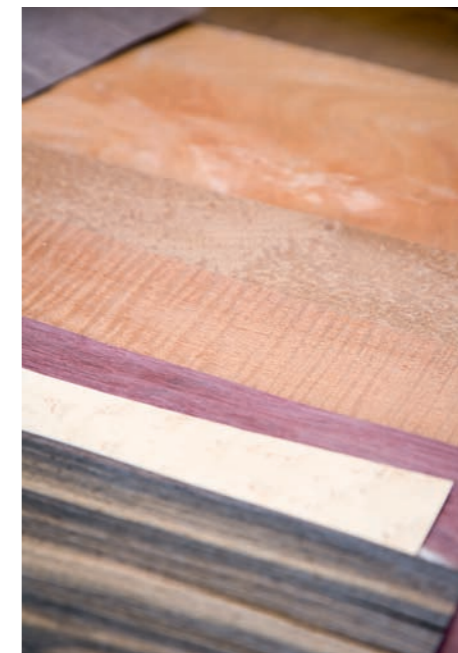
▲ Router pioneer Roy Sutton was a mentor to Kieran; his picture is pinned to the ‘shop wall



▲ Kieran’s timber stock is impressive...



▲ ...full of exotic rarities, as these samples show



▲ His veneers, meanwhile, are all off-cuts from a ‘commercial veneering company’ in Hythe



▲ A wide range of router cutters is essential for Kieran’s line of boxes

Africa’s calling

“My great-grandfather was a wheelwright cooper,” says Kieran, with one of those rare, gentle voices that immediately sets you at ease, “so I guess it’s in the blood.” Be that as it may, his father – who’d worked hard and “pulled himself up by the boot straps”, as Kieran puts it – had absolutely no intention of seeing his son pursue a ‘handy’ career. Born in Ireland, Kieran was brought up bi-lingual. Aside from Gaelic, today he speaks French, Italian, Portuguese, “about half” of Dutch, Zulu, and “English, with an Irish accent!”. His linguistic talents were to serve him well in later life.

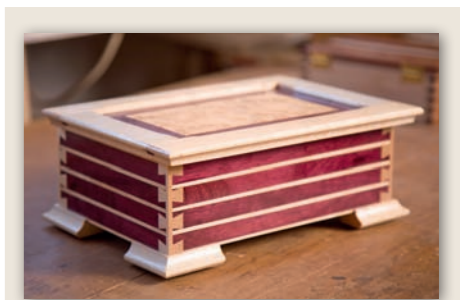
Kieran picked up Zulu during his ’20s, when he worked as a volunteer in South Africa. He did manage to get some handiwork in; his “bog-standard” carpentry included making windows, doors and huts, although, “I’d hate to see them now,” he laughs. Even so, Kieran wasn’t meant for woodwork – not yet anyway. Thanks to his volunteer work in SA and the fact that he’d picked up the Zulu tongue, he was employed in 1978 (aged 41) by the European Commission as a Regional Training Advisor, and he ended up becoming an Ambassador of the Commission of the European Union. What did this glamorous title boil down to? Well, it meant being stationed in Zimbabwe from ’81 and negotiating with one Robert Mugabe; it meant being the first ambassador from the EC to Angola while the country was a Cold War

“I’m just a monkey who’s learned a few tricks! I’m no pro”

flashpoint; it meant developing an uncanny friendship with the King of Swaziland; and it meant going to Somalia in ’93 after the famine, and to Rwanda after the genocide.

So, you’re thinking, the woodwork bug must have bitten after he retired. Not so. “It was while [I was in Zimbabwe] that I thought I wanted to do woodwork,” he explains. “I started taking night lessons to learn how to use hand tools. Then in ’83 I did power tools for six months.” After ’83 he got in touch with Roy Sutton, whose name will be familiar to many of you; the late Roy is well-known for his pioneering use of routers and jigs. Kieran did a short course with him which laid the foundations for his future practices. He remembers that, “Roy said, ‘Oh no, a man from an office. How am I going to get along with this guy?’ But we got on famously. Whenever I came back on my holidays I would visit Roy in Herne Bay for a couple of days.”

Kieran claims that Roy kept his interest going – after all, woodworking during his early ambassadorial missions was a pretty unpredictable game. In Swaziland (around ’89) he had a workshop; he had a tiny ‘shop in Angola too, but the heat was “so intense” that the joy of the hobby could be undermined. After visiting Somalia he came back to Brussels for a stretch and dropped woodwork



▲ Kieran uses many different timbers for his boxes, like purpleheart and sycamore...



▲ ...and ‘monkey puzzle’ (or parana pine)...



▲ ...while he also experiments with styles



▲ Kieran uses Incra jigs to make all of his boxes



▲ This American wooden clamp sees lots of use



▲ A purpose-built jig enables Incra crosscutting

altogether. It wasn't until he got to Surinam in '95 that he had a comfortable workshop set up and could really get on with things.

It probably seems surprising that with such a highly demanding – not to mention *important* – day job, Kieran should have spent any time at all messing about with wood. "Diplomacy can be very draining," he explains. "To be able to

come back to the workshop and make a beautiful box was so satisfying. It proved a lifeline." In fact, his solitary box-making dovetailed perfectly with the exhausting ambassadorial work – while the latter could be frustrating to the point of madness, the former almost promised accomplishment and so provided enormous relief.

Boxed in?

But why go for box-making specifically? During his many years of hard work abroad, and since returning to Faversham in retirement and setting up 'shop here, Kieran has rarely deviated from this area of woodworking.

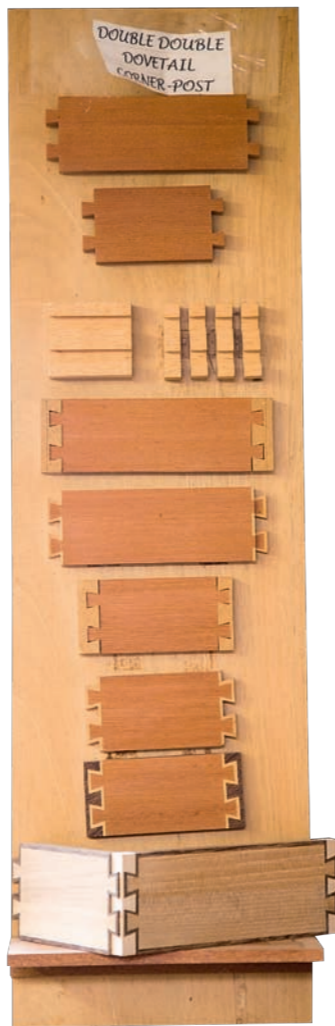
There are practical reasons. Moving around as much as he did, it simply wasn't possible to work on bigger, more varied items that would call for more kit and certainly better working space. The solution – 'I'll make boxes!' – wasn't



▲ Kieran took a course to master French polishing...



▲ ...and has devised this twisting contraption to rotate boxes by 'remote control' when polishing!



▲ The steps required in a double double dovetail

his though, it came from his mentor Roy Sutton. "Everybody needs a box," Roy told him. And so it was.

Of course, within boxes there are so many options and possibilities that, although these days he has space enough (relatively speaking) to try other avenues, he has plenty of designs and ideas to keep him busy for years to come. The scope, once you start delving into the matter, is truly huge. Apart from the usual



▲ Another course on carving has offered...



▲ ...the potential of little unique touches, as has learning to make wooden hinges (see below)

trinket boxes, of which Kieran has as you'd expect explored many different types, he's tried small boxes for rings and medals, much larger jewellery boxes with lots of different drawers and compartments, while most recently he's been trying out pen boxes.

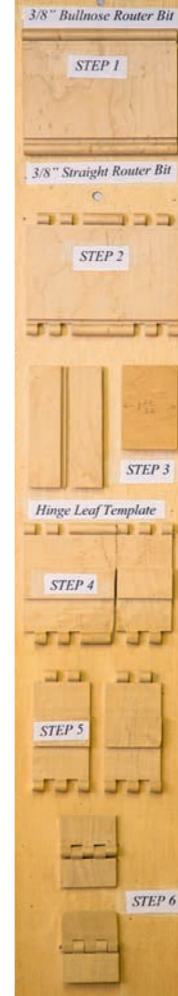
There are so many ways of giving a box a mark of individuality too, beyond just timber selection (though Kieran has nevertheless experimented with countless timber combinations). There are inlaid patterns, wooden hinges, mirrors... Kieran's even done a carving course recently as he's interested in carving images into the box lids.

Wherever does he get all his ideas from, you wonder? One source, believe it or not, is *Good Woodworking*; Kieran has a stack of back issues filling up one corner of his workshop and he has a folder of cut-outs from every article on box-making that has ever featured in our magazine. As you can see from the photos, though, Kieran's efforts have become increasingly sophisticated and so he has had to look ever further for inspiration. He doesn't say that he ever reached a dead-end, but the discovery of the Incra Jig certainly revolutionised things for him.

Incra-mentally

"I have to admit," says Kieran, "I'm Incra through-and-through. I simply cannot get the same perfection with hand tools, so I avoid them mostly." It was during his final postings in Surinam and Trinidad, between '95 and 2001, that he discovered the Incra; from Trinidad he travelled to Dallas to meet Perry McDaniel, Incra Jig devotee and author of the book, *Incra Jig Projects and Techniques*. For a man with a box-making passion, Incra offered a whole new world of possibility.

The Incra system allows you to measure and



make multiple cuts at very precise, minute Imperial increments, which means that you can ensure perfect joints down to the smallest of scales and can create Incra-unique, beautiful patterns, like the double double dovetail. Once you've got the hang of the system, you can fulfil some of your wildest woodworking dreams.

On that note, it did take some time for Kieran to master Incra, but with the help of Perry he got there, and he has never looked back. He's under no illusions, though: "Sometimes when the joiners praise my boxes I say, 'Well, I'm just a monkey who's learned a few tricks!' I'm an amateur, after all, not a professional." Even so, it takes a special kind of mind to come up with some of Kieran's designs.

Infinite detail

Not just making boxes for his own amusement, with quiet pride he says that he receives many different requests: "I was recently asked to make a sacred box for an icon painter, which was very interesting." But although he does make bespoke boxes for people, they're mostly gifts to friends and family. Some of those 'friends' are in rather powerful places, mind you; when he's been involved with special envoys to countries he formerly worked in, recipients of the

'Ambassador's Boxes' have included José Eduardo dos Santos, the President of Angola, and his old acquaintance, the King of Swaziland.

Kieran's has just launched a website (www.ocuneen.com) which may see this little cottage industry expand into a business of sorts, even if at present his focus isn't profit. Until that's up and running he has more than enough to be getting on with, however. He wants to try a few more variations on those new pen boxes, while that stunning jewellery cabinet still needs small magnetic catches.

"The variety is amazing," Kieran muses, as if taking a step back for a moment from the



▲ The 'range' includes tiny ring boxes...



▲ ...and, most recently, fine pen boxes



▲ Kieran's also tried stunning inlays...



▲ ...and scaled-up work – to splendid effect

engrossing detail of his daily pursuit. "That's what keeps me going really. It's always exciting when one starts to think what to do next. And then an idea takes form and you have to work it out..." Sometimes, the world of possibility can be too big, to the point of stifling creativity. Far from limiting yourself, concentrating on just one area can deliver vast rewards.

How to make one of Kieran's boxes, p60 ▶

Kieran's trinket box

Inkra Jig fanatic **Kieran O'Cuneen** shows you how to make one of his Ambassador's Boxes



Although Kieran's story (p56 to 59) is a fascinating one, the boxes he makes are almost as enthralling. You've seen some that he's made in the past, which has hopefully given you a few ideas of your own, but he's also kindly agreed to show *GW* readers how to make one, step by step, giving us the chance to see one up close. He's kept the design reasonably simple so that anyone can give it a go.

One thing to make clear from the outset is that Kieran uses the Inkra Jig system to make nearly all of his boxes. The system comes highly recommended from Kieran and our Andy King, though its army of international supporters will also testify to its potential! If you don't have access to any Inkra kit, you can still make this box or one similar, just bear in mind that you may find the hand or power tool work required to make such tiny finger joints rather challenging.

Right then, in Kieran's very own words...

Design choices

I decided to use English sycamore for the front and back of this trinket box, while West African sapele seemed like the way to go for the sides. Contrasting woods can highlight the humble finger joint and transform it into a thing of beauty, I find.

I thought that a sapele lid would link in with the sapele sides rather sweetly, while a central 1/2in (13mm) strip of sycamore would reflect the sycamore front. As a final touch, I decided to add two 1/2in (13mm) strips of tulipwood for a bit of decoration. It's these



▲ Pic.1 Here are the materials you need for Kieran's box – sapele, sycamore, tulipwood/ sycamore banding, off-cuts, and 1/2in cutter

little extra thoughts that can make your box that bit different.

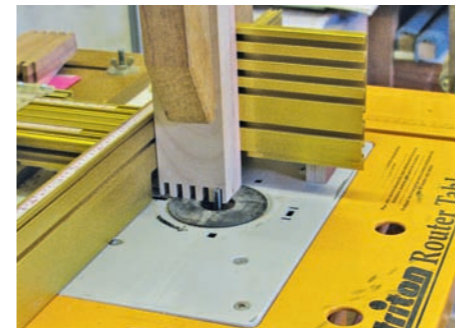
The box was further enhanced with butterfly hinges that are easy to fit, as well as a decorative clasp, while I lined the inside with self-adhesive red velour – my favourite.

Cutting the joints

As has been mentioned above, I made my joints using the Inkra Jig (produced by Taylor Design Co. of Dallas in the USA). I went for the D template and used a 1/4in router cutter. See the *Inkra Master Reference Guide and Template Library* for full details.

Install the 1/4in bit and set the depth to 1/2in greater than the stock width. Centre the bit on the stock and line up the chosen centre cut. Cut the finger joints on both ends of both the front and back pieces; you'll find this under the "A" series of cuts in the *Reference Guide*. As you can see in **Pic.2**, it's best to cut these both at the same time so that you get identical joints. Use a backing board to avoid any splintering as the bit exits the cut.

Next you'll need make the cuts on both ends of the side pieces, again holding them together as you cut along with a backing board; these are the "B" series of cuts in the *Guide*. The first cut (nearest the fence) will be an open cut so make several light passes of 1/32in or 1/64in to avoid splintering and ensure a clean cut.



▲ Pic.2 Cut the finger joints in both back and front pieces, held together (the "A" series of cuts)



▲ Pic.5 The grooves in the side pieces are stopped grooves to avoid cutting through the fingers



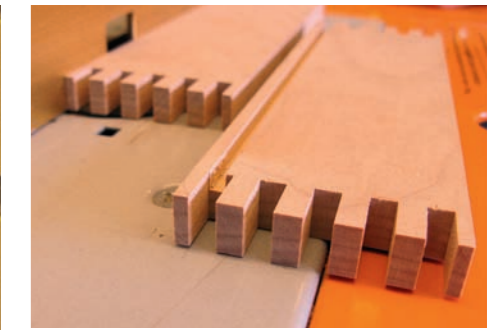
▲ Pic.7 Clamp it all together until the glue has dried. Remove excess glue



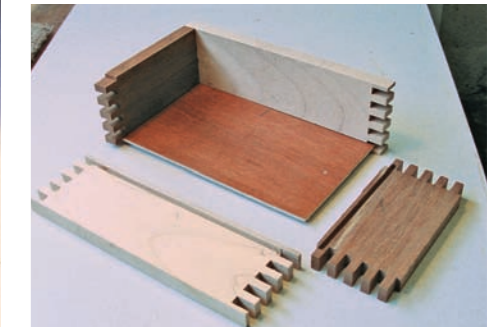
▲ Pic.3 Cut the side piece joints ("B" series). The first cut will be an open one; make several passes



▲ Pic.8 Next, onto the lid – you'll need to cut grooves in it for the sycamore/tulipwood banding



▲ Pic.4 Cut grooves in the front and back pieces to take the bottom board



▲ Pic.6 Apply glue, then assemble the front to one side, slide base in place and add the second side



▲ Pic.9 For a better presentation, you can gently pass the lid over a rounding-over bit

Grooves and assembly

Next you need to prepare the grooves in all the pieces to take the bottom panel. Install a 3/32in (about 5mm) bit in the router and set the height at 1/2in and the distance also at 1/2in from the fence. The 3/32in distance from the fence ensures that the groove will be within the joint on the front/back pieces. Thus the front/back can be simply pushed over the

cutter using a rubber-soled push block.

For the sides stopped grooves are necessary to avoid cutting through the fingers. Cut a piece of softwood to the length of the sides and mark points at 1/32in from each end. Make test cuts until you're satisfied and then place two stops to coincide with these marks. Carefully lower the sides onto the cutter at the first stop and slide them over the cutter to the second stop.

Now it's time to bring the box together.

First, apply glue to all the finger joints, then assemble the front and back to one side, slide the base in place and add the second side. Tighten the joints by hand and check that the box is square. Using off-cuts to protect the wood, apply clamps all around to ensure that all of the joints remain a tight fit while the glue is setting. Wipe away any excess glue with a wet rag or sponge.

Preparing the lid

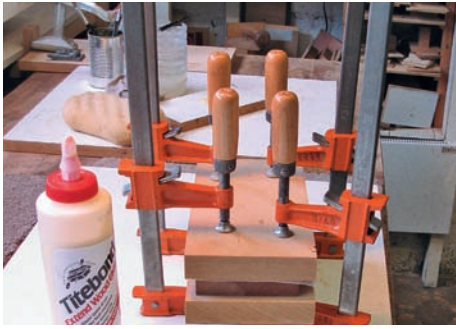
Sand the 8 x 5in (204 x 125mm) sapele lid on both sides. I used a random orbital sander and finished with a 400-grit abrasive paper.

Then you'll need to cut the grooves for the inlaid sycamore and tulipwood strips. For the tulipwood bands, install a 1/2in (13mm) cutter in the router, set the height at 1/2in (1mm) and the distance at 1/2in from the fence. Pass the lid from each edge over the cutter using a rubber-soled push block and cut the grooves.

For the groove for the sycamore band, reset the cutter distance to coincide with the centre of the top of the lid and make the cut.

CUTTING LIST			
Section	Timber	Sizes (inches)	Sizes (millimetres)
Front/back	Sycamore	2 1/2 x 1/2 x 8	64 x 13 x 204
Sides	Sapele	2 1/2 x 1/2 x 5	64 x 13 x 125
Base	Plywood	4 5/16 x 5/32 x 7 5/16	110 x 4 x 186
Lid	Sapele	5 x 1/2 x 8	125 x 13 x 204
Banding	Sycamore/tulipw'd	1/2 x 1/32 x 8	13 x 1 x 204
Centring board	Softwood	2 1/2 x 3/4 x 8	64 x 19 x 204
Backing board	Softwood	2 1/2 x 1/2 x 8	64 x 13 x 204

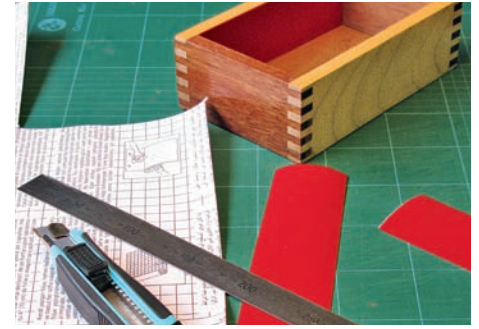
Project



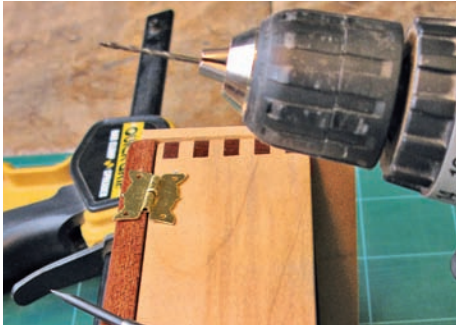
▲ Pic.10 ...and clamp tightly with MDF blocks to ensure they stay in place



▲ Pic.11 Once dry, lightly sand down the lid with 400-grit paper



▲ Pic.12 Measure and cut some lining for the inside – Kieran opted for his favourite, red valour



▲ Pic.13 Pre-drill holes and, holding the lid firmly in place, screw in the butterfly hinges



▲ Pic.14 1mm holes were predrilled into the front and the clasp was attached with pins



▲ Pic.15 Kieran finished by applying many layers of French polish. You could also use varnish

After all the grooves have been cut, glue the bands in place and clamp them between two blocks of MDF to ensure they remain firmly in place until the glue sets. Finally, lightly sand the lid top (400-grit) to ensure a smooth finish.

Final touches

Carefully measure the inside of the box and cut four pieces of velour for the front, back and sides. Be careful that they line up square at each corner and gently rub them into place.

Next, measure the inside of the velour-covered box and cut a piece of cardboard 1.5mm less all around. Glue a piece of ¼in (6mm) foam to the cardboard (to act as a cushion for the bottom). Cut a piece of velour 1in (25mm) wider than the cardboard and cut a triangle from each of the corners so that it can be folded around the cardboard with the foam face downwards. It should then slip easily into the box to form a cushioned bottom.

With the lid held firmly to the box, screw the butterfly hinges to the back. Using ¼in round



TIP

A nice touch is to use a ½in diameter punch to cut four circles of velour for the corners of the base of the box.



▲ A devout user of Incra Jigs, Kieran calls himself an “Imperial Empiricist”, as he always test-cuts first

head brass screws, I predrilled the holes with a 1.5mm bit. Similarly, the clasp was pinned to the centre of the front – I used 6mm pins and predrilled 1mm holes to guide them in.

The box was finished by applying many layers of French polish. This needs to be done over a number of days and some may find it easier to apply varnish.

And that’s it – you’ve made your very own handsome-looking trinket box! ✂

Information

Hinges, clasp and velour: Hobby’s in London (www.hobby.uk.com).

Banding: www.originalmarquetry.co.uk

