

# A Tale of Three Pilgrims

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I had the title 'A Tale of Three Pilgrims' in mind when I thought about an Inaugural Lecture following my appointment as Professor of Design Education towards the end of my career at Loughborough Design School. Regrettably the appointment had been delayed by several years and by the time the invitation to give the lecture arrived I had retired and a combined Inaugural and Valedictory Lecture did not seem appropriate. Still you never know when things are going to 'come in' and the title works just as well for the Design and Technology Association's invitation to write a final Reflection piece for the journal. The Three Pilgrims are of course guitars! The instruments span my Loughborough career and are symbolic of conceptions of design innovation that have been at the heart of developments during this period.

I joined the Department of Design and Technology at Loughborough University in 1984 and a few years previously, and few miles to the south in Leicester, Paul Tebbutt was perfecting his design for the Pilgrim guitar shown in Fig 1. Having obtained financial backing and brought-in a technical manager, Paul Tebbutt continues the story of the Pilgrim as follows:

'Then there followed a period culminating in exhibiting at the Frankfurt Trade Fair where the World's music dealers and press gave us unprecedented approval; we returned to England knowing that we held the key to success.



Figure 1 Paul Tebbutt's Pilgrim Guitar (1980)

There then followed a difficult two years during which we set about the task of finding craftsmen equal to our desired quality and we have succeeded in gathering together a team of the highest calibre.

The Pilgrim Guitar is craftsman built to a degree of perfection we are sure you will find truly pleasing. Every aspect of our guitars has to meet a standard of quality control seldom found in today's hurried world.'

Pilgrim used the highest quality materials and the most exacting manufacturing

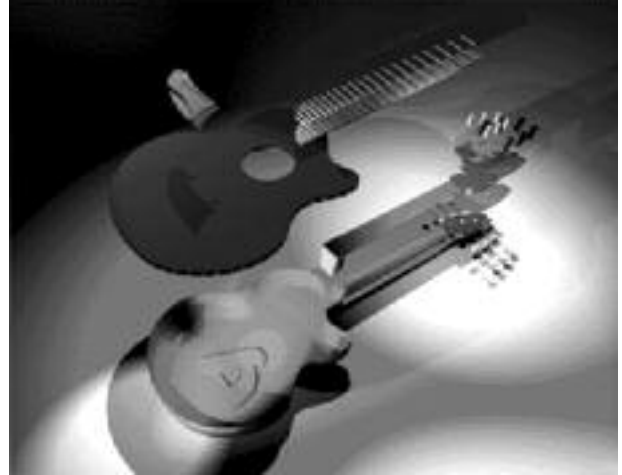


Figure 2 Designing-in quality

methods, and the guitars were correspondingly expensive. I bought mine second-hand, but it still cost rather more than I should have spent. Nevertheless it is still doing sterling service and being played most days by a friend of my daughter. The 1980s were a tumultuous period as the UK struggled to improve its international competitiveness and 'craft' and 'quality materials' as a basis for design innovation were already in retreat. There was a drive towards achieving 'quality through design' and investment in automated manufacture to improve productivity. In general education in the UK, Craft, Design and Technology (CDT) had lost 'Craft' from its title by the end of the decade. Amongst my first responsibilities at Loughborough was being in charge of the Machine Shop and the associated initial training, so I am sure I was at least ambivalent about some of the changes, having been a great admirer of the high level of craft skill that the Metalwork and Woodwork A-level students brought with them to Loughborough. Which brings us to our second Pilgrim.

I had always agreed with the view that design academics in higher education should endeavour to sustain and develop their practice, which was one of the motivations behind my involvement in the 'polymer guitar' project which I pursued with Dr Owain Pedgley. It was really a research project relating to design innovation and one of the outcomes was a 'Frankfurt Show Prototype' embodying the capability to design in quality as indicated in Fig.2. We were aiming to improve many aspects of guitar performance – including playability, ergonomics, form and cost – and partly influenced by the wasteful production of toy 'plastic' (polymer) guitars that could not

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be played. These appeared to us to be largely a waste of materials, time, design, manufacture and distribution effort, although some children no doubt got some fun out of them for a short period at least. Anyway, although well-received at Frankfurt, we could not get the business arrangements in place to start manufacture. Pilgrim No.2 was my record of this project. Rob Armstrong had bought up the remaining guitar parts from the Pilgrim factory when it closed in the late 1980s, and he made this instrument for me with a foamed polycarbonate soundboard.

Pilgrim No.2 is also a waterproof guitar that I discovered I needed because after becoming the musician for Charnwood Clog Dancers, I found out that their dancing made it rain! I had previously been using a 30th Anniversary (all wood) Rob Armstrong guitar. It was made from wood that Rob had collected and been seasoning for decades, and I was playing it to looks of horror from informed guitarists as I tried to shield it under an umbrella. I continue to use 'the waterproof Pilgrim' to play for clog dancing and most people do not even notice that the soundboard is polymer. It sounds just like a guitar (as would be expected) and a very good one at that (as Rob Armstrong made it).

I bought Pilgrim No.3 when they became available early in 2010, and largely out of curiosity. John Hornby Skewes Ltd (JHS, a UK-based musical instrument company) had taken



**Figure 3 Pilgrim – Rob Armstrong waterproof hybrid**

the Pilgrim guitar to the Far East where it had been copied. JHS also took an instrument that Rob Armstrong designed in 1980 to be copied as the basis for a Gordon Giltrap Signature guitar, and these formed the start of their award-winning 'Vintage Series'. I have a few issues with Pilgrim No.3, largely surrounding the neck and fingerboard, but otherwise it is a fine instrument. It has a loud, strong sound, which is less subtle than my original Pilgrim, but it is great for playing outdoors and, particularly for Morris tunes. However beyond the technicalities of guitar-making lies a much stronger message.



**Figure 4 JHS Vintage 'Far East' Pilgrim**

In the mid-1990s when we started the 'Polymer Guitar Project' at Loughborough, the reputation of guitars made in the Far East was for being 'cheap,' OK for beginners' etc. A decade later they were mass producing well-crafted Pilgrim guitars at relatively low cost. Manufacturing in the Far East was now offering quality as well as cost advantages. By the time I retired from Loughborough Design School in 2010, students were building CAD files for their final year projects and then deciding whether to send them to CAM

machines on campus or companies in the Far East, and considering which would be fastest! On a more negative note, an American guitar company was reporting difficulties in obtaining supplies because of the emerging world-wide shortage of tonewoods. So the global economic model with the Far East as the manufacturing powerhouse is already beginning to show the 'sustainability cracks' that we had hoped the Polymer Guitar Project might help to alleviate, but, of course, that would only have been a 'drop in the ocean' in combatting the environmental damage that mass production and global trade are creating.

It is certainly a challenging task for future design and technology educators to retain relevance in such a complex, global context, but there is clearly still scope to believe that design innovation has a strong future in the UK. Perhaps the greatest challenge of all is to recognise and understand those aspects of 'craft,' 'design' and 'technology' education that enable sustainable design innovation to happen. If the Inaugural lecture had taken place then making some contributions relating to these matters founded on my 28 years' experience at Loughborough Design School would have been its agenda, so it's probably fortunate that I retired when I did. There are some tricky questions here.

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### **Errata**

With regards to the research papers 'Technical Objects Between Categorisation and Learning: An exploratory case study in French middle school' page 32 and 'Phenomenology for Introductory Architectural Analysis Courses: The pentagon methodological approach' page 58, published in Design and Technology Education: An International Journal 20.2, the full list of authors/co-authors was not published. We apologise for this omission and the full list of authors is as follows:

### **Technical Objects Between Categorisation and Learning: An exploratory case study in French middle school**

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### **Phenomenology for Introductory Architectural Analysis Courses: The pentagon methodological approach**

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