

Discretion as well as quality in the Monks Eleigh workshop

TRY pumping Suffolk joinery owner Barrie Keitley-Webb for the names of his clients and this normally bluff but courteous man will become uncharacteristically evasive.

If he wanted to, he could reel off a list that might include international financiers, foreign embassies and other diplomatic missions, governments, major architectural practices and the rich and famous.

He doesn't — because discretion is what customers value as highly as the quality of the joinery produced in his firm's Monks Eleigh workshops.

However, there is a price to pay for keeping mum and that is a certain anonymity in his home county.

"No one really knows we are here," he complained. "I've been thinking that we ought do as everyone else does and produce a brochure."

Were he to do so, it would be packed with examples of

By Michael Hughes

elegantly proportioned, classical doorways and stairs, windows and wall panelling, shelves and furniture, in oak, mahogany and other rare and exotic woods.

It could also show pictures of some of this country's most distinguished addresses, including the private library of a London home, which cost its owner well over £100,000 — just for the one room.

"No one who actually does the work gets that sort of money, of course," said Mr. Keitley-Webb, shifting uneasily in his big black wellies.

Currently on the stocks is a £15,000 to £20,000 project which will soon grace the reception hall of a London embassy.

Which one, joinery man-

ager Melvin Piper wouldn't say. "If we disclosed who we worked for we wouldn't get any more contracts."

The project, an architect-designed classical screen about 20 feet long and ten high, took two or three craftsmen seven weeks to complete, said Mr. Piper.

"The panelling, which is in Brazilian mahogany, is backed with steel plates and the windows will be fitted with bullet-proof glass.

"No, they are not expecting trouble," he said. "This is a fairly standard specification for this kind of work."

Most of the work completed by KW Joinery at Monks Eleigh is destined for London, although some does go overseas.

A panelled room originally intended for the White House, ended up as the centrepiece of a specially built home in New England.

The company also had a contract to supply "ye olde worlde Englishe" pub interiors to Japan, made from old beams and distressed timber.

Tastes in the Far East must have changed, because that business has dried up now, said Mr. Piper.

Mr. Keitley-Webb, who founded the joinery business about 16 years ago, is a slightly larger-than-life character, distinguished by a black eye-patch — "I'm a war invalid, y'know."

He is said by his staff to be a farmer and — dressed in wellies, old cord trousers, a



● Mr. Keitley-Webb, right, discusses a project with foreman Richard Smith, left, and manager Pip Piper.

pullover and an overall — he does admit to keeping horses.

However, he prefers to describe himself as "a Jack of all trades and master of none."

Back in the early 1970's he joined forces with Monks Eleigh craftsman Mr. Cyril Garnham, who had worked extensively with Suffolk-based architect, the late Raymond Erith, on the

restoration of 10 Downing Street.

They were bad years for launching a new venture. "Cyril couldn't understand why I wanted to do it, but I just love wood," said Mr. Keitley-Webb.

The business started with a staff of four at Paddock Hall, a village landmark perhaps noted more today for its dereliction than as a

source of quality joinery work.

Mr Garham finally retired about two years ago, but not before he had seen the business firmly established.

There is now a staff of 12, mostly local people who already had or have acquired the skills needed to produce the standard of work that KW's clients expect — and receive.

They operate from a series

of extensive workshops and there is planning permission for a new machine shop to be built on adjoining land.

There is also permission to convert the old hall.

"Yes, it is a beautiful building," Mr. Keitley-Webb agreed. "One of these days we will turn it into offices and showrooms."

"But we never seem to get around to it."