

## House&amp;Home

## A cut above the rest

**Artisans** | David Wilkinson and his team use traditional techniques to create and conserve classic chandeliers. By *Jonathan Foyle*

Light waves are the ultimate interior dressing, picking out important features in a room even as they alter the colours in paint and fabric, capturing sheen or hiding shortcomings in shadow. Once the summer has passed, the ambience of an evening is determined by artificial illumination. Lighting – whether cast as scattered rainbows through crystal prisms, the warm glow of a dozen candles or glare of a fluorescent strip – will make or break a house in the months in which we spend most of our free time at home, so it ought to be well chosen.

David Wilkinson, 57, holds the warrant as glass restorer by royal appointment to the Queen, and he is the UK's premier chandelier maker. Wilkinson's manufactory sits among hop fields south of Sittingbourne in Kent, by the 15th-century timber-framed house his family call home.

His wife and four daughters work as administrators in the second-floor office in a building between the house and workshop. Its pine-clad interior is like an overscaled sauna, except for the 20 or so gilded and glittering chandeliers overhead, made by the hands of Wilkinson's 18 employees.

The Wilkinson family were originally from the West Midlands. Wilkinson's



An Adam-style chandelier in crystal, which sells for about £50,000

Photograph: Stephen Burns



A lathe in the workshop



David Wilkinson, who runs Wilkinson's in Kent



Acetone is used to clean up decorative colour

grandfather, Reginald, started out as a glass cutter in his brother's company F Wilkinson & Co of Stourbridge, in 1922. At the British Industries Fair of 1929 their sparkling exhibits included biscuit jars, fruit bowls and creamers, jugs, powder-puff boxes and grapefruit dishes. But the Blitz years demanded that molten sand and potash be invested in replacement window glass rather than glassware, and the fortunes of Stourbridge tableware were shattered.

Reginald moved to Battersea, south London, to set up his own business. By now his son Arthur – Wilkinson's father – was a teenager and ready to join the family firm, which made cut-glass

tableware for the haunts of the well-heeled, including Harrods. In 1954, an antique dealer came calling, hoping a chipped decanter could be recut. Impressed with the results, he returned with £5,000 of business – a small fortune then. And so the Wilkinson company was reborn, in a larger, two-storey workshop in Temperley Road, Balham.

Reginald and Arthur had closely studied antique glass and made a decision to revive the 18th-century method of glass cutting, which involves incising "V" shaped grooves with two separate cuts rather than use a precisely faceted blade of the sort introduced, for greater efficiency, after about 1810. This may seem