

The Countryman – Natural Chairs

Paul Morris meets a greenwood worker crafting contemporary style furniture from traditional methods

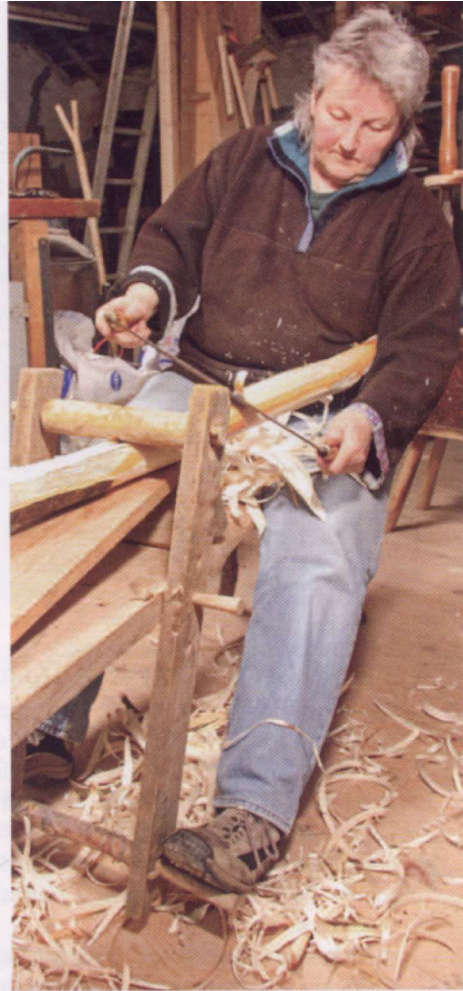
Smooth operator

GO TO any major craft show and you will see a number of craftsmen and women making and selling furniture. Few of these do it the hard way of using a pole-lathe, shave-horse, and traditional hand tools. Fewer still make their furniture such that the natural form of the wood is retained. Liz Child of Natural Chairs is one of this small band.

The ethos of her business is to practise minimal environmental impact and sustainability, and demonstrate that contemporary styles can be achieved with traditional methods. Using the traditional foot-powered tools is hard work but immensely satisfying. Couple this with the fact that for many of her pieces, Liz works with the wood to produce items that are strong, look good and have great character.

Using a traditional tool such as the pole lathe has the advantage of producing a most tactile finish. She agrees the wood is not completely smooth like a machine turned piece is. This gives a pleasant, tactile, quality to the wood, reminiscent of antique furniture. And, when finished in natural oils and homemade furniture wax, it is nice to touch and run your fingers across.

Not all the components are turned on a lathe. For some, she starts out by splitting wood along the grain to bring out the natural elegance and inherent shapes. This method allows its natural curves to inform the design of the furniture and these forms are retained even when the wood is smoothed and polished. For instance, the branch of a tree may be split into quarters; a natural curve



Smooth ...Liz uses a shave horse to follow the wood's natural curve and grain. Above, the corner of a hand-turned child's chair

in the wood providing the shape for the back of a chair with small indentations on one side being reflected as small bumps on the other. It needs to be seen, and felt, to truly appreciate the nature of making furniture this way – the product of a true artisan. As a result many of the pieces are not symmetrical; no two items are the same. This obviates the need for flat, dried, machined pieces of wood with the risk of warping as they try to take up their natural shape. Liz's wood is unstressed, enabling her to make the most of the form with little chance of it going out of shape.

Wood split along the grain tends to be stronger than machined pieces as the grain is not broken. Willow for cricket bats starts off this way (see *Countryman*, June 2006). For much of her work, Liz builds the furniture in this manner. One reason she uses self-powered tools is for the environmental considerations. This means that less energy is being consumed in their manufacture and use. Not only that, little cast iron, steel, copper or plastics have been used in the construction of the machine – predominantly wood from natural sustainable resources.

As her work has progressed, Liz has built up a collection of tools and equipment that enables her to make the furniture in a sustainable manner: the majority being home made or second hand.

Following her interest in sustainability and the environment she gained a degree in Human Ecology in 1997. Then more recently she gained a C&G award in cabinet-making to hone her woodworking skills, although the course was based on conventional methods of manufacture.

Making greenwood furniture has developed from being a hobby that she has pursued for over 10 years, to that of a trade that, although not full time, makes a pleasant alternative to working in an office. She rents a studio in the upstairs of an old mill on a nearby farm – an example of 'recy-

cling' an old building that would otherwise fall into disrepair. Here she has the space and light to make her fine furniture, although in the winter it can get rather cold.

Liz uses locally found quality recycled timbers – wood that might otherwise go for firewood – but her mainstay is local greenwoods from the small sustainable woodlands of the West Wales coast. She would love to have her own wood to extract ash, oak, beech and wych elm, coppicing or cutting as required. Churchyards are a source of yew trimmings that, for a small fee to the church funds, can be harvested for more rustic style furniture while at the same time tidying up an overgrown tree to the benefit of the church.

Her current focus is on children's chairs; although a range of products are made, each being unique. Little is made to stock; most work is by commission. Her influences include Gudrun Leitz – an accomplished greenwood furniture maker – who encouraged her to go 'free-form', and James Krenov whose book *The Impractical Cabinet Maker* makes sense of her own approach. The Arts and Crafts, and Bauhaus movements influence design, and the love of woodland and bird ecology, with its essential reciprocity, has its impact on her too.

Liz is working to value the hidden woodlands of the West Wales coast, support sustainability and 'social justice' for the natural world, promote a modern revaluation of the artisan woodworker while reducing the environmental footprint of the furniture maker. Part of this promotion will include the running of courses so that Liz can impart her skills and ethos to others interested in making fine furniture.

Old crafts can work in the modern age. ■

Liz is a member of the Association of Pole-lathe Turners and Greenwood Workers. Her work can be seen on her website www.natural-chairs.co.uk or tel 07811 640031