

Two chair-making workshops in the Midlands

Tuesday 30 October 2018

Lawrence Neal Chair-Maker: When is a chair more than a chair?

In 1971, when we first moved to Oxford, we chose for our kitchen-dining room Gimson no 3a ash rush-seated chairs made by Neville Neal. They have been in daily use ever since. Their elegant traditional country style is timeless. They are comfortable and very well made, light in weight and yet very strong.

The story of Ernest Gimson learning how to make traditional Herefordshire ladder-back chairs from Philip Clissett at the end of the nineteenth century is well

known. Less well known is that those chairs are still made today. After his death his workshop foreman Edward Gardiner continued to make chairs to Gimson's designs at Friars Marston near Rugby. He took on Neville Neal as an apprentice. In 1958 Neville took over the business and moved to the present workshop in the nearby village of Stockton, where his son Lawrence is still making the chairs today.

The workshop is surprisingly compact with just enough space for the various stages of making a chair by hand. On the walls hang chairs in various stages of construction or awaiting collection. Ash and oak logs are piled up in the garden. A circular saw is housed in an outbuilding, as are formers used to hold the ladder-back splats and rear legs of the chair in shape after they have been boiled and bent. Splats held in a woodworking



Lawrence Neal rushing a chair. Note that he is rushing the seat before putting on the arms as it makes the rushing easier. *Photo Neil MacLennan*



Sam Cooper using a drawknife on the horse. *Photo Jeremy Bate*



Richard Platt working on the lathe from Edward Gardiner's workshop. *Photo David Dewing*

horse are shaped with a drawknife. Legs and stretchers are turned by hand on an electric- powered lathe. Some of the formers are the original ones used by Ernest Gimson and the lathe was Edward Gardiner's.

Lawrence, with succession in mind, has recently taken on two apprentices, Richard Platt and Sam Cooper. There are plans for the workshop to move to Marchmont House, Berwickshire when he retires in about two years' time.

Lawrence's story and the story of Gimson chairs is beautifully told by Lawrence himself in the film 'The Chair Maker' – <https://www.holeandcorner.com/films/the-chair-maker-lawrence-neal>

Neil and Sally MacLennan