

# WORKING WITH GREEN WOOD

Steve Warren

It seems that I was the only RFS member to take up the opportunity of a three day course 'Introduction to Green Woodwork', at Clissett Wood at the end of August 2000, (RFS Newsletter No.31), therefore it falls to me to make a short report on what turned out to be a most challenging and rewarding three days.

When Clissett Wood came on the market some ten years ago, under a different name, it was bought by a consortium of seven including Gudrun Leitz who saw the possibilities it offered. Gudrun came from Stuttgart and initially trained as a teacher. Later she found her vocation in green woodwork in the West Country. Gudrun's expertise was recognised when she was commissioned to make some 400 oak balusters for the reconstruction of the Globe Theatre in London. The consortium also included Mike Abbot, acknowledged expert and writer on green wood affairs.

Always subject to proper planning permissions, an access drive was built, and an area cleared and levelled for workshop and kitchen facilities. Clissett Wood has since built up a reputation as a centre of excellence in the teaching and practice of the art and craft of working with green wood.

Sited in the middle of the wood a couple of hundred yards from a quiet country lane, the working centre comprises a large workshop area, a kitchen area, and basic amenities. The working and kitchen areas are made up on the levelled ground with a simple natural pole structure supporting large tarpaulins. Elsewhere in the wood there are smaller covered structures for individual or common accommodation.

All work at the centre is carried out under open-sided shelters and, as there is no power supply, all woodwork is done using only hand tools, shave-horses and pole-lathes in the traditional fashion. Safe working practices are taught but because green woodwork is inherently safe, accidents at work are rare. Hard work and absence of saw-dust make for a healthy outdoor life. Many of the students find Clissett Wood a welcome retreat from workaday life.

Most of the equipment and some tools are hand-made on site. Timber is either selected from the surrounding woodland by careful management, or it is bought in from other sites; for example, routine tree surgery and forest management schemes.

Accommodation in the wood comprises camping in small clearings or under the purpose built shelters. Lodgings are also available locally but most students remain in the wood for the duration of a course. Food is provided and, in my experience, it is always more than adequate and almost entirely vegetarian. My first, self-cooked, breakfast of bacon sandwiches was viewed with suspicion, not to say disdain and I soon abandoned the provisions I had brought along and joined in the masses of food supplied as part of the course.

Food is cooked either in a clay oven or over a raised, open, wood-fired hearth upon which a variety of much blackened iron kettles are kept in steam throughout the day. These serve to provide not only a constant brew of tea but also any hot water required for ablutions at a primitive wash-place in a not too well concealed arbour, and also for the shower, afforded by a bucket and a string arrangement, in another leafy glade. Toilet facilities incorporate environmentally sound principles, albeit in a primitive location where a communal dry closet is sited. There are no services in the wood other than a single mains water supply.

The weekend started with Gudrun giving newcomers an introduction to the amenities at Clissett Wood, going to great lengths to explain the necessity for proper use of the dry and wet closets. Teaching comprised hands-on instruction in the proper use of saws and axes and the shave horse for the preparation of timber and in the use of turning chisels on the pole lathe. After that, the philosophy was one of 'You decide what you want to do' although most of the projects were aimed at producing simple woodland chairs. Other popular projects include the construction of pole-lathes and shave-horses. Some of the students I met would be there for a week or more, or they would return more than once in the year to complete their projects. We were also taught how to look after tools and how to sharpen them properly.

Whilst the simple option might be to produce a standard kitchen chair, the opportunity is there to use the natural form of the wood to make 'freeform' items. It was the latter which left me with the strongest impressions. As a three day student I limited my ambitions to learning how to use the pole-lathe, producing a rolling pin and a pair of almost identical



candle sticks in alder wood. Some of the other students had already created several highly commendable 'freeform' chairs, one with an elm-bark woven seat, but not in the three days, I hasten to add. Gudrun and her very able apprentice, Ben, were always on hand to give advice or practical assistance.

There are many skills to be learnt when working with green wood, not the least important of which is in the selection of timber for a particular purpose. For example, we were shown several samples of ash where the disposition of the growth rings is a deciding factor. Too close together and the wood will be lacking strength: too far apart and the wood will be too 'stringy' to turn well.

Having cut the tree-trunks to length, split them into billets, perhaps four for a set of chair legs, and shaved them roughly to round on the shave-horse one then turns them on the pole-lathe. It is normal practice to leave the tenon oversize. They are allowed to dry to a desired moisture content before turning to a tight fit. When fitting to the mortises in an elm seat of 'wet' wood for example, the seat will shrink as it dries out to give an extremely tight grip on the leg tenon. There is a range of techniques to ensure strong joints, many of which are illustrated in Mike Abbot's book 'Green Woodwork'. Of course they can also be learnt at Clissett Wood.

When turning candlesticks, spindles, chair-legs or whatever, one soon finds that it is not strictly necessary to produce identical items, and indeed it is rarely possible to do so with green wood. I was shown some turnings made by an acknowledged expert which only on close scrutiny could be seen to have several discrepancies.

A visit to Clissett Wood is recommended to anyone who wonders, as I did, how a simple wooden chair could still be sound and safe after a hundred or even two hundred years of regular use. Here, one can work to one's own design in a truly creative atmosphere. If you are a little weak in the arm or have a bad back you do not need to worry about heaving heavy timbers about: Gudrun Leitz throws tree trunks about as if they were matchsticks.

There is quite distinctly a 'back to nature' ethos and, having spent much of my own life in the outdoors, my impression of Clissett Wood was one of astonishment that there are so many other people who also believe it possible to live without the amenities and comforts of the 21st century.

*Steve Warren*