

Mursell's Clever Windsor Ways

Once a commercial fruit producer, James Mursell became a maker of Windsor chairs, and now brings a modern approach to the tools, chairs and courses he produces and runs



Drive through the pretty little Sussex village of West Chiltington, past the church and across some fields and you reach a pink farmhouse looking over paddocks for ponies and horses. Near the house is a battered old shed, seemingly on wheels, that has seen better days. "That was our mobile shop," James explains, "for selling pick-your-own fruit. We used to pull it behind a tractor all over the place." Next to the shed, in far better condition, is the imposing 1950s white barn, with impressive new green roof, that is The Windsor Workshop, housing the many facets of James Mursell's life as a chairmaker, tutor, author and toolmaker.

James Mursell was brought up here, at Churchfield Farm, and for 15 years, having studied botany at Cambridge and spent some time in industry, he grew fruit on the farm commercially. Gradually the enterprise became unviable, and eventually he reluctantly closed the farm in 2001, the land now being used for grazing and livery. "The upside of that difficult decision," he says, "is that it allowed me to devote all my time to Windsor chairs."

He'd already been spending his evenings making chairs, and at one point joined one of Jack Hill's courses at West Dean College. Before long he was helping Jack with his courses at West Dean, and eventually took over when Jack became too ill to run them himself. In those early years as a chairmaker he was drawn to the Windsor chair designs of England and America, studying the construction and gradually finding out how to make better chairs, and at one point he went to America for a course to learn about green woodworking.

"There is very little doubt that Windsor chairs can become an addiction," he writes

Pic. 1 James Mursell at his stand-up shaving bench. The foot pedal is linked to the pivoting jaw at the top

in his new book, *Windsor Chairmaking*. "My father taught me to appreciate the pleasures of making things of wood, and that lodged in the back of my mind and lay dormant for almost 30 years. Ten days of formal instruction and 15 years of self-apprenticeship have brought me to where I am now – and I'm still learning."

21st Century methods

The self-apprenticeship and an enquiring mind have led James to find an intriguing balance between the traditions of Windsor chairmaking, and the potential to work more efficiently and effectively, using appropriate innovations.

Take, for instance, the shaving bench he uses at shows, combining both workbench and shaving horse, and is used standing up (Pic.1). This is a technique our colleagues from *Living Woods* magazine have embraced, not only because it means you can talk to visitors but because you are more flexible standing. Two blocks (or cheeks) are bolted (so that they can be removed) to the top of James's bench, with the vice jaw pivoting on a bar. Rails run down to the floor, where there is a pedal for the user to exert pressure with one foot. Such arrangements work surprisingly well, and you can swap feet if one gets tired. Traditionalists may scorn, but this is the modern way to go about green woodworking.

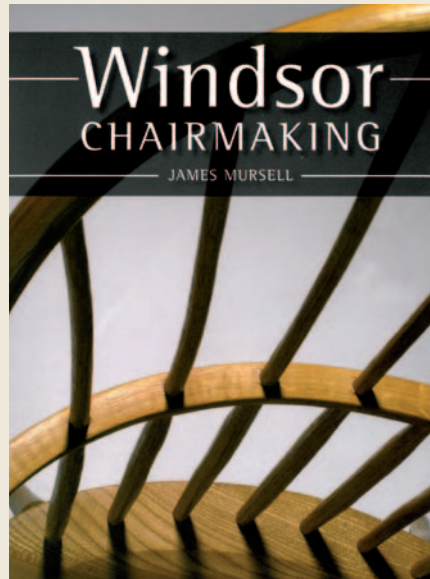
And because he works inside people don't always realise that he produces most of the parts for chairs green, when they are soft and more pliable. He uses conventional, powered lathes because he's not that enamoured by pole lathes and can't see any problem with working in the warmth of a workshop. Watch out though, for developments of a person-powered lathe because a recent visit to the Association of Pole-Lathe Turners and Green Woodworkers annual bash (the Bodgers Ball, about which



Pic.2 James with the shuttering ply covers that dampen the noise of his extractors. He now makes travishers for bottoming chair seats (above). His winch is for benching arms and bows



More details



James Mursell's new book *Windsor Chairmaking* is a great balance of technique and tradition, looking at the history and design of Windsor chairs, but also showing his very modern approach, with lots of useful tips and insights. Signed copies are available through James's website, thewindsorworkshop.co.uk, for £19.95 plus £2.75 p&tp. You'll also find a short video plus details about the tools James sells and the courses he runs. Alternatively call 01798 815925 for details.



you can learn more in *Living Woods* magazine) has got his inventive mind going.

For the last few years James has been making and selling his own tools, notably wooden spokeshaves with Ron Hock blades. He has the bodies cut out locally with a CNC machine, to keep costs down, but does the finishing himself. The tools are also supplied in kit form, so for lower cost you can make your own. The spokeshave block you buy has a recess for the blade and holes for the blade tangs and for two grub screws that make adjustment so much easier than on most traditional wooden versions.

For some time he couldn't source blades for the maple travishers he makes, but now Ben Orford, the knifemaker in Herefordshire, produces them for James. Obviously James sells them to the budding chairmakers who attend his courses. It is an impressive business, full of joined-up thinking.

Working wood

It's no surprise James has taken to making spokeshaves and travishers because chairmaking, he says, is "90% shaping and 10% joints," compared with cabinetmaking, which is the other way round. He has interesting thoughts on the path people take when they begin making chairs, comparing their early efforts with 'mistake-free' mass-produced furniture.

"When one starts making Windsor chairs for the first time, the challenge is to complete the chair with as few mistakes as possible," he explains. "There are so many steps in the process that mistakes are almost inevitable, but eventually the process will become instinctive. Until those mistakes are eliminated in the hand-made chairs, the good quality machine-made chair may be considered superior. The individual maker has the time and opportunity to aim for aesthetic perfection. In fact he must strive for it, as this is all that sets his work apart from the mass- or batch-produced competition!"

It is to smooth that journey or path for less experienced chairmakers that James runs courses and has written his book. In *Windsor Chairmaking* he explores the materials, techniques, tools and processes of making chairs, generously gifting readers so many of his good ideas. He looks at the making of two specific chairs but most interestingly explores the body language of chair design, asking new questions about



Pic.3 The Axminster Engineer's Vice that is fitted to each of the benches in James's workshop, and which is essential for holding the shaped components in chairmaking, which is, he says, 90% shaping and 10% joints



TIP

Pic.4 James uses foaming polyurethane glue for assembling his chairs, distributed in little milk bottle caps. A good idea he says anyone should do is have a magnet on the side of a pillar drill so the chuck key never gets lost. Or, we retorted, you get a pillar drill with keyless chuck!

the way chairs are designed. It is a topic we will explore here (and doubtless in *Living Woods* too) in the future.

Working outside

Not all James's work is done in his large, bright barn, because in further outbuildings he has areas devoted to timber storage and conversion, plus a bending and drying room. It is here you'll find his winch-powered frame for bending chair arms and bows, where his steaming box sits atop an electric urn, and where in an insulated kiln

Traditional techniques, modern ways



Having bent the arms and spokeshaved the sticks and rails in the first couple of days on a course with James, students then put the green parts in his kiln for rapid drying, so that they are ready a couple of days later for finishing and assembly. His well-engineered frame (right) is for bending double bow shapes, and behind it you can see his store of shuttering ply. It is that wonderful and relatively cheap material that he uses to build stands for lathes and other aids around the workshop. Each of the electrically-powered lathes has a shuttering ply 'lectern' of calipers and the three tools you need for turning green wood (below).



Pic.5 James uses shuttering ply to make pretty much everything in the workshop (except chairs, though that would be interesting). Turning green wood means you need fewer tools

students condition the stretchers and arms they make early in the week for assembly in the final two days. It is a very clever system that means every student makes a chair in the five days, with very little help from James. The kiln comprises an oil-filled electric heater and a fan, and is made from shuttering ply, one of James's favourite materials. It is a refreshingly modern approach to a traditional technique that's typical of James Mursell. We can't wait to see his take on the pole lathe next: it's bound to be interesting. Watch this space.