

THE WINDSOR CHAIRMAKER

Newsletter of The Windsor Workshop

Late Summer 2009



Contents of Newsletter :

- *Panorama (p. 2)*
- *Curious Windsor (p. 2)*
- *Shows (p.3)*
- *Spokeshave Testimonials (p.3)*
- *Jack Hill 1933 - 2009 (p.4)*
- *Bandsaw (p.4)*
- *Coming Back for More! (p.5)*
- *Course Dates 2010 (p.5)*

Welcome!

By the start of my next course at the beginning of September I will have had two months away from teaching. This has coincided with my family's school holidays, but there has been no chance to ease up in the workshop. A steady stream of orders for interesting chairs has come in and it has been great to have an intensive period of making again. There's a paragraph and photo about one of these orders later (Curious Windsor!), and I'll talk about another in a subsequent newsletter.

I exhibited at a most unusual show at the beginning of July – the Bignor Church Weed and Wild Flower Festival (www.bignorchurch.org/wandf2009/wandf2009.htm). This was the third such festival in four years as it's held every other year, and although I had been invited last time this was my first attendance. The small church at the foot of the South Downs, which has services only once per month, was transformed into meadow and woodland. The pews were entirely hidden by vegetation and the centre piece was a waterfall cascading into the aisle. An article in the Saturday Telegraph ensured lots of visitors and I had more interest in those two days than at almost any other show!

My brother Tom manned a stand for me at the Retirement Show at Olympia in the middle of July. This was a much larger venue and affair than I usually go to, but with the experience gained it may be worth doing again – depends on the response!

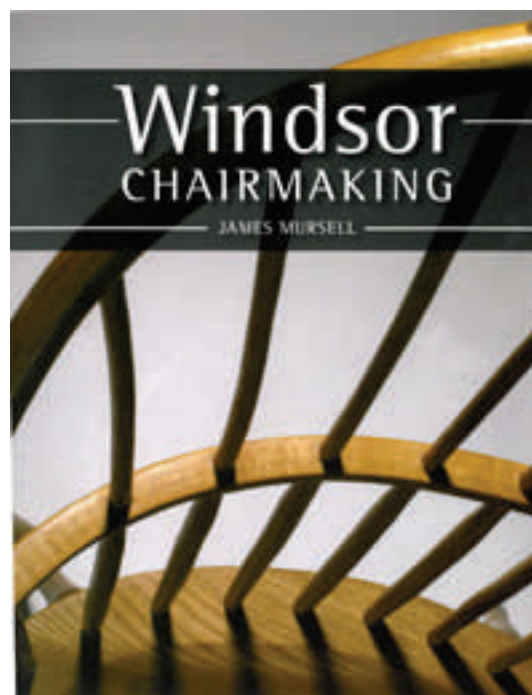
At the end of this newsletter you will find course dates for the first six months of 2010. There are just a few places left before Christmas, but with these new dates there is no excuse not to book onto a course!

The book is back at the typesetter for corrections to the first proof, and I have been assured today that it should be on sale by the end of November. Here's the front cover to whet your appetite!

On a different note, we made hay on the farm at the beginning of July. My daughter and I got it all under cover by 10.30pm on the day that it was baled, and an hour before it began raining. It doesn't seem to have stopped since! The upside is that the farm has never looked so green and the horses have always had plenty to eat. Thank goodness my fruitgrowing days are well behind me.

Enough digression - must get back to the workshop to make some more spindles!

James Mursell



www.thewindsorworkshop.co.uk

"dedicated to Windsor chairmaking"

Panorama of Workshop



One of the joys of teaching is meeting people with amazing skills and experiences. Dave Castle attended a course at the end of June, and one of his many interests is photography. While many photographers have taken my courses, none have specialised in panoramas. Here's Dave's photo taken just before we began work one morning. It only took a minute or so to take but I wonder how long was required on the computer!

Thanks Dave!

Curious Windsor

I have just completed an order for four of the most curious Windsors that I have ever seen. I was asked to copy a copy of an old chair. This is not ideal as each maker alters the chair just a little and some of the original maker's ideas and techniques can get lost.

Almost everything about the chair is unusual: the seat is flat and is made of two layers at right-angles to each other; the stretchers are arranged diagonally with a halving joint in the middle; the top bow passes through the arm and continues through the vertical arm post; the spindles are not glued or wedged (or both) into the seat, but are pegged alternately to the seat and arm; finally 19 spindles represents a lot of work for each chair!

The copy that I have worked from has a badly split seat. This has arisen from the crossed wood making up the seat. The top half has the grain running across the seat, while the lower section has the grain running from the front leg to the back and the wood is pegged and glued to the top. The wood used for the top was obviously rather damp when the chair was assembled and when it was brought into a dry environment it shrank but was prevented from moving by the cross piece underneath. The seat first became concave on the top, but eventually the stresses became too great and it split – badly!

The chair is made entirely of ash. Sadly I did not have access to air dried ash for the seat (I have now found a good source) and used kiln dried wood. What a horrible material! The kilned ash is hard and brittle – avoid at all costs. The wood for the remainder of the chair came from my normal supplier – the Cowdray Estate. I'm off there next week for another load of ash. www.cowdray.co.uk/forestry.htm

The spindles were made with a trapping plane, though I would probably turn them in future. I guess the originals were turned in some way.

Mounting the top bow was one of the trickiest jobs. The holes in the arm and arm-posts had to line up, and be at the correct angle, and the only way of inserting the spindles was to drop them some way through the seat and tap them up through the bow when it was in place.

It was a challenge! *Is anyone interested in making it on an advanced course next year?*



Upcoming Shows

Two shows are coming up shortly, both with [Classic Hand Tools](#), that you might be interested in attending:

Festival of the Tree 28th – 31st August at Westonbirt Arboretum, nr. Tetbury Gloucestershire

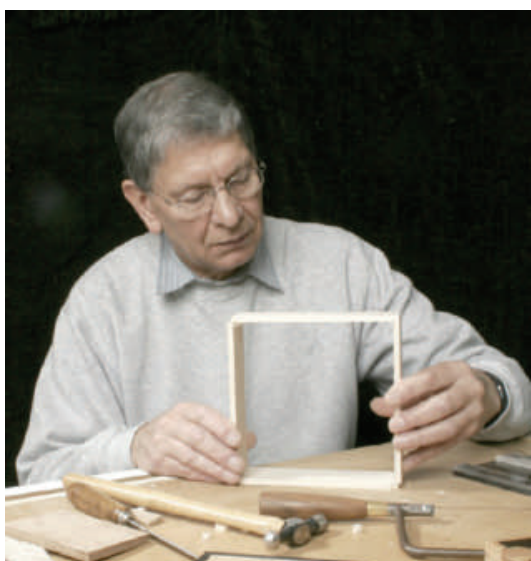
This is the biggest wood show in the country, and is a must for anyone with even the remotest interest in wood. Many people spend two days enjoying the show and the arboretum (which is worth a visit on its own). As usual I'll be in the Classic Hand Tools marquee demonstrating spokeshaves and travishers, and promoting my chairmaking courses. www.forestry.gov.uk/forestry/INFD-6XCLUX

European Woodworking Show 19-20th September at Cressing Temple Barns near Braintree, Essex.

This is a brand new show. Mike Hancock of Classic Hand Tools has pushed the boat out to create this unique show. His West Dean show was great in June this year, but this promises to be in a different league altogether. Have a look at the website for more details www.europeanwoodworkingshow.eu

Tool Testimonials

It's always pleasing when you receive positive feedback! Here are two reviews of my spokeshaves, which will be on sale at the two shows mentioned above and can be ordered direct from myself.



Robert Ingham wrote:

'The right tool for the job' is a saying that rolls off the tongue quite easily when craftsmen discuss techniques. I came across a wooden spokeshave which had been made by James Mursell at The Classic Hand Tools exhibition recently and was pleased to have a chance to try it out. My own approach to tools is to spend some time tuning them and in some cases improving their performance. I have also made quite a number of my own tools when those that are commercially available do not perform to my expectations. James's wooden spokeshaves are made by him and they embody an understanding of the geometry, function and the feel that these tools should have. In addition to these features, they have fine adjustment that has been ingeniously thought out and carefully manufactured. If you are involved in sculptural shaping of wood I strongly recommend that you treat yourself these very enjoyable tools.

Furniture & Cabinet Making - click on the link below to see it full-size

<http://thewindsorworkshop.co.uk/F&C%20155%20P84%20Spokeshaveah.pdf>

Shortly before Michael Huntley's stood down as editor of F&C, he produced this short review of my spokeshaves. They seem to have been well received by his students!

Please note that the prices mentioned have been reversed for the large and small shaves.

F&C TEST: Mursell spokeshaves

Mursell spokeshaves

Why are these tools described as brilliant? Michael Huntley explains

"The Mursell spokeshaves are absolutely brilliant!" That was the first of my students and about three or four at my Saturday sessions. And I have to agree. These are tools designed by a working chairmaker for working wood.

I had a medium spokeshave and a small spokeshave from James to test. They both have maple bodies and hick blades. Setting the blades is accurately controlled by threaded rods with knurled knobs and set screws.

The shaves are supplied with Allen keys for the set screws and a series of screws that make all the difference. The blade position can be adjusted with absolute precision.

James uses the spokeshaves with just fingertips on either side of the body swell.

There is a common misconception that the handles of spokeshaves should be gripped tightly in the fist by the user. This is wrong and the method that the shaver is to use just the fingertips, as he demonstrates.

Its use. These tools can be used on end grain or long grain and I had a go with the smaller hick on some particularly wild elm that James was preparing for the seat of an exhibition chair. It was very sweet to use.

Finally I should mention the small mouth and large throat. There can be a problem with some shaves dragging up when used flat on long grain. These don't, no.



F&C verdict

Brilliant. Should you have any problems using them, well I am sure you won't, you can actually telephone the designer and he will sort out your problem.

Price

Designed for actual chairmaking by a chairmaker

Small

Price £100.00 inc VAT

Medium

Price £150.00 inc VAT

From The Windsor Workshop Ltd 01908 855 800

Web: www.thewindsorworkshop.co.uk

Jack Hill 1933 – 2009



Attending one of Jack Hill's chairmaking courses at West Dean was a life-changing event for me. I remember the course clearly after almost 15 years, working every night through to 10 pm to get the most out of it. He was a great teacher and communicator, and was never short of another story to tell. It was a privilege to have known him and I was honoured when he asked whether I would be interested in taking over his chairmaking courses at West Dean.

Here is a little about Jack's life, written by his friend Don Vaughn:

'Jack Hill was born in Leigh Lancashire in April 1933, he was an apprentice coach fitter and later worked as a car salesman. He served in the RAF for his National Service, with a short period of secondment to the Royal Navy. This service whetted his appetite for adventure and travel and he later joined two Antarctic survey teams, in the 1956 - 57 and again from 1961 - 62. After a successful lecture tour, following his return to warmer climes he trained as a teacher, gaining his degree at Manchester University.'

His long term interest in the natural world led him into rural crafts and eventually to a teaching post at Manchester College, where he taught City and Guilds level furniture making until his retirement in the eighties. He moved to West Sussex, where he remained until his death, here he taught chair making at West Dean college. He authored several books on the subject and ran a monthly column for several years in an international woodworking magazine, called Jack Hill's Country Diary.

He was able to make a final lecture tour to the Antarctic and had run several international chairmaking courses in the UK, Ireland, the USA, Finland and Newfoundland before discovering he was suffering from Parkinson's disease. He continued to work tirelessly, both in wordsmithing and hands on training in country crafts, finally relinquishing his carving class last year aged 75.

He took a fall on the 19th July and was admitted to Chichester hospital for treatment of his fractured femur. He was later moved to the Bognor Regis Memorial Hospital where on the evening of Saturday 8th August he passed away in his sleep.'

Bandsaw

I have finally bought a new (one year old) bandsaw. My Startrite 301 is 15 years old and has given great service. It's still going strong, but is just not powerful enough for ripping thick, wet, ash logs. The new saw arrived on a pallet during a course, and was deposited outside the main door of the workshop by the driver who was in a great hurry to get away (aren't they always!). There was no way that it was going to fit through the door on the pallet, and even when detached it was far too tall. Fortunately my students were very strong. Mel McMahon lifted the base on his own while two of us supported the top and manoeuvred it inside.

The three phase machine needed a new feed and isolator, but now it's up and running it is proving its worth. 1" blades with 2 teeth per inch make short work of the ash, and allow me to rip spindle blanks without having to wait for the motor to cool down every now and again, as was the case with the Startrite. The only downside of the machine is that it doesn't have a mitre slot. The table has extra metal cast to accept one, but it was never machined. It never occurred to me to check!



My trusty Startrite is available for sale at £100 plus VAT, including a spare blade. Let me know if you are interested.

Coming Back for More!

Stephen Cruickshank has now taken two courses and is signed up for a third. He describes how he caught the chairmaking bug:

'I first conceived the idea of making a Windsor chair when I saw a demonstration at the Northern Woodworking Show in Harrogate a few years ago. It looked fun and I thought I should find the time to do it some day.

A while later Classic Hand Tools in Suffolk ran a competition to win a week-long course with James Mursell at the Windsor Workshop and I entered. I did not win but decided I would go and spend a week there anyway; the website made it look attractive and West Sussex was a part of the world I did not know. I did this in June 2008 and spent a splendid week on the Introductory course making an elegant bow-back chair in the colonial American style. This was such good fun that I wanted to move on and make an armchair.

On my second, intermediate, course in May 2009 I made a continuous arm chair, again in the colonial style. The sculpted seat and general style were similar to that of my bow-back. The arrival of a monster bandsaw during the week added some heavy metal entertainment as we manoeuvred the new acquisition through the doorway and into place. Although the pace is quite busy with lots to learn and do, coffee, lunch and tea breaks are opportunities to relax a bit and get to know James and fellow chairmakers better.

Towards the end of the week, sanding one's nearly-completed chair outside (naturally) in the sunshine with a view to the South Downs has a certain relaxing quality that makes one ready to sign up for another course, another chair. So I did; next time double bow. Each course is finely organised so that by Friday mid-afternoon, the chair is ready to go away with its proud maker.

As an exercise in creative refreshment of the inner man or woman, a course at TWW may have equals but I doubt if it can be bettered.'



Course dates to June 2010

New Course Dates for the first six months of 2010 (dates for the remainder of 2009 are on the website):

	2010	<u>Course costs:</u> Introductory £450 Intermediate £475 Advanced tba
Introductory	11 – 15 January	
Introductory	25 – 29 January	
Intermediate	8 – 12 February	
Introductory	22 – 26 February	
Introductory	1 – 5 March	
Intermediate	22 – 26 March	
Advanced	19 – 23 April	
Introductory	3 – 7 May	
Continuous-arm at West Dean	16 – 21 May	
Introductory	7 – 11 June	
Intermediate	21 – 25 June	

Details of the courses can be found on the website: www.thewindsorworkshop.co.uk Unless you have already made a Windsor chair, or are a green woodworker, begin with the introductory course. After that you can attempt most chairs!

Booking instructions can be found on:

www.thewindsorworkshop.co.uk/Course%20Dates,%20booking%20and%20prices.htm

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