

THE WINDSOR CHAIRMAKER

Newsletter of The Windsor Workshop

January 2011



I began preparing this newsletter at the end of October and hoped to get it out to you in good time for Christmas, but unfortunately ill-health intervened and I have only just got back into the workshop after 2 1/2 months.

In early August I began to get symptoms that I later discovered were angina. They came on as I was walking the dogs each day and after a shorter and shorter distance as time went on. I was able to continue running courses through to the end of October, with no problems, but had to cancel the two November courses due to increasing incapacity. The doctors didn't seem to consider my condition terribly urgent until my GP alerted the cardiologist, who then phoned and told me to be down at the hospital within 3 hours! After that the NHS was incredibly impressive. An angiogram on Thursday late-afternoon revealed that one of my (3) cardiac arteries was completely blocked and only a capillary, that had formed a natural by-pass, was preventing a major heart attack. By 11.00 am the next morning I had been transferred to another hospital and had a stent (24mm x 4mm) fitted. This was at the end of November.

Recovery after the operation has been steady and with a modified diet and lots of exercise I am looking forward to running my first course starting 24th January. In all I had to cancel five courses and I would like to apologise again to everyone that was affected. I guess I have been lucky that these were the first courses that I have had to cancel through ill-health since I began them in 2004.

You will see below the introduction of weekend courses to make stools. These are a great way of finding out whether you are interested in making chairs without the need to take time off work and at a lower cost.

My enforced break has given me the opportunity to think of other innovations, but all that I will say at present is 'watch this space...!'

Belatedly, I wish you an excellent 2011.

James Mursell

New Weekend Stool-making Course

A number of people have asked me over the years whether I run weekend course. There are two reasons for this. First, to allow people to come on a course without having to take time off work; and secondly a two-day course is a chance to try Windsor chairmaking without committing to the time and expense of a 5-day course.

I intend to offer a couple of weekends in the first half of 2011 during which students will make a four legged stool with shaped seat and stretchers. If you have visited my workshop you will know that I have six of these stools and they are both comfortable and useful. We also have several in our house and they are perfect for squeezing in an extra person at a table or for using anywhere where that space is limited. One really can sit comfortably on these stools for an extended period.

I picture two painted stools (because I love the look of this milk paint finish) but there is no need to paint them. Most use my Windsor Wax as a finish, allowing the grain of the ash undercarriage and tulipwood seat to be clearly seen.



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"dedicated to Windsor chairmaking"

On the course you will make one stool. The seat is drilled, and shaped with travisher and spoke-shaves. The legs are turned on the lathe – do not worry if you have not used a lathe before, you will be taught! Then the stretchers are fitted to the legs and the undercarriage is glued into the seat. The stool is levelled up, the seat-tenons trimmed, and a finish applied.



The course is suitable for all levels of experience (including none!) and the hours are: 0830 – 1800 Saturday, and 0830 – 1500 Sunday. There will be plenty of breaks for refreshments and the catering will be to the same high standard as the 5-day courses.

The cost of the course is £200 all in and there are absolutely no extras! If you need accommodation there is a list on my website.

New Bow-back Chair Suitable for Introductory Course

I have recently developed a new style of side chair as an alternative to the current bow-back chair. The main difference is in the shape of the seat and the shape and angles of the legs. The seat is convex over most of its surface compared with the shield-shaped seat from 1780's America. The front of the new chair seat does not come up to a point and strongly reminds me of the bonnet of the Porsche Cayenne, though this is quite accidental!

If you are already booked on a course there is no need to let me know which chair you wish to make beforehand. Make the decision and let me know when you arrive.

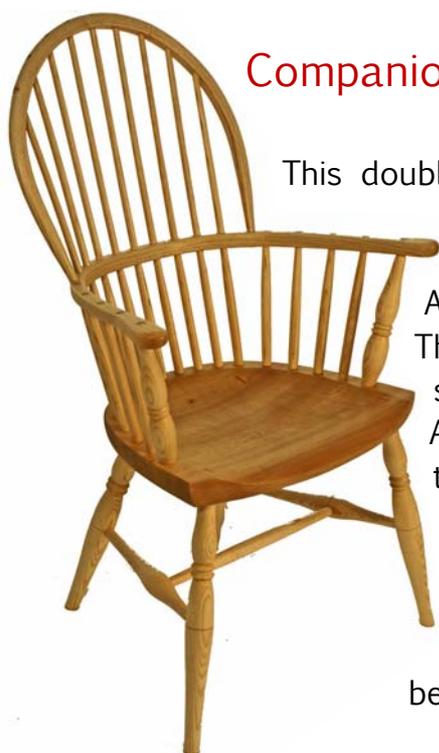


Companion Armchair to New Bow-back

This double-bow armchair is just finished in time for inclusion in the newsletter (*written in October!*). I designed it to complement the side chair above and it is a mixture of features from English and American chairs, with the English influence just winning out.

The seat is a non-traditional shape, designed to wrap around the sitter and the 1 3/4" elm is deeply sculpted to maximise comfort. As with the bow-back companion there is no pommel in the centre, though this could be added easily if preferred.

The substantial bow and arm are typically English, though bringing the spindles through them and wedging each joint is an American feature. Those who have been on courses at The Windsor Workshop may be surprised that the 28" spindles have been turned rather than shaved!



The bow is fairly upright in the English tradition, but its position means that the outer spindles have to be steam bent to curve between the arm and bow. The four short spindles on both sides are also classic English.

The legs are a new design with elements of both traditions, though the reverse curve at the bottom with the scribed line at the stretcher insertion are from across the Atlantic. The stretchers, which are not symmetrical are typically English. The angles in the seat are more American than English.

If you are an aficionado of chair design I hope that you are not offended by the mixed features. The design is informed by my experiences from both traditions and I have incorporated all of my favourite features.

My plan is to develop this chair further, perhaps producing a rocking version and a writing-arm chair. If these prove popular then perhaps I will be able to offer them as Advanced courses. Unfortunately the chair is beyond Intermediate due to the large number of difficult spindles and heavy bends. I will keep you posted!



Thoughts on Spokeshave Design and Use

Some of you are probably aware of the origin of the shape for my unique spokeshaves, but if not, here is a brief summary: early students, when given a traditionally-shaped spokeshave to use, grasped the handles with their fists and went to work on the wood. With this grip they were unable to do any sensitive work as they received no feedback through their fists. My designs were initially an attempt to encourage the holding of shaves by the fingertips placed directly in front of and behind the blades by doing away with the handles.

I was experimenting a short while ago making a shave from one of my 'medium spokeshave kits'. I decided to give it traditionally shaped handles but make the tool overall unconventional (*see YouTube video link below*). The handles are thin and at the level of the blade; and as in all my tools the shavings are ejected from the top of the tool.

On using this new tool I quickly realised that the 'handles' were not really handles at all but 'stabilisers' preventing the rotation of the tool in my hand. The top of the stabilisers rest against the outer edges of my palms, preventing rotation.

Rotation is also minimised in this design by keeping the stabilisers low and in the plane of the blade. If you look at old tools you will often see that the handles are well above the blade generating a twisting force when pushed or pulled.

Since this revelation I have subtly modified the design of my other shaves to keep this rotational tendency to a minimum.



Check out the 90 second YouTube clip at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MvURhCTeQS4>

I keep reading that spokeshaves are the most underappreciated tools in the workshop. As a maker and user of these this is frustrating, but I work hard each year to introduce students and visitors at shows to their delights. However I cannot help but think that the main reason for their limited use is that most woodwork designs are constrained (perhaps unconsciously) by what can be easily achieved with tools such as a bandsaw and router.

Most curves in furniture are essentially two dimensional e.g the rounding over of an edge. The edge may be curved along its length (eg a curved bandsaw-cut out of the flat) and the round-over will be a constant radius produced by a router or spindle-moulder.

It seems a shame to me that more complex shapes, with constantly varying curvature, are not more common. Hand-tools such as rasps and spokeshaves are perfectly suited for this work and while it may be almost impossible to make a jig for such shapes, these tools make jigs unnecessary and their creation simple.

Next time you design something why not consider whether you are ruling out a more complex shape, that would look better, just because it cannot easily be made by power tools! Give the spokeshave a chance to prove its worth!! Also, why not take up the challenge of making your own unique spokeshave from a kit?



Chris White's Teddy Bear Chairs

Last week (October 2010) Chris made a double-bow Windsor for his brother-in-law at The Windsor Workshop (TWW). This was something of a busman's holiday for Chris as he makes about 150 chairs a year..... This is his story:



Chris (65) retired from a career in contract heating two years ago and is already well established in a new career making Windsor chairs for teddy bears and dolls!

Chris attended one of my early chairmaking courses at West Dean (5 - 6 years ago) and also made a child's armchair at TWW three years ago. Then, before he retired, a friend who used to be a dressmaker to the Queen and who now makes couture dresses for china dolls, asked Chris to make a chair for one of her dolls. Chris leaped at the opportunity and after 5 prototypes he had a chair that he was pleased with. It was 18" high, with a 8" wide seat, and was made of softwood with hardwood dowels.

With no patterns or plans available, Chris drew on the skills and experience that he had learned at TWW. He knew that he couldn't justify using all the techniques in a full size chair as they were too time consuming and unnecessary as the chair only had to support the weight of an unmoving bear/doll.

'I drew my plans out on the back of an old calendar' said Chris. 'The worst job was getting the right angles for fitting the spindles into the arms. It was really hit and miss to begin with!'

In any event the first chair was very well received and this experience kindled an idea for his upcoming retirement. Chris said 'I knew that I would not be required around the house when I retired and had to find something to do!'. He decided to go into production of small chairs.

His garden shed, in which he had made the first chairs, was not big enough for serious work. 'I trebled it in size, bought a bandsaw and lathe, built a bench and set up shop. It's still not big enough.....' He sighed!

He soon found that there is a thriving market in quality teddy bears (Chris' favourite) and dolls, and that owners like to have chairs on which to display their 'children'. He discovered that there is a definite limit to what his customers will pay and he has adjusted his techniques to adapt to this reality. Even so, his products are at the top end of the price range, but far superior to imported items from China and the Far East. Chris has found his niche.

This year he will sell at 16 shows, taking him from Cornwall to Bolton to Canterbury and many places in between. There is apparently a hot-spot of demand around Birmingham. He expects to sell 15 - 20 chairs at most shows.



Chris says that he loves the challenge of developing new lines and not satisfied with chairs alone, his product range now includes: benches, tables, cradles, rockers, beds and stools. His latest product which he will introduce shortly is a 'Collector's Chair' which allows the owner to display a number of bears at the same time.

He is full of enthusiasm for his new business: 'I meet a great range of (sometimes strange, but) wonderful people. I enjoy selling and it's fun!'

His chairs are much in demand and are used by aristocratic bears too. The most expensive bear that has been bought a chair is a 26" black Steiff which sells for £4,950! Have a look at Chris' website www.christopherschairs.co.uk and if you are a collector, why not place an order!



Course Dates

Here are the latest course dates, including the new weekend courses, through to September:

January	24 - 28	Introductory
February	14 - 18 28 Feb - 4 Mar	Introductory Introductory
March	14 - 18 28 - 1 Apr	Intermediate Introductory
April	2-3 11 - 15	Stool Introductory
May	15 - 20 28 - 29	West Dean Stool
June	6 - 10 20 - 24	Intermediate Introductory
July	4 - 8	Introductory
September	5 - 9 19 - 23	Introductory Intermediate

If you wish to book a course please check with me first that there is a vacancy (phone or email). A deposit of £150 will secure the place on the course and it can be paid via the website (card or PayPal) or by sending a cheque to The Windsor Workshop. All payments will be promptly acknowledged.



New Course Brochure

I have just produced a new course brochure which can be downloaded from the website or by using the link below. This is on two sheets of A4 and is designed to be folded to give four pages.

Link:

<http://thewindsorworkshop.co.uk/courses-at-the-windsor-workshop/download-a-course-brochure>

Price Increase

For all the usual reasons I have put up the price of courses for the first time in two years. The costs are now as follows:

stool course	£200
Introductory course	£470
Intermediate course	£495

Yandles Woodworking Show

For the first time I will be exhibiting at the Yandles spring woodworkingshow on 8/9 April. If you are not familiar with Yandles they are in Martock, Somerset. Details of the show and the company are available from their website at: www.yandles.co.uk

James Mursell

The Windsor Workshop, Churchfield Farm, West Chiltington, Pulborough, West Sussex. RH20 2JW

T: 01798 815 925

E: james@thewindsorworkshop.co.uk

W: www.thewindsorworkshop.co.uk