

Working with Wood

Cabinet-maker Oliver Essame describes an intimate life-long relationship with wood.

In the corner of my workshop, on top of the cupboard next to the lathe and waiting patiently to be refinished, is a fruitwood salad bowl that I turned in a school carpentry class when I was 11. Three pieces have survived from those days: the bowl, a bookstand in oak that was a gift for my father, and a small urn that holds paper clips and is on the desk beside me as I type. The timber for all three was a gift from the sea.

When I was eight years old I followed my brother to a school on the coast of Kent. He had been sent there for his health. For a while we shared a room from which it was possible, if you stood on his bed, to see the North Sea breaking against a distant promenade.

On wild winter nights the wind battered and rattled the large, curtain free, sash windows. Lightning filled the room. In the mornings, before plainsong in the chapel and breakfast, we ran first through a cold shower and then, if the tide was out, down to the beach.

We were often on the beach. Swimming, running, or playing games and, especially after a storm, scavenging for whatever flotsam or jetsam could be added to the pile of timber in the school yard. I don't think we wondered where our haul had come from or what its destination, or speculated on how parts of ships or their loads came to be washed up on our shore. When it was dry enough we trundled it on a cart through the town to the sawmills, where it was cut into usable dimensions by huge, noisy machines, driven by

long sagging belts. It was there that I first became intoxicated by the smell of freshly cut wood.

Our sense of smell is a powerful stimulant to memory. In my twenties I taught in India for a year. When new furniture was ordered for one of my classes, a carpenter came with a bullock cart loaded with timber, and, sitting on the floor and using only rudimentary hand tools, made desks. I don't know what timber he used, but I can still recall the rich perfume of the shavings, so

redolent of that Kentish mill that I was inspired to think that this might be a way I could make a living.

I have been a jobbing cabinet maker now for well over thirty years, making furniture of all kinds for all kinds of places: for penthouse and cottages,

for palaces and museums, for churches and crematoria. 'It must be lovely to work with wood,' people say. Well, yes. Usually.

The whole of my first week as trainee was spent learning how to sharpen and set a plane and then to use it to make a piece of rough sawn timber absolutely straight and true and square on all four sides. No power tools in those days. It was tough, but eventually, years later, there comes that moment which all craftsmen and artists will recognise, when you find that you have developed your skills so much that you can sense without looking that what you are doing is true and good. I have had to learn to respect the materials I work with. Some timbers are soft and easy to handle, others are resistant and toxic; some can be carved like butter, others blunt your tools in a moment;



Christ in the House of his Parents by John Everett Millais



some look their best with just a little wax, others need all the subtleties of a deep French polish. A bit like people, really. And wood never stops moving; even a well-seasoned hardwood will be

either expanding or shrinking, all the time. A piece of furniture of quality must take all this into account, if it is to survive to become an antique and still be functional and look good.

When I turned that bowl in the school workshop, I was using a treadle lathe and ended each lesson covered in shavings, with my eyes stinging from the dust and my hands and face sore from the bombardment of wood chips. Now, I am required to dress as if for a space walk. A mask protects my eyes and face and fresh filtered

air is pumped into it, I wear heavy gloves, and steel capped boots. And many of the skills that I paid for so heavily in time, I no longer use. We have machines that do it almost as well – and much quicker. I miss the intimate contact with my materials that I once had.

In the cupboard next to my lathe, on which the fruitwood bowl sits, are fifteen planes. Long ones for straight edges, short ones for smoothing, and specialists for moulding, trimming, and grooving. They are old and dusty and none too sharp; a little like their owner. I expect they recall the old days with fondness too.



Oliver Essame is a SOF Trustee.

Trees Be Company

If leaves be bright up over head,
When May do shed its glitt'ren light ;
Or, in the blight o' Fall, do spread
A yollow bed avore our zight –
Whatever season it mid be,
The trees be always company.

When dusky night do nearly hide
The path along the hedge's zide,
An' dailight's hwomely sounds be still
But sounds o' water at the mill ;
Then if noo feace we long' to greet
Could come to meet our lwonesome treace;

Or if noo peace o' weary veet,
However fleet, could reach its pleace –
However lwonesome we mid be.
The trees would still be company.

William Barnes

Dorset dialect poet and philologist William Barnes (1801-1886) was also a Church of England parson .



The English oak tree supports a huge variety of life. Its open canopy allows plenty of light to reach the ground, so that many other plants, including primroses, violets, bluebells and ferns, can grow here. The tree is home to many birds, small mammals, mosses, lichens and fungi, and at least 350 varieties of insect. Those living in the bark attract birds, such as great-spotted woodpeckers, to feed. In summer the canopy hosts colonies of the rare Purple Emperor Butterfly. The oak's soft leaves rot quickly in autumn, forming rich leaf mould for insects and earthworms. The acorns which fall to the ground in autumn provide another important food source, for wood pigeons, rooks, squirrels and mice. Source: icons. org.uk