



I'm a human doing, not a human being!

Founder of The Big Tree Society, Eoin Cox, tells how 'making together' is leading to a green wood revolution.

Working with wood, and green wood working in particular, sustains the soul. The creative input and manual work experienced by our green woodworking course participants creates a lasting bond with the timber. This making action, participation with others and the eventual outcome are often more than the product itself and to convert a tree into a piece of furniture is a great achievement.

The Big Tree Society, founded in 2011, runs green wood working and furniture making workshops. One of its underlying social objectives is to achieve common unity, which is the main driver of our workshop ethos. It is the environmental context of the making days and the emphasis on self-made construction which allows conversation, enjoyment and learning to result.

From a facilitator's point of view, Big Tree courses are more hands-off than hands-on. We get the participant familiar with the objective, whether it is a stool, a chair or a giant wood

print, and steer them through a process. Throughout the day, materials knowledge is transferred, new techniques learnt and honed and traditions appreciated and better understood. Many of our attendees have no direct connection with wood. Introducing 'grown ups' to the techniques and traditions of timber allows the creative and practical juices to flow from hands that have perhaps never held an axe, a draw knife or a chisel. The results are truly impressive and tangible. They come about directly as a result of making contact with the wood.

Playtime with rules

The prospect of starting with a big log first thing in the morning and ending up with an amazing piece of vernacular furniture at the end of the day is daunting for most. But it shouldn't be. Our workshops are supervised playtime with rules. We do not want participants to damage themselves or the tools but we have to give them the freedom to learn, and introduce the skills to craft the stool or chair in the correct way. After all,

the piece has to stand properly, it has to function, and it has to look good. The process is simple - just let people play, but with generous instruction.

Time slips away. The initial timidity and nervousness wanes and the confidence in handling unfamiliar tools and sharp edges grows as the product takes shape - by their very own hands, not a machine, not by someone else; via their heads, hands and hearts. Our participants go through physical exhaustion, emotional highs, and deep trance-like 'out of body' experiences; it sounds like a transcendental work out but it's true! We watch people's demeanour become relaxed, their concentration levels become less intense and the attention to what they are doing become a seamless action. Individual energy is used more effectively, personal confidence builds and group-skills levels grow. There is a common aim: a common unity, rather than competition, begins to prevail. They are all in it together and the conversation and construction leads to common purpose.

People change shape, they connect - we know that our workshops have altered a lot of Big Tree participants' lives. Our 'repeat offenders' as we call them, come back for more, tell others, give friends and colleagues a course as a gift, send us photos of what they have raked out of skips or found on the shore line, they tell of how they have become involved with a community woodland near them, joined local conservation organisations, committed themselves and their families to volunteering, set up their own wee workshops, started Men's Sheds and so on. A whole street of women come every year to make willow chairs for their front gardens.

People travel from all over Great Britain and beyond. Our participants have introduced green wood working 'Big Tree style' to Japan, New Zealand, Norway and Bahrain. They are not wood nuts, hard core conservationists or experienced craft workers. They range from the financially very secure to very insecure, and are often people who have had a bash or are just hacked off with their lives and in need of a change. Once-bored office workers now get out their tool catalogues at lunch time, and we get emails from nurses, finance officers, psychologists, actors, IT specialists, car sales reps, mums and dads saying how much they have enjoyed the experience and that they have continued making. There is a wee green wood revolution going on out there!

Clockwise from opposite page: Stool makers - nobody leaves until everyone is finished sharing; Sanding a chair - the finishing touches for this first timer; Wood working - a complete beginner using a shave horse with her chair nearing completion. Photos: Eoin Cox.

Connections

Having worked alongside Sami, Squamish, Maori and other indigenous craftspeople, it is clearly obvious that they have a deep-rooted connection with natural materials. They are not taught this at school but usually as a result of immersion in their culture and rubbing alongside their own tradition keepers. It is often said that we in Britain have lost this connection.



Big Tree firmly believes that that 'lost links' are actually inside us all! If we have heard "I'll never be able to do that" or "I was always told that I was useless with my hands" or "I would never have the skill or confidence to make this" once, we have heard it a thousand times. We have also seen those same people walk away with their efforts, having changed their own mind - not having it changed for them. Participants also take away new found respect for our woodland environment, forest management and quality hand-made products. They leave with a pride in

knowing that they have contributed to maintaining woodland economies and habitats.

Working more formally with community woodland groups throughout Scotland has been equally rewarding. The Big Tree Society goal here is to help make even greater connection of the human resource with the natural resource. Through quite intensive workshop days we take participants through tooling, techniques and traditional design. This always results in some radical discussion and often teases out additional skills from amongst the foresters, woodfuel guys, the fund

raisers and the volunteers. They become the trusted communicators for their woodland group or community organisation. They establish more diverse incomes streams and more intuitive use of their 'waste' or 'underutilised' forest materials. It undoubtedly brings cohesiveness within a group and a collective approach to making. Consistency and quality of product ensues, experimentation and further development arises, internal supply chains improve and new markets and customers are discovered. The process turns a good group into a great group!

The knowledge base expands and latent talents are exposed. It is fantastic to watch a group work 'more better' and never ceases to amaze us what new ideas emerge through good practice and this immersed approach to making together. Their aesthetic and creative approach leads to a better understanding of what a total forest product does, in fact, look like. Everyone learns and shares the new knowledge with colleagues. The workdays are demanding yet stimulating and the new confidence and interpersonal skills that develop are self-taught. Teaching technique is gleaned by the participants during the 'training' and always continued and transferred beyond.

Nurturing and maintaining traditional craftsmanship and contemporary making technique through action-born knowledge is our responsibility as a society. It is so important to hand this over to others, who then, in turn, come to respect and utilise the woodland resource that surrounds us all. In the past three years, Big Tree participants have made over 400 pieces of furniture using local timber, learning through an inclusive and practical situation, and demonstrating the difference between their 'knowledge of' and their 'knowledge in' our native timbers and social forestry.

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