

# The New Chairmakers

Chairmaking is rapidly becoming the new exciting skill to learn on a course

Chairmaking is often considered the most difficult of woodworking projects. Many professionals will avoid making a chair at all costs, and you see fewer of them at woodworking exhibitions than you might expect. The angles and need for strength make seats challenging to build, but the burgeoning interest in green woodworking, as advocated by our colleagues at *Living Woods* magazine, has inspired a growing number of course providers to offer a week of tuition at the end of which you leave with a chair of your own.

Green woodworkers, pioneered by the likes of Jack Hill, Mike Abbott and Gudrun Leitz, have been running chairmaking courses in the woods for years. Participants sign up to experience woodland life, to learn new skills and to make something

unforgettable. Some go on to become enthusiastic woodmen, while for others it is a unique one-off experience, potentially repeated, but not carried on at home.

Though indoor chairmaking courses have been run at West Dean College in Sussex since Jack Hill's days as a tutor there, and by other teachers like James Mursell, it is with the woods and bodgers that one associates this particular craft. Times are changing, with Axminster now offering a chairmaking week indoors at their Skills Centre, and recently we visited the Peter Sefton Furniture School in Worcestershire to sample the critical Thursday of a five-day course run by Stroud-based Paul Hodgson, who used to be a pupil of Peter's.

Peter Sefton runs full-time nine-month courses in fine furniture near Upton on Severn. "We started in September," says

student John Dunlop, who was attracted to the course by a combination of hands-on experience and formal training. The course comprises fixed projects and time for students to do their own thing. "At the end of the first term I made a jewellery box," remembers John Dunlop. "Then we all made workshop stools at the start of the second term, and then I made a mahogany bedside table as an accurate copy of a Victorian one. During the rest of the term we will be visiting the workshops of designer makers in the area and to museums showing Arts & Crafts and other styles of furniture."

The chairmaking course is considered an opportunity for the students to learn completely different skills and approaches. Peter Sefton asked his ex-pupil Paul Hodgson, who has been running woodland-based chairmaking courses since 2005, if he could run one in a workshop.

The day we arrived is important because that's when the participants reach a crescendo when the front and back frames of the chair are joined, like the Channel Tunnel breaking through. The idea of the course was for the students to see how a professional craftsman produces chairs in the workshop, not so much as a lifestyle choice, but to earn a living.

## New approach

The big difference about this workshop approach is that Peter's students were using seasoned timber. James Mursell, at The Windsor Workshop, also favours teaching chairmaking in his large Sussex workshop, to avoid the rain, wind, cold and darkness, but employs green woodworking techniques and dries some of the components overnight to



Assembly John Dunlop and Paul Hodgson (top) assembling John's first chair, having marked out the rail holes with Paul's measuring device, which holds the back frame at the right angle

prepare them for assembly. Paul Hodgson learnt chairmaking with Mike Abbott in Mike's original wood at Hursttrete in the early 1990s, and then at Clisset Wood.

Green woodworking became a significant hobby, but when the electronics company for whom he worked as a software engineer went bust, Paul decided to become a full-time woodworker. Concluding that he couldn't make a living just making chairs he enrolled at GlocCat on a two-year City & Guilds Cabinetmaking course. Peter Sefton was his tutor there.

Paul combines conventional workshop woodwork with chairmaking, and since 2005 he has been running green woodwork courses at Westorbirt, and now has added chairmaking at the Monastery Garden Woodland Workshop at Prinknash Abbey near Painswick in Gloucestershire. The chairs he makes are noticeably well made; very slick and professional, and excellently finished. And he has developed techniques to make them quickly to keep the price down, and for 'repeatability'.

It is those methods, in the workshop, that



Position Paul Hodgson uses blocks to guide the chair leg positions



**Tolerance** Peter Sefton likes his students to try chairmaking because it changes their perspective of tolerances. Paul Hodgson uses a jig to align the front and back frames (left), but John Dunlop has to rely on brawn to straighten up an assembled chair (above)



he aimed to teach the students on Peter Sefton's nine-month. Chairmaking is part of the syllabus, aiming to offer a different tack to the more precise confines of cabinet work, of which Peter is a master. "It is nice for students to have a different perspective and a different skill," Peter says. "Chairmaking is a lot more three-dimensional, and they get a different feel for tolerances."

Peter uses other 'follow-me' projects on his courses, to inject a bit of pace, but this

was the first time for chairmaking and he wasn't sure how it would go. When we arrived his students had assembled their front and back frames, and produced 'turned' rails with rounders. Using seasoned ash means the spokeshaving of the slats and arms is much more time-consuming than when working with green wood, but the finish is much finer, and you aren't constrained by a timetable that calls for the rails to be kilned very early on the course. There is also less emphasis on turning.

The students were tidying up the components, shaping and sanding the arms. The front and back frames stood ready for assembly, the slats having been mortised into the bent back legs. It was a very impressive sight. John Dunlop, first up, became the guinea pig to see how the assembly is done.

### Working with jigs

One of the clearest distinctions between the more free-form nature of green wood chairmaking courses and the workshop approach at Peter Sefton's is that the process is sped up with jigs and guides. The most notable of these is the angle-setting device he uses to mark up the drilling angles and hole positions when it comes to joining the two frames.

Setting the lean of the back relative to the seat and front legs, and making sure the two frames are centred on one another is crucial for a good-looking chair. Paul uses a



**TIP**  
**Pegs** Paul makes his own dowel for pegging joints by cutting a block of blanks on a bandsaw then using a dowel plate (above)

spirit level to line up the front legs vertically, and various rods and stops to space the frames correctly. And then out comes his digital Bevel Box from Axminster, which he uses to set the lean on the back to somewhere between 9-10°.

The back frame is clamped to the hinging back of his device, and the front legs held in position by blocks clamped to the base. The front and back frames are temporarily held apart so that the marking of the holes can be done, and the length of the side rails measured. The holes in the back frame are drilled with a cordless drill, by eye, and then the front frame is put on the pillar drill table for corresponding mortises.

This is the technique Paul uses in his workshop, at Woodchester near Stroud in the hilly part of Gloucestershire. He shares the workshop with a varying number of

other woodworkers, and now employs a craftsman himself, a few days a week. "We were trying on this course," he explains, "to show how I make chairs in the workshop, though I use a few more rasps and sanding devices. I am interested in showing students a profitable method for making chairs that can be scaled up to small batch production and it works with either green or air dried timber. The method has been refined to save time and reduce mistakes."

When you assemble a chair Paul's way there is very little room for mistakes. The tenons are turned with rounders to be very tight in the holes, and they are only forced into the mortises once. Then it's a case of flexing the chair to level the legs before the glue sets, and on the final afternoon students add the seagrass seating.

The results speak for themselves. Peter Sefton's students will have learnt a crucial new skill, relying more on instinct than on the ruler. The course will also have introduced them to the way a professional chairmaker works, and the need for speed and a methodical approach. "I am more committed than ever to setting up my own workshop now," says student John Dunlop. "Who knows where all this will lead?"

*Details Peter Sefton will be running another chairmaking course with Paul Hodgson from 22-26 August. Visit [peterseftonfurniture.com](http://peterseftonfurniture.com) for details.*



*Finished John Dunlop's completed one-week chair*