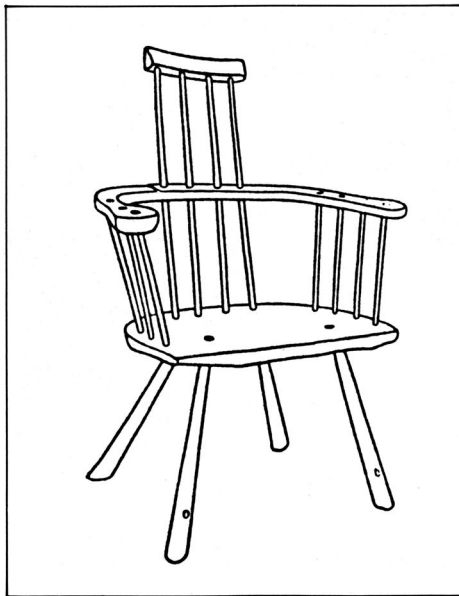


WELSH STICK CHAIRS



Frontispiece: *This is the earliest representation of a Windsor chair. It is from a mid 12th century manuscript of the Laws of Hywel Dda. The picture is of a judge sitting on a chair. Note the tapered legs, arm rests and high back.*

WELSH STICK CHAIRS



John Brown

LOST ART PRESS





Published by Lost Art Press LLC in 2018
26 Greenbriar Ave., Fort Mitchell, KY 41017, USA
Web: <http://lostartpress.com>

Title: Welsh Stick Chairs
Author: John Brown
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ISBN: 978-1-7322100-1-1

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This book was printed and bound in the United States.
Signature Book Printing, Inc.
8041 Cessna Ave.
Gaithersburg, MD 20879
<http://signature-book.com>

*Dedicated to the
memory of Laurence*

Library Chair
er côf John Brown 1932-2008

‘Beth yw gweithio ond gwneud cân
o’r coed a’r gwenith.’ Waldo Williams

John, before the making of my chair
you asked me for a poem. As I choose now
your chair to make my little thing of air,
the perfect pen and page, so twenty years ago,
you chose wedge and dowel, the right piece of ash
to form the lovely curve where now I lean
to think a moment, wanting the words fresh,
My fingers tell the silk-slick ebony beads
where the sticks pierce the arm, the seat of elm.
Our songs are worked from the wood and the wheat.
Your work or mine, when art is at the helm
there’s vertigo as mind and matter meet.
We leave our wake on water, in the grain of things,
with chisel or pen. Sometimes it sings.

Gillian Clarke
National Poet of Wales
2008

Introduction

John Brown began writing *Welsh Stick Chairs* in the late 1980s, though he'd been mulling over the idea of writing something for a while. Apparently he had read a book about raising poultry, inspired by the fact that the author spent most of the book philosophising and very little explaining the intricacies of producing eggs.

In fact he hated the slavish following of plans and dimensions that you find in most woodworking books. John's publishing foray was never going to be like that, and indeed in meeting the photographer Victor Wilkins he found a man of more than sufficient talent and passion to produce exactly what he wanted. The result is a remarkable little book that breaks many of the publishing conventions of the day, and perhaps that's why its popularity is so enduring. John threw out the idea of an introductory chapter on the tools and timber you might need to make a chair, though there are some bonus technical sections near the end. There was, of course, no mention of health and safety, and certainly no dimensions for woodworkers to follow. John believed in inspiring people, and could be dismissive of anyone who asked for direction he regarded petty and unnecessary, though every reader I've ever met said John was always conspicuously generous with his time and advice.

Published in 1990 by Abercastle Publications, the dark green book, with its dimpled cover, was more about inspiration than instruction. Though there are Welsh stick chairs around the world that have been made from its photographs, it's always been more of a beacon than a torch. Its publication was noticed by magazines, leading to a review (by Jack Hill) and feature in *Woodworker*, which I was editing at the time. When, a little later, we launched *Good Woodworking* I remembered John and asked him to write a monthly column about chairmaking and tools, but it was he who introduced the philosophy and the inspiration and the music, and, famously, stories about his cat Gallipoli.

His column was fundamental to the success of that magazine, and asking him to contribute was probably the wisest publishing decision of my career. He brought perspective to the technical content, a foil to the tests of power tools and the step-by-step projects on how to build this or that table or wardrobe. His regular three or four pages achieved the remarkable feat of being the thing that almost every reader turned to first, a luxury few magazines ever enjoy. His

opinions certainly weren't shared by all of his audience, and he could be naive when it came to the ways of modern publishing and business, but his enthusiasm swept all before him, reinvigorating a passion for hand tools, a simple kit, and what John called "Good Work". In hindsight, John knew better than most of us what captures the imagination.

Welsh Stick Chairs is unusual in featuring a single image per page, accompanied just by a long caption. The photographer, Victor Wilkins, had recently moved to Wales, attracted to the area by John's father-in-law, the self-sufficiency guru John Seymour. "John asked me over and told me that the photography would have to be done with just available light because he had no electricity. He'd ring me and tell me to 'Come Now!' because he'd reached a particular point in the chair, and I'd arrive hoping it wasn't too dark". Wilkins processed and printed the images in a blacked-out family bathroom.

Anyone who has worked with John can imagine the trials Wilkins must have encountered in managing to get John to hold a pose or wait for a cloud to pass. There are a couple of shots of John, notably thwacking in the legs, when the frustrations of modeling come flooding out onto the page. The results, of course, were dramatic. The book oozes life and vigour, with a passion for chair-making and a single-minded pursuit of excellence. In making Welsh stick chairs John felt he was reviving a dying symbol of his national culture, just as the Irish rebels of 1916 turned to Gaelic as a tool of popular rebellion.

The growing 'fame' that came from the book and his Good Woodworking column (not to mention his chairs) took John to America, where he taught chairmaking (twice) at Drew Langsner's Country Workshops in the mid 1990s. "It was a good time here with John", wrote Drew. "He seems to have a great way of attracting certain people who became long-term fans". Sure enough, people came to John, finding his latest workshop on his moves around Wales. Kenneth Kortemeier, having met John while interning with Drew, spent six months as John's assistant. "He was a wonderful host", Kenneth remembers. "I learnt so much from John; all the talking and philosophy, lighting a candle every morning before work, and listening to the BBC".

In much the same way, Chris Williams was one of many to be inspired by John's chairs. A carpenter and joiner by trade, Chris visited John in the late 1990s to learn more about wood, having read this book, but quickly recognised it was a poor use of their time together. "He was inspirational. You'd start a conversation and end up discussing anything and everything. I wanted wood knowledge, but realised I didn't need it from John". Working near the Preseli Hills John so adored in West Wales, Chris has continued John's work, making

and promoting Welsh stick chairs. John could be a harsh critic, and likely gave Chris a hard time, but he surely would be supportive and appreciative of Chris's work now.

I too benefited immeasurably from John's friendship, guidance and occasional ire. He became well known to woodworkers and chairmakers worldwide, whom he inspired from afar through his writings and by generous correspondence. He was always generous with his time and knowledge. His family and friends were inundated with messages of thanks and good wishes from people John had never met when he died after a short illness.

"I started to make chairs when I bought John's book in 1996", writes Low Lai Kwok from Malaysia. "John has influenced me to work with hand tools, making less dust than with machines". Closer to home Bob Elliott, who woodworks in a wheelchair, represents the many British readers of John's monthly column. "I didn't know John personally. I only knew him through his articles, and his ideas. He gave me a lot of inspiration, ideas and a reason to go on with a hobby despite my condition. When I was feeling low his articles would help me to focus on a project that would make me continue through bad times".

Christopher Schwarz, the American editor of *Popular Woodworking*, rated John Brown as the most influential writer of a generation on handwork. "He inspired thousands of woodworkers to attempt or even completely embrace handwork", Chris wrote in an obituary, going on to add that *Welsh Stick Chairs* is one of his prize possessions. "I think it's best said that if I had to have only one hero in woodworking, it would be Chairman Brown. If you can get a copy of *Welsh Stick Chairs*", Chris told his readers, "you certainly will get the flavor of his writing and wit".

Though you'll find nuggets of John Brown's philosophy in *Welsh Stick Chairs*, the genius of the book is that you can read it in so many ways. Novices will use it as a manual to make a chair. Other woodworkers can scour the pages for tips. Anyone with a love of tools will identify the specialist equipment John picks up from one photo to the next. And the rest of us can just enjoy the passion and energy he has for the task in hand; the inspiration of watching a craftsman producing Good Work, the stub of a cigarette hanging from his mouth and a lighted candle on the bench reminding us of the enduring human spirit that drives us all to keep battling on.

Nick Gibbs, December 2008

Founding Editor, *Good Woodworking* magazine



John Brown (1932-2008). The Anarchist woodworker with Gallipoli, the anarchist assistant. Photo by John Havard, used with permission.

“I am very sorry to hear of John Brown’s passing. We are very fond of the John Brown chair, and of John Brown himself. The late Alan Davies of the Welsh National Folk Museum at St Fagan’s was a huge admirer of John Brown’s amazing skill with the old-fashioned tools”.

Rhodri Morgan, First Minister for Wales



PLATE 1

St Fagans

This three-legged, pretty little chair has been called a weaver's chair. However, this is unlikely. A high stool is more appropriate at the loom. The chair would have been perfectly suitable for spinning, though is probably just a chair for general use. The hoop back is particularly delicate and interesting. Whoever built this chair had good skill and a good eye.

Author's Foreword

I have been advised by friends and colleagues, that, from the title, *Welsh Stick Chairs*, only an expert would understand what the book is about. Welsh Windsor chairs, on the other hand, would be understood much more widely. Welsh Windsor chairs sounds to me like saying Welsh Scottish oatcakes, or Welsh Wexford glass. The chairs I am writing about are very definitely Welsh, and they are called stick chairs in Wales. They do, however, fulfil exactly the definition of what has come to be known, in Britain and the United States, as Windsor chairs. My judgement is to stay true to my original thoughts; only time will tell if I am mistaken.

There are people who do things, and there are people who write about things. If this book doesn't make sense it's because I prefer, and am happier, doing, than writing. Previous books on Windsor chairs, if they have referred to Welsh chairs at all, have called them English regional! Whatever else Wales might be, it is not an English region. It is offensive to Welshmen, or should be, to refer to it as such. So many facets of Welsh culture are entirely ignored. People often visit Wales for the wrong reasons. Ask a foreigner about Wales. He will tell of mountains, eisteddfodau, coal mines and Welsh dressers. There is so much more to Wales, and Welshmen would like to share it. I want to share with the reader my love of Welsh stick chairs.

I would have liked to have included much more about the history of these interesting chairs. But such information doesn't exist. There is hardly anything but the chairs themselves; they turn up in antique shops or museums with no provenance except the last place they came from. Many still exist in private hands. I feel a pang of disappointment when I see beautiful items in a museum. A museum is like a place of death, finality; this is how it was and now it is no more. But these chairs would look so undignified in a modernised farmhouse or a bungalow, that in this case the museum is the right place. And of all museums, St Fagans, the Welsh Folk Museum, is the best of all places for the Welsh stick chair. At St Fagans, amid thousands of treasures of Welsh rural life, the originals of some of the illustrations in this book can be seen in their correct setting. I spent a day with T. Alun Davies at St Fagans, and without his help this book would have been difficult to compile. I must thank him and his staff for photographs, which are acknowledged individually. The line drawings of chairs

are the work of Owen Tudur Jones, and are published by kind permission of St Fagans. Gerald Oliver of Haverfordwest has written two interesting articles in the *Country Quest*. He has kindly given me permission to use the photographs from these articles, which were taken by Arthur Williamson, as also are the four portraits of my own chairs. Mr Oliver still has three of the chairs from the illustrations in his possession.

John and Lel Cleal of Workshop Wales, Fishguard, have been keen supporters of my work for several years, and I owe them a great debt for their encouragement over many lonely periods. In the village of Newport is a first-class bookshop owned by Tony and Eiry Lewis. They had the courage to buy one of the first chairs I made, and over the past ten years have always given freely their help and advice. Victor Wilkins showed patience beyond the line of duty in taking the set of photographs in my workshop. I would like to thank him. Finally, to the 400-odd people who have bought my chairs I also owe a word of thanks. It has been an act of faith on their behalf and I am rewarded beyond the financial recompense.



PLATE 2

St Fagans

A reconstruction of a Welsh fireside.

*Author's foreword to the third printing,
October 1998*

I am very pleased to be writing a foreword to the third printing of this book. Nobody was more surprised than I that so many people would be interested in Welsh chairs.

The Cardigan chair which is described in part 2 has not changed significantly in the nine years since the photographs were taken. The ways of making have. I am always thinking of new ways, either for speed, or more likely for a greater element of certainty, often to return to the original method. Nevertheless, I have changed much of the process. Perhaps I shall have to write another book!

The photographs in part 2 of this book were a 'snapshot in time' and represent where I had got to then. Using the skills of a boatbuilder, both traditional and modern, and isolated from instruction, I worked out one way of doing it. By then I was beginning to earn some money at it. The fact that I do some things differently now is not important, for if there were ever a fourth edition they would be different again. Never a day passes when I don't learn.

At no time have I ever made a drawing. Each chair is a new canvas, and an adventure. I can tell you nothing of degrees or feet and inches, there's enough of that elsewhere. How could I maintain the joy and excitement if I worked to plans? I'll leave that to the factory and use my eyeball.

Other things have changed. John and Lel Cleal who sold my chairs in their lovely gallery, Workshop Wales, have now retired. Fortunately, their son Mitch and his charming wife, Alice, have opened a successor, still called Workshop Wales, in the countryside just outside Fishguard. My market is secure! Otherwise my life is much as I have told it.

I am grateful to Brian Davies of Stobart Davies Limited for having the faith to reprint the book; I hope it will be justified.

Finally, I forgot to thank Annie in the first edition. The fact that I forgot the most important person has weighed heavily on my conscience and I am glad of this opportunity to put it right.

JOHN BROWN
Newport, Pembrokeshire
1998

Bending Wood for Chair Parts

Not all wood is bendable, even with steaming. Undoubtedly, the best wood for this purpose is ash, and Welsh ash is the best of all. Young, fast grown trees are very good and they are plentiful. I have bent oak for arms and combs, but Welsh oak is not good, for it is too slow growing and the local variety is often knotted and gnarled. In England, beech is used a lot for bent parts, but I have no experience of this. I have always found beech too uninteresting in its grain patterns, but it is undoubtedly very tough and a worthy chair wood.

Traditionally, ash for arms was split out of a smallish log, say 8" to 12" in diameter, and perfectly straight. First, with axe and wedges, the log was halved, then quartered, and with a froe finally reduced until pieces which would encompass the size required were obtained. Then, in a shaving-horse with a draw-knife, the arm would be shaped into a square ready for the steamer. All this is highly-skilled work, but very wasteful of timber. Times change. We must all conserve and utilise trees to the utmost.

I buy my freshly cut ash logs from a small local timber yard. The saw-mill is interesting in its own right, in that the young man who runs it, Quentin Davies, is the fourth generation in the family firm, James Davies of Abercych. (The yard is now actually at Cenarth on the main Cardigan road.) I quote from David Pye's book, 'The Nature and Art of Workmanship': "*The Welsh turner, James Davies of Abercych, told me that as a boy he had carved wooden spoons to be sold at fairs at, I think, twopence each. He said that at that price there was just time, when the spoon was finished, to look once at the inside, once at the outside, and then throw it over your shoulder on to the heap and start another! But having seen his work I do not doubt the spoons were a pleasure to look at.*"

Having bought my log from Quentin, he carefully saws it for me on his band-mill, making sure to keep parallel to the grain. We end up with the log sawn through and through at a thickness of 1¼". Now the grains are all exposed. I am allowed to use the large Wadkin band-saw, and I now cut these planks into 1¼" strips. If there is a slight bend in the grain I follow it so that I end up with a perfect square, 1¼" X 1¼", but perhaps with a slight curve, a very gentle banana shape. This is quite immaterial once it has been in the steamer.

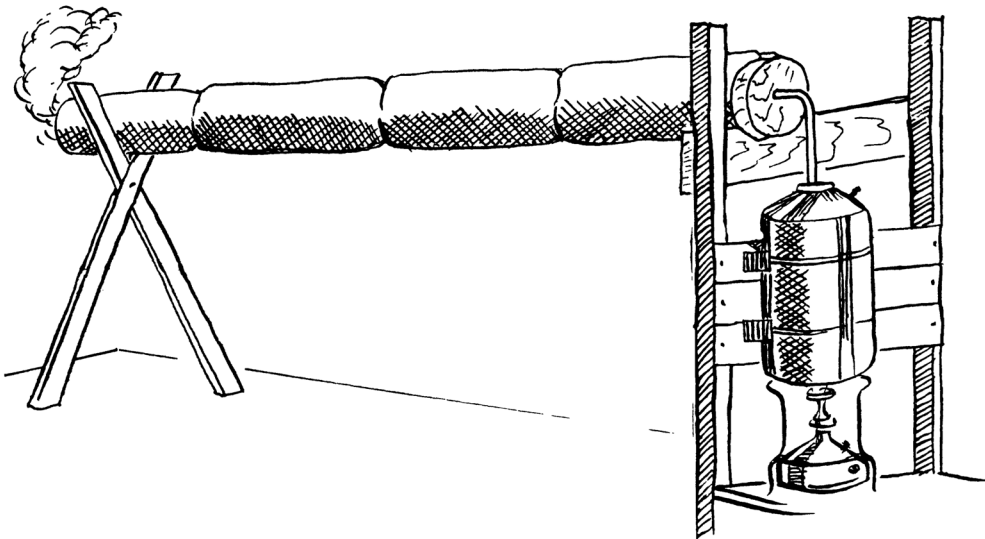
Taking a log 10" in diameter, 5' long, and using my method of cutting I can get forty arms. Had I used the traditional splitting method I doubt whether I

would have twenty.

I disagree with people who say wood should be partly seasoned for steaming. The best would be 'cut down yesterday, steam today'. Anyway, as soon as this ash is cut up it starts to dry. The moisture is sap. I drive it home and put it in a butt of water. Then I get my steamer rigged.

Two steamings a year supplies all the bends I need. My steamer consists of a 6' length of heavy cast-iron pipe, 6" internal diameter. At one end is a good fitting elm plug with a $\frac{1}{2}$ " hole through it, in which is a copper tube. There is a wooden frame to support this end of the pipe and a pair of 'scissors'-type gallows to hold the other end. The copper pipe leads into a 2-gallon stainless steel tank. (The tank came from the inside of a liquid vending machine and it is a pressure vessel.) For heat I use a trusty primus stove. The open end of the pipe also has a plug with a handle on it. I also have a small $\frac{1}{4}$ " hole bored through this end with a removable wooden plug. I will explain why later. The whole pipe is lagged, sewn up in old rags and insulating material.

I start early on a steaming morning. Up at 6 a.m., fill the tank with water, light the primus. Everything must be ready and in its place, like an operating theatre. Forty ash sticks, pieces of string to tie round them so that I can pull them out, thick leather gloves, jigs for bending around, cramps, everyone I can lay my hands on, in fact no hold-ups. It's like the morning of the big fight!



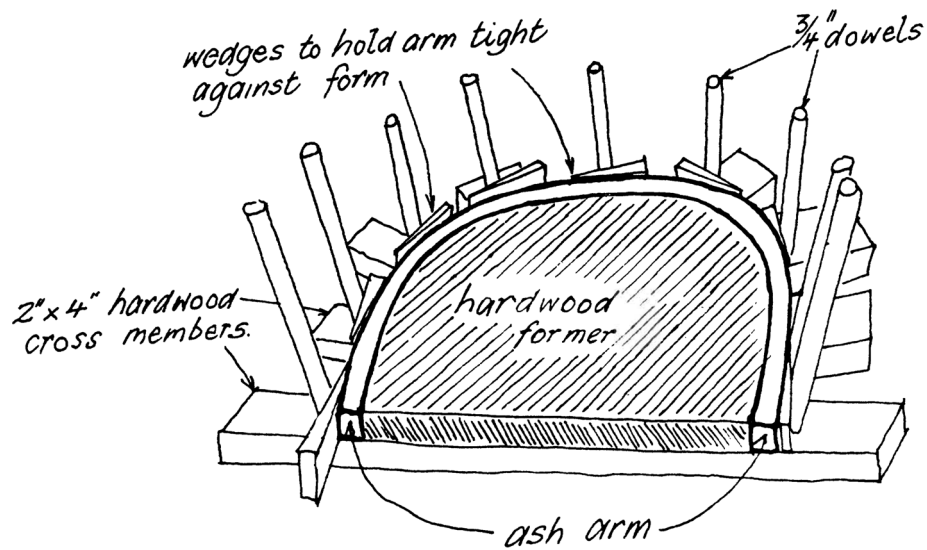
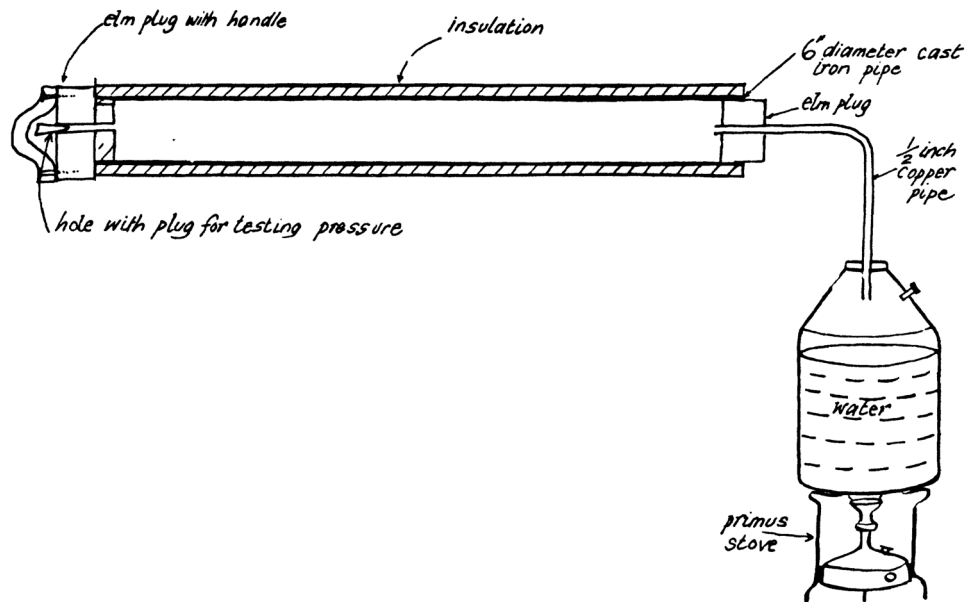
I can get from five to seven pieces in the steamer, it depends how curved they are. Each piece has string which hangs down under the removable bung. Gradually, the whole contraption heats up. By lowering the outer end of the pipe I can drain off excess water, for until the pipe hots up, the first steam condenses. At this stage I leave the small bung, in the $\frac{1}{4}$ " hole that I mentioned, out. Soon, say by about 7.30 a.m., a small jet of steam comes out of this small hole and I know we have 'steam up'. The lagging of the pipe is so important. What is needed for bending is heat, wet, and pressure. Now I have worked out that if I remove the little plug from the $\frac{1}{4}$ " hole and the steam shoots out 6" or so – I have pressure!

How long should I leave these pieces in? Difficult to say. About two hours is the norm, but I have left them too long when they get soggy and lose all the natural springy wood-like qualities. Really they want the minimum time that will allow them to bend. There are as many different theories as there are stars in the sky about bending wood with steam. What works for you! Meanwhile, I must prepare my jigs, and have a set of replacement ash blanks ready. I don't want visitors today!

My jigs are all sorts. The first one is a very fine piece of work. A 2" piece of elm, looking not unlike a chair seat in outline, nailed to a larger piece of 2" elm. Around the perimeter of the jig, and about $1\frac{1}{2}$ " out from it, are $\frac{3}{4}$ " holes at 3" intervals. The idea is to bend the arm around, putting $\frac{3}{4}$ " dowels into the holes, and then wedging the arm tight to the jig. It takes longer to write than it does to do! I have about four different shapes, and these determine the type of chairs I make. As the year goes on I judge what I will need. Some jigs are old seats that were too hard to chop. I bore slots at intervals about 2" in from the edge. In making jigs I have to overstate the curve a little, for like all things natural, wood tends to want to go back to where it was.

9.30 a.m. approaches. Jigs are all ready, the first one cramped solidly to a bench. After all these years, the heart still beats faster. On with gloves. If ever the proverb 'make haste slowly' applied it is now. Out with the bung, a rush of steam. Pull the string you want, holding hot ash in one hand, replace the bung. Dispose of string and look for centre mark on arm. Now, place it on jig, bang in dowel, and wedge, ease round, no jerks, dowel and wedge, round, dowel and wedge, then the other side, round, dowel and wedge, round, dowel and wedge ... it's there, o.k....no split-outs. The tone is set for the day. And so it goes.

I have steamed six and had one good arm, I have steamed six and had six



Gear for steaming.

good arms. I could get masterful results by using a strap contraption. This is a method whereby a thin metal strap is clamped to the hot arm, and it is then bent round the jig. This requires more accuracy than I use. The pieces must be an exact length to fit in the end blocks of the strap. My main objection to this method is that if the arm is going to break or shred, better it happens now than when the chair is in use. Remember those lovely Thonet bentwood chairs? The wood for them was bent in huge numbers. Heated in an autoclave, and bent, dozens at a time in hydraulic presses. I have rarely seen one without a sheer brake, or incipient brake. Steaming is an art; science and technology cannot do it. Sometimes, having successfully bent an arm, I get the next piece out, put it on the jig, start to pull and realise this piece is not ready, although steamed for an identical time, and I put it back in the steamer.

I leave the arms on the jig for a couple of hours until the next lot in the steamer are ready. Then I release them and tie a cord across the open end to maintain the bend. Until they are cool and dry they will not maintain their shape. Steaming vastly accelerates the drying process. The sap is all out, and only water remains. The residual heat rapidly dries them. In one month they are totally dry.



Williamson

A Welsh library chair. This chair is made of elm. There is no taper on the sticks, they pass right through the seat and are wedged underneath. The wedges on the top of the arm are of black ash or ebony. This chair is sealed and waxed with no stain so that the natural figure of the elm is shown at its best.