GOOD WORK

The Chairmaking Life of John Brown

by Christopher Williams

Lost Art Press

First published by Lost Art Press LLC in 2020
837 Willard St., Covington, KY, 41011, USA
Web: *http://lostartpress.com*

Title: Good Work: The Chairmaking Life of John Brown
Author: Christopher Williams
Editor & publisher: Christopher Schwarz
Copy editors: Megan Fitzpatrick and Kara Gebhart Uhl
Linocut illustrations: Molly Brown, *mollybrown.ink*
Cover illustrations: Molly Brown
Research and interviews: Kieran Binnie
Distribution: John Hoffman

ISBN: 978-1-7333916-2-7

This book was printed and bound in the United States.
Signature Book Printing, *www.sbpbooks.com*

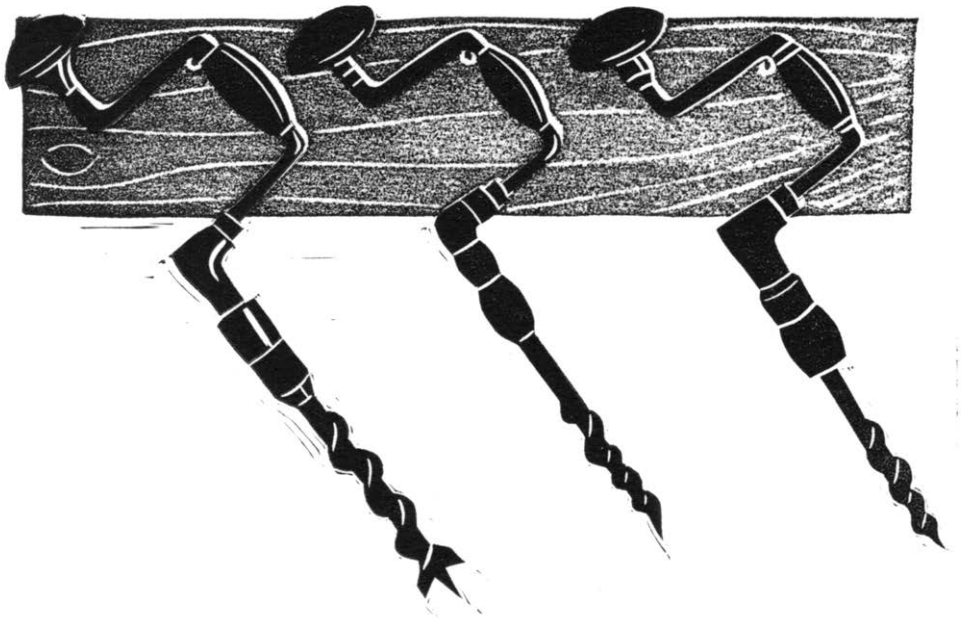


TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I must thank Christopher Schwarz who has shown such humility to both me and the subject of this book over the last five years. I've learned and gained so much from him over this time. I couldn't have done it without him.

I'd like to thank Molly Brown for producing the wonderful artwork for this book, also Heather Birnie for the photography. And not forgetting Drew Langsner and John Brown's family for providing many historical photos and also for their support with this book.

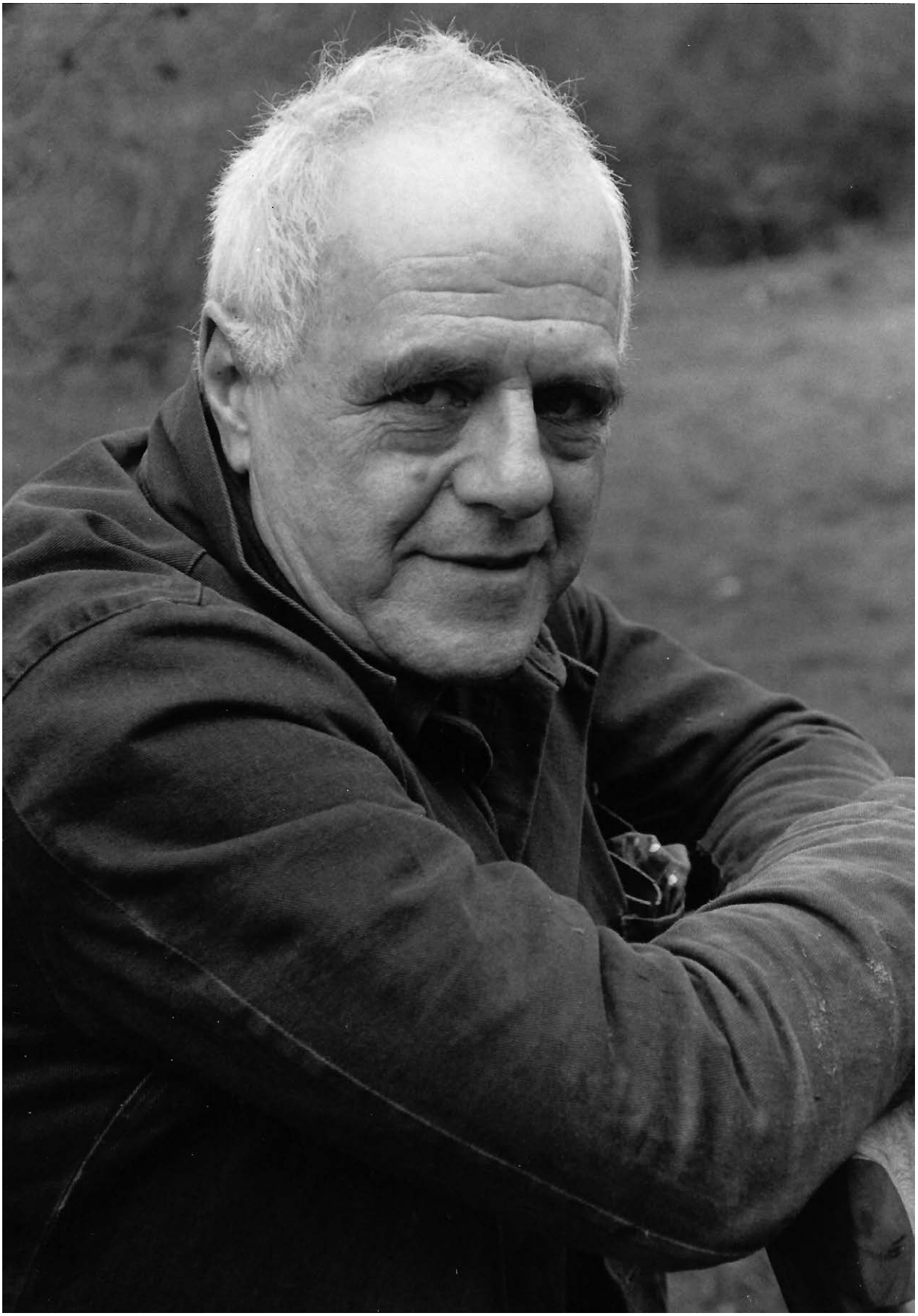
Special thanks to Annie Sears, David Sears, Matty Sears and Nick Gibbs for their essays.

Thanks to Dorian Bowen at The Welsh House, Anthony and David at Jin Talog and Wyn Jones for allowing us to use their wonderful homes for photography. Thanks to St Fagans National Museum of History for opening its collection to me.

Many thanks to Megan Fitzpatrick, Kara Gebhart Uhl, Eifion and Amanda Griffiths, Emyr Davies, Hugh Haley, Dai Seymour, Tim and Betsan Bowen, Tom Unsworth, Anjuli Quatermain'e and Kevin Adams for their support. A special thanks to Mitch Cleal for allowing us to use an image of the work by his late father, John Cleal.

For Claire.

You shared this journey with me every step of the way,
yet without your love, support and compassion, this journey would have been impossible.



Preface

by Nick Gibbs

John Brown came into my life, and into the lives of woodworking readers worldwide, in autumn 1993. We'd launched *Good Woodworking* magazine at the end of 1992, and already it was making an impact on the market, but Future Publishing, for whom I founded and edited the title, were passionate about making magazines better and better. One day my boss, Kevin Cox, suggested *Good Wood* might benefit from a crusty craftsman to give it some gravitas. Painfully, I had to acknowledge he was right, and I began a search for the right person.

We didn't want to poach someone from another magazine, preferring to build people up from scratch. I recalled, a few days later, a review of an odd little book called "Welsh Stick Chairs" in one of my last issues editing *The Woodworker*. There was an article about the author, who worked without electricity in Wales. He was called John Brown, or at least so we thought. He was actually born Grahame Eynon, changing his name twice over the years.

I hot-footed it down to Wales in my Golf Caddy pickup to meet John and discuss the possibility that he write a column for a magazine he had never seen. He'd expected me to arrive in a BMW, and was impressed by the rawness of my steed. We sat down in his little kitchen and drank lots of tea, and started a conversation that was to last for 15 years, on and off. He gave me a wooden carving of a bird in flight, made, he explained, by a prisoner in jail. Years later, at his memorial, I met the carver, who John claimed had been interned during The Troubles in Ireland. It might well have been so, but according to friends and relatives at the gathering, John preferred not to let the truth get in the way of a good story.

I can't recall how easily I persuaded John Brown to start writing. As for all new columnists I have employed, I would have advised him to start as if he'd been contributing for some time. "It is not often that craftsmen have the opportunity to design their own workshop," were his first words, written with a manual typewriter on the thin paper that became so familiar, always held together with (green string) treasury tags. "Usually they [craftsmen] work in buildings that were meant for other things, from garages to cowsheds, and from garden sheds to disused warehouses. At last I have the chance to reverse this trend, at least for myself." Reading those sentences, I knew we had discovered something special, and someone who listened as readily as he exclaimed. He had clocked (though not illustrated here) my tip to fill writing with capital letters and numbers. When I receive an article from a new contributor I immediately scan the words for proper nouns: names of products, of people, of places; and for figures to show

At work on the underside of a chair seat with a wooden-bodied spokeshave.

dates, quantities, weights and measures and prices. That is where facts lie. The rest is just opinion.

Having recently re-married and moved into a new home, John Brown was midway through building his latest workshop, having taken time off chairmaking for that purpose. Though he wrote diaries and letters profusely, he never found writing his column easy, and it was always a bit painful. Beneath the bluster he had a certain insecurity, but his articles became an inspiration to woodworkers the world over. He liked to test people's conviction by challenging them, but would often turn his convictions around afterward, or forget what he had said.

Speaking at the Celebration of his Life at Pantry Fields in June 2008, I had to confess that the flash of inspiration to ask JB to write was the best decision I'd ever made as an editor. I suspect it has had more of an impact than anything else I've done for a magazine, perhaps only rivalled by the launch of *Living Woods* magazine, which near the end of his life John derided with typically forthright criticism. Editors know they have a gem when reader after reader admits to searching for a particular regular when the next issue drops on their doormat. Such familiarity and expectation drive sales, and few magazines have the fortune to contrive an editorial opiate or find a columnist as tempting as John Brown, whether or not his Marmite followers cursed or applauded his dogmatic words.

Let's face it, JB's regular missives from Wales made *Good Woodworking* Britain's best-selling woodwork magazine. We were inundated at *British Woodworking* (a magazine I later started) by emails when we announced John's illness. Time and again read-

ers recall opening *Good Woodworking* to find John's pages first, and how they still return to the articles or the memories of inspiration. "John Brown's articles were the very first thing I read when my monthly copy of *Good Woodworking* was delivered," emailed John Clayton from France when he heard about John's poor health in May 2008. "I was an impecunious wannabe woodworker with little in the way of tools and resources. John's no-nonsense, simple and traditional hand-tool approach was an inspiration to me. I did my best to follow his ways and my love of woodworking blossomed. I have never forgotten John's firm views and regularly find myself using one or another of the old hand tools I obtained as a result of reading his articles."

Fans overseas tempted John to run a couple of courses for a dozen or so potential chairmakers at Drew Langsner's Country Workshops in North Carolina. Each time he made a chair of his own, alongside students, but was unhappy with the chair he built on the first course. He asked Drew to destroy it with an axe, which of course was never done. According to Drew: "For the second course John brought a full-arm chair, with his characteristic dark finish, knocked down in a box. This was assembled before the class. It was left at Country Workshops as a gift, and part of our small collection of seating. Not many people do that."

Issue 13 of *Good Woodworking* magazine, the issue that introduced the world to The John Brown Column.

Though he was in Wales when we met, and was born there, John had lived all around Britain. He'd been in the Merchant Navy (jumping ship in Australia over a girl) and the RAF (in which he flew the very dangerous Vampires, very fast). For a while he was a boatbuilder in Falmouth, though he'd started married life in Cambridgeshire, having been demoted by the RAF for marrying Frances Parker without permission. They had six children (Ieuan, Katy, Michael, Henry and twins Maria and Matthew). When the marriage fell apart and his boatbuilding business collapsed, he moved to Pembrokeshire, having first had a farm in Llandeilo, Carmarthenshire, for a while. He spent a few early years as a child in Caerphilly and the Rhondda, but for most of his childhood he was in South East London and Kent. Since leaving the RAF John had led a nomadic existence, living in a tent for a while and on a boat, but back in Wales in the late 1970s he went to visit John Seymour, the author of books on self-sufficiency.

About this time John decided he would dedicate his life to making Welsh country chairs, which he described as stick chairs. He married John Seymour's daughter Annie, and they lived together at Pantry Fields near Newport in a pair of railway carriages, which had previously been used for transporting bananas. The small carriages were 8' apart, joined by a little corridor, and both their children, Badger and Molly, were born there. In October 1984 he helped with the launch by the National Trust of John Seymour's book, "The Forgotten Arts." That month he gave a demonstration of chairmaking at Guild, the well-known Arts & Crafts design shop in Bristol. In the *Bristol Eve-*

One of the unpublished outtakes from "Welsh Stick Chairs." Photo courtesy of the Sears family.

ning Post at the same time is a short piece praising John's chairs for children, made beautifully "with as much love as I can muster." In June 1985 he was one of 27 craftspeople to exhibit at the inaugural National Trust Craft Fair, and one can only assume that the next few years were filled with events and ideas and demos that fuelled John's enthusiasm for chairmaking. He sold all his chairs at a gallery in Newport, refusing to produce them by commission. I remember the torture he endured producing a set of six dining chairs to order, declaring he would never do that again, and customers could only buy what he had already made. He hated the idea of using measurements or templates to make a chair, and so each was unique.

In the late 1980s he decided to write his book, "Welsh Stick Chairs," alongside other ideas. His notes were so far-reaching that it is hard now to distinguish one writing ambition from another, merging his love of making chairs and his fascination with self-sufficiency. Presumably influenced by John Seymour, he explored changing attitudes to sustainability, scribbling down "environomics" as a New Age word. Ultimately, he wrote, printed and had published the book that was to make his name, "Welsh Stick Chairs." The timing is hard to fathom, except that the first copies were out at the beginning of April 1990, weeks after I first heard his name. "I have been given your name by Ashley Iles," I wrote to him on 2nd March that year. "He says you make wonderful chairs. Could you send some photographs?" A week later I had a review copy of his new book and within a few days had sent our freelance photographer, David Askham, to take pictures and write an article. Then I left *The Woodworker* and forgot John Brown and his chairs.

From the day we met in 1993, we enjoyed a brilliant working relationship, speaking for hours on the phone and exchanging long letters. His were typed on an old manual typewriter, and were usually full of thoughts and recommendations. In a box of correspondence, I have found a few torn pieces of notebooks, with John's suggested reading, including the poem "Lines Written for a School Declamation" by David Everett (1769-1813); the biography, "Hermit of Peking," of the Chinese scholar Sir Edmund Backhouse; and David Yallop's novel "To the Ends of the Earth." If only I could recall the chats that sparked these scribbles, which also included the "Berlin Diaries" (1940-45)

of Marie Vassiltchikov. Perhaps I'd be reminded by reading the books now, and perhaps even hear the strident, kind, waspish voice I relished at the height of our friendship.

It wasn't always easy. I'm told, but can't verify, that JB declared I wasn't permitted to change a word he wrote. Certainly, at one point we had a stand-off because we had made an unauthorised alteration or were getting shirty about a deadline or something, and I found myself in the crossfire between John and our fiery production editor, Claire. JB hadn't embraced the new era of political correctness with any great enthusiasm, and though he was respectful and kind generally, he could be harsh at times. Our relationship was often tested by working together, but I soon left to do other publishing jobs and then our friendship really began to develop. He came to stay with my wife, Tina, and I for the *Good Woodworking* leaving-do in 1996, and afterwards he sent me a photographic chronicle of our weekend, recording my attempts to launch homemade rockets and nicknaming me Werner von Gibbs. It remains one of my most prized possessions. On the birth that year of our eldest daughter, Lara, JB sent a Newcastle United babygrow. He had been following Kevin Keegan's exciting tenure at St James Park, but was really, I'm told, a lifelong Charlton supporter.

JB and I had an idea to launch a new type of magazine, aimed at readers only interested in hand tools. We wanted to call it *Quercus*, modelled on the cult journals for gardeners and cooks, Hortus and Convivium. I still have a bulging folder of letters and notes between the two of us. As ever, he favoured narrow and deep rather than wide and shallow. "In assembling material and writing an Editor's Introduction I become more and more uncertain, not about the viability of the mag, but where to aim it," he wrote to me on a postcard. "If we try to cast the net too wide we might miss all our targets. Buckshot versus bullet." Our ideas grew rapidly just after the end of my *Good Woodworking* editorship in 1996. JB even announced the approaching launch in Country Workshops' annual newsletter: "*Quercus* will have a high content on hand tools and techniques, chair history and the Zen of woodworking. It will be more like a journal than a magazine. I shall look for contributors who have something new to say, or want to get something off their chest." Ironically, since John's concluding comment was that "it's bound to be a success because the competition is so poor," *Fine Woodworking* magazine asked how to subscribe.

I am loathe to spell out our plan, just in case one day I return to editing only to hear a copycat rag drop on the doormat, or as JB once said: "I am feared of being a Scott – only to find Amundsen there first." Locked away in my safe is John's outline: About the Venture. Oh shucks, I must reveal that John recommended a Chair of the Month, articles about people who use hand tools and in every issue a piece about the "woodland freaks." There you go. Publish and be damned! JB hoped we would set up a base in a shop/gallery where we would sell products and teach potential craftspeople. His funding sources were typically iconoclastic. "We have numerous organisations which preserve buildings, like the National Trust, but they require money to be spent on bricks and mortar. Skills and knowledge are ignored. We have no National Living Monument grants as exist in Japan, where a craftsman, a stone waller or a blacksmith, at a certain time in his life is awarded such an honour and a pension… in other words the promotion and elevation of traditional skills, so that they don't die out." Noting work by Mike Abbott and Gudron Leitz in the U.K., JB sensed a new approach for craft skills, which was fulfilled later by the creation of the Heritage Crafts Association. "There is change afoot," he concluded, "and we must be in on the act."

He forever searched for a voice. "Perhaps there's a need for an organisation like the Soil Association, with a 'Good Work' symbol," he wrote in his essay of that name. "My grandmother had a theory that the heartbeat hasn't altered since the beginning of time, and that the pace of life should be regulated by this fact." In "Good Work" he quotes the philosophies of notables such as Ernst Freidrich "Fritz" Schumacher, Norman Potter, Aldo Leopold and Eric Gill, but his writing continually returns to the workshop, to machines and hand tools and

At work on a double-seated chair with his trademark hand-rolled cigarette.

to wood. If only he had interviewed potters, bakers and candlestick makers, and discussed their work. At some stage he wrote an intriguing dialogue, perhaps quoting another author, filed away between pages and pages of publishing plans.

"What was Renoir?"

"He was an artist."

"What do you do?"

"I am a plumber."

"And you?"

"I am a woodworker."

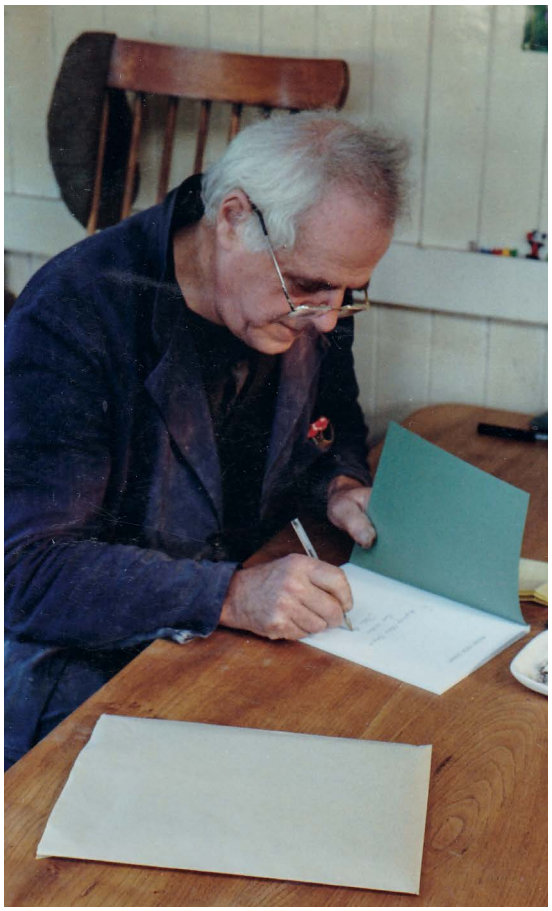
"And you?"

"I am a farmer."

"Wrong! Renoir was a painter. You are all artists."

"Artists are not a special kind of men, but all men are a special kind of artist." (A slight misquote of a saying by Ananda Coomaraswamy.)

Perhaps John Brown found solace in being a big fish in a small pond. He enjoyed styling himself as Chairman Brown, and longed to write a seminal book, all that a budding enthusiast might need to become a Self-Sufficient Woodworker. "Do it exactly my way," he planned to begin, "and use exactly the tools and materials I specify. You must practise regularly (like a piano player), and if you do I can almost guarantee success." In a loose-leaf binder on my desk, his planned book is divided neatly into 16 chapters, with distinctive, neat handwritten notes outlining each section. He writes of an allegorical pair of woodworkers crossing the Atlantic, with an Armani-suited accountant ending up stranded on a desert island with nothing more than Mr. Nice Guy's toolkit and a book called "The Self Sufficient Woodworker!" All ends well, of course, when "Shakespeare" reveals there never was a shipwreck and the two woodworkers meet again. They become business partners and "live happily ever after" when the ex-accountant marries Mr. Nice Guy's daughter.



Signing a copy of "Welsh Stick Chairs" for a reader.

In keeping with his later columns in *Good Woodworking*, JB also had plans to name the book "The Anarchist Woodworker." Previously he had written a similar proposal for "The New Age Carpenter." As ever, he returned to his perpetual bugbear that the advertising of machinery determines magazine content. Perhaps that is why he refused me altering his columns. "The editors of magazines cannot be indifferent of course to the interests of their advertisers, and therefore the editorial matter in these journals echoes that philosophy." He wrote all-but identical proposals for the books, and in one listed enchanting alternative titles in Latin, including *quae nocent docent* (things that hurt, teach), enigmatically ending with *quid caeco cum specalo*? (what has a blind man to do with a mirror?). For a small price I can forward the complete list to anyone, and it will make you smile.

Our aims to launch the hand-tool magazine *Quercus* faltered when I was tempted by broader publishing ambitions, and our paths diverged. We lost touch for about five years. When I went back to relaunch *Good Woodworking* in 2005 I knew it was fruitless trying to coerce John out of his self-imposed retirement. He hadn't done any woodwork for a few years, having moved to Carmarthen to take a degree in fine art. I visited his flat there, and we went out to see a concert. Later we discussed him writing for *British Woodworking* when that was launched in 2007, but he then had a crisis of confidence and realised he had nothing more to say. He wasn't well, and was increasingly reclusive.

I stayed again with John Brown only a few months before his death, shortly after my launch of *Living Woods* magazine. The new title was filled with the topics and ideas JB had raised all those years ago when we debated *Quercus* across pages and pages of letters, not to mention the hours of phone calls that invariably came to an abrupt conclusion when I was "too reasonable." From the start, I knew *Living Woods* lacked the intense focus JB would have wanted. That last evening together, he made it abundantly clear that he considered the content too wide and too frivolous. JB may well have been right. For many years, he and I hurtled through space in a pair of Apollo capsules, hoping to land on Earth together with a big splash, but more probably skittering off the atmosphere, away again to galaxies of our own. During my brief stay we chatted for hours, and JB was as generous as ever. He'd gone out specially to buy me supper, though he wasn't eating much himself, and he was fastidious in making sure I was comfortable in his den of a little flat. As ever he was torn by a desire to please and an ambition to push Tom Wolfe's "outside of the envelope" ("The Right Stuff"). You could tell he wasn't well and it was no surprise when he called a few months later to say that he only had weeks to live. "Come down quick," he urged, "I don't want you to be visiting a corpse."

The prognosis proved to be accurate, and I had only one brief hour with him at Haverfordwest Hospital before he died peacefully at his daughter Maria's house in Dinas Cross. Molly, his youngest daughter, was reportedly reading him emails from

woodworkers when he drifted into unconsciousness on Saturday, 31 May, and he died early the next morning. His son Henry and son-in-law Dai made the coffin themselves and John Brown's body was cremated without ceremony.

The celebration of JB's life on the side of a hill on a windy, sunny June day was a party for family and friends that went on long into the night. I felt honoured to be invited, embraced by his family as a friend and as a representative of woodworkers who John Brown had touched. Whether or not you agreed with his opinions, he was a special, special man. So many, many people contacted me after his death saying how they had been inspired by him to make a Welsh stick chair. Many added that they still return to torn-out pages of his columns. His work as a chairmaker has been continued by Chris Williams, author of this book. A new edition of John's classic book, "Welsh Stick Chairs" has been published, with tributes from some of the people John empowered. For many years there has been demand for an edited version of his columns as "The Anarchist Woodworker," which helped inspire Christopher Schwarz's book "The Anarchist's Tool Chest." Despite my daughter Sasha having transcribed many of JB's columns and scanned his photos, I am ashamed that nothing came of the book I had promised JB's eldest son leuan Einion I would publish. So, it is a great relief to find Chris Williams doing exactly that.

John Brown's real legacy is far greater than the techniques of making chairs. leuan, says that when they were living in Falmouth JB was chairman of the Falmouth Youth Orchestra and that the classical and folk worlds are now populated by many of his protégés. He taught people the importance of inspiration, the value of sharing what he'd discovered.

JB experienced his fair share of darkness, but through it all he is held in high regard because he survived day by day his way and without compromise. That his memorial "service" was such a happy event is perhaps a reflection that John Brown's life was well lived, and that, above all, is a lesson he would want us all to remember. JB, of course, would surely want the final words, just as he ended his essay on working by hand. "What I have said here is about as fashionable as advising people to sell their car, or take a bus, or even to walk. Real progress can only be spiritual progress. The calm and unhurried atmosphere in my workshop makes enough to pay the bills for a simple life, no more. God bless you, and remember, Good Work."

Nick Gibbs
Oxford, England, 2019

One of John Brown's lowback "Library Chairs," still in use today in Wales. Photo courtesy of Eifion Griffiths.

American Welsh Stick Chair in walnut by Christopher Schwarz. Who knows what John Brown would think about the chairs that were inspired by his landmark book and magazine articles?

1: Editor's Note

On the day in June 2008 that I heard that John Brown had died, I counted myself as a fool.

I was a fool for never having made the trip to Wales to meet the man who changed the trajectory of my life as a woodworker, writer and thinker.

Why, I wondered, did I never go? The easy answers were the wrong ones. I had a young family. I had a meager salary that didn't allow me to travel overseas. My job at *Popular Woodworking Magazine* kept me so busy that I didn't have time to chase a hero on the other side of the Atlantic.

All of these things were true. They were also all crap.

The real reason I never tried to meet John Brown is that it simply didn't seem possible, any more than meeting my favorite writer, Kurt Vonnegut, or my favorite songwriter, Jeff Tweedy. John Brown simply loomed too large in my psyche to be a real human being.

Plus, after reading every word he published, I suspected that he was a gruff, Ernest Hemingway-like character. Did I really want to soil or even taint my complete adoration?

And adoration it was. As a junior-level magazine editor in the late 1990s, I encountered John Brown through his columns in *Good Woodworking* magazine. Every month the magazine arrived in a brown envelope from the U.K. One of my jobs at the magazine was to sort the mail and route any correspondence or publications to the other editors for them to comment on. (Did I say I was an editor? I felt like a secretary.)

So, one day I began reading through *Good Woodworking* at my desk – as always it was router, router, tool giveaway, silly project, router – when I reached the "John Brown Column." On that spread of two pages, there were photos of some angular chairs that looked simultaneously modern and ancient. I started reading, and I couldn't believe the stuff this man was writing. There was poetry, social commentary, a recipe for bacon and a near-complete adoration of handwork.

I knew that it was my job to send away this magazine to the inboxes of my fellow editors, but I didn't want it to leave my hands. So, I photocopied the article, read it again and put the photocopies in a folder. I repeated this pattern every month (I still own those old photocopies – we used them to help republish some of John Brown's best columns in this book).

I quickly discovered that John Brown had written a book, "Welsh Stick Chairs." I bought it and read it so many times I almost know it by heart. I then tried to find out more about these chairs he kept showing in his columns, but I turned up almost nothing (this was before Google).

I was desperate to build one of these chairs. But the only teachers I could find were Windsor chair-

makers. I learned that John Brown had come to the United States – twice – to Country Workshops in North Carolina and to the Home Shop in Charlotte, Michigan.

Argh. I had missed my chance. (Truth be told, I probably could not have afforded the class, the travel expenses or the time off, but that was little solace.)

Again, more questions. Why had I not just tried to build one of the chairs on my own? Usually I jump easily into learning new techniques. But after reading Drew Langsner's "The Chairmaker's Workshop" to help me, I felt deflated. The wide world of chairmaking seemed so different from dovetails, tenons and half-laps. There were so many unfamiliar tools (an adze?). The wood was green, not dry. There was steam-bending. Compound angles. New workshop equipment – shavehorses and riving brakes. (Side note: Drew's book is great; I just wasn't ready for it.)

I wanted a human teacher to guide me through the first steps.

Luckily, I heard about David Fleming through Wally Wilson, an employee at Lee Valley Tools. Fleming was a chairmaker in Cobden, Ontario, a small town on the Canadian frontier. Fleming had built some Welsh stick chairs and knew of John Brown. And he was willing to teach me.

I convinced a fellow woodworker, John Hoffman, into making the trip with me. And we spent a long week in March 2003 learning to build a Welsh stick chair entirely by hand.

That class was just what I needed.

I returned home from Canada, began making stick chairs and haven't stopped since. It took me about five years of building terrible chairs before I let other people see them (and eventually buy them).

And so things went on like this for the next five years until I heard in 2008 that John Brown had died. In his final years he had shifted from chairmaking to fine art painting. On the day I heard of his death, I remember taking stock of the craft. John Brown was gone. His book, "Welsh Stick Chairs," was out of print and hard to find. The memory of his columns (and the toner on my photocopies) were fading.

Most significant, I seemed to be one of only a handful of people who remembered John Brown and his work – at least in the United States.

Of course – and thank goodness – I was completely wrong.

In March 2015, Christopher Williams in Wales sent me an email out of the blue:

"I worked with John for about 10 years off and on in which time he became my mentor. He changed my life in so many ways. He had the Mr. Miyagi effect (wax on wax off); he could be a pain in the arse as well, though. I am not entirely sure what if any use this message is but if I can help you with any information about JB or on Welsh chairs, please feel free to contact me on this address."

I knew then that I was not alone. Chris introduced me to other members of John Brown's extended (and quite extensive) family. And after a few missteps on my part, we were able to drag John Brown's "Welsh Stick Chairs" back into print (thanks for the most part to Matty Sears, one of John Brown's sons).

Of course, I urged Chris to write a book about his years of working with JB and the evolution of the chair's design in the decades after the publication of "Welsh Stick Chairs." To my shock, Chris agreed.

The result is what you are holding in your hands. But it is far more than Chris's account of how he made chairs with John Brown. At great expense, we secured the rights to publish 19 of John Brown's best columns from *Good Woodworking*. And we reached out to members of his family to offer their accounts of John Brown's life as a chairmaker. There's Matty Sears, who is still a woodworker and brilliant blacksmith in Portland, Ore. There's a beautiful essay from Anne Sears, John Brown's second wife, who was with him as he forged a chairmaker's life at Pantry Fields outside Newport, Wales. And a fun and charming essay from David Sears, who came to work for John Brown as a young man and still carries on the work at Pantry Fields in more ways than one.

The family involvement in this book goes even deeper than the words.

The linocut illustrations on the cover and

Woodworkers all over the world have been inspired by John Brown's chairs. Here is a class in London with their interpretations of a Welsh stick chair.

throughout the book were made by Molly Brown, one of John Brown's talented daughters and a professional artist.

The result is a book that is perhaps as complex and nuanced as John Brown was himself. And after four years of working on this book with Chris and John Brown's extended family, I can finally state that I am OK with the fact that I never met the man.

In the fall of 2019 as we were finishing up work on the text of the book, my wife, Lucy, and I were invited for a meal at Pantry Fields, where Anne and David Sears still make their home and continue their work. Anne with her ceramics and the garden. David with his woodwork and his beer brewing. Molly was there to show us her near-final linocuts for the book. Chris was there, of course. Soon the extended family began to show up, including Badger, one of JB's sons, plus Anne's mother, Molly's husband and a bunch of other delightful people I can barely remember.

As the homestead filled up with people, laughter and hilarious stories about John Brown, I realized that I have met the best part of the man. He must have been someone special to draw so many thoughtful and lovely people into his orbit. And his children (the ones I have met) are all exceptional in some way. All of them bearing some of the hallmarks of their father.

I hope that this introduction to John Brown, and his extended family, will inspire you to build one of these chairs – or at least find someone who will teach you. Like John Brown, these chairs are rare and special. And they are not always easy to love, with their peculiar angles and demanding construction techniques.

But like Chris and I have found, they just might change the trajectory of your life.

Christopher Schwarz
Covington, Ky., 2019

A note on proper nouns: John Brown preferred to be called "John Brown" or JB, though some family and friends occasionally called him "John." We have allowed the writer to use the term he or she prefers, even when it violates our editorial style.


N
W
E
S
LLANRHAEADR
CILGWYN
LLANDOVERY
SCOTLAND
IRELAND
ENGLAND

2: An Introduction to Wales

This book is about a man, a chair and a set of ideals. It's a journey of enlightenment, inspiration and heartbreak as I experienced it. There are many facets to John Brown's life and his life less ordinary, but my story concentrates on John Brown the chairmaker. Other important voices will be heard throughout, each will give an account of the time they spent with John Brown, or JB as he'll often be referred as. His daughter Molly Brown has beautifully illustrated the book; each illustration tells its own story, be it a chair, landscape or Celtic cross, all relevant to what John Brown held dear. I'm indebted to Lost Art Press, which secured the rights to 19 of John Brown's wonderful columns from *Good Woodworking* magazine. These essays will give you a flavour of his writing and philosophical approach to life in the years after writing his book "Welsh Stick Chairs." But before we dive into that, here's some brief housekeeping to fully acquaint you with the country that gave birth to both the man and chair.

Wales: The name given to us by the Anglo-Saxons. They were one of the many who tried to conquer our land. The Romans, Vikings and Normans all left their mark, yet we are still here as a proud nation. Wales is known to its indigenous people as CYMRU. Sadly the name Wales and its people, "The Welsh," have stuck. And for the broader subject of this book, we'll stick with this term.

Wales is a small country that along with Scotland, England and Northern Ireland make up what is known to most as Great Britain or the United Kingdom. The country lies on the western seaboard side of the UK. Its population is approximately 3.1 million people. Its topography is mostly mountainous, with a coastline of more than 2,700 km. Its coal, iron and slate industries are now shadows of their former selves. Agriculture is now one of our main industries, particularly sheep farming in the hills and dairy farming in the lowlands. Tourism also is a large part of the Welsh economy. People are drawn to its spectacular coastline, mountains and abundant castles.

Wales is a bilingual country. The Welsh language has survived despite centuries of persecution by the English and the powers in Westminster. It is now spoken by more than 560,000 people; for many it is still their first language.

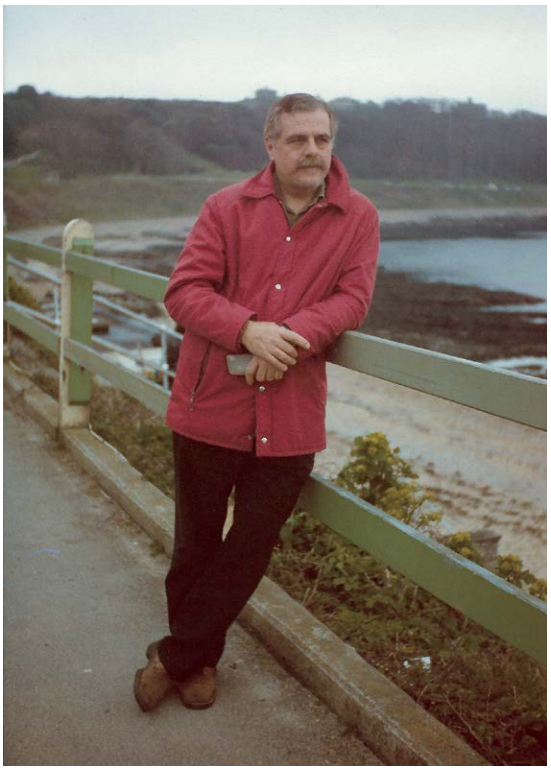
During Britain's recent history, huge swathes of people emigrated to the New World. The Irish, Scots and English all colonised enormous areas of the British Empire. The Welsh mostly stayed at home, yet small numbers went to Patagonia, North America and Australasia. As a result, Wales is little known on the world stage. The Irish identity, for example, remains a huge part of life in the New World. The Scottish are known for whisky and kilts, but the Welsh… we seem indifferent to many.

If anything, we're known for the Welsh male voice choir and rugby. This frustrates me, even more so when people see a map of Great Britain and they deem it "England." It definitely is not! The Welsh are the original inhabitants of Britain, which is known as YNYS PRYDEIN, or "The Isle of Britain" to its indigenous people. There are myriad books on the history of Wales and its people, but this book is about one Welshman in particular and a chair.

"John Brown" was born in Wales, yet spent half of his life in England. He returned to his homeland of Wales as a middle-aged man with an English accent. Culturally different, Wales must have felt alien and different to the Wales of his childhood in the industrial valleys. After a few moves he settled into the predominantly Welsh-speaking area of Cilgwyn in rural North Pembrokeshire. His flamboyant character must have stood out in that parochial community. Twenty years would pass before I would meet him in person, but during those years in that most beautiful corner of Wales he regained his sense of Welshness. For those early years other voices will be heard in this book, for that story is theirs to tell. What I write is from my personal experience and perspective.

John Brown once told me that he felt like an outsider because of his English accent, yet he was born in Wales and was a Welshman. He would have been deemed a "Saeson" – an Englishman in many Welsh-speaking communities. It's an arbitrary distinction. Yet, this sense of identity based on how we speak raises much passion in Britain. It was a conundrum for John Brown, no doubt. I do know that at least he never suffered the remarks that many have endured for having a Welsh accent. Britain is a diverse country with wonderfully different dialects and accents. Yet, why is it that unless you speak with a posh, plummy English accent you are immediately deemed as stupid?

John Brown was a maverick, and he knew his cultural history. He was the most well-read man I ever met. The knowledge that he amassed was staggering, and it had to be vented at times. John Brown relished getting his strong opinions over and out. These rants became quite the norm for me. I couldn't call them debates, as I would have had to say something. I learnt to say nothing, as I was young and naive. Yet, perversely, I learned much from them.



John Brown in his younger days.

During one of these rants, he said something that touched a nerve. We were having a pot of tea. I was taking a sip when he announced: "Your average Welshman is an arsehole!" I nearly spat out the contents of my now-gaping mouth. Myself, Welsh born and bred, and definitely Mr. Average.

I listened tentatively to his sermon until he got to the crux of his outburst: Why did the Welsh let everyone walk all over them? Why couldn't the Welsh voice be heard? These frustrations are why he had written the book "Welsh Stick Chairs." He'd found a culture rich in history and a chair that would become an obsession. He was intuitive and foresaw his beloved chair being annexed as some form of English regional chair. For John Brown, this couldn't happen.

I forgave his outburst as he was correct. We don't need any experts other than ourselves. "Welsh Stick Chairs" is a wonderful source of information. It's a brief history of Wales, a chair and one man's obsession with it, all encapsulated into a small book that became a cult object. It planted a seed

One of John Brown's so-called "primitive" chairs (left) and his Cardigan chair.

that has been sown around the world. Its message is different for all who have read it.

How to Enter Wales

Just before entering Wales from England on the M4 motorway you have to cross the Severn Bridge. The bridge spans 1.6 km over the River Severn, and on reaching the other side you're soon greeted by a road sign that reads "Croeso i Gymru," which translates as "Welcome to Wales." From this point on, every road sign in Wales is bilingual. This particular location is relevant and poignant to this story.

During a passionate conversation (or lecture), John Brown told me how he wanted to see a giant sculpture erected of a Welsh stick chair on entering Wales, similar in scale to Anthony Gormley's "Angel of the North" near Gateshead in Northern England. He thought that the humble Welsh stick chair should become the cultural icon of Wales. That particular conversation holds me to this day.

Read on. I hope that at the end of the journey (this book) you'll realise that it's OK to dream of giant chairs and to let your imagination run riot with this (or any) aesthetic in chair design. I'll try and explain….

Whilst travelling by car to Wales from the south or west of England you can see the Severn Bridge looming from several miles distant, its huge white towers slung with miles of wire, supporting the carriageway beneath. As a child it always excited me to see the old Severn bridge whilst on my return home from family holidays in England. It's a milestone in that I knew I was nearing my homeland and friends. Decades later I still get that feeling when I first see the bridge, but my thoughts are now different. So here we go….

Slowly my daily mind drains away, transcending into something more ethereal in nature, a vision begins. I'm looking at a colossus – a primitive chair, six long sticks piercing the clouds, four eccentrically raked legs rooting it to the Welsh soil, its form hoary with age and its colour patinated dark by the elements. Its silhouette screaming "I'm Welsh" against a brooding skyline. It looks outwardly from Wales. A sentinel for the past, present and future. A voiceless yet powerful symbol. This surreal moment holds me for several minutes. Its finale is when I tip my imaginary cap to John Brown as I see the road sign welcoming me back to my homeland. The moment passes and reality

returns. I usually think about chairs and JB from then on until I reach home. Melancholic, maybe. Yet, this won't be the last you'll read about giant chairs as they prove to have an important role in the tale that will unfold.

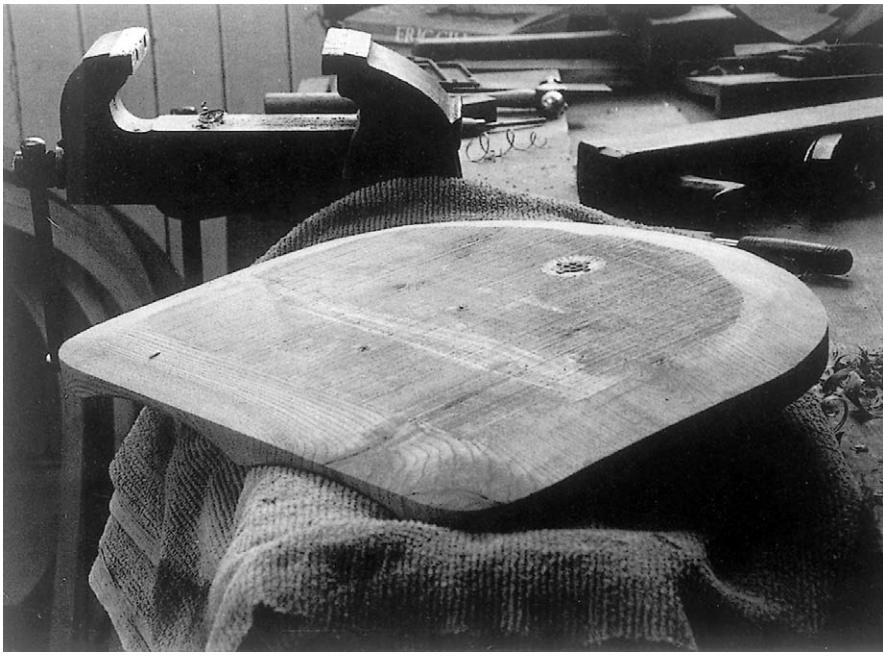
John Brown's book "Welsh Stick Chairs" is a classic. It gives us insight into a craftsman's life. The book's section on building a chair, with its beautiful black-and-white photos of the chair's construction, had a huge impact on me. This inspired me to build chairs, yet there are no plans in his book. This subject of plans is an integral part of this book – integral because there won't be any plans, but the subject will crop up constantly for good reason.

Why no plans? John Brown wrote in a *Good Woodworking* magazine column, "It is never so valid building from other people's plans as seeing an object in your imagination and then making it. I would like to see purveyors of plans go bankrupt."

I'd hate to see his words being taken out of context. He then went on to write, "There are, of course, many exceptions." This might sound extreme, but it's fundamental to the way JB felt about chairmaking. He fully understood the origins of the early chairs and their makers. No two chairs were identical, so how could a plan work? How could he ever make the same chair twice? This would become sacrosanct to his philosophy as well to me personally.

JB would happily and freely give advice on tools and workshop practise, including plans for tool chests, workbenches etc. in his monthly columns. Yet, plans for chairs weren't up for discussion. As you read this book I hope you'll be inspired and realise that the lack of plans isn't a negative! This isn't meant to alienate you, I promise! I hope that you'll embrace it as a different way of woodworking and design. Reread "Welsh Stick Chairs." Read this book over and over, become a monk for a while, let this mantra invade your veins. This approach worked for me! So first let me give you some insight into how this works.

When I was in my late teens I built my first chair. I didn't own a set of French curves or anything in particular to aid me in drawing a fair curve. I hadn't thought about buying a plan (even if one was available). I can well remember using a bin lid (trash can lid) to draw in the back curve of a chair seat, as well as using a coffee mug to draw the curves on the front corners of the seat. Once I had the curves looking fair I was away. It was my first tentative step into a new world of chairmaking. I felt at times that I was almost plucking shapes from the air. Did I have insecurities about what I was doing? Definitely!



John Brown signed his chairs with a Celtic cross.

What I made was in truth a mediocre chair. It was, without doubt, a fundamental part of my learning, and it helped me think outside the box. I hope that you will get this message, accept it and fully immerse yourself into a journey of self-discovery as a free thinker and maker. It's OK if your chairs don't look like what you see in your mind's eye – embrace it! Your work will become better for it.

If, at the end of the book, you feel that you're in need of a plan, please know that there's a plethora of wonderful books out there on the subject of chairmaking. If you're stuck on the Welsh chair aesthetic, Christopher Schwarz's excellent book "The Anarchist Design Book" has a chair plan of an American Welsh Stick Chair.

Chris Williams
Llanybri, Wales, 2019
welshstickchairs.com

5: John Brown, in His Own Words

by John Brown

Editor's note: The following chapter features 19 columns by John Brown from Good Woodworking *magazine. The columns are chronological. In most cases, the photos with the columns were lost. We have reconstructed some of the photos, which is why the image quality is not superb.*

Issue 13, November 1993

John Brown is a chairmaker. Working and living in West Wales, he uses only hand tools to make the stick chairs for which he is now renowned. You can now follow his work and experiences every month

It is not often that craftsmen have the opportunity to design their own workshop. Usually they work in buildings that were meant for other things, from garages to cowsheds, and from garden sheds to disused warehouses. At last I have the chance to reverse this trend, at least for myself.

The mechanics of workshop design are really quite simple. The workspace must be capable of handling the initial raw material, with access for machinery and benches. The heat and light must be suitable, and you are likely to need a facility for finishing and handling the end product without causing damage. All these are relatively easy to build into a design, recognising that you cannot hang a 3' door if your speciality happens to be 4' wooden cubes.

The difficult part is to create the right atmosphere, producing a workshop where the craftsman will feel relaxed and comfortable. I once worked in a disused warehouse in Newcastle, overlooking a scrapyard, with the Byker Wall in the background. I wasn't happy. The days were long and my work suffered. On the other hand I have seen fine furniture made under a railway arch in Brixton, and the craftsman was happy there.

I need to work amongst the trees, in the countryside. I like to hang pictures in my shop, with postcards, posters and interesting memorabilia. It pleases me to see tools hanging on the wall for easy access. There is however, an organic quality in the growth of atmosphere that cannot be instantly created. The workshop has to be lived in. This is the personal side of a working place, and has nothing to do with its size or shape. It reflects the character of the artist. All we can do is tackle the practical side and let the rest grow of its own accord.

New Beginnings for a Workshop

I was married in the autumn of last year, and, as a result, we have bought a traditional Welsh stone cottage near the village of Mynachlog Ddu (which means Black Monks), about 11 miles over the mountain from my previous workshop and home. Our small cottage is on the south slope of Carn Meini, where the blue stones of Stonehenge are

said to come from. Across the valley, to the south, are two very ancient standing stones. Being a "long-house" the cowshed is now our bedroom, so the one weakness in our idyll is the lack of outbuildings. So with no workshop space I am obliged to build my own.

Before we moved I worked long hours building a stock of my "stick" chairs, to get ahead, as it were. I delivered these to the gallery that sells my work, expecting them to survive the summer. In spite of all the political skulduggery about economic recovery some folk must have perceived an end to the recession as my summer stock sold more quickly than I had forecast.

I normally celebrate with cash in my hands, but the time had come for buying the materials to build the workshop. I found that I had vastly underestimated the cost. Brown's new law states: "Work out the cost – then double it!" So the reality is that the workshop has been built PDQ to get me back on the income generating trail: making chairs.

My previous workshop was 15' x 10'. This was purely working space. I had other places to store things, and it did not include room for my treadle lathe or hand morticing machine. Taking all things into consideration I decided I would need more like 20' x 14'. I've got to do most of the building myself, and with my horror of the wet trades, it is being done in wood. Initially my ambition far outweighed my pocket, so I have had to settle for the cheapest materials I can find. There is not time to search around for second-hand timber.

Having designed my building, mostly in the head but accompanied by hundreds of scraps of paper, I submitted a list – including nails, creosote and the lot – to several builders merchants. The price differential, highest to lowest, was only £30, so I decided to give the nearest one the order. This supplier is only two miles away so I have no distance to travel to give them a hard time should they get anything wrong. It is also convenient for picking up those bits I left off my initial list.

The Weather for Working Outside

In August the materials were delivered, promptly, on one lorry. Being summer, it was the time to build, with long days and balmy hot weather. Alas, this being Wales (furthermore West Wales). If there is rain anywhere – or moisture, as the forecaster predicts – it will be here as well. My friend Norman Potter spent ages once trying to persuade me to go and live in central France. But I am a Welshman, and I like it here. One good day in Wales is worth 50 good days in the Dordogne. However, bad weather does cause problems when you're building, and as I look out now in early autumn it is cold and there is continuous fine rain.

The construction is essentially that of a garden shed, only bigger, but for a workshop it is vital to have a solid floor. I had wanted to lay full 25mm (1") thick tongue-and-groove boards, but the cost was too great. I do not like chipboard flooring, so I decided to use 19mm (3/4") shuttering ply, painted later with Blackfriars red tile floor paint. Solidity in a floor is vital, as a springy one is tiring to work on all day. I laid the ply on 150mm x 75mm


THE John Brown COLUMN

It is not often that craftsmen have the opportunity to design their own workshop. Usually they work in buildings that were meant for other things, from garages to cowsheds, and from garden sheds to disused warehouses. At last I have the chance to reverse this trend, at least for myself.

The mechanics of workshop design are really quite simple. The workspace must be capable of handling the initial raw material, with access for machinery and benches. The heat and light must be suitable, and you are likely to need a facility for finishing and handling the end product without causing damage. All these are relatively easy to build into a design, recognising that you cannot hang a three foot door if your speciality happens to be four foot wooden cubes.

The difficult part is to create the right atmosphere, producing a workshop where the craftsman will feel relaxed and comfortable. I once worked in a disused warehouse in Newcastle, overlooking a scrapyard, with the Byker Wall in the background. I wasn't happy. The days were long and my work suffered. On the other hand I have seen fine furniture made under a railway arch in Brixton, and the craftsman was happy there.

John Brown is a chairmaker. Working and living in West Wales, he uses only hand-tools to make the stick chairs for which he is renowned. You can now follow his work and experiences every month

I need to work amongst trees, in the countryside. I like to hang pictures in my shop, with postcards, posters and interesting memorabilia. It pleases me to see tools hanging on the wall for easy access. There is however, an organic quality in the growth of atmosphere that cannot be instantly created. The workshop has to be lived in. This is the personal side of a working place, and has nothing to do with its size or shape. It reflects the character of the artist. All we can do is tackle the practical side and let the rest grow of its own accord.

New Beginnings for a Workshop

I was married in the autumn of last year, and, as a result, we have bought a traditional Welsh stone cottage near the village of Mynachlog Ddu (which means Black Monks), about 11 miles over the mountain from my previous workshop and home. Our small cottage is on the south slope of Carn Meini, where the blue stones of Stonehenge are said to come from. Across the valley, to the south, are two very ancient standing stones. Being a 'longhouse' the cowshed is now our bedroom, so the one weakness in our idyll is the lack of outbuildings. So with no workshop space I am obliged to build my own.

Before we moved I worked long hours building a stock of my 'stick' chairs, to get ahead, as it were. I delivered these to the gallery that sells my work, expecting them to survive the summer. In spite of all the political skulduggery about economic recovery some folk must have perceived an end to the recession as my summer stock sold more quickly than I had forecast.

I normally celebrate with cash in my hands, but the time had come for buying the materials to build the workshop. I found that I had vastly underestimated the cost. Brown's new law states: "Work out the cost – then double it!" So the reality is that the workshop has been built PDQ to get me back on the income generating trail; making chairs.

My previous workshop was 15x10ft. This was purely working space. I had other places to store things, and it did not include room for my treadle lathe or hand morticing machine. Taking all things into consideration I decided I would need more like 20x14ft. I've got to do most of the building myself, and with my horror of the wet trades, it is being done in wood. Initially my ambition far outweighed my pocket, so I have had to settle for the cheapest materials I can find. There is not time to search around for second-hand timber.

Having designed my building, mostly in the head but accompanied by hundreds of scraps of paper, I submitted a list – including nails, creosote and the lot – to several builders merchants. The price differential, highest to lowest, was only £30, so I decided to give the nearest one the order. This supplier is only two miles away so I have no distance to travel to give them a hard time should they get anything wrong. It is also convenient for picking up those bits I left off my initial list.

The Weather for Working Outside

In August the materials were delivered, promptly, on one lorry. Being summer, it was the time to build, with long days and balmy hot weather. Alas, this being Wales (furthermore West Wales). If there is rain anywhere – or moisture, as the forecaster predicts – it will be here as well. My friend Norman Potter spent ages once trying to persuade me to go and live in central France. But I am a Welshman, and I like it here. One good day in Wales is worth 50 good days in the Dordogne. However, bad weather does cause problems when you're building, and as I look out now in early autumn it is cold and there is continuous fine rain.

The construction is essentially that of a garden shed, only bigger, but for a workshop it is vital to have a solid floor. I had wanted to lay full 25mm (1in) thick tongue and groove boards, but the cost was too great. I do not like chipboard flooring, so I decided to use 19mm (3/4in) shuttering ply, painted later with

CLOSE-UP
A look at hand-tools old and new

John Brown makes Welsh stick chairs without any electricity, though he does have a tractor-powered bandsaw for roughing. He has written a book on the chairs, showing how to make them

56 Good Woodworking

The first page of the first issue of "The John Brown Column" in *Good Woodworking*, issue 13, November 1993.

John Brown in a 1992 photo by J Havard.

(6" x 3") joists at 406mm (16") centres. The whole platform is on levelled concrete blocks so that the unsupported span is never more than 1.52m (5'), and there is 50mm (2") thick polystyrene insulation under the ply.

I constructed the sides, and then the ends flat on this floor, making them up with 100mm x 50mm (4" x 2") studding, again with 406mm (16") centres to suit the outer skin of 13mm (1/2") shuttering ply. When working with sections of this size you do not want to make them so heavy that they cannot be manoeuvred into position. Equally if they are not rigid they will go out of shape when they are picked up and moved. So I nailed one ply face to each of the ends and sides while still flat, attaching the other face once the walls were up.

Giving the Workshop a Roof

Apart from the pine ends, the roof is supported by three 150mm x 75mm (6" x 3") braced trusses, with heavy 100mm x 75mm (4" x 3") purlins. I have covered the roof with 10mm (3/8") plywood, overlaid with 38mm (1-1/2") insulation board under plastic coated, box profile slate blue tin sheets. The tin is fastened with 75mm (3") screws with captured rubber sealing washers.

With occasional odd days of help, the frame and cladding have been completed in less than four weeks. The shop is now watertight, but the windows and trim will have to wait until I have made a few chairs. I am impatient to move and start work, though I have yet to collect my timber stocks and the inevitable pile of offcuts. I must also install my 30" band saw. It is driven, via a belt, by an elderly Fordson Major tractor, and will need a concrete plinth and some cover.

I convert much of the wood I use from trunks and large boards with a chainsaw and then the band saw, so it will have to be in place pretty soon to get me going. But for now I will move in my benches, unpack my tools, and generally arrange things to make a start. While I've been building the drawing office in my head has been "thinking" new chairs, and experimenting with colour, shape, decoration and timber. I am excited to get back to work, refreshed, I am sure, after the enforced break.

Issue 18, April 1994

This month chairmaker John Brown looks at tools in a variety of ways. He joins the Association of Pole Lathe Turners and gives us a taste of the origins of toolmaker Ashley Iles

I was pleased to hear that the government has at last plunged into John Brown's philosophy, back to basics. However, us back to basics men can be misunderstood. Such is the case with the piece I wrote about pole lathes in the December issue (GW 14:26).

In response to this came the excellent letters from Mike Abbott and Dick Apps. There is nothing in the letters which I really disagree with, as I probably approached the subject in a narrow way, which is what I accused them of doing. I apolo-

gise if I hurt anyone's feelings. I like their goal, the purity of what they are trying to do. I didn't join the Association of Pole Lathe Turners when it was formed because I felt it was too specific. I would have been happier had it encompassed all the old woodland crafts, hurdle making, besom brooms, all coppice work, charcoal making and baskets. However while reading the *Bodger's Gazette* I see there is another organisation for basket makers, and a body called the Coppice Association, and there are probably others. Swift had it right when he depicted the Lilliputians going to war because they couldn't decide which end of a boiled egg you should enter; and I begin to understand Bosnia! My answer is to join the Association of Pole Lathe Turners. Having sent off my £10 I am pleased to say I am now a proud member.

During the course of this week I had to consult a professional lady who has an office in the village. During our conversation I told her what I did for a living. She was interested as she has a son at university studying architecture and who has just built a pole lathe. She was surprised to hear there was an association. The following day I was talking to toolmaker Matty Sears who told me that a local lad in the village has just had a grant from the Prince of Wales Trust to set up as a pole lathe turner. And this is a remote part of Wales!

The Life and Times of Ashley Iles

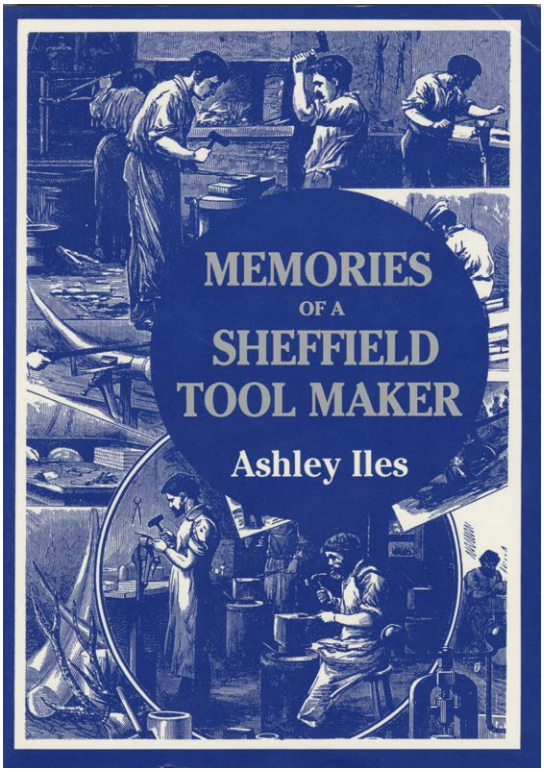
Ashley Iles recently sent me a copy of his book "Memories of a Sheffield Toolmaker." I read it in one go, couldn't put it down. This is a superb account of Ashley Iles's life, interwoven with the story of the decline in the handworking trades of Sheffield. In 1937 at the age of 14 his school days were over. With an ambition to be a joiner he sets out on a short-lived apprenticeship with a small builder. He injures his thumb on the job and when he returns after six weeks he's no longer wanted. Those were different days.

His next job furthered his education somewhat! I quote "It was nature in the raw, and relations between male and female employees were deplorable. I saw a man drag a young girl into a pile of coke and put his hand into the side split of her overalls, saying things I cannot repeat, to the sordid shouts of his male onlookers. I have in my life met many men who can only be described as a waste of the midwife's time." In the end he finds himself as an apprentice in the pattern-making trade working in the shop where his father was foreman. The book is filled with thumbnail portraits of highly skilled, hard working, hard drinking men of a breed which is gone forever.

The Technicalities of the Trade

The book is full of technical interest, describing all the many trades as well as the people who worked them. Ashley describes in details turning a 14' diameter wheel, inside and out, built up from segments. He concludes: "When people ask me if I have ever done any woodturning I have to smile to myself. It was a nerve wracking job, and I got through an enormous amount of tea."

After the war and the end of his apprenticeship,



Ashley Iles's book, now out of print, recalls his life as a toolmaker.

he worked all over the country, to gain experience. By far the most interesting part of the book is his description of the setting up on his own, and the myriad problems which he overcame to start up making edge tools.

The philosophy underlying his actions is most interesting. After reading a book by Christmas Humphries on Buddhism, he embraced the ideal, and thereafter never seemed to look back. It wasn't that his faith made things easier, but it did help to look upon setbacks in a more equable manner, the karma would sort it out. When all around him were closing down, Ashley was expanding, when industrial estates and business parks were the future he moved into the Lincolnshire wilderness.

The book does not hang around, it flows with interest. Ashley Iles is a skilled craftsman, but he is also a fine raconteur and writer. This book should be compulsory reading for every kid leaving school. It says something of the state of our nation that Ashley could not find a British publisher. The book is printed in America and can be had from Ashley Iles. There should be some publishers out there kicking themselves.

Mike Abbot: Pole Lathe Revival As Numbers Grow

Like it or not, more and more people are joining the pole lathe movement! They have discovered that using cleft wood, shaving horses and pole lathes is not only enjoyable but efficient. If you like tractors and old machinery then use a band saw, but a lot of us are scared silly by such fearsome monsters and don't want to be encumbered with anything that can't be slung in a van. As a result the simplest and cheapest way to prepare our wood is to cleave and shave it. Some of us leave it at that stage but to get an accurate round tenon, a sizing tool on a lathe takes some beating. I prefer it to a rounding plane, so if you're using a pole lathe for the joints then why not use it for the whole thing?

It is true that sawing wood will usually yield more blanks than cleaving but you are looking at woodwork through the eyes of a monoculturist. Most green woodworkers burn their waste if only to boil a kettle or to run a steamer.

Mike Abbot at the pole lathe. Abbot wrote a defense of pole lathe tuners after reading John Brown's column.

Where I do agree with you again is in the tendency to worship the Chilterns bodger. I believe that without this single word the pole lathe would rarely have got a mention. For several years though John Whipps in the Forest of Dean has been following up the research of Rob Manton and reviving the craft to turning nests of bowls. Many of these techniques are now filtering into the work of both pole lathes and electric turners.

For me the perfect product for the pole lathe is a spindle so I continue to make chair legs from the masters in their craft and through years of practice

– Mike Abbot, Glous

Dick Apps: Bodgers Retaliate In Defence of the Pole Lathe

We in the Association of Pole Lathe Turners (APT) know that the pole lathe is not the answer to the world's energy problem, and if it was, it would be too hard work for a lot of people. John says that this attitude is not uncommon amongst pole lathe users.

I disagree. I grant him that the pole lathe does not need this attitude, it speaks for itself when you use it.

The members of the APT turn their hands to make many other things besides chair legs. I have turned tompions for cannons, village pump plungers, hammers, file and chisel handles, also balls for throwing at coconuts and recently a set of pub skittles.

The modern bodger is not trying to turn back the clock to the days of slavery, the majority make their own chairs from start to finish, so there is no stacks of legs lying around the countryside.

If John reads the section in "Traditional Country Craftsmen" on Bodgers properly, he will note that the chairs were not made with green wood but from seasoned wood that had been worked whilst it was green. The idea of turning the wood green is because it is easier, it saves a lot of time and wear on the tools. Even the power lathe turners are doing it and then seasoning the article afterwards.

We are all in the learning stage, all the old skilled users are gone, so basically we are relearning a dead art. So don't know us John, come and help us. You have a pole lathe, join the Association of Pole Lathe Turners.

– Dick Apps, Somerset

Issue 20, June 1994

This month chairmaker John Brown looks at the Cardigan and Welsh primitive chairs he has made recently, and makes a plea for woodworkers to make more of their own and less from plans

I'm feeling my age just at the moment. My son bought an old Welsh cottage nearby and a nice user-friendly bathroom floor was one of his requirements. The job fell to Pa. The room in question is in an old stone extension, which had once upon a time been a shed for livestock. The existing base was a new concrete slab, so it was reasonably level. My plan was to fix 2" x 2" softwood bearers at 12" centres, with 2" polystyrene infill for insulation. On top was going to be flooring-grade chipboard. Unfortunately a load of maple flooring became available at a very reasonable price. The floor came from a

One of John Brown's Cardigan chairs.

demolished gymnasium and is made of iron-hard boards, machined in Canada. The tongued and grooved boards actually cover 2-1/4" and they have to be secret-nailed to make a good job.

I went at the job in ignorance. First of all the old 2" nails have to be removed, and far more difficult the crud of ages, a mixture of varnish, polish and dust which had worked its way into the cracks, had to be cleaned. Fortunately several members of the family were on hand to do most of this work. I used new 2" ovals and soon found out that just the right angle has to be maintained to do the job properly. If you nail too upright there is a tendency to split off the tongue, too shallow and the nail can slide on top of the bearer. It took two long days to complete the floor. Nothing is square except my knees! In due course we will hire a floor sander, clean up the boards and probably seal with Lacacote sanding sealer. Anyway my part is done and I am glad to have it behind me.

I made a Cardigan type chair this month. This is an original chair based on an old design from West Wales. The seat, 20" wide and 18" deep, is made up from three pieces of 2"-thick elm. Legs,

One of John Brown's so-called primitive chairs.

stretchers and sticks are oak, the arm is steamed ash. The comb is cut out from a 3" elm board. The chair has a slight toe-in on the sticks, this alters the appearance entirely, making the chair look more antique.

The chair is stained with naptha-based stain. To get the colour I want I mix up in varying proportions, light, dark and medium oak, sometimes a splash of green and occasionally some black. Naptha stains are by far the easiest type of stain I have used. I rub them in with a piece of rag, and no matter how ham-fisted I am there never seems to be any blotchiness. I then seal with a shellac sanding sealer, rub down with #400-grit paper, and apply a coat, or perhaps two, of button polish. After that I put on wax with #0000 wirewool. The button polish can alter the colour, so if I am doing an unstained natural chair, I use blonde polish. All the parts are completed, and waxed before gluing up.

Finishing Before Assembly

Those parts that need to be glued, like the ends of sticks, are cleaned back to bare wood with a wood file before assembly. The glue will not adhere to a polished surface. The excess glue which squeezes out onto the polished surface is picked off with a knife point when the glue is dry. Then a final waxing finishes the chair.

This Cardigan chair has the stretchers placed higher than usual, and the ash arm is 4" shorter than the few previous chairs I have made. There is no particular reason for these adjustments except that the chair looks different and that is what I am trying to do. With the arm being shorter there is only room for three short upright sticks each side.

There is no lathe work on any of my chairs. Stretchers are made with a drawknife and a spokeshave on the shaving horse, and finally finished with a Stanley No. 060-1/2 block plane. I find that if I set the blade on the skew to cut more on the left side than the right, I can achieve slight reverse curves on the stretchers. The seat pommel on this chair is 18-1/2" from the floor. The seat slopes back for comfort, tending to thrust the sitter into the chair, whereas I have noticed some old chairs seem to tend to shoot the occupant out. The arm is 11" above the seat and the back sticks are 27" long.

Primitive Welsh Chairs on Show

I have also completed one of the primitive Welsh chairs. These chairs are inspired by some early examples found quite frequently in Wales, mostly in the north. This one has a wide seat, about 24", which is 17" deep. This type I cut from a single board with the grain running from side-to-side. The chair is made completely of elm. The sticks have no taper and are 3/4" in diameter. I do them by hand with a Fred Lambert rounder. This is an ugly tool of cast aluminum. I dislike its appearance intensely, but it works like a dream, and I intend to make a wooden one soon. This chair has an arm made from three pieces.

As I have frequently done before, I stained this one green. To get the effect I want after the naptha stain has dried I rub all the parts fairly hard with #150-grit paper, rubbing through the stain in parts. Then I seal, button polish as before, and finally #0000 wirewool and wax. Another finish which has been quite effective is to paint the completed, assembled chair with blackboard paint.

Don Weber (above right) made me a brilliant drawknife, and makes his own chairs (above)

Lowback chairs, which John Brown called "library chairs."

When dry, I rub this down exposing bare wood in many places, then seal and polish as before. All these effects can be attractive, but they can also misfire. This is to do with judgement and taste: "Experience is the best teacher but the fees can be very high."

All the chairs are now in the showroom at Lowertown, Fishguard. I listen with more than usual interest to the news about the economy, green shoots and all that sort of stuff. What if everybody stops buying John Brown chairs? Of this the stuff of nightmares is made!

Imagination Makes for Better Design

Readers of my column will know that I never make two chairs alike. Numbers of sticks, their spacings and length, the size of the seat and its shape, angles of stretchers, type of arm either steamed ash or solid wood, colours etc… the combinations are endless. I have gone to great length never to let anyone make a measured drawing, I just pluck the shapes out of the sky as it were. This is a reaction to a lifetime spent making things to others' designs. I do however keep detailed measurements and photographs.

This leads me on to gripe about some of the woodworkers I come across. I hope you will forgive my opinion. When I talk to readers or get letters it often seems to be about the petty cash of woodwork (technical points about dovetails or getting joints to fit), but rarely about shape, proportion or colour. I don't think joints are that important. I would prefer to see woodworkers look at the total picture, is the piece they have just made beautiful, will it hold together, will it do the job it was made for?

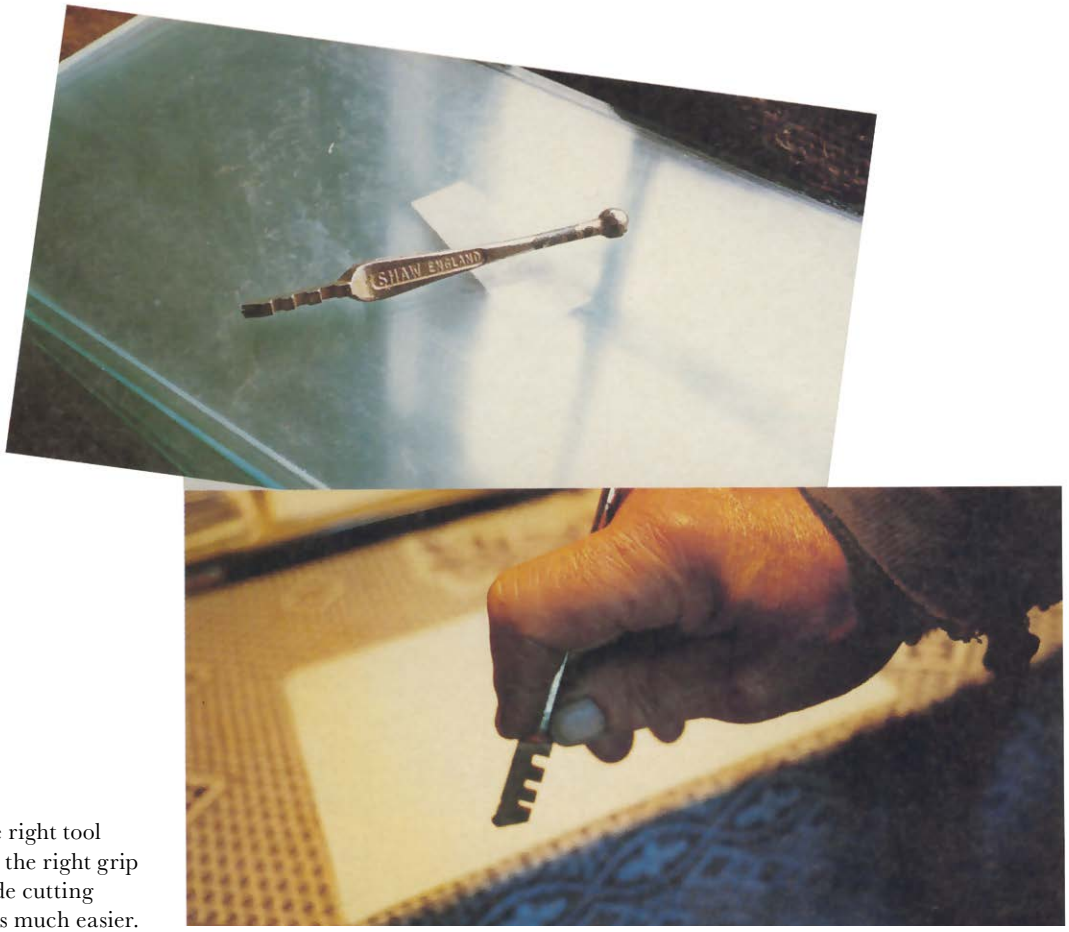
Woodworkers don't buy my chairs, but they spend ages looking at the details of construction and then frown disapprovingly. They want engineering perfection. People who buy my chairs do so for two main reasons. Firstly and by far the most important point, they buy because they like the look of them. Secondly they buy them because they like sitting in them. They rarely inspect the joints. They think they look good, they think they will do the job they are made to do and even though the parts don't fit particularly well, they are strong enough!

Confidence to Design

It is never so valid building from other people's plans as seeing an object in your imagination and then making it. I would like to see all purveyors of plans go bankrupt (not the opinion of this magazine, NG). There are, of course, many exceptions. One has only to look at the entrants to woodworking competitions to see the quality of imaginative woodwork. On the other hand, end of term exhibitions from woodworking colleges have some alarmingly grotesque artifacts that indicate the student is trying too hard to be original. My advice is to keep it simple and to bear in mind that there is nothing new.

I think many woodworkers are frightened of design, afraid there might be failures. The best way to learn about design is to use the eyes, and discipline yourself to refrain from looking at the joints. If you are unsure of your ability to judge – and many of us fall into this category – start with what is indisputably good design. Go to art galleries and museums. Read about design. In the end you may not even be able to relate the source of inspiration to the result.

I once had a letter from a man in Dublin, a keen amateur chairmaker. He told me nothing would go right, he lacked inspiration. My reply was to say



The right tool and the right grip made cutting glass much easier.

that he shut the workshop door and forget about chairs for a while. I said go and look at the "Book of Kells" in Trinity College and read Proust, look at artistic accomplishment in an entirely different field.

What we have to understand is the relationship between art and craft. Our language and class traditions have separated these two skills. Artistic talent is perceived as a result of formal training in an art school, and the artist is to be looked up to as a special person, endowed with an indefinable gift. At the same time the craftsman wears the badge of the horny-handed son of toil, the good honest yeoman, the working man, and is treated as such. This is nonsense. Craftsman (technician) plus imagination equals artist. So my plea is that when you feel the need to buy a set of plans, stop, get out your imagination, and on the back of an envelope, design your own piece.

Issue 27, January 1995

This month chairmaker John Brown masters the skill of glass cutting and defines the abstract quality of sensitivity, vital for using hand tools successfully

It has been a very busy month since I last wrote for the magazine. I have been repairing my living space and workshop in a disused stable building. I have been insulating and panelling a ceiling, laying a floor of tongued and groove chipboard, installing a Rayburn, making windows and doors and a myriad of lesser jobs. I now have two or three days work to do before the stage is reached when I can move in, so my 30-day forecast is not too far out.

My greatest success this month has been to learn to cut glass to a reasonable standard. I have never mastered this job, breakage after breakage was the invariable result, ending up with a trip to the glass works to have the piece cut for me.