

A labour of love: making rustic ash chairs

Like many craftsmen, Mark Griffin spent a lifetime in a conventional career before devoting himself full time to what was 'just' a hobby. A retired firefighter in south Oxfordshire, Mark now makes distinctive chairs from ash, working from a barn near Didcot.

Although he had always enjoyed making things from wood, Mark credits the legendary Mike Abbott with awakening his interest and helping him to hone his skills. Having spent a fascinating afternoon watching a green woodworker making chair parts at a country show in Anglesey in 1989, Mark received Mike Abbott's first book (*Green Woodwork*) from his wife as a gift, and was hooked.

Twenty years later, he went on two courses, one with Mike and the other with Gudrun Leitz at Clisset Wood. While Mike's course concentrated on the technical aspects of chair-making, Gudrun's brought out the 'arty' side of Mark's talent. He produced two chairs, the first of a collection that soon began to take over his house. Mark worked with Mike occasionally on development weeks, and in 2015 helped out as one of his assistants on several courses. 'The sense of achievement gained from making your first chair is indescribable and I'd recommend that everyone should have a go'.



Making a living from bespoke chair making is no easy matter and many craftsmen offer training and courses as a sideline to supplement their income. Pitching the prices is always difficult and many craftsmen struggle to get this right when they are starting out. Mark says, 'When I started selling my chairs, I had a long discussion with a group of green woodworkers regarding pricing and they unanimously agreed pricing was their biggest bugbear.'



A labour of love: making rustic ash chairs

Mark reckons it take about 20 hours to make a simple chair, and more intricate designs with complicated back panels, seating patterns, arms and rockers or carving obviously take longer. Mark averages one or two pieces a week, although he has spent as long as 60 hours on one really special chair. He tries to make components in batches to save time, but the legs must be reasonably green, so that when the chairs are assembled the natural drying of the wood secures the joints. Mark doesn't use any glue in his chairs, so must use the wood at its best.

'At my first commercial contemporary arts and crafts fair, several other makers complimented my chairs but all suggested that I'd priced them too low. They were right, but putting a cost on your own time and effort is one of the hardest things to do. Even now I struggle to set prices for any of my new and unique designs. I have looked at various formulae for calculating product costs and they all seem quite unrealistic to me. My wife is of great assistance when pricing my work though, as she questions all my pricing decisions, getting me to consider exactly how long each process takes and why some designs cost more than others

'All my chairs are hand-crafted from ash using traditional woodcraft tools and techniques and as such each chair is unique. I weave a variety of seat patterns using Danish cord, Sisal, paper rush, bark and Kambaa. I am never going to make a fortune chair making, but I love the making and development of new and improved chair designs.'

In his book, *The Man Who Made things out of Trees*, author Rob Penn enumerated the many uses of ash wood over the course of human history. It was readily available and widely used for tools, handles, utensils, pots and vessels, as well as chairs.

Mark believes that ash is perfect for chairs,

being flexible, strong and lightweight. The strength allows the use of smaller dimension timber thus creating a visual lightness to the chair frame. The flexibility means the furniture has a natural spring that gives slightly when you sit and pushes back, assisting when you're getting up. When green (freshly cut), ash is easily worked with sharp hand tools. It splits (cleaves) along the grain very well and cleft wood, which has been split with the grain,

is much stronger (up to 100%) than sawn timber. This allows the components to be smaller diameter and ultimately produces a light weight but strong chair. Aesthetically, ash is beautiful creamy colour, which mellows into a warm honey colour with age.

Mark is a member of the Association of Pole Lathe Turners and Green Woodworkers and undertakes commissions. He will be found demonstrating at several woodfairs and craft shows around the country over the course of the summer. Visit his website www.rustic-ash.co.uk for more information.

The sense of achievement gained from making your first chair is indescribable and I'd recommend that everyone should have a go.

Prize-winning bodger

I was encouraged to enter some of my work into the Bodgers Ball Competition last year. I submitted a 'picket fence' armchair and a child's double-rocking seesaw, and much to my delight, both won first places in their classes. This made me realise that people actually appreciated my efforts and really boosted my confidence.

