

The stick chair making movement

by Bill Ratcliffe

What is the enduring fascination with traditional chair making?

Over centuries there have been countless distinctive designs; but they are all intrinsically the same object. The ergonomics of a chair has obvious limitations, yet specialist requirements as well as the demands of fashion have provided endless inspiration for new designs.

Perhaps our obsession is down to the fact that the chair is a piece of furniture that we actually use so regularly, and, of course, the need to sit down is a basic human function.

Designs have been influenced by historical events. For example, the crown decorations added after the English Civil War to demonstrate the return of the monarchy, or military features on 'Trafalgar chairs' with sabre legs to reflect the weapons and emblems used. Given that we now have a new war in Europe, this is bound to have an impact on art and culture as well.

The regional chair styles and design features are akin to peoples' accents. The shape of an arm, the positioning of a stretcher or the design of a back – they all can pinpoint that a chair came from a certain maker or part of the country.

Take the Windsor chair and its regional variations or look west to the Welsh stick chair, which was traditionally made with native timbers, such as Ash, Oak, Beech, Elm and Yew. And they still can be - without the need for machining and with simple hand tools.

Making chairs offers the valuable opportunity to make something by hand that is beautiful, useful and essential. The maker can ensure the natural features and character of the timber are the stars of the show. They can also add their own design features and leave their individual tool marks - just like a fingerprint or signature.

Traditional chair making has never really stopped, despite mass production. Professional and amateur makers alike



Bill's hand-made Welsh stick chair beside his traditional tool chest

have kept the tradition going. But recent years have seen the biggest revival of the craft.

I have worked with many different designs, but there was always something about the Welsh stick chair that struck a chord. Maybe it was my Welsh heritage or it just being a beautiful design. One of my stick chairs, made in Oak with Walnut wedges, sits next to my tool chest. It is the perfect perch for rest and contemplation, and a place for inspiration for future projects.

As a furniture conservator, furniture maker and tutor, based near Ely, Cambridgeshire, I was first inspired by one of US woodworker Chris Schwarz's books a few years ago, *The Anarchist's Design Book*. I then looked for a copy of John Brown's seminal 1990 work *Welsh Stick Chairs* and was lucky enough to get hold of a signed copy. Brown beautifully captures the history, the tools and the techniques in such a wonderful yet unassuming green volume. I was also delighted to see woodworking magazine *Quercus* devote a cover story to "JB" recently.



Bevel gauge for drilling the legs (left) and saddle inshave tool for saddling (right)

Brown explains in his book that the English Windsor started - like the Welsh chair - as a peasant's chair. However, at the beginning of the 19th century, tycoons of the Industrial Revolution seized on a commercial opportunity. High Wycombe, also where I completed my degree in furniture restoration, became the centre of mass production with the nearby Chiltern Hills supplying all the Beech wood they could want. Brown sums up with a quote from John Ruskin: "Life without Industry is guilt, and Industry without Art is brutality".

Thanks to those books, I became hooked and have made many stick chairs since and added a five-day chair making course to my offering as a tutor. Since then, I have guided scores of students, none of whom have ever left my workshop without finishing a lovely and very personal chair to take home. In my own small way, I feel I am handing on the baton of chairmakers past.

There is a unique connection with your materials when making a chair, particularly chairs like Windsor chairs or Welsh Stick chairs. This could be because they are solid seats, and they are a canvas to display the beauty of the timber.

The seat is shaped for comfort as well as aesthetics. The "saddling" process is sculptural and brings out some lovely grain patterns. The arms and hand rests offer opportunities for shaping to tactile forms. The legs can be round, octagonal and even tapered. And the timber for wedges can be chosen to your taste, like so many personal touches that can be made.

Making chairs definitely makes you a better woodworker. For example, your ability to read the grain and feel for your materials will develop. Your work will become instinctive, and you will turn, travish, bore, scrape, spokeshave, saw, plane and wedge - just to mention a few techniques. One of the first challenges the chairmaker faces, for example, is drilling seat sockets for the legs. These need drilling accurately at an angle and along a sight line. I use a



Two of Bill's woodworking students

digital bevel set to the correct angle, which is then clamped between two blocks and aligned on my marked sight lines. After drilling, the hole is then reamed to a tapered angle.

After rough tapering the top of the leg on a lathe, the tenon is completed using a tenon cutter – like a large pencil sharpener - to match the socket.

Saddling the seat is an opportunity to really add your sculptural taste to the piece, the focal point of the finished chair, as the eye is drawn to the largest and most profiled area.

As I sink once more into my Welsh stick chair, I hope that this article may inspire some to read further on the subject and, more importantly, to make a chair.

It is such fun and so fulfilling. While the reward is in the making, the bonus is in the using.

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