The Silky Timber Journey

Inspired by the delivery of some strange logs, *Bill Ratcliffe* explores a rare British fruit wood

Bill still has a collection of apprentice pieces

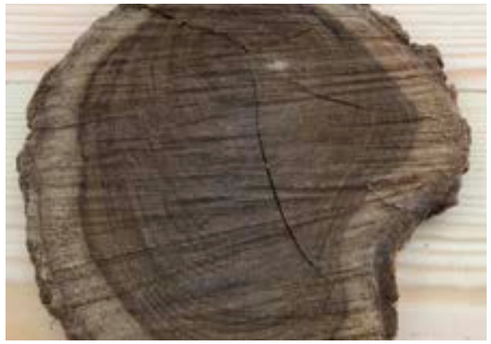
After the usual Christmas gifts of socks and aftershave, the lull and anti-climax of the New Year arrived. However, my friend Debbie had mentioned a few months prior that she had access to some unknown timber in log form, and asked if I would like it. The price to the owner was some cans of Guinness, which was more than acceptable to me even though I was unaware of the current beer to timber, ml:m^3 exchange rate. The logs arrived in early January, and they sparked my thought process and some self-learning. They had been stored at a property for over 20 years. This article is not about scientific identifications of timber. I have seen a lot of machismo or one-upmanship in this area, and I have also, on more than one occasion, seen several 'experts' standing around a piece of furniture debating endlessly about the species. I regularly see auction lots described wrongly, and I have seen people abused on social media for an errant comment about the wrong timber. Not knowing or recognising a timber is nothing to be embarrassed about, particularly in centuries-old furniture affected by light, polished, waxed and so on.

There is an appreciative and grateful feeling you get as a woodworker when someone gifts you the raw materials or tools of your craft. When this is a timber that you rarely encounter or have no reason to normally source, it is more than just a gift. Then consider the growing time and the 20-plus years of careful storage and you feel privileged to have it now. You must use it carefully and feel a heavy burden to do it justice. I will go on to discuss the identification of these timbers later.

The East India Company was established in 1600, under the reign of Elizabeth I, and the effects on the trade from the 'Far East' were to be massive. However, the East India Companies did not only import products from the Far East, they were also the stimulus of ideas, importers of design, craftsmen and new cultures. The V&A Museum research on a lacquered tabletop cabinet, probably made in London c1620, suggested the cabinet was made from tropical eucalyptus wood likely sourced from packing crates used to import other goods from the Far East. This demonstrates the novelty and value Western craftsmen put on materials which, although so common in their countries of origin that they were used for packaging, they were crafted into valued objects in England. Today we can research timbers online, see photographs and read copious amounts of literature. We have a massive choice of timbers, and we can import nearly anything we want, within the law. In contrast, imagine that your job everyday as a 17th Century craftsman was working with your hands using a few selected materials with the same feel, look and smell. Then you get to hold, touch and work on a new timber that you and your peers have not experienced before. This powerful exchange of goods and materials cannot be underestimated.

Materials were a valuable resource and as such were utilised and this is an example of up-cycling around 400 years before the phrase was coined, as a supposed innovation. We are privileged to have this opportunity to experience new materials but often stick to what we know. Why? Comfort? Laziness? Necessity? Perhaps our local timber merchant has a static or limited range? The saying goes, if you always do what you have always done, you will always get what you have always got. I will freely admit, I do not do this as often as I should or I would like to, but I do try to use a variety of timbers when making new items. Of course, when restoring items, we are often exposed to a variety of species, but it is still focused on the most common timbers. That is why the gift of a different timber is such a valuable one. Perhaps we should try monthly to buy a piece of wood we have never worked with or arrange exchanges with other woodworkers.

So back to my delivery of logs. Identifying timbers is normally more difficult in these situations, as there is less of context, where the tree grew, the overall shape, the leaf type and so on. Two of the logs were relatively easy to identify, being laburnum and box. I will touch on the former later. The third, however, was one I have not used despite in hindsight having worked on furniture made using it in parts.



Part of the log delivery (left) deposited in the workshop foyer. Time for a cup of tea... Bill cut a 20mm slice from the end of one log and exposed the vivid colour difference between the oxidised (above) and freshly exposed timber (below)

The identification

The first clue was the shape of the logs which suggest a random, unruly-shaped tree. Then secondly the bark was rough and had deep fissures. The heartwood was rich brown colour. So what timber might it be? I decided to cut an inch or so off the end of one log and this told me it was a hard and pretty dense wood. It also exposed some fresh timber, which was so different to the end that had been oxidizing for decades. The fresh timber was a bright golden/yellow colour and that really was the answer as mulberry does darken when exposed to air. This had to be mulberry (*Morus nigra* or *Morus alba*). With that renewed focus, I was able to read up and see that mulberry bark often has an orange tinge, which was evident on the logs. All these factors confirmed my thoughts and it being black mulberry.

I then had another thought. My Craven Conservation & Restoration workshops are on Barcham Farm near Ely, Cambridgeshire. My landlady, Diana Barcham-Stevens is an amazing lady. She is an inspiration and a force of nature, and has created an environment that embraces nature, and I am privileged to work and create in such a beautiful place. Diana was also the founder of Barcham Trees, which was sold on many years ago and is now Europe's largest tree specialist, growing over 200,000 instant impact trees (including mulberry). They now also hold two Royal Warrants.

I am lucky to have Barcham Trees on my doorstep and they are in the process of establishing a new 16-acre showcase garden with a new lake, café and facilities. Opposite Diana's home, 50m from my workshop, there is a stunning lake surrounded by a variety of mature trees. The lake was dug out by Diana and her late husband John, and now thrives with wildlife. I often sit on the far bank for my lunch. Diana planted all the trees herself over 40 years ago. I had a chat with her and asked if there is a mulberry tree anywhere on the estate and she told me yes, there was just one in her front garden. I had walked past this tree many times and not noticed it, so I thought I should go and introduce myself. As it was late January, it was a bare tree but sure enough the bark was the same, the orange tinge evident and the shape of the unruly branches similar. This tree is black mulberry and confirmed my timber identification.

Note the orange tinge of the bark of the delivered logs (left). The mulberry tree (right) is close to Bill's workshop, planted by his landlady, Diana, over 40 years ago. Note also the orange tinge to the bark. The mulberry table (below left, from a private collection) is c.1690 is made from solid timber, using small dimension stock no wider than 125mm (5in). The timber samples (below) are part of Bill's timber sample collection with not a mulberry or laburnum sample to be seen, for now at least...

As I said earlier, this article is not about scientific analysis and pore types. I have hundreds of timber samples, including vintage sets from timber merchants, and microscope slide specimens, and no mulberry to be seen. Nor does mulberry feature in many timber-related books but this is no surprise given the scarcity of the tree, its size and it not being seen as a good commercial option. I am now adding mulberry and laburnum to my samples, I may even make a new alternative sample box from them. This lack of detail and the need for learning sent me to the bookshelf.

Furniture history

In relation to furniture, I refer to my favourite and most prized book, the weighty tome, *Woods in British Furniture Making 1400 – 1900* by Dr Adam Bowett. He explains how research shows that black mulberry was introduced to England at Syon House, in 1548, white mulberry somewhat later.

In 1605, James 1 issued an edict offering free seeds to anyone willing to plant mulberry trees for the propagation of silkworms, with limited results, although most of the stately homes in England claim to have a tree dating back to this demand.

The famous diarist of the 17th Century, John Evelyn, commended the tree "for its Timber, durableness, and use the Joyner and Carpenter, and to make Hoops, Bows, Wheels and even Ribs for small Vessels instead of Oak". The bark was traditionally used to make ropes, and the leaves, as well as the silkworms, also provided feed for cows, sheep and young pigs. Bowett goes on to say that because of its scarcity, and because of the small size and irregular growth of the trees, mulberry wood is not commonly found in British furniture.

The colour of mulberry being a deep brown and its texture being coarse, give it a similar appearance to elm, but darker. An image (above) shows a table c1690 and due to the constraints of the timber size, the top was made up of five joined boards, none being any wider than 125mm. Some sapwood had also been included, which had then been attacked by worm. I am sure that many pieces of furniture made using mulberry are understandably misidentified when looking at thin boards, but just looking with mulberry as an option in your timber vocabulary will help.

Mulberry is therefore more associated with smaller items of treen. Bowett asserts there are a group of 18th Century objects associated with the black mulberry tree which grew in William Shakespeare's garden at New Place, Stratford-upon-Avon. When the tree was cut down in 1759, the timber was sold to a number of local

Very rarely Bill uses a microscope to analyse timber samples and slides, but there are none of mulberry nor laburnum. The Bowett book is not cheap to buy, but then quality items rarely are. It is less than the cost of a decent plane or saw, and you get something very special; years of research and knowledge

buyers, among whom was George Cooper (b.1720), a Stratford joiner. Reports suggest Cooper was a "poor joiner of Stratford, whose curiosity excited him to work what little he was able to purchase into toys, such as tea chests, boxes and tobacco stoppers etc... some of which were prettily carved".

A number of Cooper's tea chests survive, carved all over with shallow relief decorations in rococo, 'Chinese' or 'Gothick' styles. At least one is carved with the bust of Shakespeare, and the lids of the canisters are carved with mulberries.

Laburnum is a more common timber and is used in woodturning and I have turned some myself, however some of the other points still apply. Unlike mulberry, laburnum is listed in many timber books, for example, *Wood Specimens* (H.A. Cox, MA) and in Charles Hayward's *Woodworker's Pocket Book*, which in information to size ratio, is the equivalent of an early USB memory stick. The listing in my 1961 Pocket Book states: "Laburnum (*Laburnum anagyroides*) sources: British Isles and Europe generally. Colour: rich olive green. Uses: Almost exclusively for the familiar 'oysters' seen on decorative veneers. The grain of the wood is very strong and ungovernable."

I turn again to Dr Bowett for some key information. Laburnum wood is dense and moderately heavy, with a coarse, ring porous structure. The heartwood is dark brown with a bronze or greenish cast, sharply divided from the clear yellow sapwood. Laburnum is popularly thought to have been first cultivated in England by John Tradescant in 1596, but its introduction may have been earlier.

This is also a suitable time to talk toxicity. Laburnum provides beautiful yellow flowers for the gardener but the decision to grow it may be influenced by the toxicity of the seed pods which contain cytisine. Working with the timber also has its hazards, as it contains the toxin, and safety precautions should be taken.

The only area of the British Isles where

laburnum has made a significant impact on furniture-making was eastern Scotland, where a distinct and well-documented tradition emerged in the 18th Century. As early as c.1735, the Earl of Haddington noted its potential as a furniture-making timber: “The timber is very hard, and of a Bright Yellow, with Dark Purple Veins. Was it large enough to be sawn into planks, it would make charming tables.”

The largest surviving collection of Scottish laburnum furniture is at Blair Castle, Perthshire, where it was assembled prior to the First World War by Lord James Murray (later the 9th Duke of Atholl). He wrote: “This furniture was all made in Perthshire and Angus. It was the custom for the smaller lairds to have their furniture made by local cabinetmakers in imitation of the Chippendale and Adams furniture procured from London by the wealthier landlords. Mahogany not being procurable they used the local laburnum of which the centre core is very hard and almost as dark as mahogany.”

The fashion for laburnum furniture seems to have waned by about 1830, possibly due to a change in public taste, or the wider availability of imported exotics such as mahogany and Brazilian rosewood. In England, laburnum was generally regarded as a purely ornamental tree, although several commentators remarked on its fitness for many purposes, including furniture-making.

Bowett has researched the reports of laburnum being widely used for ‘oyster’ veneers, where the branches are crosscut at angles to give oval-shaped pieces of timber, which combined with the grain rings, resemble oyster shells. However, his research contradicts these reports, he explains that towards the end of the 19th Century connoisseurs of antique furniture created a cult of laburnum wood furniture which appears to have been based on the misidentification of woods used on late 17th Century cabinets.

Laburnum is frequently cited as one of the woods used in ‘oyster’ veneering and parquetry, an example of which was previously mentioned from the *Woodworker’s Pocket Book*. These assertions are, however, unsupported by microscopic analysis. All pieces so far examined have proved to be olive wood, kingwood, or cocus wood, and at the time of Bowett’s writing, no references to laburnum wood furniture had been found in inventories or bills of the period.

In fact, here is a quote from the introduction to the book, *Wood Specimens*, by John Evelyn (I have amended some of the old English): “Since it is certain and demonstrable that all art and artisans whatsoever must fail and cease, if there were no timber and wood in a nation, (for

The laburnum chair (left) is c.1740. This one is of a set at Newhailes, near Edinburgh (National Trust of Scotland). The tea chest, c.1760 (above) is also mulberry, made by George Cooper of Stratford-upon-Avon, England, from a private collection. One of a pair of Windsor chairs (below), c.1770 is laburnum, and made for Keir House Perthshire. The seats are sycamore

he that shall take his pen, and begin to set down what art, mystery or trade belonging any way to human life, could be maintained and exercised without wood, will quickly find that I speak no paradox). I say when this shall be well considered it will appear better be without gold than without timber.”

Having looked at how imported tropical timbers had an impact in Britain centuries ago, it is then interesting to see how rarer more ‘exotic’ timbers like laburnum and mulberry were grown in Britain from 1500s and found a niche as alternatives to some more expensive timbers being imported in the 16th Century onwards.

The start of the journey

This timber donation prompted me to do some fresh reading, writing, and handling of timber I had not used for many years, or in the case of mulberry, not at all. Experiencing a timber, the weight, smell, feel, hardness, colour, bark and other characteristics is such an invaluable way to expand your timber repertoire. Buying timber as a plank/board is one thing but going back to identify the tree is so much more fulfilling. Otherwise, we are like some children who eat food but have no idea how it grows or where it comes from. Depending on our specialisms, we probably have a limited menu of timbers we use, ash, oak, beech, walnut, cherry, pine and so on, some woodturners may use laburnum and mulberry regularly though. I challenge you to seek out some new timbers and research them, just as I challenge myself. Link up with fellow woodworkers and swap some timber. I always encourage my students to use different timbers as they progress.

Woodworkers often say it is good to include a new technique or tool with each project, well the same can apply to timbers. This gift gave me the raw material, the learning opportunity and eventually the objects I will make. This gift keeps giving and I have made a resolution to spend more time out of the workshop in my surroundings, focusing on where my materials come from and to look much more closely.

For me, this is as much about the journey that wood can take the woodworker on, as it is of the journey of timber and trees over the centuries.

References: Woods in British Furniture Making 1400–1900, *by Dr Adam Bowett (2012);* Woodworker’s Pocket Book *(1961 Reprint), by Charles Hayward;* Wood Specimens *by HA Cox, MA.*

Visit Bill at cravenconservation.co.uk or follow him on Instagram @cravenconservation.

Plane Box

***Bill Ratcliffe* sets his young example**

Simple task, just make a box for a LN102 block plane, after all, a box is a box is a box. Then you consider you want your box to be different and most box designs have been made already. This is not about reinventing the box, it is about practising your skills, demonstrating your abilities and the fun of making. Woodworking is about enjoying the process, being creative and continuing to learn.

So, what box should I make? *Quercus* made me aware of some styles already being made so they were out. Then I thought, I am a furniture restorer as well as a maker, there is also a tradition of making apprentice pieces and this is, after all, to support the YWW2022 Initiative. I decided on making the box based on a 17th century six-plank chest, many of which were often quite crudely adorned with studded decoration to show the owners initials and often the year of marriage. I could adapt that to say 'LN102' and the appropriate wood for this type of chest is oak, very apt for *Quercus* too. Decision made and the choice reflects my profession and my passion for historic furniture.

Lower compartment

The box is approximately 155mm long x 95mm high x 52mm deep, approx. 5mm thick stock. There is a lower compartment for blade storage, accessed when the plane is removed. The box was assembled using fish glue, the structural studs are copper rose-head type, and the finish is shellac, reflecting materials I use every day in restoration. The box is made to fit the plane, so it does not slide around when moved. The box now sits on my workbench and makes me smile. Hopefully, it will inspire some ideas for the entrants or at least make them smile too.

How will competition entrants make their work stand out or add to their design? Having written in this edition about expanding timber choices, perhaps that is worth considering. Also, does your box say something about you? Does it do the job and fulfill the brief? The box does not have to be over-complicated. The reward is in the making.

To learn more about the Young Woodworker of the Year 2022 competition visit quercusmagazine.com/young-woodworker or follow @youngwoodworkeroftheyear.

Chests like these often had the owner's initials displayed in studs, often done quite crudely, but the personalisation showed how the object was valued. The chest started as a prototype (below left) but ended up a completed box made from offcuts, done between other workshop commitments. Very few tools are required, and you can look up images of historic chests to decide on shapes. They are also great projects that can develop full-scale