



*by Jenny Nielson,  
photography by Jasper & Judi Murphy*

Jasper Murphy is a chair maker and wood enthusiast who runs a small business out of his home workshop in Gisborne.

Murphy has a longstanding interest in wood and in particular, wood turning as a craft. In the early nineties he discovered a book by Mike Abbot, an authority on green wood chair making which inspired him to make his first chair.

Until the dawn of the industrial revolution most chairs in Britain were constructed from parts turned out of green wood. Chair making was one of the first 'piece work industries' that involved people with very specific jobs. 'Bodgers' to turn the rungs and legs, 'Framers' to assemble the chairs and 'Matters' to weave the seats from rushes to mention but a few. Due to the absence of heavy machinery and the subsequent difficulty with transporting bulky raw materials, the component parts were all constructed in the forest using hand tools and a foot powered pole lathe before being moved to a workshop to be finished. As this traditional industry has died out Murphy is mastering all the tasks from tree to finished chair.

Trees are naturally very strong and flexible, having the ability to bend and sway in the wind. In storms they may have branches ripped off or be up-rooted but very seldom break at the trunk. This strength comes from the fibres that make up the wood. Splitting wood following these fibres, which is easier when green, retains the maximum amount of this strength and flexibility that may be lost using modern machinery. Murphy finds it is quicker, easier, cheaper and more convenient to split the parts for his chairs as required than have the wood milled. This also allows his chairs to be lighter and more delicate.

The hand and foot powered tools and equipment used by the original chair makers are still used by Murphy, most of which he has made himself by adapting traditional plans to suit available local materials or by trial and error. All the tools required (many of which are now unavailable) have had to be improvised. Murphy has chisels





fashioned from truck springs and a froe (splitting tool) made from part of a plough. He built his pole lathe using a combination of ancient plans; some dating back to early Roman and Egyptian times, his shaving horse is based on a Swedish coopers' design.

Using Mike Abbot's book as a starting point Murphy began making stools turned from green manuka with seats woven from sea grass. His first pieces were quite simple and more like learning exercises in using and refining his equipment and exploring the properties of wood. From there he progressed to making chairs and then rocking chairs which involved processes like steam bending and more complex angles.

Murphy never uses glues, screws, or nails in his chair joints and relies on the natural shrinkage of the wood to hold the chair together. As wood dries it shrinks, but not evenly. As a rule it will shrink twice as much in one direction as the other with negligible shrinkage in length so that a leg or rung turned round will always dry oval. This property can be seen when looking at the way a whole log will split naturally as it dries.

To create a strong joint the rungs are made first and then dried. The chair is assembled while the legs are still green which will shrink around the dry rungs thus creating naturally tight joints. It takes about twelve weeks to make a chair from the fresh cut wood to the final coat of Danish oil. First the timber is cut into lengths; split using wedges to break the log down, then a splitting froe and wooden mallet are used to split out the individual parts. Using a side axe and then a drawknife and shaving horse each piece is roughed out ready for turning on the pole lathe. The rungs, spindles and rails are made first and allowed to dry completely before the legs are turned.

The back legs and any other curved parts of the chairs are turned straight then steam bent, creating elegant curves which provide comfort. Bending the wood rather than cutting it to shape also preserves the natural strength of the grain. The chair is then assembled from a combination of wet and dry components. The rungs which were round when turned have dried to become ovals and are put into round holes in the still green legs. The hole in the leg is smaller than the long side and bigger

than the short side of the oval rung. With the long side of the oval rung oriented to the vertical of the leg it can be forced in without fear of splitting it. When the leg dries it shrinks onto the sides of the rung resulting in an oval rung held tightly in an oval hole. The natural properties of wood are used in many other ways throughout the chair building process and are considered at every step.

Once assembled, the frame has its seat woven on and is left to dry before final oiling and polishing. The seagrass used for his seats is the only raw material he can't get locally. He is keen to find an alternative at some stage but at present is happy refining his chair making skills.

In 2002 Murphy traveled to England to a chairmaking workshop in Clisset Wood, Herefordshire and spent three weeks living in the forest making chairs under the instruction of Mike Abbot. During this time in the forest Murphy was able to fine tune the skills he had taught himself and exchange techniques and experiences with other chair makers.

Since putting together his first stool Murphy's involvement in chair making has gradually grown and formed its own ecology. "People often call me when they are about to cut down a tree in their garden or if something has come down in a storm to see if I am interested in using the wood" he says. Collecting wood in this way is an important part of Murphy's philosophy and it allows him to experiment with many different and interesting varieties of wood. However, not all wood is suitable for chair making and each type brings its own limitations to the process and influences potential design.

Oak bends well, but is hard to turn, blunting tools, gum is hard to split and shrinks erratically, hornbeam and jacaranda make beautiful looking chairs but the wood becomes too brittle when dry to withstand everyday use. Murphy has an interest in using fruit woods due to their traditional use and local availability, but this would require the development of a new style of chair that could be made from the shorter lengths available. He prefers not to cut down trees and would rather utilise wood that might otherwise be burned or wasted. He has made many chairs using manuka, selecting the best parts of trees cut for firewood from his brother's farm. "I made my first chairs

from manuka because it is such a beautiful wood to work with and there is such a lot of it about that's not being used." The choice of manuka as a material was also inspired by its historical use in Maori society for constructing hard wearing implements such as digging sticks and weapons like taiaha. Early settlers also chose it to replace broken tool handles due to its similarity to European timbers like ash. Because of its small size, however, it fell out of favour once milling became popular relegating it to fire wood. Now Murphy's main use of manuka is for making sets of chairs which require a large supply of the same timber.

Making use of local resources has formed the foundation of a varied practice. "I've had people ask for specific woods like cherry which can be tricky to find but people also ask me to make things for them from trees in their garden." In the last few years Murphy has been able to expand from a locally based practice into a national and even international enterprise. He has chairs in galleries around the country and has had them shipped as far as Spain. In 2006 he had a successful solo exhibition at Auckland's Compendium gallery and has been invited to do another this year. He has also won many awards at woodcraft shows including the supreme award for wood working at the Royal Easter Show.

"I'm always learning new things about the properties of wood and finding better ways to do things. There's only so much you can learn from books, the rest comes with experience and experimentation."

Murphy is interested in sharing his knowledge in the future but feels he needs to develop his skills further before embarking on teaching. At the moment he is happy in his workshop fine tuning his skills in this ancient craft.

For contact details and more info,  
check out Jasper's website:  
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