

Making a Mendlesham Chair

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INTRODUCTION

Before I launch into the onerous and challenging task of following Trevor Branton in this column I thought that I should at least let you know just what little right I have to offer you any words of advice. So what follows is a short resume of me, and what I will offer in the forthcoming months.

My woodworking skills started at school and included a little, but not enough, woodturning. The same could be said for metal work! I applied what little knowledge I had to building sailing canoes for the school sailing club. To my knowledge none of them sank and they were fun to sail.

Having decided to fly in the RAF my days of woodwork were limited to providing the family with furniture – usually made of Orange crates or “found” wood. During my working life my interest focused on the technical aspects and construction of the military hardware that the Queen let me loose with. As I aged I started to build better “furniture” in the garage and A Multico “Shopsmith copy” found its way into the equation, primarily for the planer, Table and Band saw attachments. I thought that the lathe might be fun to play with! As we all know woodturning comes with a health warning! In that it is incredibly infectious!! So I tried to organize a course with Alan Batty. His availability and my commitments were diametrically opposed – it did not happen. By which time it was time to move to my final posting to complete 38 years of service. It was to be an Exchange position with the United States Air Force in Alaska – yippee!

After settling into Alaska I looked for an out of work interest and found The Alaska Creative Woodworkers Association and joined. At the first meeting I was informed that there were still places available on their annual hands on turning seminar. 2 weeks of hands on classes with a demo week-end in the middle, AND Alan Batty was one of the lead instructors would you believe it! So I signed up for 1 week with Alan and a second week with the then lesser known Mike Mahoney. That Club exposed me to Ray Key, Dale Nish, Bonny Klein, Nora Hall (carving), Michael Hosaluk, Stuart Batty, and Stuart Mortimer to name, but a few. So by now my enthusiasm approached the outer planets, however I would say that my skills lagged way behind.

Retired from the Air Force, and after 8 years of refurbishing an old thatched Cottage I arrived at West Suffolk Wood turners, a great bunch of like-minded folk, who made me very welcome. One of the club nights with Jeremy Lain inspired me to make a chair (a lifetime wish). So the next series of magazine entries will be an account of that experience. I hope you enjoy it as much as I enjoyed making the Chairs (a pair).

Following the restoration of the cottage and a few other “Got to do” projects Judy and I began to look at the 2 chairs we used in the Kitchen. You know the ones? The ones that a winter evening around the kitchen beg to be sat in, while a glass of wine or beer wraps up a cold but enjoyable day in East Anglia. Well the chairs in question were a couple of picnic plastic efforts probably from a well-known DIY store! Comfortable enough, but ugly. So what did we want? Well, we had seen a Mendlesham type of Windsor chair that would grace the area, and given that the design was a local one, it seemed like the perfect answer. A quick look around the local antique outlets did not produce much, other than an indication that this was not going to be a cheap venture!

Next stop, the internet and a few auction sites, that only confirmed what we already knew! This was going to be ‘spendy’ and, we could not get involved in any of the auction sales, just too expensive. So, as a diversion, we immersed ourselves in the 2013 Suffolk Show and guess what? We met Jeremy Lain and Andrew Smith from Treeincarnated, and they made Mendlesham chairs. Interest continued!

The year passed with the important task of finishing the MGB refurbishment and then Jeremy gave a presentation to the West Suffolk Woodturners and offered the facility to be guided in the production of your own chair!!!! Well, there’s a fair amount of turning in a couple of chairs, so that would be a project would it not!! Yes, said Jeremy, come over to the workshop and have a cup of coffee. It was now early 2014 – How time passes when you are having Fun. Talked to Jeremy and Andrew at the 2014 Suffolk Show and the offer was still open - so I make a plan to visit at the end of May early June, THEN!!!! I fell off a small scaffold tower and broke my right ankle B****! The pain and limping eased off by Feb 2015 and contact was re-established with Treeincarnated, and the story was rekindled:

I visited the workshop and arranged to get things moving. What a great team at Treeincarnated really friendly, inviting and importantly; fun to be with, and importantly make a great cup of coffee!

My Plan: I did not have any timber big or good enough for the seats but I really wanted to use some Pear that I had harvested from my Garden, milled and racked to dry and a fair amount of Hawaiian Koa (a variety of Acacia), which I had purchased, whilst on holiday, many years ago at Martin & MacArthur's wood yard in Honolulu.

So we mooched around Jeremy’s yard looking at Elm, Ash, Mulberry and a whole host of fantastic woods and then! at the back of a wiggly tin shed, what is that? Turned out to be a couple of large slabs of silver Birch from Hatfield House (Hertfordshire) with what looked like significant burl pattern interest.





The next visit was with Judy to review the silver Birch find and be measured up for the Chair and decide on a design, almost a story on its own. Let's not dwell on that and start with - Design decided, which was Silver Birch seat, Pear undercarriage (sorry air force background) with crinoline stretcher and Koa top with twin curved top rail.

Then to work! Andrew showed me how to mark out the chair seat which was cut with a bandsaw to shape. Then, as would be the case throughout the project, Andrew demonstrated and yours truly had a crack at replicating the instruction.

Shaping the seat was done with an Arbortech planing or chain saw cutting blade in a 4.5in angle grinder. The work needs a fair amount of care, patience and above all concentration, but overall not too difficult.

The chair seats were taken home and a few sessions of enjoyable carving roughed out the seats, and the developing grain patterns were just stunning!



At the next session with Andrew, we drilled the seats to accept the legs and back and laid out and cut the stock for the back and arms (from Koa) and the legs and crinoline stretcher (Pear). This was achieved with the use of patterns that Andrew had made some decades previously from disassembling an existing Mendlesham chair. This part would have been quite time consuming if you were trying to copy an existing chair. Then followed a session of steam bending; initially for one crinoline stretcher and one of the cow horn back pieces; a second pair would be completed a week later as there was, naturally, only one pattern form clamping a jig.



A selection of pattern pieces was supplied by Andrew and I retired to the home workshop to turn the legs, back spindles, stretcher stub pieces and a selection of decorative balls (single and double). The Koa was quite brittle so I decided to keep the back spindles a little thicker than pattern.



While continuing to work (mostly sanding) the seat the next step was to prepare the saw cut parts for the upper chair. The two uprights were given a spindle moulded bead edge and a central groove to accept a decorative strip of veneer, which we decided should be white (Holly), although Black had been the favoured option, this groove needed to stop at the armrest position. The insert veneer was glued in place. Similar detail was added to the middle rail, but the bottom rail did not receive the central groove and the top rail corner detail was left for later. The homework this week was to turn the back spindles, the crinoline spurs, and finish sand (to 600 grit) the next week I also turned the 8 legs using a storyboard copied from an existing leg design with some minor changes

At this stage in the saga the design of the back splat became a driving force. Initially I had grand thoughts of a family crest, an enlarged monogram or something equally epic. I started to play with the Koa which we had earmarked for the splats; in fact, I cut a 2mm thick veneer to play with. Whilst playing I applied a coat of white spirit to raise the grain, which was just spectacular. So after some discussion we decided to let the beautiful timber speak for itself and leave it relatively plain and unadulterated but pierced. Thus reflecting a traditional pattern, but with a small version of my Monogram applied to the back. A "book matched pair" of splats were duly cut and pierced using a Scroll Saw.



Trial dry fitting of the mortise and tenon joints of the chair back were completed, whilst the chair seats were finish sanded (to 600 grit) and an edge scratch detail applied around the top edge, with the exception of the area under the thigh – to imply wear and use (I thought this was a very interesting twist, sad or what!). Finally, the lower cow horn bottom rail was spoke shaved to shape and sanded. Throughout the build it was surprising, but satisfying, that much of the shaping work used traditional techniques and tools.



Matching detail was added to the top rail, being careful to stop the strip groove short of each end in order to hand cut the detail around the corner.

The next step was the insertion of the arms, shaping of the components, using the spoke shave and preparation of the joints was the first step. This included the insertion of a dowel to accept a screw fitting for the Arm – an Andrew improvement over the original to reduce the likelihood of the Arm splitting.

A tapered, morticed dovetail joint for the armrest post into the base sounded like a real challenge; but with guidance from Andrew it progressed like a dream. Finally, a mortice and tenon joint for the arm support into the armrest.



Several trial fits of the upper construct followed until we were happy with the fit of the decorative balls, the Splat and spindles and in particular the tapered dovetail joint. The great day arrived and the upper work was finally glued and screwed ready to finish!!

Some homework of finishing the upper parts followed and the following week the legs were progressed. The crinoline stretcher occupied a fair amount of time, again using the spoke shave and getting the stub support holes drilled. The interesting

aspect of this sequence was maintaining a certain tension within the legs loose fitted to the seat and the stretcher and stubs. We were now rushing headlong towards completed chairs, and following a 600 grit finishing session the undercarriage was finally glued and fitted. WELL that's it then! Not really, French polishing to come, which I had decided I would have a crack at!

The pair of chairs returned home for the final phase of the project.



Many years ago in a previous existence in North America I attended a Turning club presentation on French Polishing given by an elderly gentleman from Oregon. In typical US fashion he had made a detailed study of the subject and turned it into what amounted to a degree course. A little unfair, but the session contained a great deal of arithmetic, chemistry, physics and detail. Most of which surrounded the formulation of the polish and the American way, which of course was better than the Brit way. Again a little tongue in cheek, but the point is the part that stuck in my head was that the use of better quality alcohol (USA of course) avoided the difficulty of sticking polishing cloths, needing the use of oils to lubricate the polishing, and the subsequent need to 'spirit off' the oil. Cutting a long story short I applied for a licence to purchase pure alcohol (well its 99% ethyl and 1% methyl) and started the task which worked incredibly well. I mixed my own polish and used a pair of hair tonic dispensing bottles (don't ask who uses the hair tonic) and a supply of old t-shirts with cotton wadding. 12 coats of polish later (about 8 days) the chairs were complete. Just as well because I had promised Jeremy that he could use them for his display at the 2015 Suffolk show. So we had come full circle twice, from the Suffolk show 2013 to Suffolk Show 2015 and the first glasses of wine were consumed in the chairs and very comfortable they are too!

