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"Where trees grow, so does the spirit of the imagination"

by Angie Boyer

chaircreative

Paul and I run from the car park, through the gardens, heads down against the driving rain. We're heading for the long barn beyond the kitchen garden, where we have arranged to meet Alun Heslop in his *chaircreative* workshop. Alun throws the door open to welcome us in from the deluge. A warm golden glow comes from the recently lit stove, the earthy smell of burning wood mingles with the enticing aroma of coffee brewing.

And there, on the floor between us and the stove, we see a huge, perfectly formed wooden ball, with an equally huge, hand crafted cricket bat resting on it.

The ball that has been turned to 460mm in diameter fits snugly into the underside of the oak bat. Together they become a beautifully proportioned seat, 3 metres long, which dominates the floor space in Alun's workshop. This Cricketer's Bench is a special commission that he's working on, to be sited beside the cricket pitch at Belmont Park, the peaceful country setting where Alun's workplace is located, surrounded by lush gardens and wide open spaces.

Alun tells me that he usually cycles to this workshop, near Faversham in Kent. "I live about ten miles away and would rather be on two wheels in the open air that sitting inside a tin can!" He tells us about this substantial piece of craftsmanship, "I have designed the seat with an incline along the length of it for comfort and rain relief, it follows the line of the wood. It's important that a piece like this works ergonomically, it has to perform its function as well as look good, it's much more than just a sculptural object."

Like much of Alun's work, this seat is made from oak. "I like to use air dried seasoned oak, which comes from Lenham oak saw mill, a place about five miles from here," he explains. "That means the material costs are fairly substantial, but it's more dependable to work with than green oak, which in some instances can distort and move on outside pieces. Weather will degrade wood, sunlight and rain; oak is naturally resilient, but it does help to give it a basic weather seasoning treatment. The oak in any outdoor piece like this will eventually turn a silvery grey with age and weather," continues Alun, "but that's okay really, the piece is about form rather than fancy wood!"

Alun's woodworking skills have a foundation based on his extensive knowledge and experience

of green woodworking techniques. He tells me that "having recognised that maths and physics were not for me, I went off to do basic interior design, leaning towards product design as well. It was really good, but I soon knew that I didn't want to be an interior designer, so I decided to study Fine Art Alternative Practice. For me, that involved looking at environmental issues, many of the things that are coming up again now. I realised then that art isn't about what you do, it's more about who you do with it, so that wasn't for me either.

"I wanted more of a hand to eye element in what I did. So after my degree course I went more towards green woodworking. I still hold the ethics of that type of work today, it's very important to me. I don't do much pole lathe turning now, but I still use many green woodworking techniques in my work. More and more I want to create my own designs using traditional techniques, to make one-off sculptural pieces, a transition to much finer and sophisticated work that's more suited to galleries and 'exhibiting' shows."

We visited Alun at a time when he was busy preparing for Origin in London, having already exhibited at shows like Craft in Focus and Art in Action earlier in the year. He showed us some of the pieces that he would be exhibiting at Origin; flowing, balanced designs that are not only pleasing to the eye, but also entirely suitable for their purpose. Sometimes a piece may have a hint of fragility, which totally belies the stability and strength of the structure, qualities that are created not only in the actual design, but also in the careful attention to detail in the making.

I asked Alun where he found his inspiration for this delicate aspect of his chair designs, which are very different from his robust and sturdy outdoor seating. "My wife is an entomologist, so maybe it's the images of stick-like insects that surround her work that bring these designs to mind,



Above: Nimm Kei, elm and ash

Alun Heslop



Acai, detail



Razorfish



Garden entrance seating at
The Light Box Gallery,
Woking, Surrey