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24-page RESTORATION & NEW BUILD SUPPLEMENT *inside*



Round peg, round hole

Sue Gaisford takes a trip down to the woods to meet a traditional oak framer...

Everyone's afraid of something. The shepherd fears losing sheep, the actor forgetting his lines; the dental hygienist lives in terror of someone biting her. In all innocence I once asked an opera singer if he fretted about getting hiccups on stage. His furious reaction made me do a quick finger-count on Paul Cresswell, before asking him whether he worried about accidents. But he's a gentle, phlegmatic type and his response was – well, touching. He touched wood.

It's easy to touch wood at his place. It's everywhere. He works in a clearing, in the middle of 800 acres of woodland. Once part of a grandee's park, there are also some fabulous specimen trees, like the ancient beech against which he leaned for his photograph, the morning we met. There are several large (wooden) buildings there, all containing wood. Some of it is very beautiful. There's some lovely walnut, the trunk of a massive cedar of Lebanon and a stack of extraordinary planks of yew, beautifully streaked with pinkish-purple, like borscht and sour cream. There's a stash of gnarled and elderly roots of trees, waiting for an artist to come and select some, to make glass-topped tables. And

there's oak.

Ask Paul what his favourite wood is and he has to say oak, for ninety per cent of his business is making oak-framed buildings. He has some mighty machines to help him: two mobile sawmills and a big old lathe, all with huge, sharp, shiny discs, like something from a giant's *Magimix*. One is from New Zealand and turns an oak trunk into beams – as easily as that same giant could turn out julienne carrots.

The other mill is Canadian, and makes planks. It is called a Lumber-mate, which is, essentially, what Paul was, during a year he spent in Canada learning about logs. (Actually, he called himself a timber-jack: has Monty Python destroyed forever the image of the butch and strapping lumberjack?) Logging in British Columbia and another year spent working with an event-staging company in Australia, combined with a degree in architecture and a lifelong, self-confessed love-affair with wood have made him the man he is.

It is exhilarating to spend time with someone who is so clearly in the right job. Though only 28, he has always liked learning from old hands, and he certainly knows his trees. He has recently coppiced his chestnuts, using the



Above: At the foot of the ancient beech in Paul's yard

wood for post-and-rail fencing and hop-poles: "Some people think it's deforestation. They don't understand that coppicing is preserving trees by treating them as a crop, to be harvested every twenty years."

The oak he buys in from Rheims is similarly farmed, and he uses it well. He has mastered the art of making oak buildings in the traditional way, using no softwood, and joining the timbers by a method called draw-pegging (this means that the hole in the tenon is offset to the hole in the mortice, just so you know). Even a small building may take 300 pegs, all made by hand, and Paul disciplines himself to make 20 pegs a night, when his other work is finished, so that the task isn't too daunting.

At the moment, he is making an extension to a listed building, but last year he made a stable block. Working alone, it took him, he says, ten weeks "from round tree to pegged-up" and it was pretty marvellous. But he also makes temporary buildings, by similar methods, to be erected and subsequently dismantled, at festivals or other special occasions. The most successful of these is the Aspalls Cyder Barn, a replica of an old Suffolk brew house. It is a twelve-ton oak building, totally demountable. He stores it in the winter and then, come the summer, he and two others take it off to wherever Aspalls want to use it, set it up in a couple of days and it becomes their bar. It is, he says, becoming quite well known, and has already been booked this year for an event at Jimmy's Farm and for the Secret Garden Party.

So he does get out a bit, taking the cyder barn on its trips. But he's happiest in his yard, with his wood. He's making a wonderful, tall curved seat, a bit like a sedan chair, out of some spalted beech he felled last year, and there are other bits and pieces of timber tucked away, waiting for him to work on



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Above: Paul's company, InSitu Designs, specialises in traditional oak framing. Projects range from green oak-framed barns and buildings through to extensions and stable blocks
Left: Paul at work on an oak frame in his yard

them. What will he make? "The wood will tell me what to do," is his mysterious reply.

The last of the snow was melting fast as I left, and birdsong echoed in the leafless woods. It felt as if the year had turned, that spring might be on its way. It will be lovely here, in spring.

Paul can be contacted at InSitu Designs on 01580 212106 / 07779 303680, email: mail@insitodesigns.com
 For examples of Paul's projects visit www.insitodesigns.com

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