



Intro: The project to save Winsford Cottage Hospital, which completed in 2019, benefitted from National Lottery Heritage funding, which allowed us to run training and volunteer projects both on and off site. Inspired by the work of the buildings architect, Charles Voysey, and his significant talents as furniture designer, we worked with two local makers to explore an example of Voyseys design work – the iconic heart-back armchair. In this conversation between Alasdair Kilpatrick a greenwood worker on Dartmoor, Alice Blogg, who designs and makes from a studio in Dorset and myself Kasia Howard the Landmark Trusts Engagement Manager, we discuss how the chairs were made, our mutual respect for Voysey's work and a passion for native, local hardwood.

Kasia: I guess if we, if we start at the beginning, for me, coming into the Winsford project, I'd just come out of a big project in Wales. It was a mediaeval building straight into Arts and Crafts building, which, you know, hundreds of years apart, but actually, the philosophy behind the two buildings possibly wasn't that different because architects like Voysey were looking back to the good old days, the traditional times, the mediaeval times where things were handmade and hand produced, and everybody was happy, leading lovely lives in the countryside. Of course we know that's not true. But it was that principle of craftsmanship. And as I do with most projects that I get involved with, there's a period of sort of hunting people down, finding out who's working in the area, who's interesting, who's making work that's has a synergy with our buildings. And actually, quite importantly, as well, who can work with other people, I felt extremely lucky to find you, hidden in the deepest, darkest corner of Dartmoor, as I discovered when I tried to find you that first time and got totally lost. But yeah, maybe you could just tell me little bit about how you came to do what you do.

Alasdair: It's interesting your previous project kind of harked back to the mediaeval period, because a lot of the ways that I work with wood and I've taught myself and been influenced to work with wood, harking back to that period. So it is very much based on hand tools, hand craftsmanship, an instinct for what works and what doesn't. And really importantly knowledge of the material and knowledge that is getting increasingly lost as we move into using different materials and move away from that strong connection. I got into or found myself working with wood through managing woods, managing trees. And I ended up doing that from a desire, not specifically with wood or with landscape or countryside contexts, but to do something worthwhile, and preferably physical, and to some extent creative. Because I trained as an engineer and had a wonderful degree and all the rest of it. And one of the things I learned during that degree was that it there was no scope for me to create within this. It was fascinating, but it was a closed box in terms of what I could bring to it. I found myself after a number of different things, volunteering and then working for the National Trust, managing areas of coastal woodland in North Wales. And we were lucky enough to have the time and the colleagues and the skills within us and around us to start using the materials that we managed. And that then led to me starting to do that on my own when I relocated - that was in North Wales and you found me in Devon. And my mission in Devon really as well as running a successful small business, more importantly almost, was to share my interpretation of our knowledge and understanding of the woodlands and the greater landscape around us and how we can use it. Which lends itself very well to rustic furniture making and the whole mediaeval trades of hazel weaving and cleft timber framing. But the chance to do something in a building, that the projects that you came to me with was a definite step above, I would say, or beyond what I'd done previously.

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Kasia: Yeah, the hospital is a very, very designed space, isn't it and you sort of get the impression that Voysey was incredibly meticulous and he designed the architecture, but he also designed tiny individual details. Everything to him was important and this whole idea of the lived space and how people move around that building. And particularly because it was a hospital building, you can tell he thought very carefully about how those spaces might be used by people who aren't well. It's this incredibly considered space. And so when we were researching it, or when I was researching it, to think, well, how can we work with the community, I think it was his, his furniture that instantly struck me. That's probably the thing that he's most famous for. And there are, a couple of very iconic designs, which are these Voysey chairs. And that's what I took to you wasn't it? And I said, 'Can we make a chair with a group of people who've never, ever made furniture before'? And, and that's, that's a big ask. But rather than replicating that you took what you did, and his I kind of married the two together with a group of rookie furniture makers.

Alasdair: There were so many unknowns until the day we met. I'll never forget that. Yeah, yeah. There was definitely scope for the way I work and particularly involving people in running a lot of courses. And giving people the freedom to create was applicable to the project you came to me with. And then the challenge was really to take my skills and knowledge of material and apply it in a slightly different way that would produce and replicate and hopefully complements what Voysey was doing, not just with wood but with a whole range of materials. And it wasn't necessarily the work in wood and timber with furniture that he done, that was reassuring to me – it was the continuous fine attention to simple details throughout everything he did. And this comfortable fitting together of all aspects of his work really evident in the hospital building. So I moved away from my own designs and my own concept but kept my passion and my ethos and learned a great deal from it really about myself, my capabilities. There's a... I from a woodworking perspective, there's a great deal of precision and the same consideration that went into the building and all aspects of the building goes into the furniture. It's never form over function. Functionality is absolutely right throughout everything I've seen that he's turned his hand to. But with a piece of furniture like that, to be able to recreate that in a way that doesn't require my hands but uses many hands of people who've never done it before, it was a significant challenge. But it's that sort of challenge is a challenge that should always be fun. It should be something that people can buy into. And a large part of making it work is the initial getting people to buy into the challenge and getting people to feel confident that they can put their mark on it and that they have control over it, and it's their challenge, which I think you did absolutely brilliantly. You set me up in exactly the right way to make it work. And the people that came along, the quite a diverse group, apart from in experience and skill, because there was none of that. But there was a lovely diverse group otherwise, we're not in the least bit afraid to give it a go. And we had really helpfully, a very well defined concept for what we were making, but the bounds within it - so the exact dimensions, elements of the form and things were flexible. And having that freedom to hand it over to the group, and say right this is what we're looking for. This is what we've got. How are we going to get there? How do you think it should look? How tall do you think it should be? Why wide does that look in the picture? So I took in a load of reasonably well planed roughly shaped dimensioned timber. And the big decision that helped a great deal was not to use oak as Voysey would have, but to use sweet chestnut and seasoned sweet chestnut. Normally, I would work with green and seasoned wood. And there'd be a process of drying and seasoning before we assemble it all. We didn't have that option. So we use seasoned sweet chestnut, which is much more forgiving than oak, much more pleasing and easier to work with hand

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tools. And the shaping that was required was done with incredible patience and incredible care by the people on it using fairly rudimentary tools compared to the tools that would have been used in the workshop producing the original. But once we got up and running with that level of knowledge and enthusiasm that you'd instilled in a lot of people. They were there for a good reason, They wanted to be there. They wanted to be involved, obviously. And they weren't shy of committing to it or putting in the work. It largely built itself from my perspective, which is exactly how it should be.

Kasia: I think that's a really nice way of looking at it. It built itself. It certainly didn't. You know, it was quite a large -ish group of us. Eight people.

Alasdair: Yeah, yeah.

Kasia: And everyone got on really well and helped each other out. Clearly, some people were better or more confident at doing one thing or another, you know, we had sort of age range spanning probably, what 50 years from the oldest youngest. And it was, it was a lovely thing to see everyone coming together around the making of this of this one item and learning something new. And like you say it's learning to work with the materials, but there's also a huge amount of learning about yourself, because it requires patience, it required respect of the materials and certainly the tools because you know, these sharp hand tools. And, you know, I love the fact that you work with primary school children in this way, on other projects.

Alasdair: The tools will only do what we ask of them. They're in our hands and essential, especially on a... There was a lot of work to be carried out to make that chair. I don't think any of us really grasp of just how much physical work there was in going from that pile of wood to that chair. Now that can only be achieved and it can only be achieved safely, if you're confident in what you're doing. And that requires no fear of the tools. Yes, they're sharp. Yes, they could be potentially dangerous, but we were using them in ways that they've been used for literally hundreds of years. That's not an idea that I've had, this will probably work. This is tried and tested. It's, the equipment was there. And there is no need at all, and I'm adamant about this, and I had a four year old, making a rolling pin. Both with a draw knife, a side axe, and a pole lathe last weekend. Absolutely loved it. And the feedback I got from the parents was along the lines of it – once you'd showed me what to do, and then largely left her to it. And there is, getting over that fear. Just making it normal. This is what we're doing, and this is how you use it, and that's fine. And you've got to use it properly, otherwise, the wood is not going to change shape, and we can be here forever. So that's kind of fundamental to my approach in teaching. And that's all you really need to learn is the confidence to pick them up and start using them. And I think the chair that we made is testament to that.

Kasia: So we've just been joined by Alice.

Alice: Hi.

Kasia: So Alasdair and I have just been chatting about the project that he did. So I'm aware that you guys met briefly at the building when you each sort of delivered your pieces of furniture. And Alasdair, we were just reminiscing about his project, which was approached in a very different way to your commission. Alasdair was asked to work with a group of novices, complete novices to make the furniture that he did and some of those were children and some of them were also patients at one of the local NHS hospitals as well. So he had a very different experience. So How was it for you because I asked you to create it was two chairs you created wasn't it?

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Alice: Yes, I suppose it's an interesting thing, because I normally design and make. So when you're looking at someone else's designs and trying to replicate exactly what they've done, you almost have to think like they would, which is not the same way that you think. So you have to almost put your identity out of the way, which is nice, actually, it's refreshing, because it's always upon you and your design work. And actually, sometimes you just want to say I just want to do what they do because they're really good. And I appreciate his design work a lot. He's influenced my way of thinking a lot anyway. And it's quite refreshing to look at someone else's design work and see where, what their constraints are in all their work and why this chair is like that. And also understanding them. So it's not just about maybe looking at the chair and thinking yeah, we'll just make it like that, because you've got to understand the nuances of how he put it together. And I really enjoyed it. It was really good project, but still with the same ethos of using local wood that I always use. So that's, I think his work always used to use that anyway. So the wood kind of married and paired together.

Kasia: So how important is it to be using locally sourced materials.

Alasdair: T-o my mind, not only is it important for a huge variety of reasons - there is an industry within forestry and woodland, which is largely due to, largely about monoculture plantations and pulp wood and exporting huge volumes of timber. Whereas we've got beautiful native hardwoods that grow all over the country to varying degrees of success and are a marketable value. Unless we can use that resource. we stand to lose it, because it has no intrinsic value. It's not enough anymore for a nice broadleaf woodland to be somewhere for people to walk their dogs or have a picnic. There is far more going on in there. And what I try and connect people to on my Greenwood courses is that the materials we're using are there, there and there. They're all around us as we're working. And that's as far as you need to go. And by using them, we promote the habitat and the environment from which they come, and this long, long, long standing relationship we've had, as humans with the woodlands around us and the landscape around us. We're codependent. And it's that appreciation for this. All I do is cut down the tree and move the logs near the other workshop. Everything else is done by the participants on the course. So cleaving and splitting. So you literally start with a tree. The only tool I use that they don't use is the chainsaw to cut the tree down. And that closeness, that intimacy, with where the wood grows and where it comes from, and how it grows and how the aspect in which its grown, the situation in which it's grown, the weather in recent years has influenced how we use that material, is something that is becoming increasingly lost in woodwork. It's seen as a very desirable, perfectly uniform homogenous material that we can do whatever we want with. And it's not, you know that the wood that I choose normally for my projects is, by its very nature characterful. And I work with rather than try and hide the flaws within the timber and the timber has, the wood, the tree, the way it's grown has as much of an influence on the design of what I might make as I do.

Alice: I'm really keen on promoting where my wood comes from, and why it comes from where it comes from, and like, Alasdair, the faults in it. Mine's a little bit more refined and I suppose I spent a long time paying to get to this point of being able to have it in the shed, being able to have a kiln to dry it, so I can do the whole process. So we can go with some clients from tree to piece. And I think that's such, it's really hard to achieve, but I fought for it because that's what I believe in. I believe in my tree not coming from a forest that's completely felled and killing it ecological systems. How I was brought up is this, and I've never understood a different way of working. And it puts some pressure upon me, but it makes me enjoy my business and fight for it in a reason. So that in a way is the

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businesses it's not just a business to make furniture because people want furniture and its consumerism. It's almost a teaching aid in some way to that people respect why we need to take this tree down and not that tree and why we're using this tree instead of this tree and spend years with logs in a timber shed and months with them in a kiln to then finally spend months in the workshop. And they're like, 'What? That's like years in the making', and they look at me like I'm an absolute nutter but I really believe in it. And, and I believe the beauty, the reason my furniture has beauty is because of the timber. So if I was using other timber that wasn't from pretty much on my doorstep or maybe Somerset, a little bit of a Devon, then I don't believe that has the climate we know about the character that we know about as people where we come from, and I believe that's really important. But yeah, and I believe in finding the timber or the customer having it and then knowing that it takes years. I was building a big dining room table and that took three years for the for the tree to dry because I wanted it to air dry and then just killn the last little bit.

Kasia: And I think that that's the lovely thing because both of you are creating furniture that has meaning. And that's really, really important. And you look back at the furniture that Voysey made and his contemporaries and that's why that furniture is worth a small fortune now is because it was beautifully designed, beautifully made and has been respected by its owners over many generations. And I imagine that's what you hope when you send your furniture off into its new home, knowing that people will have that same relationship with it and an enduring relationship with it, must be incredibly satisfying.

Alice: I think that's why I do what I do. Because of that satisfaction at the end you know, spent four years prepping for this one piece. And when it goes, you almost feel, because you spent all of that time just looking at the wood thinking how to cut it, plank it, store it, is it dry enough? Is it not? Shall I turn it? Is there enough air going in? Is it getting too damp? Is it cracking, is it not? You spend your nights not worrying but just thinking about it. I think when Voysey was making his furniture and designing, you know, all the bits for his houses and places, hospitals, then that was the way they used to work. There wasn't any different way. So that's why all furniture from around then is cherished in a way and that's why it still lives on now. Whereas I think these days there are other ways of working. So it seems to someone ludicrous to work the way they work, which is the way I do because the amount of time and love and effort, but I do believe it makes so much in a difference. And that satisfaction is just more than anything really.

Kasia: Well, I'm really glad that both of you exist, doing what you're doing, because we've got such a lovely collection of furniture in that building now Its furniture, that means an awful lot and will certainly stay with us and the building for many generations and is much appreciated by everyone who comes to see it so, what more could you want? We've ended up with, with things that have a story and that have a meaning and that we can talk to people about.