



# Wyre Forest Study Group

## RUSTIC FENCING AND FURNITURE MAKING IN THE WYRE FOREST

**Paul Jackson**

I was born in 1959, in Far Forest, near Bewdley, Worcestershire, in a converted army hut which mom and dad had made their home a few years earlier. I enjoyed a happy childhood, with my three younger sisters, on the edge of the forest. We were surrounded by oak coppice and looking back, it almost seems inevitable that I would end up working with these trees, seeing them as armlets, arch bows, running on and uppings.

Yes, it is a language all of its own, a rustic maker's language, one I started to learn at the age of sixteen when I went to work for Bill and Gerry Doolittle at "Forest Glade" in the village of Far Forest.

We would have a yard with about 50 tons of peeled oak in all different shapes and sizes and we would select the pieces we needed from this stock. The straighter pieces would be used in fencing while the crooked pieces were for seats, tables and arch tops. I should point out that all of the oak would have been cut from the Wyre Forest, transported to the yard and peeled, a process which I will describe in due course.

We would carry the oak into the shed and cut it into lengths with a circular saw. From then on only hand tools were used.

In the construction of a seat for instance, the first job would be to make the frame and nail the four legs to it, with all the nail holes being drilled to prevent the wood from splitting. Then several thinner, crooked pieces are fitted, a cross at each end and two curves on the front. These would be shaped to fit with a two and a half-pound Elwell axe, (an axe I am still using 30 years on.). Then the arms would be cut to fit and nailed on. Next the seat back can be fitted. This should have a gentle curve, the lower ends being flattened to allow it to be nailed onto the top of the back legs. Then the back of the seat is decorated with more crossed sticks, shaped once again with the axe. Armlets are then shaped and nailed on. These pieces are about 18 inches long and are steam bent almost to a right angle, nailed to the seat back and curved around and down onto the arm, giving the seat a rounded look. All the square ends of the sticks can be trimmed off with a chisel and mallet. Finally four oak laths are cut to length and nailed on.

Ten years had passed us by and at that time, Bill and I made all the furniture and fencing. Ted List, another local man, worked part time in the woods, felling and transporting the oak back to the yard. Bill's wife Gerry, kept the books, made deliveries and dealt with the orders, while we all shared the task of peeling the wood.

However, things were about to change. Ted List passed away a bit sooner than he should have, a quiet and inoffensive man, sadly missed. Consequently, I took on his role working in the wood as a weekend job. I had worked with Ted in the past and was looking forward to learning new skills.

Oak coppice seemed plentiful in those days. Most of the softwood plantations were interspersed with small oak, (uppings) and the Forestry Commission were only too pleased for us to cut. I widened roads and rides to aid extraction of larger parcels of timber and reinstated footpaths that were overgrown, (not that there were many visitors to the Wyre in those days). I also worked within the softwood plantations, removing oak which had been left behind as it was overtaken by the faster growing softwood.

I would work a typical area of oak coppice in the following way. In the winter months the small oak of 2-3 inches in diameter would be cut from the stool and taken back to the yard to be steam peeled. Anything smaller than this would be left uncut to grow on. The larger poles would then be cut in the Spring, while the sap was rising, and returned to the yard the same day to be peeled naturally. Usually one pole would be left to grow on to maturity. The brush was laid across the cut stool to prevent deer from browsing off the new shoots - (rarely successful).

As the years passed, I would continue to cut oak coppice in the Wyre, but I noticed that the oak was not regenerating as it should. Oak stools, which I had cut several years earlier, were shooting but the ends were being bitten off by Fallow Deer. There were a lot of deer in the forest at that time, which would prove to be detrimental to oak coppice stocks in the future.

All this wood had to be peeled and this was done in two very different ways; traditional natural bark peeling and steam peeling, a discovery Bill had made some years earlier.

Natural bark peeling takes place while the sap is rising, usually between April and July. The pole is laid across two wooden horses and a draw knife is drawn along the top side of the pole, all the way down its full length, thus enabling the peeling iron to be inserted between the bark and the wood, starting at its butt end. The peeling iron is inserted into the gap in the bark on the top of the pole and then with a firm but gentle pressure, the bark is eased away, allowing the iron to follow the curve of the pole.



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The bark is gathered up, put on ranges and allowed to dry. After about a week it is tied up into bundles and stored under cover until the end of the season, when it is transported down to Colyton in South Devon, to Baker's Tannery. As far as I know, this is the only tannery left still using oak bark.

Some years before I came to work at Forest Glade, Bill had an idea that steam could be used to assist peeling. I don't know why he thought this, but he persevered with the idea and eventually proved it to be true. The advantages are, that peeling could be undertaken throughout the year, not just in the Spring, and that upplings could be peeled more quickly.

Bill purchased a second hand 1940s Cradley steam boiler, linked to a steel tank 10ft long x 3ft x 3ft, via a piece of half inch steel pipe. Oak upplings were placed in the steel tank, usually the day before. The steam peeling day would commence with Gerry lighting the fire, usually about seven o'clock, using off-cut logs as fuel. By eight o'clock, the steam would be up, meaning that the water was boiling inside the boiler and steam was being made above the water. Under low pressure the steam would travel along the steel pipe into the steel tank containing the upplings and as long as the fire was made up regularly, the upplings would be "cooked" by about eleven o'clock.

At this point, the door could be opened carefully and about twenty upplings would be thrown out onto the ground. This peeling is approached in a different way to natural bark peeling. The upplings are held at the butt end, in the left hand, with the other end resting on the ground and the peeling iron is pushed, with the right hand, between the bark and the wood. Once you have separated the bark from the wood, allow the peeling iron to roll back in the hand and use the fingers to pull the bark off, and down the full length of the uppling, (like peeling a banana). Gloves are needed for this job, as the wood is still very hot. The tank would hold 200 – 250 upplings and if three people are involved in the process, the peeling would be completed by lunchtime.

The age of steam also gave us the opportunity to bend pieces of oak for some of the more ornate arches and those armlets, mentioned in the making of a seat. Peeled upplings were placed back into the steam tank, re-heated and then taken out two at a time. They were then clamped in a vice, bent to the required shape and the ends tied together, reminiscent of a bow. After a couple of days, they were dry enough to be used.

Ten years slipped away and once again, at Forest Glade, things were changing in two different ways. Firstly, coppiced oak was getting more difficult to find and secondly, Bill and Gerry were talking about retiring on or around Bill's 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday, so I was having to think about my future. Bill had said that if I wanted to carry on making rustic, he would help me all he could, but to continue, I would need more oak. The demand for furniture and fencing was as strong as ever, but finding the oak to make them with would be a problem.

The main block of the Wyre Forest had served us well for many years but, in my opinion, an over population of deer in the eighties, in conjunction with a thick canopy cover, made oak regeneration poor. I had done some cutting in Ribbesford Woods and there was a lot of oak coppice which could have been available, but the presence of dormice led to a policy by Forest Enterprise to protect their habitat. This prevented me from working large areas of this wood and time spent looking in other woods proved fruitless and left me thinking, what was I going to do?

The answer came in conversation with a basket maker called Owen Jones, in the Lake District. "Why don't you use sweet chestnut?" he said. I was assured that chestnut was both long lasting and would peel like oak. After a lot of time spent making sure sweet chestnut would be a good alternative to oak, I was prepared to give it a try. The Forestry Commission kindly gave me permission to cut a small amount of chestnut from Shrawley Wood, near Stourport. After peeling it, Bill and I thought that this would ensure that we would be able to meet the increasing demand for our fencing. This was going to benefit me more than Bill, as he was about to retire.

In August 2000 I signed a lease on Sturt Forestry Yard, which was situated on the West side of the Wyre Forest. Although a bit remote, I thought this would be an ideal place to work from. Bill and Gerry were going to retire at the end of that same year. The three months difference was necessary to make the building habitable, as it had been empty for about ten years. My dad and I worked evenings and weekends to make it so and I decided to call the new business "Coppice Creations".

It is four years now since Bill and Gerry retired and I know they still miss "Forest Glade". It must have been difficult for them to hand their business straight over to me.





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The business of rustic furniture making continues to thrive as you would see, if you drove past Sturt Forestry Yard, by the steam rising above the old Cradley boiler and the cracking sound as the oak bark is peeled from the wood.

And what of the future? My younger son, Henry, plans to work for me next year when he is sixteen, just as I did when I started working for Bill nearly thirty years ago. Oak regeneration in the Wyre Forest is improving, due to a stronger deer culling policy but it is a constant challenge to find new sources of raw material. Although I have secured two chestnut coppicing contracts at Ramscombe and Worles Common, this will not be a sufficient supply to ensure a secure future for rustic furniture making in the Wyre Forest.

Over the years, the way in which rustic furniture and fencing has been made has not altered much, but sourcing the raw material has. Not only is the forest changing from season to season, it is ever changing and we must adapt accordingly.

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Prepared logs

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Fencing

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