



GOOD WORK

The Chairmaking Life of John Brown

by Christopher Williams

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Lost Art 
PRESS



First published by Lost Art Press LLC in 2020
837 Willard St., Covington, KY, 41011, USA
Web: <http://lostartpress.com>

Title: Good Work: The Chairmaking Life of John Brown
Author: Christopher Williams
Editor & publisher: Christopher Schwarz
Copy editors: Megan Fitzpatrick and Kara Gebhart Uhl
Linocut illustrations: Molly Brown, mollybrown.ink
Cover illustrations: Molly Brown
Research and interviews: Kieran Binnie
Distribution: John Hoffman

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ISBN: 978-1-7333916-2-7

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Signature Book Printing, www.sbpbooks.com

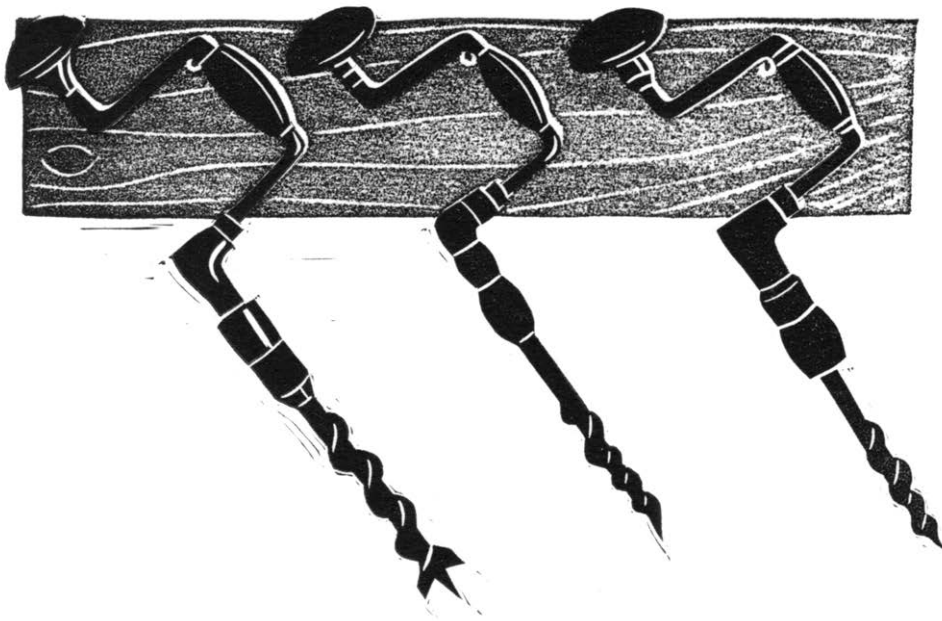


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Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I must thank Christopher Schwarz who has shown such humility to both me and the subject of this book over the last five years. I've learned and gained so much from him over this time. I couldn't have done it without him.

I'd like to thank Molly Brown for producing the wonderful artwork for this book, also Heather Birnie for the photography. And not forgetting Drew Langsner and John Brown's family for providing many historical photos and also for their support with this book.

Special thanks to Annie Sears, David Sears, Matty Sears and Nick Gibbs for their essays.

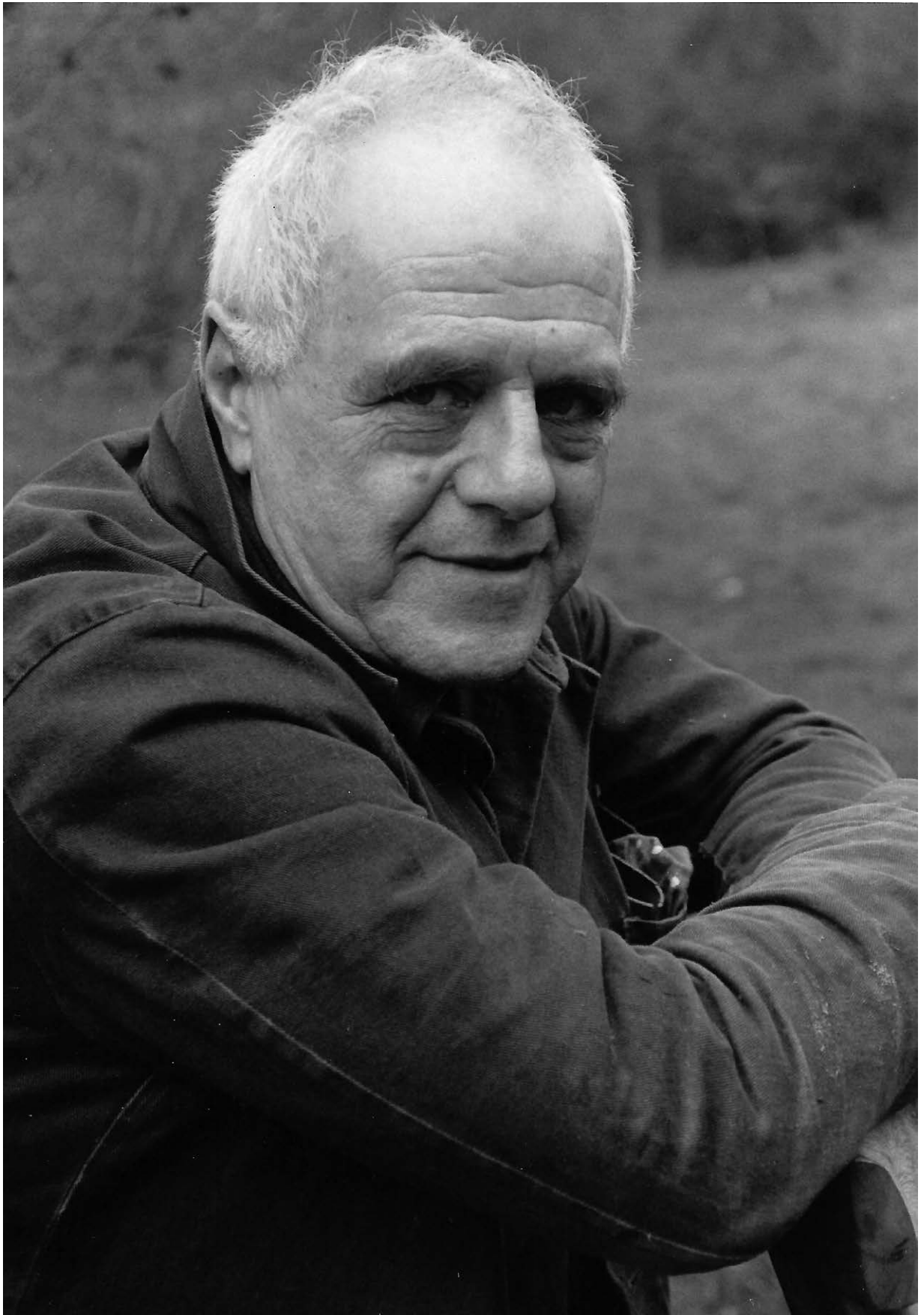
Thanks to Dorian Bowen at The Welsh House, Anthony and David at Jin Talog and Wyn Jones for allowing us to use their wonderful homes for photography. Thanks to St Fagans National Museum of History for opening its collection to me.

Many thanks to Megan Fitzpatrick, Kara Gebhart Uhl, Eifion and Amanda Griffiths, Emyr Davies, Hugh Haley, Dai Seymour, Tim and Bet-san Bowen, Tom Unsworth, Anjuli Quatermain'e and Kevin Adams for their support. A special thanks to Mitch Cleal for allowing us to use an image of the work by his late father, John Cleal.



For Claire.

You shared this journey with me every step of the way,
yet without your love, support and compassion, this journey would have been impossible.





Preface

by Nick Gibbs

John Brown came into my life, and into the lives of woodworking readers worldwide, in autumn 1993. We'd launched *Good Woodworking* magazine at the end of 1992, and already it was making an impact on the market, but Future Publishing, for whom I founded and edited the title, were passionate about making magazines better and better. One day my boss, Kevin Cox, suggested *Good Wood* might benefit from a crusty craftsman to give it some gravitas. Painfully, I had to acknowledge he was right, and I began a search for the right person.

We didn't want to poach someone from another magazine, preferring to build people up from scratch. I recalled, a few days later, a review of an odd little book called "Welsh Stick Chairs" in one of my last issues editing *The Woodworker*. There was an article about the author, who worked without electricity in Wales. He was called John Brown, or at least so we thought. He was actually born Grahame Eynon, changing his name twice over the years.

I hot-footed it down to Wales in my Golf Caddy pickup to meet John and discuss the possibility that he write a column for a magazine he had never seen. He'd expected me to arrive in a BMW, and was impressed by the rawness of my steed. We sat down in his little kitchen and drank lots of tea, and started a conversation that was to last for 15 years,

on and off. He gave me a wooden carving of a bird in flight, made, he explained, by a prisoner in jail. Years later, at his memorial, I met the carver, who John claimed had been interned during The Troubles in Ireland. It might well have been so, but according to friends and relatives at the gathering, John preferred not to let the truth get in the way of a good story.

I can't recall how easily I persuaded John Brown to start writing. As for all new columnists I have employed, I would have advised him to start as if he'd been contributing for some time. "It is not often that craftsmen have the opportunity to design their own workshop," were his first words, written with a manual typewriter on the thin paper that became so familiar, always held together with (green string) treasury tags. "Usually they [craftsmen] work in buildings that were meant for other things, from garages to cowsheds, and from garden sheds to disused warehouses. At last I have the chance to reverse this trend, at least for myself." Reading those sentences, I knew we had discovered something special, and someone who listened as readily as he exclaimed. He had clocked (though not illustrated here) my tip to fill writing with capital letters and numbers. When I receive an article from a new contributor I immediately scan the words for proper nouns: names of products, of people, of places; and for figures to show



At work on the underside of a chair seat with a wooden-bodied spokeshave.

dates, quantities, weights and measures and prices. That is where facts lie. The rest is just opinion.

Having recently re-married and moved into a new home, John Brown was midway through building his latest workshop, having taken time off chair-making for that purpose. Though he wrote diaries and letters profusely, he never found writing his column easy, and it was always a bit painful. Beneath the bluster he had a certain insecurity, but his articles became an inspiration to woodworkers the world over. He liked to test people's conviction by challenging them, but would often turn his convictions around afterward, or forget what he had said.

Speaking at the Celebration of his Life at Pantry Fields in June 2008, I had to confess that the flash of inspiration to ask JB to write was the best decision I'd ever made as an editor. I suspect it has had

more of an impact than anything else I've done for a magazine, perhaps only rivalled by the launch of *Living Woods* magazine, which near the end of his life John derided with typically forthright criticism. Editors know they have a gem when reader after reader admits to searching for a particular regular when the next issue drops on their doormat. Such familiarity and expectation drive sales, and few magazines have the fortune to contrive an editorial opiate or find a columnist as tempting as John Brown, whether or not his Marmite followers cursed or applauded his dogmatic words.

Let's face it, JB's regular missives from Wales made *Good Woodworking* Britain's best-selling woodwork magazine. We were inundated at *British Woodworking* (a magazine I later started) by emails when we announced John's illness. Time and again read-

ers recall opening *Good Woodworking* to find John's pages first, and how they still return to the articles or the memories of inspiration. "John Brown's articles were the very first thing I read when my monthly copy of *Good Woodworking* was delivered," emailed John Clayton from France when he heard about John's poor health in May 2008. "I was an impecunious wannabe woodworker with little in the way of tools and resources. John's no-nonsense, simple and traditional hand-tool approach was an inspiration to me. I did my best to follow his ways and my love of woodworking blossomed. I have never forgotten John's firm views and regularly find myself using one or another of the old hand tools I obtained as a result of reading his articles."

Fans overseas tempted John to run a couple of courses for a dozen or so potential chairmakers at Drew Langsner's Country Workshops in North Carolina. Each time he made a chair of his own, alongside students, but was unhappy with the chair he built on the first course. He asked Drew to destroy it with an axe, which of course was never done. According to Drew: "For the second course John brought a full-arm chair, with his characteristic dark finish, knocked down in a box. This was assembled before the class. It was left at Country Workshops as a gift, and part of our small collection of seating. Not many people do that."

Though he was in Wales when we met, and was born there, John had lived all around Britain. He'd been in the Merchant Navy (jumping ship in Australia over a girl) and the RAF (in which he flew the very dangerous Vampires, very fast). For a while he was a boatbuilder in Falmouth, though he'd started married life in Cambridgeshire, having been demoted by the RAF for marrying Frances Parker without permission. They had six children (Ieuan, Katy, Michael, Henry and twins Maria and Matthew). When the marriage fell apart and his boatbuilding business collapsed, he moved to Pembrokeshire, having first had a farm in Llandeilo, Carmarthenshire, for a while. He spent a few early years as a child in Caerphilly and the Rhondda, but for most of his childhood he was in South East London and Kent. Since leaving the RAF John had led a nomadic existence, living in



Issue 13 of *Good Woodworking* magazine, the issue that introduced the world to The John Brown Column.

a tent for a while and on a boat, but back in Wales in the late 1970s he went to visit John Seymour, the author of books on self-sufficiency.

About this time John decided he would dedicate his life to making Welsh country chairs, which he described as stick chairs. He married John Seymour's daughter Annie, and they lived together at Pantry Fields near Newport in a pair of railway carriages, which had previously been used for transporting bananas. The small carriages were 8' apart, joined by a little corridor, and both their children, Badger and Molly, were born there. In October 1984 he helped with the launch by the National Trust of John Seymour's book, "The Forgotten Arts." That month he gave a demonstration of chairmaking at Guild, the well-known Arts & Crafts design shop in Bristol. In the *Bristol Eve-*



One of the unpublished outtakes from “Welsh Stick Chairs.” Photo courtesy of the Sears family.

ning Post at the same time is a short piece praising John’s chairs for children, made beautifully “with as much love as I can muster.” In June 1985 he was one of 27 craftspeople to exhibit at the inaugural National Trust Craft Fair, and one can only assume that the next few years were filled with events and ideas and demos that fuelled John’s enthusiasm for chairmaking. He sold all his chairs at a gallery in Newport, refusing to produce them by commission. I remember the torture he endured producing a set of six dining chairs to order, declaring he would never do that again, and customers could only buy what he had already made. He hated the idea of using measurements or templates to make a chair, and so each was unique.

In the late 1980s he decided to write his book, “Welsh Stick Chairs,” alongside other ideas. His notes were so far-reaching that it is hard now to distinguish one writing ambition from another, merging his love of making chairs and his fascination with self-sufficiency. Presumably influenced by John Seymour, he explored changing attitudes to sustainability, scribbling down “environomics” as a New Age word. Ultimately, he wrote, printed and had published the book that was to make his

name, “Welsh Stick Chairs.” The timing is hard to fathom, except that the first copies were out at the beginning of April 1990, weeks after I first heard his name. “I have been given your name by Ashley Iles,” I wrote to him on 2nd March that year. “He says you make wonderful chairs. Could you send some photographs?” A week later I had a review copy of his new book and within a few days had sent our freelance photographer, David Askham, to take pictures and write an article. Then I left *The Woodworker* and forgot John Brown and his chairs.

From the day we met in 1993, we enjoyed a brilliant working relationship, speaking for hours on the phone and exchanging long letters. His were typed on an old manual typewriter, and were usually full of thoughts and recommendations. In a box of correspondence, I have found a few torn pieces of notebooks, with John’s suggested reading, including the poem “Lines Written for a School Declamation” by David Everett (1769-1813); the biography, “Hermit of Peking,” of the Chinese scholar Sir Edmund Backhouse; and David Yallop’s novel “To the Ends of the Earth.” If only I could recall the chats that sparked these scribbles, which also included the “Berlin Diaries” (1940-45)

of Marie Vassiltchikov. Perhaps I'd be reminded by reading the books now, and perhaps even hear the strident, kind, waspish voice I relished at the height of our friendship.

It wasn't always easy. I'm told, but can't verify, that JB declared I wasn't permitted to change a word he wrote. Certainly, at one point we had a stand-off because we had made an unauthorised alteration or were getting shirty about a deadline or something, and I found myself in the crossfire between John and our fiery production editor, Claire. JB hadn't embraced the new era of political correctness with any great enthusiasm, and though he was respectful and kind generally, he could be harsh at times. Our relationship was often tested by working together, but I soon left to do other publishing jobs and then our friendship really began to develop. He came to stay with my wife, Tina, and I for the *Good Woodworking* leaving-do in 1996, and afterwards he sent me a photographic chronicle of our weekend, recording my attempts to launch homemade rockets and nicknaming me Werner von Gibbs. It remains one of my most prized possessions. On the birth that year of our eldest daughter, Lara, JB sent a Newcastle United babygrow. He had been following Kevin Keegan's exciting tenure at St James Park, but was really, I'm told, a lifelong Charlton supporter.

JB and I had an idea to launch a new type of magazine, aimed at readers only interested in hand tools. We wanted to call it *Quercus*, modelled on the cult journals for gardeners and cooks, *Hortus* and *Convivium*. I still have a bulging folder of letters and notes between the two of us. As ever, he favoured narrow and deep rather than wide and shallow. "In assembling material and writing an Editor's Introduction I become more and more uncertain, not about the viability of the mag, but where to aim it," he wrote to me on a postcard. "If we try to cast the net too wide we might miss all our targets. Buckshot versus bullet." Our ideas grew rapidly just after the end of my *Good Woodworking* editorship in 1996. JB even announced the approaching launch in Country Workshops' annual newsletter: "*Quercus* will have a high content on hand tools and techniques, chair history

and the Zen of woodworking. It will be more like a journal than a magazine. I shall look for contributors who have something new to say, or want to get something off their chest." Ironically, since John's concluding comment was that "it's bound to be a success because the competition is so poor," *Fine Woodworking* magazine asked how to subscribe.

I am loathe to spell out our plan, just in case one day I return to editing only to hear a copycat rag drop on the doormat, or as JB once said: "I am feared of being a Scott – only to find Amundsen there first." Locked away in my safe is John's outline: About the Venture. Oh shucks, I must reveal that John recommended a Chair of the Month, articles about people who use hand tools and in every issue a piece about the "woodland freaks." There you go. Publish and be damned! JB hoped we would set up a base in a shop/gallery where we would sell products and teach potential craftspeople. His funding sources were typically iconoclastic. "We have numerous organisations which preserve buildings, like the National Trust, but they require money to be spent on bricks and mortar. Skills and knowledge are ignored. We have no National Living Monument grants as exist in Japan, where a craftsman, a stone waller or a blacksmith, at a certain time in his life is awarded such an honour and a pension... in other words the promotion and elevation of traditional skills, so that they don't die out." Noting work by Mike Abbott and Gudron Leitz in the U.K., JB sensed a new approach for craft skills, which was fulfilled later by the creation of the Heritage Crafts Association. "There is change afoot," he concluded, "and we must be in on the act."

He forever searched for a voice. "Perhaps there's a need for an organisation like the Soil Association, with a 'Good Work' symbol," he wrote in his essay of that name. "My grandmother had a theory that the heartbeat hasn't altered since the beginning of time, and that the pace of life should be regulated by this fact." In "Good Work" he quotes the philosophies of notables such as Ernst Freidrich "Fritz" Schumacher, Norman Potter, Aldo Leopold and Eric Gill, but his writing continually returns to the workshop, to machines and hand tools and



At work on a double-seated chair with his trademark hand-rolled cigarette.

to wood. If only he had interviewed potters, bakers and candlestick makers, and discussed their work. At some stage he wrote an intriguing dialogue, perhaps quoting another author, filed away between pages and pages of publishing plans.

“What was Renoir?”

“He was an artist.”

“What do you do?”

“I am a plumber.”

“And you?”

“I am a woodworker.”

“And you?”

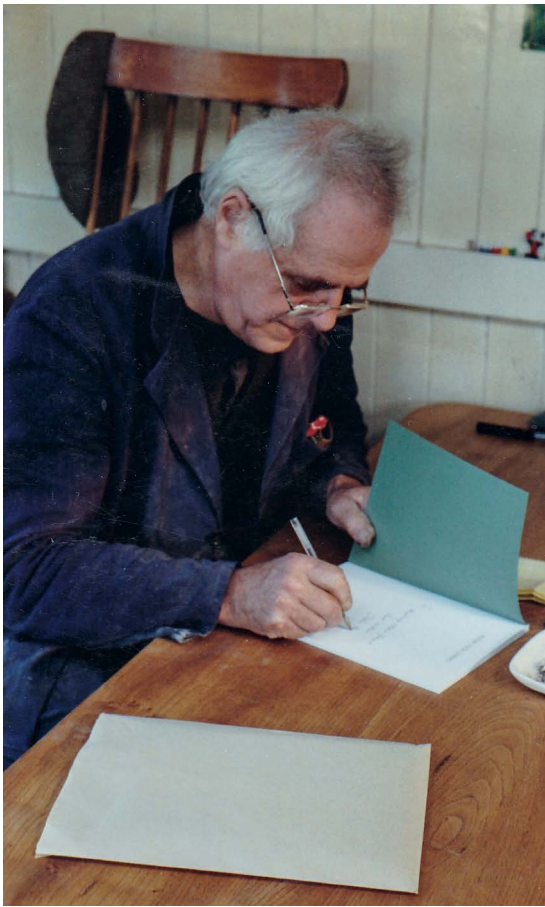
“I am a farmer.”

“Wrong! Renoir was a painter. You are all artists.”

“Artists are not a special kind of men, but all men are a special kind of artist.” (A slight misquote of a saying by Ananda Coomaraswamy.)

Perhaps John Brown found solace in being a big fish in a small pond. He enjoyed styling himself as

Chairman Brown, and longed to write a seminal book, all that a budding enthusiast might need to become a Self-Sufficient Woodworker. “Do it exactly my way,” he planned to begin, “and use exactly the tools and materials I specify. You must practise regularly (like a piano player), and if you do I can almost guarantee success.” In a loose-leaf binder on my desk, his planned book is divided neatly into 16 chapters, with distinctive, neat handwritten notes outlining each section. He writes of an allegorical pair of woodworkers crossing the Atlantic, with an Armani-suited accountant ending up stranded on a desert island with nothing more than Mr. Nice Guy’s toolkit and a book called “The Self Sufficient Woodworker!” All ends well, of course, when “Shakespeare” reveals there never was a shipwreck and the two woodworkers meet again. They become business partners and “live happily ever after” when the ex-accountant marries Mr. Nice Guy’s daughter.



Signing a copy of “Welsh Stick Chairs” for a reader.

In keeping with his later columns in *Good Woodworking*, JB also had plans to name the book “The Anarchist Woodworker.” Previously he had written a similar proposal for “The New Age Carpenter.” As ever, he returned to his perpetual bugbear that the advertising of machinery determines magazine content. Perhaps that is why he refused me altering his columns. “The editors of magazines cannot be indifferent of course to the interests of their advertisers, and therefore the editorial matter in these journals echoes that philosophy.” He wrote all-but identical proposals for the books, and in one listed enchanting alternative titles in Latin, including *quae nocent docent* (things that hurt, teach), enigmatically ending with *quid caeco cum speculo?* (what has a blind man to do with a mirror?). For a small price I can forward the complete list to anyone, and it will make you smile.

Our aims to launch the hand-tool magazine *Quercus* faltered when I was tempted by broader

publishing ambitions, and our paths diverged. We lost touch for about five years. When I went back to relaunch *Good Woodworking* in 2005 I knew it was fruitless trying to coerce John out of his self-imposed retirement. He hadn’t done any woodwork for a few years, having moved to Carmarthen to take a degree in fine art. I visited his flat there, and we went out to see a concert. Later we discussed him writing for *British Woodworking* when that was launched in 2007, but he then had a crisis of confidence and realised he had nothing more to say. He wasn’t well, and was increasingly reclusive.

I stayed again with John Brown only a few months before his death, shortly after my launch of *Living Woods* magazine. The new title was filled with the topics and ideas JB had raised all those years ago when we debated *Quercus* across pages and pages of letters, not to mention the hours of phone calls that invariably came to an abrupt conclusion when I was “too reasonable.” From the start, I knew *Living Woods* lacked the intense focus JB would have wanted. That last evening together, he made it abundantly clear that he considered the content too wide and too frivolous. JB may well have been right. For many years, he and I hurtled through space in a pair of Apollo capsules, hoping to land on Earth together with a big splash, but more probably skittering off the atmosphere, away again to galaxies of our own. During my brief stay we chatted for hours, and JB was as generous as ever. He’d gone out specially to buy me supper, though he wasn’t eating much himself, and he was fastidious in making sure I was comfortable in his den of a little flat. As ever he was torn by a desire to please and an ambition to push Tom Wolfe’s “outside of the envelope” (“The Right Stuff”). You could tell he wasn’t well and it was no surprise when he called a few months later to say that he only had weeks to live. “Come down quick,” he urged, “I don’t want you to be visiting a corpse.”

The prognosis proved to be accurate, and I had only one brief hour with him at Haverfordwest Hospital before he died peacefully at his daughter Maria’s house in Dinas Cross. Molly, his youngest daughter, was reportedly reading him emails from

woodworkers when he drifted into unconsciousness on Saturday, 31 May, and he died early the next morning. His son Henry and son-in-law Dai made the coffin themselves and John Brown's body was cremated without ceremony.

The celebration of JB's life on the side of a hill on a windy, sunny June day was a party for family and friends that went on long into the night. I felt honoured to be invited, embraced by his family as a friend and as a representative of woodworkers who John Brown had touched. Whether or not you agreed with his opinions, he was a special, special man. So many, many people contacted me after his death saying how they had been inspired by him to make a Welsh stick chair. Many added that they still return to torn-out pages of his columns. His work as a chairmaker has been continued by Chris Williams, author of this book. A new edition of John's classic book, "Welsh Stick Chairs" has been published, with tributes from some of the people John empowered. For many years there has been demand for an edited version of his columns as "The Anarchist Woodworker," which helped inspire Christopher Schwarz's book "The Anarchist's Tool Chest." Despite my daughter Sasha having transcribed many of JB's columns and scanned his photos, I am ashamed that nothing came of the book I had promised JB's eldest son

Ieuan Einion I would publish. So, it is a great relief to find Chris Williams doing exactly that.

John Brown's real legacy is far greater than the techniques of making chairs. Ieuan, says that when they were living in Falmouth JB was chairman of the Falmouth Youth Orchestra and that the classical and folk worlds are now populated by many of his protégés. He taught people the importance of inspiration, the value of sharing what he'd discovered.

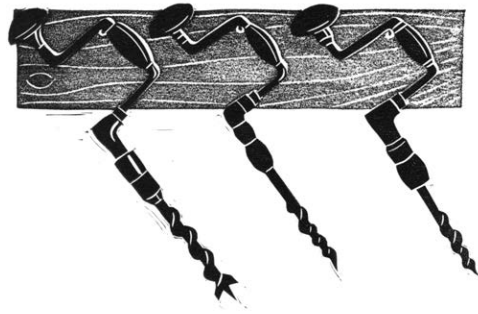
JB experienced his fair share of darkness, but through it all he is held in high regard because he survived day by day his way and without compromise. That his memorial "service" was such a happy event is perhaps a reflection that John Brown's life was well lived, and that, above all, is a lesson he would want us all to remember. JB, of course, would surely want the final words, just as he ended his essay on working by hand. "What I have said here is about as fashionable as advising people to sell their car, or take a bus, or even to walk. Real progress can only be spiritual progress. The calm and unhurried atmosphere in my workshop makes enough to pay the bills for a simple life, no more. God bless you, and remember, Good Work."

Nick Gibbs
Oxford, England, 2019



One of John Brown's lowback "Library Chairs," still in use today in Wales. Photo courtesy of Eifion Griffiths.





10: Construction of the Chair

I'd like to start this chapter firstly by stressing the importance of John Brown's philosophy with regards to how each chair should not be built the same. This point has stayed close to my heart through the years. Although my own chairs and, to some extent, how I make them has changed, his point stays sacrosanct to me. I quote JB from *Good Woodworking* issue 20.

"Readers to my column will know that I never make two chairs alike. Numbers of sticks, their spacing and length, the size of the seat and its shape, angles of stretchers, type of arm either steamed ash or solid wood, colour etc....the combinations are endless. I have gone to great length never to let anyone make a measured drawing, I just pluck the shapes out of the sky as it were. This is a reaction to a lifetime spent making things to others' designs. I do, however, keep detailed measurements and photographs."

I still have JB's arm and seat templates but have changed the shapes gradually through the years. I personally have attempted hundreds of variables in arm and seat shapes whilst in pursuit of the perfect chair. In truth, I'll never find it as a maker. I'm constantly drawn to new shapes that I see in my daily life. A line on a car bonnet or something in nature makes changes a constant for me. I recently had a cull of my templates and feel far better for it. With that being said, it's nice to have perhaps one

arm template to use as a rough guide. By placing a template on a board you can quickly see what's available for you to utilise. If you can't find what you're looking for in a board, don't discard it. Just use what you have! To reinforce what I've written, I'd like to quote JB as he discussed the making of chairs Nos. 9 and 10 in 1999. This is from *Good Woodworking's* issue 88.

I have just finished making two chairs purposefully different using the same shapes and measurements. Well, in truth the pair were meant to be the same, but I was defeated at the very beginning.

I had a 2" elm board with enough width to cut the first seat; this was for number nine. But when I looked about for suitable elm for the other half of the pair, number ten, I could only find elm about ten inches wide without making a trip to my wood store. So I glued up this one from two pieces, using three 1/2" dowels as I usually do.

I can deep cut this width on my Startrite 352 bandsaw, so I resawed them to 1-5/8". So right from the beginning, the chairs grew apart. I then cut out the arm blanks. I had to shorten the arms on one by 4 inch (on) each side because it was late and



John Brown's Paramo vice, the centerpiece of his workholding scheme in the workshop.

wet and I didn't want to go out to look for another plank. In shortening the arms I also had to shorten the doubler which covers the short grain at the back and reinforces the dowelled joint at the back. Now this meant less room for the sticks. I could have altered the spacings but this would have also meant more short sticks under the side arms just to keep all the spacings similar. I decided to put five sticks in the back of number ten, the first time I have done this, I think.

When I cut the sticks I used two differing lengths of straight-grained oak, so I made six sticks for number nine at 21 inches long and five for number ten at 24 inches long. These were the main differences. Leg lengths were the same, although I put a mite more splay on number ten, and the stretchers were similar...but I did raise them on number ten. Get the picture?

I just find it impossible to make two identical chairs.

JB's approach was a conscious one as he made several hundred chairs. Yet historically the maker may have only ever made a handful of chairs in their lifetime, and I doubt they ever consciously made each one different. It was again what they had to hand within their square mile that made their chairs individual. I hope that this all makes sense. If not, please read it again! Try to let it sink into your psyche. Once understood it will again help you make your own chairs with soul.

Don't be a slave to a plan! Listen, read, study photos of historical chairs as well as JB's or my own, but never copy as it would be disrespectful to the memory of my fellow countrymen who made these wonderful chairs.

I'll finish this short section with a quote from Henry David Thoreau. It was of huge significance to John Brown. He would quote it and regularly incorporate it into letters he wrote. This encapsulates the mantra of being and making as an individual – don't follow the crowd and never make the same chair twice! Think round, think flat and definitely think Welsh!

"If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a differ-

ent drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away.”

Build

This chapter deals with how I learned to build a chair the John Brown way. My goal is to cement some of his techniques to the craft of chairmaking so they are not lost. I'll be true as I can, with a few exceptions. If, at certain points, I differ in my approach I'll explain why JB did it differently. I doubt these will amass to much difference, but it's important to point these differences out for posterity.

The mechanic's vice is the centerpiece of most of JB's technique. It's a simple tool that aids chairmaking significantly. The jaws are lined with oak to protect chair parts, and it's bolted to a short length of 4" x 2". When in use, the vice sits within the woodworking vice on your bench.

The value of a mechanic's vice cannot be overstated. I do most of my work at this height and it is much better for my back. It's a simple matter to release the woodworker's vice and remove the top vice – the changeover is instant.

The other important aid is the leg vice. Because it is on a single screw, tapered work is held with ease. If you haven't a leg vice on your bench don't panic. A jig for holding tapered legs can be quickly knocked up from a few offcuts of timber or ply. I personally don't care for jigs as they add another crutch to what is a simple approach to building a chair. Less is more.

So here we go. And for those of you who have read the reams of chairmaking books out there, get ready for “the unconventional approach.” Viva la John Brown.

Glue up the Seat (if Necessary)

Firstly, if joining the seat from two or three boards, I glue it up at this point. I'm using a single-piece seat for this chair, so this stage is redundant for me. The arm is glued from three pieces. This takes time to dry, so it needs to be done early and set aside. I have started at this point for this very reason.

If a single-piece seat was unavailable JB would glue up his seat stock. Depending on the chair style

he used either two or three boards. Historically a rubbed joint with hot hide glue was commonplace. These have survived hundreds of years of use. JB's preference was for polyurethane glue and dowels. I can hear him saying “belt and braces.”

Dowels were a popular method of construction in years past, yet alien to many contemporary woodworkers. No matter. For John Brown they were essential to his methods of seat construction. His reasoning: glue creeps whilst being clamped and dowels stopped this from happening. He would gauge his lines on the edge of the seat stock from the underside. This meant that after drilling and fitting the dowels into the edges of the two boards, the underside of the seat would remain flush. JB said there was no need to work the underside of a chair seat other than cleaning off any excess glue. He'd leave the polyurethane to cure and remove it with a chisel. The edges on the topside of the seat may have had a step in them, but this was arbitrary as the seat would need to be chopped out with an adze. John would plane the eventual narrow strip left on the stick deck flush with a handplane.

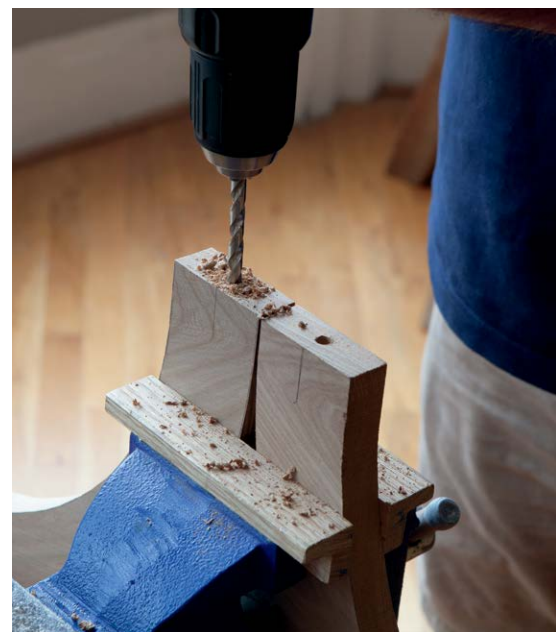
The Arm

The arm is made from two pieces of timber that are cut from solid, resawn and bookmatched from the same board. If I can find a board with curved grain that matches the arm then that's all the better. This being elm, it isn't prone to splitting. So, I'm less concerned than if this were ash or oak. For the arm, 2-1/4"-thick stock is preferred as a starting point as the arm bow (once cut out from the solid) is then resawn and bookmatched to make the arm. The other component is what JB called a “doubler.” This again needs to be resawn from thick timber and one-half is used for the arm. I now have three pieces of wood that are 1-1/16" thick or thereabouts that will make up the arm. I now either handplane or machine them to 1" thick finished. I actually accept anything down to 7/8" bare as a finished thickness.

To assemble the two arm pieces, I have a simple wide board clamped into the mechanic's vice that has a square grid pattern drawn on it. This allows me to arrange my arm pieces so they are symmet-



Press the two ends of the arm together and then saw through the joint. Repeat until the joint closes tight.



The dowel keeps the two parts to the arm in alignment. It does not add significant strength.

rical and not cockeyed. I clamp the arm pieces to the board and saw down the joint. I then release the clamps and pull the joint together. Once I'm happy with the joint, I mark a line across the joint. This line represents the dowel that will join the two arm pieces.

Now I square a line down the ends of the arm pieces. Set a marking gauge to halfway and score a line. With the pair of arms held upright in the vice, drill a 1/4" or 3/8" hole into the ends to receive a dowel. Whilst drilling I think: plumb and square! I use a battery drill, but JB used a brace and bit here.

It's not a structural joint. It's more to stop the arm from sliding around while being glued. I then cut and fit a length of dowel. I relieve the ends of the dowel to act as a glue sump, should I get too excited with the glue.

I put the wide board with a grid back into the mechanic's vice and lay out the arm bow with the dowel dry-fit into the holes. If the planets have aligned, I should have a flat, consistent arm. If there's a slight step between the two, now's the time to clean it up with a sharp handplane.

I now place the doubler on top. This piece covers the short grain on the arms and acts as a bridge to hold the arm together. If I'm happy with how it sits, I get to gluing. I never forget JB's words – "Maim, don't kill" – whilst dealing with cramps. I clean up the armbow assembly and set it aside to dry. I'm a stickler for keeping things in an orderly fashion around my bench whilst gluing. A dry rehearsal is never a bad idea, either.



Glue the doubler to the arm. Clamp the pieces together whilst the arm is clamped to your alignment board.

The Seat

I find that 2"-thick stock is preferable for a chair seat but anything down to 1-1/2" is fine. I was encouraged to go as thin as 1-1/4" full at one time. If elm is unavailable I look for something with erratic grain as it will be less prone to splitting when the



After sawing the bevel on the underside of the seat, clean up the cut with a spokeshave.

legs are driven in. I mark out the seat's shape with my template (if I'm working to one). Don't forget to mark the centreline on both the top and bottom at this point. Choose your desired surface for the topside and mark it as so. I go full belt and braces and mark the underside also. Mark the leg positions at this point on the underside of the seat.

I cut out the seat shape with my weapon of choice. I experienced both the turning saw and the band saw with John Brown. I chose the band saw and follow the line with care. A poorly cut seat adds an extra hour of spokeshave work later. If I'm happy with the cut, I then adjust the band saw's table to whatever bevel takes my fancy to undercut the seat. This undercut takes the visual thickness out of the seat. I've gone for a nice clean 45° bevel as an undercut. This is a personal option. I don't like a chunky look. If no band saw is available or warranted, I use a drawknife, spokeshave or coarse rasp to remove the waste. I clean up the rough-sawn seat edge and bevel with a spokeshave. Tool marks are a personal choice here as well. I prefer not to leave any.

I should add at this point that in his book "Welsh Stick Chairs," JB chops out the seat shape before cutting the bevel – the reason being that with the bevel cut it's difficult to hold the seat in

the mechanic's vice. I get around this problem by using a cradle to hold my seat whilst chopping out the seat with an adze. JB, on the other hand, held his seats vertically in the vice and chopped them. During my time with JB, he used thinner and thinner seats. This made the bevel on the underside smaller and the seat was then easier to hold upright in the vice. So, this issue became less of a concern.

Chopping & Shaving

I mark the area around the pommel of the seat boldly as a reminder not to chop away anything there and then draw a line around the edge of the seat. This is the point between where the stick deck starts and the saddled area ends. This is roughly 2" from the outside edge of the seat. If I'm feeling squeamish with the adze I go to 2-1/4" then slowly creep up to the 2" mark.

With the seat held in the mechanic's vice or cradle I start chopping. There's no right or wrong way here. It's just a grunt to remove at least a mini-



Note the wooden guard below the adze. It protects the vise jaws and adze's edge from damage.

mum of 1/4" of material from the seat. This is a Welsh chair not an English Windsor – there's not much depth to the saddling on a Welsh chair. With the bulk removed I spin the seat around 180° and address the pommel. Again, if I'm concerned or tired I leave this area for the spokeshave.

With the seat chopped I screw a batten to the underside of the seat (not forgetting to drill pilots for the screws) and position it in horizontally the mechanic's vice.

I'm now ready to clean up the adze work. An inshave or scorp can remove the bulk of the adze work. For years I had neither and went straight in with the spokeshave. JB introduced me to the Stanley Nos. 53 and 54 spokeshaves. These tools are fantastic for chairmaking as the throat is adjusted by a single screw. Heavy or fine cuts are achieved easily. The No. 53 has raised handles so you won't drag your knuckles on the seat. The No. 53 was my only tool for finishing hundreds of chair seats before I had a wonderful rosewood travisher made for me by my good friend Bernard Billsberry. A travisher is, without doubt, a great tool and it's



The finished saddle after a few minutes of work with the adze.



The scorp removes the high furrows left by the adze and further refines the shape of the saddle.



The No. 53 spokeshave is the ideal tool for shaping the concavities at the front edge of the seat.

eased my workload by not having to sharpen my No. 53 so often whilst dealing with the seat.

Once I'm happy with the general clean-up from the shaves, I start with the curved scraper. This makes quick work in levelling the contours left by the shaves.

Legs

I choose my leg stock from arrow-straight-grained stock. Oak is my go-to timber here. The legs taper from 1" at the top to approximately 1-5/8" at the foot. These are sawn from air-dried stock and kept in volume as I like them as dry as possible. I first plane the four edges square or thereabouts in the leg vice. I then plane the legs into an octagon. This is done by eye and experience. I use a go/no-go gauge, which is a scrap of MDF with a 1" slot cut into it. This stops me from planing too much off. It's imperative that great care is taken around the top of the leg as this is what will become the leg tenon.

Once I've repeated this process with the other three legs, I move on to making the tenons. With a scrap of wood in the mechanic's vice drilled with a 1" hole in it, I start the "dance." With a block plane in my right hand and slowly rotating the leg with my left, I form the tenon. I check the fit frequently in the mortise and constantly think "round." Once



Shape the legs to a tapered octagon with a jack plane. The leg vice is helpful as it clamps tapered shapes easily.



Refine the shape and size of the leg tenon with a block plane. Press the tenon against a stop in the mechanic's vise.



Test the size of the tenon by pressing it into a sample hole in a chunk of hardwood.



The sample hole will compress the tenon a bit, guiding the shape and size as you plane the tenon.