Out of the Woods

Philip Koomen: a sustainable approach to furniture design

Oxfordshire's woodlands are in a state of ecological and economic crisis. Almost two thirds of UK woodlands are privately owned and most timber resources are poorly used. Oxfordshire's small woodlands have the capacity to produce timber worth up to £1 million each year, but current production is almost negligible.

Are there any solutions? In an effort to find alternative and sustainable ways of sourcing, processing and utilising wood, the Philip Koomen workshop makes creative use of local timber resources that are not usually considered commercially viable in the timber trade. Koomen has developed a 'local cycle' which promotes greater collaboration and support among woodland owners and local forestry-related businesses. The timber is sourced from estates and woodlands within thirty miles of the workshop in South Oxfordshire. Local sawmills convert the timber into pieces, which are dried on site at the workshop ready for use. By reducing the number of stages in the supply chain, woodland owners are able to negotiate a better price for their timber.

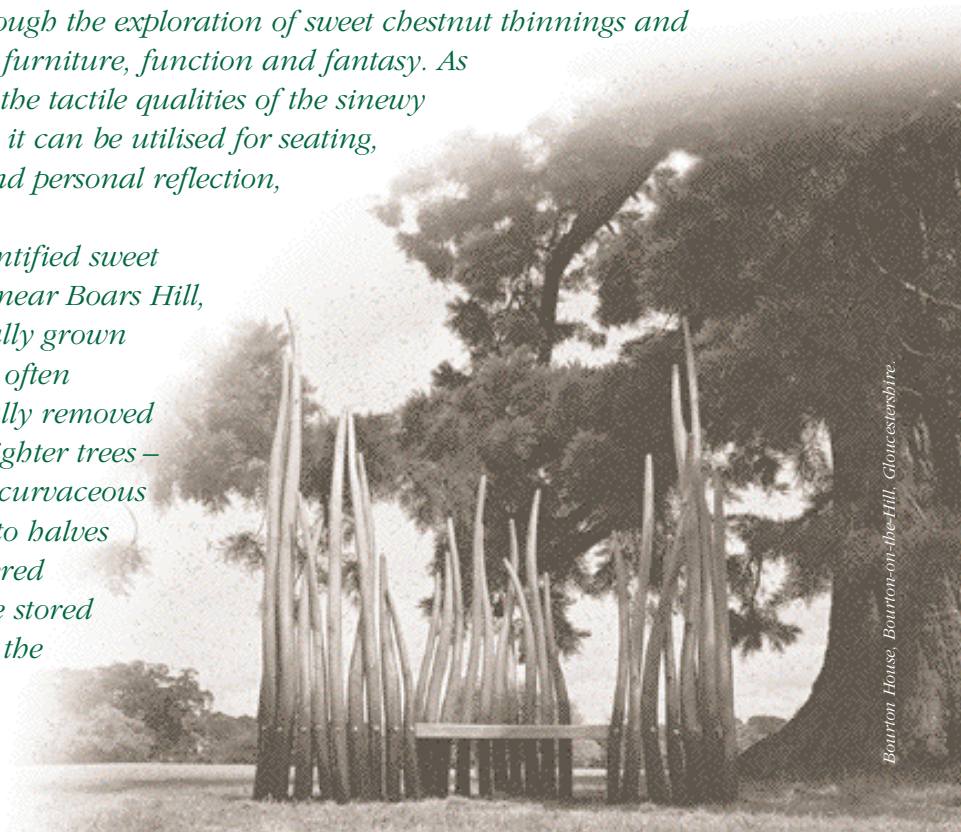
Locally grown trees, which have not been grown specifically for timber production, come in a huge variety of shapes and species. These timbers have many unique characteristics, including knots, cracks, unusual grain patterns, or uneven colouring caused by fungi or age. Because conventional manufacturers need wood that has consistent qualities to maximise efficiency, the variety found in local timber complicates production. For this reason, local timbers are typically used for firewood and low value products.

Yet, unusually shaped trees and planks can inspire unique design forms. The varied characteristics of locally grown timber can be used to create furniture with a distinctive regional identity.

The creation of an infrastructure to facilitate the sourcing, conversion, drying and selection of locally grown hardwoods has fundamentally altered the working practices of the Philip Koomen workshop. The project has increased our understanding of the difficulties and challenges that forestry professionals and the timber trade are faced with, and has created a growing network of collaborators among professionals who derive their livelihoods from local woodlands and the world's forests. ■

The Pondlife *bench is one example of this radical rethink of the purpose of furniture and the local cycle. Its unusual form has evolved through the exploration of sweet chestnut thinnings and the relationship between sculpture and furniture, function and fantasy. As sculpture,* Pondlife *invites one to enjoy the tactile qualities of the sinewy reeds. However, unlike most sculptures, it can be utilised for seating, as a space for respite, contemplation and personal reflection, either in the garden or the home.*

The Oxfordshire Woodland Project identified sweet chestnut thinnings from Bagley Wood near Boars Hill, as an under-utilised, durable and locally grown hardwood. The misshapen thinnings – often regarded as a waste product and usually removed to promote the growth of stronger, straighter trees – are particularly suitable for Pondlife's *curvaceous carved reeds. The thinnings are cut into halves at the Bagley Wood sawmill and delivered directly to the workshop where they are stored until band sawn and shaped to create the finished* Pondlife *reeds.*



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