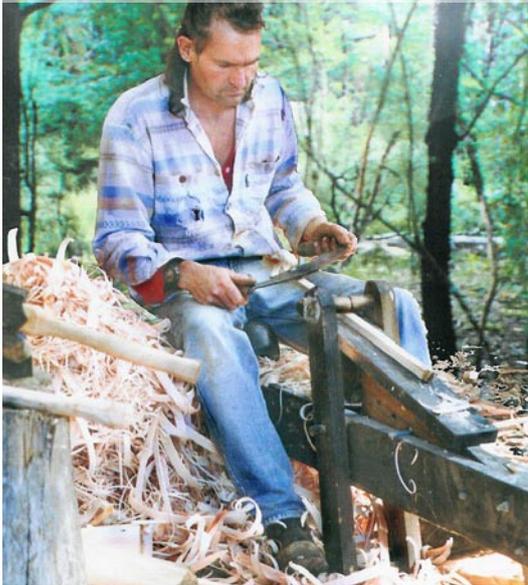


# THE ART OF WORKING WOOD ... UNPLUGGED

by Gwynna Whiteowl



In a world where technology has taken over ... where machines replace men and faster is better ... or so we are lead to believe, it is indeed rare to find yourself not only stepped back in time but able to enjoy the active physicality and skill necessary in a wood working craft that pre dates the industrial revolution.

Master craftsman Richard Bowes Hare – the only full time traditional chair-maker in New Zealand from 1998 to 2003 when he left NZ - keeps this tradition alive. But how did it all begin for him in an age where we have electric lathes and power tools to do everything?

Growing up in the bush clad, peaceful tranquillity of Karamea, Richard has always been involved with wood initially doing a forestry degree and later, forestry contracting. He built his first home on Stewart Island by hand, chain-saw milling the timber in the early 1980's. Richard designed and crafted beautiful hand dovetailed jewellery boxes and individual pieces of furniture over the years until he found he had a passion for making chairs. His research on chairs led him to the Windsor chairs of the 17th & 18th century which are today's antiques. Richard discovered you simply cannot improve upon the techniques and skill used then to make a chair today.

His passion saw Richard travel to Ironbridge, England in 1995 to learn the art of traditional chair-making. Richard

spent the next 3 years practising his craft before successfully establishing "Traditional Greenwood Chairs" in 1998. His work was commissioned privately or by exclusive furniture stores around New Zealand, where using these long forgotten techniques he hand-crafted over 600 Windsor and Shaker style Ladder-back chairs. Richard uses beech for the turned legs, elm for the sculptured chair seat and ash for the steam bent backs and spindles of the Windsor chairs. He uses ash for the Ladder-back chairs which also have steam bent parts and weaves by hand the 'sea-grass' seats.

Through this period Richard travelled the South Island by invitation demonstrating his craft at events like A&P Shows and various festivals such as the annual Oamaru Victorian Celebrations, Timaru Rose Festival and events 'in sync' with the era from which this traditional hand craft originated. Contributing to such events is an important part of keeping the skills of his craft alive in the public eye.

His active working display is always a top draw-card with crowds of fascinated people watching for long periods of time. Most people have never seen a 'pole lathe' or 'shaving horse' being used let alone seen a man with the trunk of a freshly felled tree using a side axe, adze and a strange array

of chisels, draw knives and spoke shaves with such dexterity. Ask anyone who has watched him; he makes it look easy when it isn't!! Richard's passion for chair-making naturally flowed into tutoring Traditional Greenwood Chair workshops like the one he attended in England, giving keen folks an opportunity to craft their own Windsor side chair while having an experience of a lifetime.

With a maximum of 6 students per workshop, only 100 New Zealanders have completed this intensive five day course. Aside from tutoring workshops for Wood working/turning guilds in Blenheim and Nelson and independently facilitating workshops South Island wide, Richard tutored annually at the Methven Summer School and Wanaka Autumn Arts School.

This unique workshop enables you to make an 'heirloom' Windsor side chair from start to finish using freshly felled green timber, age-old methods and traditional design. Richard teaches you to cleave the green timber into billets and shape them on a shaving horse using a draw knife.

You learn to use a pole lathe, powered by your legs to complete the turning of four chair legs and stretchers. You learn the art of steam bending the back bow to your chair and Richard guides you through

## PHOTOS:

- Splitting Chair Leg Billets .01
- Preparing Leg Billit On Shaving Horse .02
- Detail Of Chair Leg Turning .03
- Spoke Shaving Spindles .04
- Steam Bending Chair Bow .05



shaping the seat by hand using an adze, in-shaves and scrapers.

Using a brace and special 'chair bits' you will drill the holes in all components and assemble your chair without nails or screws. Differential shrinkage is the key. This unique workshop, suitable for the experienced woodworker and the complete novice to wood and hand tools alike, gives you far more than a beautiful Windsor chair.

Your confidence and trust within self grows each day culminating as one of life's most self satisfying achievements accomplished by an individual. Students usually sit on their finished chair, faces beaming a happy smile and contemplating this intensive yet very rewarding week where they have created a family heirloom.

It is a physical yet highly rewarding five days where students to date have ranged in age from 15 to 76 - usually two women per workshop - coming from all walks of life; retired men and grandfathers; farmers; doctors; teachers; botanist; builder; wood turners; engineers; mothers and grandmothers; artists; students; tourist and agricultural industry executives; even a chap from Texas came and made a chair.

Some folks have attended two workshops having thoroughly enjoyed their first experience with a master craftsman and tutor who has the gift and passion to teach others the art of his craft ... or is that the craft of his art???



This is a simple but effective lathe, powered by a strong leg, using a springy sapling as resistance on the turn.

Living on sub-tropical Norfolk Island since late 2003 with his partner Gwynna, Richard continues to tutor Traditional Greenwood Chair workshops in conjunction with annual local events on Norfolk Island. With 4 courses planned for 2006 (using local woods on the island) 3 are closed with local interest booking all available places. One keen Kiwi man is the only exception, phoning at the right moment in 2005 as dates were being set. He is participating in the June workshop planning a holiday

with his wife to include Bounty Day Celebrations. The last workshop with places open is in early October 2006.

In New Zealand the recently established "Nelson Greenwood-Working Centre" at Lud Valley has invited Richard, one of only two known tutors of this craft in Australasia to return and teach workshops possibly in early 2007.

If something in this article has 'chipped away at your ancestral wood working soul' and you would like to put yourself in the picture to attend this unique workshop as part of a holiday upon history rich Norfolk Island check out:

[www.norfolkisland.com.au](http://www.norfolkisland.com.au) - click on 'Norfolk Island Explorers Paradise' then click on 'Activities' (in the top tool bar) - under 'Activities Selection' click on 'Chairman Hare Workshops' for details.

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<b>PHOTOS:</b>	
Seat Blank Preparation .06	
Adzing Seat Blank .07	
Sculpting Chair Seat .08	
Spindle Time .09	
Five Days To The End! .10	



**CREATIVE WOOD New Zealand**

[www.naw.org.nz](http://www.naw.org.nz)

Creative Wood is published quarterly by the National Association of Woodworkers of New Zealand Inc and is sent to all members of the Association and is also sold to the public.

The magazine aims to be of interest to a range of woodworkers, but with an emphasis on woodturning as most members of the NAW are woodturners. Each issue contains a mix of articles, including informative shared experiences and ideas, project ideas and instructions, tool and machinery reviews and hints, book reviews, articles on forthcoming and past events around the country and overseas, historical information, and other inspirational items.

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**Creative WOOD New Zealand**  
 Published by the National Association of Woodworkers NZ Inc. No. 82 Spring 2006

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