

# GOODBYE MR BEAMS

HOW PETER MEREDITH FACED  
HIS WOODWORKING DEMONS  
AND AGREED TO MAKE A CHAIR

**A**T PRIMARY SCHOOL I HAD a woodwork teacher named Mr Beams. He wore a cloth cap and a grey work coat and issued orders such as “Try some elbow grease!” or “Use yer gumption!”. Mr Beams had me make a pair of bookends in the shape of Mickey Mouse’s head. The experience, as much as the awful product, put me off woodwork and Mickey Mouse for the rest of my life.

So when I was recently invited to join a seven day workshop that would involve me building a wooden chair, I thought carefully. Mind you, this would be no ordinary chair; this would be an American Windsor chair, whose pedigree goes back to 17th century England. With its finely turned legs, sculpted seat and graceful back bow, the American Windsor chair is a thing of unique beauty. During the workshop I’d construct this complex artefact using traditional (medieval and earlier) tools powered only by muscle. My tutor would be Richard Bowes Hare, 53, a master artisan specialising in crafting furniture out of green (unseasoned) wood in the time honoured manner.

Quashing my misgivings, I accepted. This might be a chance to exorcise the ghosts of Mr Beams and Mickey Mouse. Or it might be an embarrassing disaster. Either way it would make a good story.

## DAY 1

Only when Richard described exactly what he wanted me to do did it dawn on me what I’d let myself in for.

We were six aspirant chair builders with varying degrees of woodworking skill. One was a cabinetmaker, though he’d never used traditional tools. There was an electrician from New Zealand, an accountant, a forensic photographer, a businessman and...a journalist. We’d turned up at the Wildwood Gallery, in Fitzroy



PHOTOGRAPHS TONY SHEFFIELD

Falls, at 8.30 on a Saturday morning as instructed and would make chairs till the following Friday afternoon.

Outside a workshop complex behind the gallery, Richard pointed to a large log of *Eucalyptus fastigata*, or brown barrel. He told us we would split this into several lengths and would axe-trim, shave and lathe them into elegant chair components – legs, spreaders and spindles.

I thought, “Carve a chair from a log? He’s got to be kidding!” Next Friday afternoon seemed very far away.

But Richard is a considerate as well as an authoritative teacher. His instructions implied that nothing he asked us to do was beyond even a woodwork-phobic nong like me.

So I learnt how to cleave a log with up to three axes simultaneously and use a side-axe to trim the pieces (known as “blanks”). I shaped them further with a drawknife and a spokeshave on a shaving horse and gave them final form on a foot operated pole lathe. Once I’d learnt

how to pump my foot while handling a chisel, I found the pole lathe, developed in ancient Egypt, a delightful device to use. I was genuinely reluctant to stop lathing at day’s end.

I had aching arm and shoulder muscles and a blistered hand. But I also had two gorgeous chair legs. I was truly amazed at the result of my labours.

## DAY 2

I was more confident today. Only two more legs, three spreaders, nine spindles, one back bow and one seat to go.

Despite my new-found lathing enthusiasm, my lack of turning expertise was showing. My legs were supposed to be identical but were all different. Accentuating the positive, Richard said flaws gave handmade artefacts character. I felt mine had rather too much of that.



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Richard is a tall, rangy bloke with a ponytail and seemingly limitless stamina and strength. Growing up on the family farm in New Zealand he developed an early penchant for making things with his hands. His love of the outdoors took him into forestry, salmon farming, sphagnum moss harvesting and possum trapping. But by the late 1980s his deeper desire was reasserting itself: he was building houses, doing joinery, making wooden jewellery boxes and teaching woodwork.

In 1990 he gained an advanced certificate in design and craft, specialising in fine woodwork. Then in the mid 1990s he became fascinated with green woodworking. He attended a greenwood chair making course in the UK and returned to New Zealand with new skills. Although his UK course gave him experience in building the English Windsor chair, his subsequent research drew him to its American cousin.

From 1998 to 2003, Richard worked as a greenwood chair maker, turning out 600 chairs, both American Windsors and ladderbacks, as well as running chair making workshops.

By the end of the day I'd finished two more legs. I'd also taken half an hour out from lathing to prepare a length of ash for steam bending into a U shape to form my chair's back bow. My muscles ached a little less than yesterday.

### DAY 3

I worked on spreaders, the horizontal rods that link the legs. Again I started from scratch: splitting a brown barrel log, followed by side-axe trimming, shaving and turning. By now I was better on the lathe, so I finished the spreaders relatively quickly.

I took half an hour off late in the morning to bend the back bow – or rather, to give Richard a hand while he did the job for me. We had to move fast. Once the length of ash came out of the steam box, we had only seconds to do the work before the wood cooled and hardened. Muscle power provided the bending force, and a jig gave the wood its shape. Then, held fast by an outer metal frame and a length of rope, the bow would cool and dry for 24 hours.

After that I started on spindles. These are the nine sculpted rods that, with the bow, form the back of the chair. They're thin and fiddly, requiring precise use of the drawknife. If you make them too thin, you've got to toss them out and start again.

I was now way behind the others. But that didn't bother me: the ambience was too pleasant for that. With the shaving horses

dotted about the grass outside the workshops, we were doing much of our work under a bright winter sky.

### DAY 4

Still shaping my spindles, I was on my own among the shaving horses; the other blokes were inside the nearest workshop sculpting their seats. By lunchtime I'd had enough of muttering to spindles and was glad of human company. As on previous days, lunch was a hearty soup served by Richard's partner, financial manager and marketing wiz, Gwynna WhiteOwl.

Yes, that's her real name. She chose it on the spur of the moment while applying for a passport one day and confirmed it by deed poll. From an early age she'd had a passion for owls. Later, when she was working in natural therapies, she named her business the WhiteOwl Wisdom Clinic.

Gwynna, a farmer's daughter from New Zealand's North Island, hit the road in the early 1990s in a house truck, a kind of modern-day gypsy caravan. It was a mobile base from which she practised her natural therapies.

After she and Richard met in 2000, they travelled together, she in her house truck and he in a bus he'd converted into a mobile home-cum-workshop. He built chairs and conducted greenwood chair workshops; she worked at her natural therapies and did his accounts and marketing. The couple left New Zealand in 2003 and, by a roundabout route, ended up in the Southern Highlands, where the climate reminded them of



New Zealand and the chair making prospects looked bright.

My workshop was the second they'd run here, and the first residential one. The participants were staying at the Fitzroy Falls Conference Centre, and at the end of each day they sat around a campfire and enjoyed a meal prepared by Gwynna.

Not all of us were working on the same project. Four were taking seven days to build an American Windsor; two were working on a Windsor double-bow carver chair, which would take 10 days. These latter two were Colin Nicholson, 32, the cabinetmaker, and Franco Giacon, 53, from Gosford. Of the seven-day workers, New Zealander Greg Colville was charging ahead, leaving the rest of us for dead.

I finished my spindles by mid-afternoon. Now at last I could start on my seat. The seat blank was a five centimetre thick slab of elm sawn approximately into shape but otherwise unworked.

First I had to drill it. I'd have to use a brace and bit to make the



holes for the legs, bow and spindles. So, having spent four days getting used to one set of tools, I now had put them aside and master another. Getting the angles of these holes right called for precise judgment and lots of help from Richard, Greg, Jonathan Stenson, the forensic photographer from Canberra, and Gordon Glister, 67, from Adelaide.

## DAY 5

I started the day by shaping the seat's underside with a drawknife, spokeshave and scrapers. At one point Richard said, "Want some gorilla?" Unsure what he meant, I said yes out of curiosity.

He took the drawknife from my hands and attacked the seat with vigour, removing much larger chunks than I'd dared to cut. Okay, so that explained "gorilla". Mr Beams and his "elbow grease" came to mind.

The top of the seat demanded more radical treatment. It had to be hollowed out to cradle a human backside and thighs. This called for an adze, a tool resembling a mattock, with its blade set at right angles to the shaft. Woodworkers have been using them to whittle rough-cut timber since prehistoric times.

This time, after a quick demo from Richard, I was able to practise on a slab of scrap timber before getting into the real thing. There would be no room for error: one over-zealous chop could render all my other seat work void.

Scooping out my seat top took me the rest of the day. By the end of it I ached all over and found it hard to stand up straight. Manual labour was proving a shock to my system.

But my seat was ready for its final sculpting.

## DAY 6

There were more unfamiliar tools to master: the inshave (a curved drawknife), the round-bottomed spokeshave, called a travisher, and the round-bottomed plane. The inshave was great, but I never warmed to the other two.

By lunchtime my seat was as ready as it would ever be. In the afternoon I fitted the legs and spreaders. This took more work than I expected, but then everything about making a Windsor chair was like that. I had to widen, or ream, the leg holes I'd drilled in the seat earlier, and for this I used a spoon bit in the brace. Spoon bits go back to Roman times and are used

specifically in chair making. With much help from Richard, I finally got to the point where I could glue the holes and join all the components permanently. So there it was, a seat with legs. I tried sitting on it. It really worked!

## DAY 7

Because I was behind schedule, this was going to be a busy day for me.

Much of my morning was taken up with shaving, scraping and sanding the back bow and spindles. In the afternoon I tackled probably the trickiest task of the week: drilling the holes in the back bow for the spindle ends. The holes had to go in at varying angles, some very acute. One slip and I'd wreck the bow.

I managed eight out of nine holes without a problem. But on the ninth I let the bit wander, resulting in some split wood. Richard showed me how to cover up this unwanted element of character.

In the afternoon it was time at last to fit everything together—seat, spindles and bow. I was tense as I glued the holes and prepared to insert. There was no going back now: if I'd mucked up any of the parts I'd been labouring over, I'd know about it instantly. Having to fix a mistake at this stage would be traumatic.

Richard and I slid the bow into the holes in the seat, coaxed the spindle ends into theirs and, with a wood block and a hammer, rammed everything into place without a hitch.

So there it was, a complete chair. I was smug all right. I was surprised at just how smug I was. When I took my chair home to show my family I was the kid coming home from school with something amazing I'd made in class. For a long time I didn't sit in my chair; I sat in another chair gazing in wonder at my chair.

That evening I joined my fellow chair makers at the Burrawang Hotel for a celebratory dinner – sitting on our chairs. Not long after Richard had presented us with certificates of achievement, I glanced out of a window and thought I glimpsed the phantom form of Mr Beams vanishing into the night, Mickey Mouse clutching at his grey coat. **FL**

*Richard Bowes Hare's next workshops are in November this year and January 2010. Contact Richard or Gwynna on 0448 877 479 or at [workshops@rbhchairs.com](mailto:workshops@rbhchairs.com). Web: [www.rbhchairs.com](http://www.rbhchairs.com). Richard will be displaying his work at the Tulip Time Festival (September 24 to October 7).*

