



Jules Hudson

COUNTRY ESCAPE

Jules' longstanding love for natural wood prompts him to learn the ancient craft of working with wild wood, such as green oak, and become an artful bodger

Since I was a boy, I've always had a love of natural wood. Growing up in the 1970s, I can recall many a news report that warned of the imminent disappearance of trees across the country, reports that to be honest I found hard to comprehend. Since then, mercifully, these gloomy predictions have failed to materialise, but they did give us all a collective kick up the backside to understand the importance of trees to our landscape, not just as part of the ecosystem. Trees are a powerful additive to our spiritual well being. I've yet to meet anyone, countryphile or townie, who doesn't appreciate the majesty of an old oak, or the dramatic colours that warm swathes of woodland on a bright autumn day.

I've always loved its texture, its smell, and its history. There's something timeless about wood. It's also incredibly honest. Different species have their own distinct properties and uses, and over thousands of years their value has become as ingrained into human history as it has into the fabric of wood itself.

I've also long had a passion for building things. When I was a kid, my father encouraged me to play around with bits of timber. Unlike concrete or steel, it's a safe material, and forgiving of young hands with basic skills. When I became a proud home owner in my early 20s in the heart of Mid Wales, my skill set was challenged again on an upward curve that is still going, not least because we're now renovating a timber-framed house on the Borders. When it was built around 1580, the methods used were old news, time-honoured practices and skills. Timber-framed buildings were and are commonplace in Herefordshire, just as they are in East Anglia where I grew up, and as such they provide a welcome degree of familiarity. They were mostly built from green oak, in other words oak that had been felled for the job. As we all know, oak is incredibly tough and resilient, but when green it's much easier to work with. Timber frames will more easily slot together, but will then slowly weather and shrink, creaking and twisting as they do, tightening themselves into the strongest of structures.

Over the years I've met many enthusiasts and experts in the green wood trade, from re-enactors recreating Saxon villages in Kent, to companies and craftsmen restoring some of our most important houses.

When we first moved to Herefordshire a couple of years ago, I had the happy coincidence to shoot a piece for *Countryfile* in the company of a man who's spent the last 20 years of his life working with green wood in a forest he calls home. Incredibly, his name was 'Sherwood'. Since then we've become friends and, after years of putting it off because of work, I finally got to begin a journey which I've long wished to undertake. In short, after years of trying to hone my skills, I'm learning to be a 'bodger'!

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The art and craft of using wild wood to produce furniture and goods has long been the preserve of the bodgers: artisans who made Britain's woods and forests their own. What's exciting is that I'm not alone in my quest, for the skills and tools they developed over hundreds of years are it seems gaining renewed interest. Courses in green wood working are developing all over the country, and I can see why. Where once a bough might have gone for firewood, now I see it as a chair or stool, only in kit form. Sycamore, often derided as a weed by many, will produce the finest wooden spoons you'll ever need because it doesn't taint food, whilst Ash lends itself to becoming fantastic furniture, take it from me.

So next time you think of chopping something down, don't think of it as valueless. Think of it as a cash voucher at the DIY store that could become almost anything the artful Bodger wants it to be; as the nursery rhyme says, if you do go down to the woods today, you are sure to get a surprise.

JULES HUDSON was born in Essex but stayed in Wales after studying archeology at Lampeter University. He has worked in television since 1996 and is a member of the *Countryfile* team, but is best-known as the leading face of *Escape To The Country*. He moved back across the Border in 2012, to Herefordshire.

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